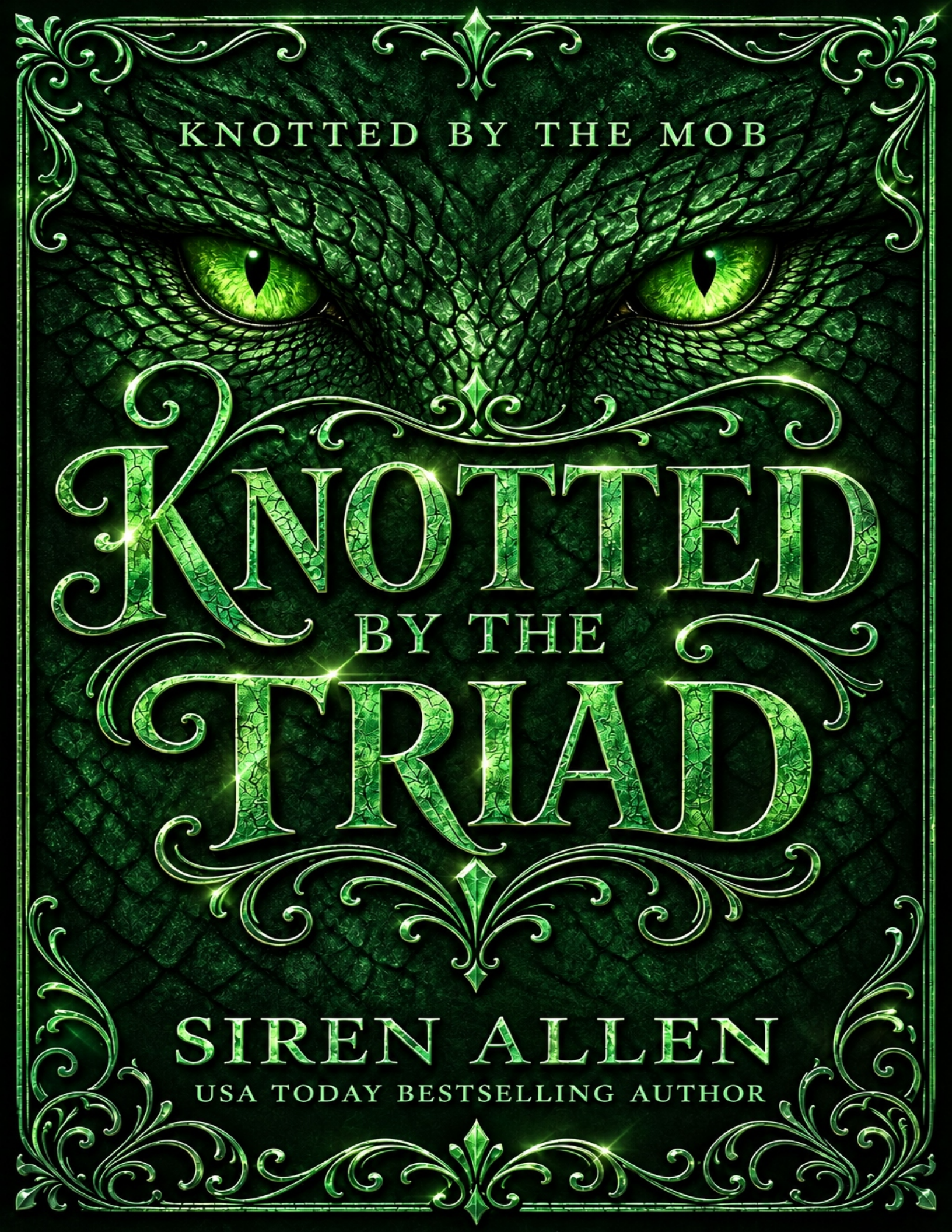




KNOTTED BY THE MOB

KNOTTED
BY THE
TRIAD

SIREN ALLEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KNOTTED BY THE TRIAD

BY SIREN ALLEN

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**PART OF THE KNOT CROWNED
SERIES
AND
THE KNOTTED BY THE MOBSTERS
SERIES**

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ABOUT THE BOOK

I was written to be the villainess. Now I'm changing the plot to survive.

I know exactly how my story ends.

I know because my best friend wrote it.

One minute, I'm in the car with my besties, heading to dinner to celebrate one of them landing a movie deal for her bestselling fantasy romance series. The next, our car crashes, and I wake up inside that very novel as Zuri Bane, the villainous second female lead my best friend named after me.

And guess who's standing over me?

Three dragon princes.

The three future rulers of the Triad.

Three dangerously powerful alphas whose hearts already belong to the story's heroine.

And thanks to my runaway sister, I've just been forced to marry all three of them.

But I'm not the Zuri Bane they remember.

The original Zuri spent the story consumed by jealousy, determined to tear the princes away from the woman they loved. Her obsession turned her into the villain of their love story and eventually earned her a cold, lonely death in a tower.

Yeah, that's not happening to me.

I know this story from front to back, which means surviving should be simple. All I have to do is stay away from the heroine, stay away from my conniving family, and most importantly, do not fall for the three alphas destined to hate me.

There's just one problem.

The moment I stop following the plot written for me, the story stops following the book.

The princes who should despise me begin protecting me. The alphas who were supposed to belong to another omega can't seem to stay away from me. And the harder I try to escape the ending written for me, the more I seem to change theirs.

I woke up in this world determined to change my fate.

I never expected to change their hearts.

Now I have to decide what frightens me more: dying the way the story intended or trusting my heart to three fictional alphas who are destined to destroy me.

KNOTTED BY THE TRIAD is a transmigration, omegaverse, reverse harem, mafia romance. It's fast-paced and will leave you craving a dragon shifter... or three!

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CHAPTER ONE



ZURI

If you'd asked me what I thought would happen that night, dying wouldn't have been my answer. At the age of twenty-six, I don't often think about how I'll die. We all know we must go some day.

But we take comfort in not knowing when that day will come. It would've ruined my mood if I'd known that night would be my last. Especially since there was so much more I'd wanted to do with my life.

I wasn't done living it up yet. And once I was done, I'd hoped to marry a handsome rich man and have his babies. As for tonight, all I'd wanted to do was hang with my three besties and celebrate the fact that one of them had accomplished her life's dream.

One of her fantasy romance novels was being made into a movie.

How freaking awesome was that! And to think, the idea for the series had come from a recurring dream CiCi had been having since we were kids. We'd told her to write a story about it years ago.

Finally, she listened. Ciori had worked hard on that series. So many nights she'd called us to run ideas by us. And like the good friends we were, we sacrificed our sleep to help her work through plot holes.

Her hard work had paid off, and I was so damn proud of her. Tonight, we were going to show her a good time because she deserved it. I sat in the back seat of Kenadi's SUV with Brielle beside me, and Ciori up front.

I was touching up my lipstick in the little mirror on the back of the passenger seat. We'd just picked up Brielle from her place. I won't lie, I was shocked that she'd actually come out with us.

And she was actually dressed in a sexy outfit, flaunting that curvaceous figure she usually tried to hide because her husband said she needed to lose weight. *Bastard!* Her husband wasn't a fan of her going out with the girls. He claimed married women shouldn't hang with single women too much.

Fuck that and fuck him.

The real reason he didn't like us was because of that one time, about two years ago, when we'd jumped his sorry ass after we found out he'd hit Bri. We'd hoped Bri would leave him after that.

But she didn't. She was still with his sorry ass. And for once, I was going to try to hold my tongue and not bring him up. I wanted to tell her that even though she looked cute tonight, and I loved the short, pixie hairstyle on her, she also looked drained.

That marriage was sucking the vitality out of her. I'd rather be single for life than unhappily married. But whenever I brought up her leaving him, it put her in a bad mood and ruined the night.

So, for the sake of Ciori's celebration, I was going to shut up for once. We were all dressed up tonight and looking good. Ciori had told us that the dress code for tonight was black, grown, and sexy attire. I stared around at my friends in their black party dresses.

We'd all understood the assignment!

What made tonight even better was the Blood Moon. We'd always been obsessed with space and the stars, so seeing one was already a big deal for us. But this one felt extra special since CiCi had written a Blood Moon into *Realm of Fantasies*.

Seeing one on the same night we were celebrating her movie deal felt like the universe was celebrating with us. Like this night was destined to happen. Like it was fated, if you believed in that kind of stuff. Which we did.

Kena glanced at Ciori. "I still can't believe your new series is being made into a movie."

"Only the first book," Ciori explained, pushing strands of her long, curly hair out of her face. "If the first movie does well, they want to move on to the second book and keep going from there."

“Book 1 will do great,” I told her as I snapped the cap back onto my lipstick and dropped it into my purse. “I’m happy for you, CiCi. Truly. But I hate that the entire world is soon going to loathe the name... *Zuri Bane*.”

Ciori groaned. “Oh, my gosh. Are you ever going to let that go?”

“No. You named an evil bitch after me. I can’t let that go. You didn’t make Brielle or Kenadi’s namesakes evil. Actually, you made them the female leads of their books.”

“I’ve apologized about that. Fictional Zuri wasn’t evil in the beginning,” Ciori defended her actions.

But there was no defending what she’d done to my namesake.

“Don’t try to talk around it. The bottom line is that you named the villainess after me. That’s not cool.”

“I didn’t plan to put any of your names in the books. But after I put you in book one, Bri and Kena started complaining about not being in a book. So I put them in a book. I didn’t plan for it to happen this way. As for fictional Zuri, when I was plotting her, I needed her to have a great name. And you have a great name.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” I told her, smiling at the compliment.

My name was kind of awesome. The headmistress at the orphanage we’d grown up in had named me. The others had arrived with names already. Only I had been left on the front steps of the orphanage, no name, nothing.

“Fictional Zuri had reasons for becoming the way she did,” Ciori argued. “You just refuse to have any sympathy for her.”

“I had plenty of sympathy for her in the beginning of the book. Her family treated her like shit because she couldn’t shift. Her father forced her to marry three men who didn’t want her, and those same men made it clear they were in love with somebody else. I was on her side right up until she decided all of that was the heroine, Mei Lin’s, fault.”

“Exactly,” Kena agreed. “That’s where she lost me too.”

“Thank you.” I pointed toward the front seat. “See? Kena understands.”

“I didn’t say I agreed with everything you’ve been saying for the last two years about the character. Just that part,” Kena clarified, staring back at me, her natural curls bouncing every time she moved her head.

“You agreed with the important part,” I told her.

Ciori shook her head. “Zuri was desperate. She spent her entire life being told she was defective since she couldn’t shift. And then when her

designation couldn't be determined, her father made her undergo so much testing to prove she was an omega and able to bear children. On top of all that, he made it clear that producing an heir for the princes was basically the only way she could prove she had any value to the family."

"And Orion Bane was trash for that," I said. "Which is why she should've poisoned his ass instead of Mei Lin, the female lead."

Kena burst out laughing.

Even Ciori laughed at that. "And then I wouldn't have had a book."

"You would've had a shorter book," I shrugged.

"A very short book," Ciori said.

"At least it would've been satisfying," I mumbled.

"You're impossible."

"No, I'm practical. If three men tell me they're in love with another woman, I'm not spending months trying to convince them they picked wrong. I'm going to believe them. I mean, the alphas were hot and all..."

"Hell yeah," Kena agreed. "I wish CiCi would've made the story more erotic because those fade-to-black parts had me wanting to throw my e-reader at the wall."

"I'm not good at writing sex scenes," CiCi whined. "I described their junk and their knots. You got to see a little hanky-panky. That was enough. I made sure they had big dick energy."

"True," I agreed. "But that big dick energy wasn't worth her losing her life," I finished.

"Not even three big dicks?" CiCi joked.

"Not even three," I laughed.

"What about the marriage?" Bri questioned in that soft voice of hers.

"What about it?" I asked, looking over at her.

"You can't just walk away from a royal marriage," she pointed out.

Yeah, walking away wasn't exactly an option in the world Ciori had created. A royal decree was law, and defying the King could get your entire clan killed.

"Would you walk away from a marriage the King decreed?" Bri asked.

"No, I wouldn't disobey the decree. But I wouldn't obsess over those men. I would let them go play house with their delicate little Mei Lin while I found something better to do with my time."

Ciori looked back at me. "Something better like what?"

“Anything. Learn to shift so I could learn to fly. The heffa never learned to shift in the book. She never figured out that her inability to shift was a mind thing, not a physical thing. And you’re wrong for that.”

My friends laughed as they often did when we had these types of book discussions.

“Also, if I were her, I would’ve spent my days shopping. Those triad dragons Zuri married were rich and hoarded gold. As their wife, half of that gold was mine. I could find a hobby. Zuri came from the Poison Clan. She could’ve gone and made antidotes to help people who’d been poisoned or something. Anything would’ve been better than destroying her whole life over three men.”

“You make everything sound simple,” Bri murmured.

“Because sometimes it is,” I told her. “Loving somebody doesn’t mean you have to lose your damn mind over them.”

Kena nodded. “I’m with Zuri on that one.”

When I looked over at Bri, her smile had faded, and her expression had become forlorn. *Shit*. What had that bastard she’d married done now? Should I say something or mind my business?

Fuck that. She was my business.

“What’s wrong, Bri?” I asked.

Glancing up at me, she forced a smile. “Nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“About the Brielle from Ciori’s books. I love what CiCi did with the character.”

Ciori turned slightly in her seat. “Yeah?”

Bri nodded. “You made her confident. She loved her body, her curves, and her love handles. She was strong. The kind of woman who didn’t take bullshit from anyone.”

She looked down at her hands, which were clutching her small purse.

“I know why you did that,” Bri whispered. “You did it hoping that I could become more like her.”

“Bri...” Ciori started.

“It’s okay. That’s why I love her. I want to become more like her, and I’m glad you wrote her like that. Actually, reading Brielle’s book finally gave me the courage to do something I should’ve done a long time ago.”

The mood in the car changed. All of us fell silent, our gazes drifting to Bri. When our car swerved slightly, I glanced at Kena to find her trying to watch Bri in the rearview mirror.

"Eyes on the road," I whispered.

"Sorry," Kena whispered back.

I didn't know why we were whispering. Bri slowly lifted her hand. Only then did I notice the ring missing from her finger. I gasped, tears filling my eyes.

"I took it off tonight," she muttered, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'm... I'm leaving him."

For a second, nobody said anything. I stared at Bri's bare ring finger, then at the tears rolling down her cheeks. I'd wanted to hear those words for so long. Now that she'd finally said them, I didn't know what to say.

Apparently, Kena didn't have that problem. With her usual take-charge attitude, she skipped over the emotional part and went straight to the practical part.

"Okay. That's great. When are you planning to leave him for good?" Kena asked.

Bri wiped her cheeks. "Soon. I've already started getting things together. I told him I lost the ring. He said he's not buying a new one. I knew he'd say that."

"Okay," Kena said. "So, you're leaving him soon. How soon?"

"By the end of next week. He's leaving at the end of the week for another business trip. He's taking his secretary again. They'll be gone two weeks this time," Bri said, chuckling sarcastically.

That cheating bastard.

He had a beautiful and accomplished woman like Bri by his side, and he didn't treat her right. Yet, he spoiled that fake-ass, whiny-voiced secretary of his. I should've hired someone to kidnap him and dump his body somewhere private years ago.

But first, I'd tell them to cut his penis off. If he didn't know how to keep it in his pants, then he didn't need it. According to Bri, his dick wasn't even that good. It was always the *Can't Fuck* men who liked to throw their dick around like it was made of gold.

"Do you have somewhere to live?" Kena asked.

"Yes."

"Somewhere he doesn't know about?" Kena pressed.

Bri nodded, and with a slight smile, she said, "Yes, Kena."

"Does he have access to your money?" Kena continued.

"No. I opened a new account a couple of months ago, and I've been putting my money in it."

"What about the tax office?" Kena questioned.

"He can't touch my business or my business account."

"He's a lawyer, Bri," Kena pointed out. "And he enjoys the idea of having a successful accountant as his wife. He's going to contest the divorce."

"I know. That's why I hired a P.I. I have photos of him and his secretary in compromising positions."

"Are there faces clearly visible?" I asked.

Bri nodded. "Oh, and I'd been wondering why he'd never let me anywhere near his firm's books, even though I do bookkeeping for other law firms. Now I know why. My PI found out he's been embezzling money from the firm."

"Okaay, PI," I drawled, impressed.

"I plan to use this to force him to divorce me," Bri said.

"What property do y'all have together? What's in your name and what's in his?" Kena asked like she was a damn divorce lawyer and not a fitness instructor and nutritionist at the gym she owned.

I leaned forward and slapped the back of Kena's seat.

"Can you stop interrogating her for five seconds so the rest of us can talk?"

"I'm just making sure she has a plan and that everything is in order," Kena said, briefly glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"I have a plan," Bri insisted.

"See? She has a plan." I turned back to Bri. "Now, when are we going to get your stuff?"

Bri stared at me. "We?"

"Yes, we."

"Zuri..." Bri started.

"What?"

"You are not coming to my house to fight my husband again."

"Who said anything about fighting him?" I asked.

"We know you," CiCi said.

“I can control myself,” I told her. “As long as he don’t start nothing, there won’t be nothing.”

“I’m serious,” Bri said. “I don’t want any of you confronting him. Plus you won’t get the chance to because I’m hiring a company to help me move while he’s on his work trip.”

“That’s smart,” Kena said.

“I’ve already moved some of my important things. He hasn’t noticed.” Bri looked down at her bare ring finger. “I was going to wait another couple of months, you know, just until tax season was over. But I don’t want to anymore. I’m tired.”

That last part wiped the smile off my face.

“I’m tired of being nervous when I hear his car pull into the driveway. I’m tired of watching what I say so I don’t piss him off. I’m tired of making excuses for why I can’t go anywhere with y’all. I’m tired of him telling me that I’ve gained weight since we got married. Tired of the look of disgust on his face when he sees me getting dressed. We haven’t had sex in over a year. And I don’t miss the intimacy at all. I’ve been tired of him touching me.” She took a shaky breath. “I’m just tired of him. Period.”

“Then leave his ass and don’t look back,” I said.

Bri smiled through the tears threatening to fall again. “I am. For real this time. I’m ready to live again. No, I’m ready to thrive again.”

“Hell yes,” CiCi said. “Where are you moving your stuff to? You know, if you need somewhere to stay, you can stay with me.”

“Or me,” Kena added.

“Or me,” I offered. “I’m the best option. My guest room is cuter.”

“Your guest room is full of wigs,” Kena said.

“They have their own shelves.”

“You had three mannequin heads sitting on the bed the last time I was there. While you were doing my hair, I kept feeling like they were watching me. They scared the hell out of me.” Kena shivered.

“I was working on new wigs for my wig line. Shut up,” I told her.

Bri laughed. “I already found a condo.”

I blinked. “You did?”

She nodded. “I already signed the lease and everything.”

“Bri!” CiCi shouted.

“What?”

“Why are you just now telling us this? We could’ve helped you,” CiCi said.

“I needed to do it by myself. And once it was done, I wanted to tell y’all in person instead of in the group chat.”

Kena reached one hand toward the back seat without looking away from the road. Bri leaned forward and grabbed it.

“I’m proud of you, my beautiful and strong Bri-Bri,” Kena said, holding her hand.

“Me too,” CiCi added.

I looked at Bri, and the tears finally won. One rolled down my cheek before I could stop it.

“Damn it.” I wiped it away. “Now y’all got me crying before we even make it to the restaurant. I’m going to ruin my makeup.”

“Big baby,” CiCi muttered.

“Shut up, CiCi.”

Bri laughed again, but she was crying too. I reached for her other hand. She placed it in mine. I gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m proud of you,” I whispered.

“Thank you,” she told me as Kena released her hand.

“And if he puts his hands on you before you get out of there, call me,” I told her. “I’m ready to put all those self-defense lessons we learned at Kena’s gym to use.”

“I’ll call you,” she promised.

“Call me too,” Kena spoke up. “I’ll come with my swords.”

“Ooh,” I cooed. “Yeah, our swords. Those sword classes we took will finally pay off and give us a reason to use the swords we’d purchased. I can get my Michonne on.”

“I can’t risk losing my movie deal,” CiCi said. “So, my sword will remain sheathed. But I’ll bail you all out of jail after you get arrested.”

Our laughter filled the car. And for the first time in a long time, Bri didn’t have that air of sadness that seemed to cling to her every time I saw her. Tonight was supposed to be CiCi’s night, but now we had two things to celebrate.

CiCi was getting her movie, and Bri was finally getting rid of the asshole she should’ve left years ago. Tonight was a good night. Still smiling, I turned and looked out the passenger window.

That was when I saw the headlights. At first, my brain didn't understand what I was looking at. Two bright lights were coming toward us from the side, moving too fast. My smile disappeared.

"Kena," I yelled.

She must have seen them at the same time.

"Oh, shit!" she shouted.

The SUV jerked hard. Bri screamed. Everything happened too fast after that. A horn blared. Tires screeched. Kena yanked the wheel, and my body slammed sideways before the seat belt snapped me back, digging into my chest.

Then something smashed into us. The sound was horrible. Metal crushed. Glass exploded. My head snapped sideways, and pain burst through me so violently that for a second, I couldn't breathe.

Someone was screaming. Maybe all of us were. The SUV spun, and I grabbed for Bri, but I couldn't tell where she was anymore. My ears rang so loudly that every other sound seemed far away.

"Bri!"

I didn't know if I'd actually screamed her name or only thought I had. Our car was still moving. Tilting. The world turned upside down, and my stomach dropped as the SUV rolled. Something warm ran down the side of my face.

My body dropped, my eyes landing on the floorboards. More glass shattered. And then everything stopped. For a few seconds, I couldn't move. But I knew that I was hanging upside down, and the seatbelt felt like it was cutting into my flesh. My chest hurt. My head hurt.

Hell, everything hurt.

"Kena?" I tried to shout, but my voice came out as a rasp. Nobody answered. "CiCi?"

Nothing. Panic pulsed through the pain. I tried to turn toward Bri, but my body wouldn't cooperate, and everything was blurry. How could this have happened? On tonight of all nights?

We were supposed to be going to dinner. We were supposed to celebrate. CiCi had a movie being made. The four of us best friends should have been laughing and drinking champagne until the wee hours of the morning.

Instead, I didn't even know if my best friends, my sisters, were still alive. My eyelids grew heavy. The pain became too much to bear. My last

thought was, *Please be okay, Bri, Kena, and CiCi*. And then my world went dark.

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CHAPTER TWO



ZURI

When I opened my eyes again, I was hot.

Not warm. *Burning hot!* My skin felt like it was on fire. It also felt overly sensitive. And whatever I was wearing was heavy as hell, making the heat damn near suffocating. I tried to kick off what I assumed was a blanket, but my legs barely moved.

What the hell?

I blinked until my blurry vision cleared enough for me to see sheer red fabric hanging above my head. It draped from the top of an enormous bed, trimmed with gold embroidery. Tiny dragons twisted through clouds and flowers along the edges of the fabric.

This definitely wasn't Kena's SUV.

Memories of the accident rushed back. The headlights. Kena jerking the wheel. Bri screaming. The sound of metal crunching and glass shattering around us. Then... nothing. Only darkness and a mind-numbing silence. Now... this! Where was I? Better yet, where were my friends?

"Kena?" I called, but her name came out weak and slurred.

I tried to sit up, but my arms felt like they weighed a hundred pounds. That slight movement made the room tilt so badly that I dropped back against the pillows and squeezed my eyes shut. Yet, I was still spinning.

Damn it.

I attempted to ignore the dizziness as I gathered my thoughts.

Okay, Zuri, think.

I had to be in a hospital. Maybe I was drugged out of my mind on pain medication. That would explain why my body felt strange and why I couldn't seem to make my limbs work properly.

It did not, however, explain the red canopy bed, unless I'd somehow been taken to the fanciest hospital in Louisiana. Even a fancy hospital wouldn't have dragon decor. *Shit.* Had I been rescued by some voodoo priestess?

I didn't have to practice it to believe it was real.

I opened my eyes again. They darted left, then right. I tilted my chin toward my chest, trying to see as much of the room as I could without making myself dizzy again. The room was huge and lit by dozens of candles.

Dark wood furniture filled the space, and red and gold seemed to cover damn near everything. A sweet, smoky scent hung in the air that reminded me of incense, but beneath it were other scents I couldn't identify.

Everything smelled stronger than it should have. I could smell the wax from the burning candles, and even hints of floral notes from flowers that smelled like they were across the room to my right.

How the hell did I know that?

My hearing seemed to be acting weird too. I could hear the soft crackle of the candle flames and the faint rustle of fabric from the canopy. Why the hell could I hear candles burning? The thud of approaching footsteps echoed in my ears.

Could that be the doctor approaching?

I tried to sit up again. What did I do that for? I collapsed against the bed, eyes drifting shut, chest heaving from the exertion.

You were in a wreck, Zuri. Stop trying to move. Damn.

"Don't pretend to be asleep now," a deep male voice filled the room.

My eyes snapped open. This time, I didn't try to sit up. I tilted my chin toward my chest again and squinted, making out the figures of three men approaching the bed. I blinked rapidly as they drew closer.

They stopped and stood there, all three of them staring down at me with almond-shaped eyes and furrowed brows. The warm glow of the candles highlighted their dark gazes and sun-kissed complexions.

I stared up at them, the questions I'd been about to ask my *doctor* melting on my tongue. They were clearly not physicians. For a few moments, I forgot about the accident. Hell, I almost forgot my own name.

These three men literally stole the words from my mouth. They damn near stole the air from my lungs. Lips parted, all I could do was stare at them. My attention settled first on the man standing in the middle.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in black robes trimmed with gold. His hair was dark green, which should've looked ridiculous on a grown man. It didn't. If anything, it made him even more striking.

He was handsome as hell, but that hard-ass expression on his face made his good looks less appealing. My gaze drifted to the man beside him. His dark hair was long, the silky strands falling past his shoulders.

His face was leaner than the green-haired guy's, with high cheekbones, a straight nose, and a defined jaw. His dark eyes were strikingly beautiful. Like staring into a starless night. And he watched me without blinking.

This man was gorgeous. There really wasn't another word for him. But there was something cold about that beauty, something dangerous, especially with the way he stood there studying me.

A chill raced down my spine, and I quickly averted my gaze. I took in the third man. His black hair was cut close to his head. *A buzz cut*. Thick brows sat above dark eyes that watched me with an unnerving calmness.

He had high cheekbones, a straight nose, and full lips. A hint of facial hair dusted his upper lip and traced his chiseled jawline. Like the other two, he was beyond handsome. But he wasn't glaring at me like the green-haired man or studying me with the long-haired guy's cold scrutiny.

Mr. Buzz Cut simply looked... bored. Like he didn't want to be here. Like he didn't want to see me. Like I was... beneath him. *Disdain!* That was the expression on his face. I cocked my head to the side, my gaze swinging from one man to the next.

Now that I thought about it, these men looked familiar. My gaze jerked to the green-haired man again. There was something about that green hair. My foggy brain struggled to remember where I knew him from.

Damn it! Why couldn't I remember?

I glanced from the long-haired one beside him to the one with the buzz cut. Then it hit me. I truly had seen these men before. Not in person, of course. I'd seen drawings of them. *Artwork*.

CiCi had commissioned character art for her latest series, *Realm of Fantasies*. She had their pictures on her website and all over her social media pages. They'd been included on promotional material and special editions that I'd helped her create.

I'd stared at those damn pictures enough while reading the book to know exactly who I was looking at. The green-haired man was Zhen Kai of the Zhen family's Iron Clan. The long-haired one was Wu Daemin of the Wu family's Assassin Clan. And the one with the buzz cut was Hao Zian of the Hao family's Shadow Clan.

Kai, Daemin, and Zian. The three leaders of the Triad who were related to the new king, making them royals now. They were the three dragon-shifter alphas from the first book in Realm of Fantasies.

But how were they standing before me right now? This had to be a dream or a hallucination. Maybe I was unconscious in the hospital, and my brain had decided to entertain itself. That made more sense than believing that three fictional men were truly standing in front of me.

"Are you listening to me?" Kai, the green-haired guy, asked, his tone laced with fury.

I frowned at him. His voice sounded exactly as I'd imagined while reading the book. Deep, commanding, and a little too used to people doing whatever the hell he told them to do.

"I don't know what your father told you before sending you here," he continued. "But this marriage changes nothing."

My father?

What father?

I didn't have a father.

I had three best friends, the woman who'd raised us at the orphanage, an online boutique, a wig business, and soon a hospital bill waiting for me somewhere in the real world. What I didn't have was a father, and I definitely wasn't married.

Kai kept talking, but I could barely concentrate on what he was saying. My head felt too heavy, and the ringing in my ears had returned. I blinked, my vision starting to blur again. Then he said something that made my heart almost stop beating.

"Zuri Bane of the Poison Clan, do you hear me?" he roared.

My stomach dropped.

Poison Clan?

Zuri Bane of the fucking Poison Clan!

I looked down at myself. I wasn't wearing the black dress I'd put on for my girls' night celebration. Instead, red silk covered me from my chest to my ankles. Layers of it. Gold thread decorated the fabric in elaborate patterns.

I managed to lift one sluggish hand. Gold-painted nails stared back at me. My nails were supposed to be medium-length, pale pink, and French-tipped. These were long, like claws. And sharp. They were the nails of Zuri Bane of the Poison Clan.

"No," I mumbled, the word coming out as a breathless whisper.

I looked around the room again, then back at the men.

Noooo!

My heart started beating so hard that I could hear it pounding in my ears. This could not be happening. I could not be *that* Zuri Bane. There had to be another explanation. *Please, let there be another explanation.*

"Daveah was the omega promised to us," Kai continued, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I was seconds away from having a complete breakdown. "Your father replacing her with you at the last minute does not change the agreement between our families."

Daveah?

I knew that name too. Daveah Bane was Zuri's younger sister. She was the daughter Orion had originally arranged to marry the three new leaders of the Triad. Except Daveah had been in love with a scholar and wanted nothing to do with her father's arrangement.

She ran away with her lover before the wedding. That was how Zuri ended up here. Orion couldn't break the marriage pact without bringing the King's wrath down on the Bane family, so he'd ordered his oldest daughter back home from the countryside to take her sister's place.

I looked down at the red silk covering me again. This was a traditional wedding dress. My gaze moved back to the three men standing beside the bed. And those were the new leaders of the Triad.

Each one came from one of the three founding families. Together, they ruled over their territories with iron fists. And they destroyed anyone who got in their way.

"Oh. My. God," I whispered.

I was in CiCi's book. And this was Zuri Bane's wedding night. And if I was Zuri Bane, that meant the three men standing in front of me were my

husbands. My stomach rolled, and I suddenly felt nauseous.

No. I refused to believe this was really happening to me. Although I couldn't think of one, there had to be a logical explanation for why I was lying in Zuri Bane's bed, wearing her wedding clothes, with her husbands standing over me.

Kai's expression hardened when I didn't respond.

"Whatever expectations Lord Bane gave you about this marriage, understand this now. Mei Lin is our secondary consort only because the marriage pact requires a Bane woman to hold the position of our primary wife. But Mei Lin is still our priority. She's still the lady who will manage this household. That will not change simply because Daveah ran away and you were forced into our lives."

Mei Lin.

My heart gave another uncomfortable thump. Of course she was here too. Mei Lin was the heroine of the first book. She'd grown up with Kai, Daemin, and Zian. The four of them had been close since childhood, and the men had spent most of their lives protecting her because she was a delicate omega.

She was their *Lin'er*.

The woman they loved.

I remembered exactly what happened between Mei Lin and Zuri, and for the first time since Kai said my name, something other than panic pushed through my confusion. At this point in the story, Mei Lin was healthy and unharmed.

Zuri hadn't poisoned her yet. I stared at Kai as that realization settled over me. Zuri hadn't begun tormenting the Blasian female lead. She hadn't spent months competing with her for the alphas' attention.

She hadn't drugged the men to get them into her bed. She hadn't done any of the horrible things that eventually turned everyone against her. None of it had happened yet. I was at the beginning of their story, which meant I could change Zuri's fate.

"You will treat our Lin'er with the respect her position deserves," Kai, Mr. Green Hair, ordered.

Fuck their Lin'er. I wanted nothing to do with any of them. I opened my mouth to tell him that, but no words emerged. I swallowed and tried again.

"Fu..."

My tongue felt too thick for my mouth. Kai frowned. *Damn it.* I really wished I could tell them I didn't give a damn about Mei Lin being their secondary consort. If this really was CiCi's book, the last thing I planned to do was repeat Zuri's mistakes.

They could love Mei Lin all they wanted. I had no intention of getting in their way. What I needed was to figure out what had happened to me and whether Kena, Bri, and CiCi were still alive somewhere in the real world.

The thought of my friends made my chest ache. Were they in a hospital? Were they looking for me? Or had none of us survived that crash? *Was I... Could I be... dead?* I pushed that thought away before the panic could take over.

I couldn't think about that right now. Not while my head was spinning and three men who shouldn't exist stood beside my bed.

"I think something is wrong with her," Zian stated.

His voice was deep too, though much calmer than Kai's. Like his expression, even his words dripped with disdain.

"I'm fine," I tried to say.

It sounded nothing like *I'm fine*. Daemin's gaze moved over my face again before he stepped toward the bed, his long hair brushing against his shoulders as he walked. As he drew closer, I caught the scent of leather mixed with something warm and spicy.

It took me a moment to recognize the spice as cloves. My body reacted before my brain could make sense of anything. The heat burning beneath my skin intensified. A flutter started low in my belly before drifting lower to places that shouldn't be fluttering right now.

I pressed my legs together, confused by the sudden reaction. Then my nipples hardened beneath the heavy layers of silk, and a throbbing ache settled between my thighs. My breath caught as a tremble wracked my body.

The feeling got worse when Daemin took another step toward me. That's when I realized that the scent of leather and spice was coming from him. He smelled... he smelled... *intoxicating*.

My mouth watered. But that wasn't the only thing growing wet. My eyes widened when a rush of warmth spread between my legs. For one horrible second, it felt like my world had stopped spinning.

Oh, no. I knew what this was. I'd read enough omegaverse romances to know exactly what happened when an omega became aroused. CiCi had

certainly written enough about it in *Realm of Fantasies*.

Slick.

This alpha's presence was making me slick for him. No way. I wasn't an omega. I was human. At least, that's what I'd been before I ended up in this book. Damn it. It seemed I was now a real omega with real omega needs.

And my body was telling me I needed these alphas. Daemin stopped, his nostrils flaring slightly. Could he... could he smell what was happening to me? That happened in these types of books.

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.

He could smell that I was wet for him! How embarrassing! Daemin didn't come any closer, but he didn't back away either. Behind him, Kai's hands curled into fists. Even Zian no longer looked bored.

His brows pulled together as his gaze roamed over me. A low sound rumbled through the room. I couldn't tell which one of them had made it. I tried to scoot back but found myself unable to move.

Instead, something inside me was urging me to move closer to the alphas. It took all of my strength to hold still. When Daemin started to lean toward me again, Kai stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder, forcing him back.

"We're leaving," Kai said suddenly, rubbing his free hand through his green tresses, disheveling his hair.

Looking slightly dazed, Daemin glanced at Kai but didn't argue. Instead, the long-haired alpha backed away from me, shrugging Kai's hand off his shoulder as he moved. For a moment, his eyes were glued to mine.

Then he shook his head, as if shaking himself out of a trance, and turned to leave. Zian glared at me for another moment before turning away also, following Daemin out of the room. Kai remained where he was, staring at me like he was trying to make sense of something.

Finally, he spoke. "Whatever Lord Bane gave you has clearly not worn off. We'll discuss the terms of this marriage when you're coherent enough to understand them."

My confusion must have shown on my face because his mouth tightened.

"Your father drugged you. You were barely conscious when you arrived." He inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring. "Whatever he gave you is affecting your scent. I'm guessing it was some type of aphrodisiac meant to

provoke a response from us. None of us will touch you while you're in this condition."

Wait a minute.

What scent?

In the book, Zuri was a dragon shifter who couldn't shift, which made her a cold omega. She'd never gone into heat and had never developed an omega scent. Her family considered her defective because of that.

That was part of the reason they despised her and sent her to live in the countryside with her grandmother. So why did I suddenly have a scent? Why was I suddenly wet and aroused? That never happened in the book.

"We'll spend the rest of the evening with Lin'er," Kai continued. "The King's decree remains unchanged. We will not violate it. So rest assured, our marriage to her will not be consummated until an heir has been conceived within the primary marriage."

I stared at him. Primary marriage? That would be this marriage.

They wanted an heir?

With me?

Did these men really expect me to sleep with them? I mean, that wouldn't be a horrible thing. They were sexy as hell. And as long as they didn't talk, I could take one for the team. However, I wasn't the real Zuri.

And they never slept with her in the book. The King ordered them to produce an heir, but Zuri's schemes eventually made them hate her so much they refused to touch her. Their refusal even caused problems between them and the King.

Kai kept talking, but I barely heard anything he said. I was too busy trying to remember the book's timeline. I caught something about discussing the heir matter once I had recovered.

The problem was, when Zuri recovered, she immediately started targeting Mei Lin, angering the alphas and making them hate her more. Done talking, Kai took another step back, but his eyes remained on me.

A frown marred his handsome face, almost like there was something about me he couldn't figure out. Finally, he turned away from me and walked out, leaving me alone in this strange room, in this strange world, with these strange feelings.

With all of them finally gone, I closed my eyes, hoping when I reopened them, I'd be back home. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. I was still

trapped here, in a body that wasn't mine, living a life that wasn't mine. I lifted one hand and pinched myself as hard as I could.

"Ow."

I immediately let go. The sting remained. I stared at the spot I'd pinched. Maybe dreams could hurt. But this didn't feel like a dream. The heat was real. The lingering dizziness was real. The ridiculous amount of fabric weighing me down was real.

Even the embarrassing wetness between my thighs felt very, very real. I slowly lowered my hand. The last thing I remembered before ending up here was hanging upside down in Kena's SUV, praying my friends were okay. Then darkness. Now I was here.

Inside the *Realm of Fantasies*.

I didn't know how it had happened. I didn't know if I was dead, unconscious, or had somehow lost my mind after the accident. But I knew this story. And I knew Zuri Bane. I knew she would become a manipulative villainess.

And I knew she would end up locked inside a tower by the three men I had just watched walk out of this room. In that tower was where she would breathe her last breath. She would die heartbroken, regretful, and alone.

And that would be my fate if I didn't find a way to wake up.

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CHAPTER THREE



ZURI

The doors had barely closed behind them when they opened again. I looked up, expecting one of the three men to have returned. Instead, a woman hurried inside, lifting the hem of her deep blue dress as she crossed the room.

She had smooth umber-brown skin, a slender face with high cheekbones, and dark eyes beneath gently arched brows. Her black hair was parted down the middle and gathered into a long, thick braid that hung over one shoulder.

"Princess," she whispered. "It's me."

I knew exactly who she was. *Allie*. Zuri's personal maid and the most loyal person she'd had in CiCi's book. Even after everyone else turned against Zuri, Allie stayed. Right now, she looked sick with worry. Allie rushed to the bed and pressed the back of her hand against my forehead.

"How do you feel?" she asked, voice low.

"Like somebody drugged me," I rasped, throat dry.

Lowering her hand, she mumbled, "What kind of father does this to his eldest daughter?"

The kind that doesn't care about anyone but himself.

She reached for the pitcher beside the bed and poured me a cup of water. I took it gratefully. My hand was steadier than it had been earlier, although my arms still felt heavier than normal.

But at least that intense feeling of arousal from moments ago was dissipating now that the alphas were no longer in the room with me. I was still in need of a hot shower, you know, because of the slick. *Ugh!*

"Drink slowly," she instructed.

I did. The cool water helped with the dryness in my mouth and throat. When I finished, Allie took the cup from me, then reached for the pins in my hair. I lowered my head, letting her take this mess off my head.

Whatever this monstrosity was, it had my neck aching. I think CiCi had described it as a wedding crown or something. I hated it.

"Help me sit up," I told Allie.

"You should rest."

"I don't have time to rest," I insisted.

I needed to start plotting how I was going to survive in this book. Allie hesitated, then slid an arm behind me. A dizzy spell came over me. I closed my eyes and waited for the spinning to stop.

Allie propped the pillows up behind me, then helped me lie back against them. In this position, I could see the room better. I tamped down a wave of panic that threatened to overtake me. I was really in CiCi's book. Allie went back to removing the pins from my hair.

"What happened before my father gave me the drug?" I asked, trying to recall all of today's details. "I remember arguing with him. Everything after that is hazy."

"You argued because he wouldn't allow you to speak to the princes before the ceremony."

I frowned. Had that happened in the book? I couldn't remember.

"You wanted to tell them what Lady Daveah had done yourself," Allie continued. "You said you wouldn't stand before them pretending nothing had happened. They were expecting your sister. You thought they deserved to know why you had been sent in her place."

"And my father didn't agree."

"He forbade it."

That sounded like Orion. Allie placed another pin on the table.

"You told him you would still honor the marriage if the princes agreed to accept you. You only wanted them to know the truth first."

Oh, yeah. I'd forgotten that part. At the start of the book, Zuri had actually been a good person. She hadn't wanted to trick the princes into marrying her. That had been her father's plan.

"That's why he drugged me," I whispered. "Because I refused to get into the wedding sedan. I'd wanted to meet with the princes first to explain the situation."

"Yes." Allie nodded. "You didn't refuse the marriage. You just wanted to talk to the princes first. But your father was afraid they would get upset when they learned of the sister swap and take the matter before their cousin, well, Prince Kai's cousin, the King. If they refused you and reported that Lady Daveah had abandoned the marriage ordered by His Majesty, the Bane family would have been held responsible."

"So he made sure they couldn't refuse," I mused.

Allie nodded. "I guess it's a good thing the princes ordered you escorted into the estate through the side hall and didn't prepare a lavish wedding. You were too drugged to walk down the aisle. I had to carry you inside with the help of the steward. The princes didn't know it was you who'd entered the manor until the steward caught a glimpse of your face when the wind lifted your veil. He must've run and told them the bride had been switched."

I wasn't worried about the steward. My mind was stuck on the fact that I'd been carried inside because I was too drugged out of my mind to walk on my own. *How embarrassing!*

I guess this could be considered secondhand embarrassment, since it hadn't happened to me, per se. Still, it was embarrassing. I looked toward the doors the three alphas had just walked out of.

They knew Orion had drugged me, but they clearly didn't know why. They thought I'd been given some kind of aphrodisiac, something that was affecting my scent so I could elicit a sexual response from them.

Orion hadn't been trying to make his daughter more appealing to the three alphas. He'd been making sure she was so out of it, she wouldn't be able to tell them the truth. Once she spent the night under the princes' roof as their bride, it wouldn't matter whether they touched her or not.

Everyone would assume they had. Her reputation, well... *my* reputation would be ruined if they sent me home afterward. Orion knew the princes would be expected to take responsibility for me.

He'd covered himself from both directions. He'd fulfilled the Bane family's obligation by delivering a bride, and he'd made it nearly impossible for the princes to send me back without creating another scandal.

Orion Bane was a sneaky and manipulative bastard. I didn't know what else my father had planned for me, but one thing was certain: I wasn't going

to make it easy for him. Allie finished removing the last pin from my hair, then lifted the dragon crown from my head. My curls fell freely around my shoulders.

"Your father isn't finished," she said, setting the small crown onto the table. "He has more plans for you."

"What else does he want?" I asked, massaging my scalp, happy to have the wedding pins out of my head.

"He wants you to secure your position here. Once you give the princes an heir, he believes the Bane family will finally have the connection to the imperial court he's wanted for years."

Right. I remembered that from the book. Orion had always been obsessed with increasing the Poison Clan's status. Though the Bane family was noble, Orion was of lower rank than others in his circle.

"He hopes to become an imperial relative through you and your child. After that, he believes he'll have enough influence to become an imperial merchant. He wants the Bane Clan to supply the palace directly. Medicine, herbs, poisons, whatever else the imperial household requires. He's been trying to secure the position for years."

So, Daveah hadn't just run away from an arranged marriage. She'd nearly ruined whatever grand plan Orion had been working toward. No wonder he'd been so desperate to shove another daughter into her place.

"He told me to remind you that once your position with the princes is secure, you need to speak to them on his behalf and have them recommend him to the King in the future."

Fuck that!

The original Zuri had wanted her father's love and respect so badly that she'd often argued with the alphas on his behalf, pushing them to speak to the King and recommend Orion as a supplier of medicinal herbs to the palace.

The princes had always refused. Kai warned her that if Orion failed to deliver what he promised, the responsibility would fall back on them. But Zuri hadn't listened. She'd convinced herself they were refusing because they didn't love her.

"I don't want to be my father's pawn, Allie," I whispered, refusing to be controlled by Orion.

"But what can you do? You don't have anyone else to back you up, princess."

True. In this world, the weak needed a backer, and right now, I was probably the weakest person in this manor. Since I didn't have someone powerful to protect me, I'd have to figure out how to become strong enough to protect myself. Allie too.

I looked around the room while she helped me out of the heavy outer layer of my wedding robe. The red silk was beautiful, but between the weight of it and the heat still lingering beneath my skin, I couldn't wait to get it off.

This was too much. I'd gotten into a car accident, woken up inside a book, been drugged by a father who wanted to use me for his own ambitions, and somehow ended up married to three dragon-shifting alphas who were already in love with someone else.

And now I was supposed to figure out how to survive all of it. Maybe I should just run away. The thought was tempting, but where would I even go? Back to the countryside? That would be the first place my father looked.

And going back there would put my grandmother and cousins in danger. No. Running wasn't an option. At least not yet. The King had ordered this marriage, and the princes couldn't consummate their marriage with Mei Lin until their primary wife gave them an heir.

If I disappeared back to the countryside, I'd be defying the same decree Orion had gone through all this trouble to satisfy. And I'd anger the princes, which would lead to them putting me in that tower where I would ultimately die.

I needed a way to give everyone what they wanted without sacrificing my life. Wait, that was it. I could just give the alphas what they wanted. I could have an heir for the princes, then ask for a divorce and leave.

I didn't know if the King would allow it, but it was worth finding out. If he did, the princes could live happily with their precious Lin'er, and I could leave. They'd have an heir, like the King wanted.

And they'd be free of me, like they wanted. As for my father, *fuck him*. His grandson would be a prince. That was all I could do for him. Once that was done, I could leave and explore this world.

Maybe I'd visit a temple, find a Daoist priest, and see if he could tell me how to wake the hell up and return to my world. And if I couldn't wake up, if I was truly trapped here, then I would find a way to make the best of it.

But I would do that far away from the capital, the King, the princes, and my father. I smiled, suddenly feeling like I just might be able to survive.

"That smile is scaring me," Allie mumbled warily as she hung my dress up, leaving me in a white slip of a gown.

"I have a plan," I told her, lying back against the pillows. "Come here. Let me tell you about it."

Allie rushed over and knelt next to the bed.

"Don't kneel. Bring over a chair."

Her eyes widened. "But..."

She fiddled with the edge of her sleeve. *Oh, right.* She was the maid. She wasn't allowed to sit when in my presence. What a dumb ass rule.

"Bring a chair," I told her.

She rose slowly to do as I said. But I could tell she wasn't okay with it. After positioning the chair next to the bed, she sat down, looking uncomfortable. Her gaze kept drifting to the door, as if she was afraid the princes would catch her sitting down.

"Allie," I said.

She looked at me. "Yes, Princess."

"From now on, you're not just my maid. You're my friend. And when we're alone, please don't treat me like a princess. Okay?"

She shook her head. "I can't do that."

"You can and you will."

She shook her head quickly. "I can't, Princess. Please don't ask me to. Our statuses are too different."

The alarm in her voice made me realize I was pushing too hard.

"Okay, you don't have to treat me as a friend," I rushed to say. "Just stop being so formal. I need a confidant more than I need a maid right now."

She stared at me for a moment, then tears filled her eyes.

"I'm sorry this is happening to you, princess," she whispered.

Something about the way she worried over me reminded me so much of Bri. Smiling at her, I softened my tone.

"It's okay. Stop crying. Let me tell you about my plan."

She swallowed, wiping at her eyes.

"I'm going to give the princes an heir, and then I'm going to divorce them."

Her lips parted. "Divorce them? Princess, His Majesty ordered this marriage."

"I know." I adjusted the pillow behind my back. "That's why I'm not packing my things and sneaking out of here tonight. I need to find out exactly what the decree says first and find a loophole. There's always a loophole."

Allie still looked doubtful.

"Think about it. The princes don't want me. They want Mei Lin. The only reason they have to stay married to me is because the King ordered them to marry a woman from the Bane family and produce an heir. He wanted them to have a bride from a noble family but not so noble that their in-laws would pose a threat to him. If I produce an heir, my job is done."

"But even if you give them an heir, that doesn't mean His Majesty will allow you to leave."

"If the King only ordered the princes to marry a Bane woman and produce an heir, then once I give them one, I would have fulfilled my part of the deal. If there's nothing in the decree saying the marriage has to continue afterward, I might have a way out."

"And if there's no way out?"

I frowned. "Then I'll figure something else out."

"Are you truly willing to leave your child behind?" she asked, voice low.

I'm not even from this world. It's not like I could take the kid back to the real world with me. The child wouldn't even be real outside of this bookish hell. So, in the words of a modern-day social media poet, Fuck them kids.

"I'd be leaving the young prince or princess with their father. What's there to worry about? They can raise the child here, and I can visit. Or the child can spend time with me too. We can raise him or her together without having to live together. I'd make a great co-parent."

I probably sounded insane to Allie. But my plan made perfect sense to me. I didn't need Kai, Daemin, or Zian to love me. That was where the original Zuri had gone wrong. She'd wanted their love so badly that eventually nothing else mattered.

I wasn't that desperate for love. I'd been born alone. I would die alone. But while I lived, I only wanted to surround myself with people whose presence I enjoyed and who enjoyed my presence.

As for my husbands in this world, they loved Mei Lin. *Fine*. They could have her. All I needed to do was fulfill the decree without losing myself in the process. Love was not in my survival plan.

"Do you really want to leave the princes?" she asked.

"I do."

"But..." She paused. "You used to dream about marrying them."

I stiffened.

Wait. What?

My thoughts drifted back to the book. I remembered Zuri wanting the princes after the marriage, but I couldn't remember CiCi ever saying she'd wanted them before it.

"You mean I liked them even before my father called me back from the countryside?"

"Yes. You used to talk about them all the time when we lived in the country."

Well, shit.

"I've had a very long day, Allie," I said carefully. "Remind me what I told you."

She seemed to accept that excuse.

"You've loved them ever since the year it flooded badly, and so many people in the country got displaced."

The flood?

Displaced?

I vaguely remembered that from the book. It happened while the old king was still in power. My husbands weren't even leaders of the Triad yet. Kai's cousin, the current King, had been the Triad leader.

But he'd been plotting to overthrow the tyrant king. To win over the people and make them see him, his family, and his organization favorably, he'd ordered his cousin, Kai, and Kai's two friends, Zian and Daemin, to go to the countryside and help the flood victims.

"Tell me more," I encouraged.

"Well, the river overflowed and destroyed part of the town. The magistrate sent a letter to the capital, asking for government aid. The King didn't send help. So, the Triad stepped up and helped out. The princes came with men and supplies from their territories to assist us. One day, while passing out porridge, you saw them soar into town in their dragon forms. You left me at the porridge stand and rushed off to see who they were.

When you came back, you told me you had fallen in love with three alphas.”

“I did?” I frowned.

She nodded. “You said they landed in front of the magistrate's office, looking majestic. And then they shifted into their skin forms. And you said you were impressed with how well they used their Raiment Shift ability.”

Oh, right. Raiment Shift.

In this world, shifters could bind their clothes to their bodies before transforming, so when they returned to their skin forms, their clothes returned with them. No naked dragons running around the capital.

Convenient. I'd loved that detail when CiCi told me about it.

“You said you loved how kind they were to the citizens. And how they were working hard with their guards and other workers to help rebuild the structures damaged by the flood. You were shocked to learn they were members of the Triad, just like everyone else in the countryside. By the time they left, you and the others viewed the Triad more favorably than the tyrant king, who hadn't sent any aid.”

I nodded. A part of me remembered that. Not from the book. It was as if I was acquiring some of the original Zuri's memories and feelings. I could feel her admiration for them, feel how much she'd crushed on them. She'd truly fallen in love with them at first sight.

“You never approached them while they were there,” Allie continued. “But you always watched them from afar. You admired them after that. Especially because they came themselves instead of only sending servants and supplies.”

I vaguely remembered this bit of backstory from the book. CiCi didn't touch on it in detail. It was mainly there to explain why Zuri had wanted the three alphas badly enough to eventually lose herself trying to win them over.

Even with old Zuri's memories and emotions blooming within me, I still didn't think it was reason enough for her to turn into a villain. I definitely wasn't going to fall in love with them for simply doing the job they'd been sent to do.

“Well, I no longer have a crush on them,” I told Allie. “All I want to do now is give them an heir and leave.”

Allie looked at me like she still wasn't convinced. I couldn't blame her. As far as she knew, I'd spent years talking about these men. One bad

wedding night shouldn't have been enough to make those feelings disappear.

But those feelings had never been mine. I knew where loving Kai, Daemin, and Zian had gotten the original Zuri. She'd spent years trying to make them choose her, only to lose herself along the way.

I would not walk the same path she had. I would find out exactly what the King's decree required. I would find my loophole. And if giving the princes an heir was the price of my freedom, so be it.

After that, they could have the life they wanted with Mei Lin, and I would forge my own path. Besides, sleeping with them wouldn't be any hardship. They were sexy as hell. In the real world, I'd be called a hoe for fucking three men at the same time.

Here, I could fuck until I was all out of slick, and no one would judge me. Here, most relationships consisted of multiple partners. I smiled, thinking of the fade-to-black sex scenes CiCi had written.

These alphas were not ready for me. I was going to slut them out before returning them to their precious Lin'er. After I'd used them up, she could have my leftovers. And I would move on with my life and live it well.

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CHAPTER FOUR



KAI

Seated behind my desk, I twisted the jade ring on my finger, my thoughts on the woman we'd left behind in the bridal chamber. Zian and Daemin sat across from me. From the confused expressions on their faces, I knew they were thinking of her too.

I could also feel a hint of their emotions through our pack bond. Our bond wasn't the strongest. We often blocked each other out, which had fractured our connection. But the bond was still there.

Every now and then, I could feel a sliver of what they were feeling. We'd formed our pack a few years ago, as most unmated males eventually did. There was nothing romantic about it.

Daemin and Zian had been my closest friends for most of my life, and when it came time to form a pack, they'd been the obvious choices. We fought well together, even in our dragon forms.

Plus, we'd all been friends with Mei Lin. And we'd all wanted to protect her. It was only natural that we form a pack while we waited for our inner dragons to choose her as our Fated mate.

Our pack bond didn't allow us to read each other's thoughts. However, strong emotions had a way of bleeding through. Sometimes it was nothing more than a faint tendril of anger, fear, or excitement that didn't belong to me.

Other times, especially when one of us wasn't guarding the connection, the feeling came through much stronger. Over the years, we'd gotten into the habit of blocking each other whenever we wanted privacy.

We did it so often that our connection wasn't as strong as it should have been. That suited me just fine tonight. Because if I could feel their confusion, there was a chance they could feel what I was desperately trying to hide from them.

For several minutes, none of us spoke. We'd come to my office intending to discuss Triad business, but we all seemed lost in our own thoughts. Finally, Daemin broke the silence.

"Should we address the elephant in the room?"

I looked up to find Daemin staring at me.

"What elephant?" I asked.

"Our bride," he answered.

"Which bride?" Zian spoke up. "We have two."

Daemin glared at him. "Which bride do you think I'm talking about?"

"The unwanted one," I answered.

Daemin frowned, but nodded. "She... was not what I'd expected."

"What did you expect?" I cocked my head to the side, watching him.

He shrugged. "I don't know. When our informant learned Daveah had run off and Orion was going to replace her with his daughter from the countryside, none of us cared. No matter who arrived, our plan was to have an heir with her, then let her live the rest of her life in her own courtyard and not bother with her. We planned to let Lin'er raise the heir. But..."

"But what?" I asked. "Don't tell me you've suddenly fallen for this woman after only seeing her once."

Daemin shook his head, his long dark hair brushing his shoulders.

"I'm not saying that," he told me. "I'm saying she's nothing like the information we received about her."

"What's different?" I asked.

"The spy we placed in Orion Bane's manor said Zuri Bane seemed happy about the wedding. He overheard one of the servants say she'd had a crush on us since seeing us years ago. However, in the wedding chamber just now, she didn't stare at us like she had a crush on us. In fact, she looked like she despised us."

"She was faking it. Have you ever heard of the retreat-to-advance tactic? That's what she's doing," I told him. "Plus, she was drugged half out

of her mind. Give her time. Soon, she'll start living up to the information we've received about her. Soon, she'll start fawning over us and trying to get us to fall in love with her. Don't let yourself be fooled by this woman and her schemes."

I didn't know why we were wasting our time talking about this. We'd investigated the Bane family before agreeing to the marriage. Our informant had kept us aware of what happened inside Orion's household.

Orion was a schemer. And he was desperate to attach himself to the crown by any means necessary. We knew Daveah was the daughter he'd intended to send us. We also knew about Zuri.

Years ago, we'd gone to the region she'd grown up in after the floods destroyed homes and farmland. We'd brought supplies and helped with the rebuilding. I couldn't remember seeing her among all the people we'd helped.

Apparently, she'd seen enough of us to develop feelings for all three of us. By the time she was brought to the capital, she'd made it no secret in Orion's household that she was happy to marry us in Daveah's place.

That was why tonight made no sense. The woman in that bridal chamber hadn't looked pleased to see us. She'd looked at the three of us like she'd been handed a problem she wanted no part of.

"We were also told she was a cold omega," Daemin continued. "Yet, when I got close to her, I could've sworn I smelled..."

"Strawberries and chocolate," Zian whispered, staring off into the distance.

"Yeah, strawberries and chocolate," Daemin agreed.

The memory of that scent filled my mind before I could stop it. *Sweet strawberries coated in rich chocolate*. I'd smelled it the moment we entered her bedchamber. And it had grown stronger when Daemin approached her.

"I smelled nothing," I lied.

Both men glared at me. *Shit*. Had they sensed the truth through our bond?

Zian chuckled in that condescending way of his. "Liar."

I gritted my teeth. "Our new bride is a cold omega who can't even shift. Her scent was caused by whatever aphrodisiac Orion gave her. This is just another one of his schemes."

Zian rubbed his chin. "I don't think so. If she was under the influence of an aphrodisiac, she would've been clawing at us and stripping her clothing

off. Instead, she leaned away from us.”

“Perhaps the dosage was too low,” I hissed.

Neither of them looked convinced. Even to my own ears, that excuse sounded weak. Orion Bane was a poison master. He wouldn't mess up the dosage, especially not for something this important.

“It doesn't matter what he gave her or what she smells like,” I told them. “It can never compare to Lin'er's lavender scent.”

Both men gave me a weird look. Did they not like Lin'er's scent? Since when?

“I know this is going to piss you off, but I'm going to say it anyway,” Daemin started.

“Don't you always say shit that pisses me off?” I mumbled.

Ignoring my words, Daemin continued. “Lin'er's scent has never made me react the way Zuri's scent did tonight. With Lin'er, I feel a sense of camaraderie. Yet, when I got close to Zuri, I felt...”

“It was the drug,” I interrupted him.

“If it was the drug, then why was I affected?” Daemin asked. “She was drugged, not me.”

I stared at him, unable to answer right away.

Daemin leaned forward. “And when I got closer to her, I could smell...” He swiped a hand over his face. “I could smell her slick.”

I leaned back in my chair, my eyes dropping to the desk. I'd smelled it too. Her strawberry-and-chocolate scent had grown stronger as her arousal increased, and my dragon had become almost impossible to ignore.

My mouth watered from just thinking about it. A cold omega wasn't supposed to react that way. Zuri Bane had supposedly never developed a proper omega scent. She'd never experienced a heat.

According to our informant, she'd undergone multiple tests to determine her designation because her body hadn't presented the way an omega's normally did. In the end, her family learned she'd never be able to shift, never develop normal scent glands, and would require meds to go into heat and procreate.

Yet tonight, her sweet scent had filled the entire room. And Daemin getting close to her had been enough to make her slick for him. The insane rush of jealousy I'd felt at that moment had shocked and frightened me. Not once had I been jealous of Daemin or Zian being near Mei Lin.

Yet, watching our new bride's eyes widen, her lips part, her body shiver as Daemin approached her had caused my dragon to roar in jealousy. None of this made sense. Not her response to us or my response to her.

"That's not all," Daemin added. "My dragon was affected by her too. He'd wanted me to move closer to her. It had taken everything in me to walk out of that room and not pull her into my arms so I could bury my face in her neck and breathe in her scent."

"My dragon had reacted also," Zian admitted, brows drawn, unease etched into the lines of his face. He rubbed his chest. "He's still restless within me, urging me to go to her. I've never felt this way before. It... unsettles me."

My dragon paced restlessly within me, just as he'd been doing ever since we'd left Zuri's courtyard. He wanted me to return to her. To apologize for how rude I'd been. I ignored him. Our dragons must have been affected by the drug. That was the only explanation.

"It has to be the drug," I insisted.

"I want to agree," Zian told me. "But a drug doesn't explain our dragons being affected. And don't deny it. Yours was affected too."

I gritted my teeth but said nothing. However, Zian wasn't done talking.

"Part of the reason we put off marrying Lin'er all these years was because we were waiting for our dragons to react to her. They never did. Yet, tonight, they reacted to..."

"Don't," I hissed.

"I'm just stating facts, Kai. The only reason we rushed to marry Lin'er now was because she said if we waited any longer, our new wife would take charge of the household before she could, and she was afraid the Bane daughter would bully her," Zian stated. "We wanted to give Lin'er a title and move her into the manor so she wouldn't feel slighted. She's our friend. We care for her. She's always followed us around, and we've always protected her. But tonight, with Zuri, we all felt something we'd never felt before. We can't ignore this feeling. I don't want to ignore it."

His words irritated the hell out of me because I couldn't deny them. Lin'er had been part of our lives for years. We'd grown up together. We'd protected her, cared for her, and thought one day our dragons would recognize her as our mate.

We'd never been intimate with her, for fear she'd one day find her true mate and regret having been involved with us. We'd seen what that could

do to a person. Years ago, one of Daemin's cousins, Chen, had married his chosen mate only for her to later meet her Fated one and fall in love with him.

Their marriage was annulled because, by law, a Fated bond took precedence over a chosen one. I still remembered what it had done to Chen when the woman he loved admitted she wished she'd waited for her Fated mate instead of giving herself to him.

None of us wanted that to become our future with Mei Lin. We didn't want to hear her say she regretted choosing us if her Fated mate appeared one day. We also didn't want to be the reason she was heartbroken if we one day found our Fated One.

That's why, when we came of age, the four of us began taking suppressants. They kept our urges and desires under control while we waited to see whether our dragons would ever react to her dragon.

That never happened. Eventually, we decided that if our dragons never recognized a Fated mate, we would stop waiting for a bond that might never come and marry the woman who was already at the center of our lives.

But our plans changed when my cousin became the King, and we replaced him as leaders of the Triad. He'd also given us the title of princes, trying to make us appear less threatening to the citizens.

Mei Lin's father was the Prime Minister. As Prime Minister, he already held considerable influence in the royal court, and he'd made no secret of his opposition to many of my cousin's decisions.

Taking Lin'er as our primary wife would only strengthen her father's position in the court, making things difficult for King Zhen Zeyan. The three of us weren't only princes. We also controlled the three clans that made up the Triad.

Giving the Prime Minister's daughter the highest position in our household would tie his family too closely to ours and give him an advantage Zeyan had no intention of handing him. That was why the King had insisted our primary wife come from another noble family.

A family that would be of no threat to him. A family he could control. The decree had forced our hands. However, we'd refused to bring a Bane daughter into this manor as our primary wife without giving Lin'er a proper title.

She deserved better than that. So we married Lin'er today, solidifying her place in our household. Zuri's arrival had been different. She'd been too

drugged to walk, so we'd had her brought into the manor through the side courtyard.

We performed the wedding ritual without her and left her to sleep until the drug wore off. Today, we'd taken two brides into our harem. Yet only one was important to us. The other was a nuisance and a necessity.

"I know you think it's the drug, Kai," Zian continued, pulling me out of my thoughts. "And maybe somehow the Poison Clan did create a drug that could even affect our inner dragons. That's all the more reason to find out what is going on. Such a drug should be outlawed. But if it's not a drug, then..."

"She is not our fated one," I growled. "It's rare to find a fated one. It has to be the drug."

Zian didn't say anything else. Neither did Daemin. But neither of them looked like they believed me. I didn't care. I had to be right. Mei Lin was our best friend, the woman we cared for. And after years of waiting, she was now our secondary wife.

No daughter of the Bane family was going to walk into our home and change our plans simply because she smelled like strawberries and chocolate. Or because the defiance in her gaze had impressed me.

Or because my dragon had roared the moment I laid eyes on her. *Damn it!* Maybe we should demand that Daveah be found and brought in and let Zuri return to the countryside, out of sight, out of mind. A knock sounded at the door.

I leaned forward. "Come in."

The door opened, and one of our shadow guards stepped inside. *Great!* Something to distract us from the *cold* omega resting in the far courtyard of the manor. At least now we would be forced to focus on work instead of our new bride.

Our new bride, who was spending her wedding night alone. My dragon clawed restlessly inside my chest at that thought. I rubbed a hand over the spot. When I glanced up, I found Daemin staring at me. He smirked. I ignored him. The shadow guard closed the door behind him and bowed.

"Forgive the interruption, Your Highnesses," the guard said, voice low.

"What happened?" I asked, ready to focus on something else, anything else.

The guard wouldn't have disturbed us on our wedding night if he were here to deliver a routine report. Our shadow guards came from Zian's clan,

the *Shadow Clan*. Its members were elite spies and provided most of our intelligence.

“We've intercepted another shipment of prohibited cargo. The wagon and everyone traveling with it are being held at the southern checkpoint until we receive your orders.”

That made this the third shipment we'd intercepted. The first had been discovered moving through Assassin territory, the second through Shadow territory. After the second, we'd ordered our men to watch every route controlled by the Triad more carefully.

We allowed plenty of illegal goods to move through our territories. Smuggling was part of the business, and the Triad took its cut just like we did from gambling houses, protection payments, and the other operations under our control.

But we had rules. Human trafficking, along with the selling of certain weapons and poisons, was forbidden. We were even stricter now that Zeyan was King. However, lately, someone had been testing those rules.

“What did they find?” I asked.

“A medicinal merchant was transporting herbs, roots, and several crates of medicinal wine. His paperwork was in order, but when the guards searched the wagon, they discovered a false compartment beneath the cargo.”

“And?” Daemin asked, hating when others didn't give him all the information in one go.

“Inside, we found six sealed jars of Dragonblight.”

The room fell silent. It had been a long time since I'd heard the word Dragonblight. Even on the streets, where it was commonly known as DB, people didn't speak about it openly. None of us had ever seen it in person.

“You're certain it's DB?” I asked.

“The guards found residue around the seal of one of the jars. Our on-site poison master tested it and confirmed it was Dragonblight. From the concentration, he believes the contents of all six jars are undiluted.”

“Fuck,” Daemin muttered, rubbing a hand through his long hair.

Dragonblight had been prohibited throughout our Ashborne Kingdom for generations. Most poisons had limited effects on dragon shifters because our bodies burned through toxins quickly and healed the damage they caused before it could become life-threatening.

Dragonblight was different. It attacked the connection between a shifter and his dragon. Once enough entered the body, it prevented the victim from shifting and slowed the accelerated healing that might otherwise save them.

Long ago, a Dragon King had been murdered with it during a feast. He'd tried to shift after realizing he'd been poisoned, but his dragon wouldn't answer him. Without his dragon, his accelerated healing failed, and he'd died before the feast was over.

After his death, the Crown outlawed Dragonblight throughout the realm. The Triad eventually did the same, forbidding anyone from manufacturing, selling, or transporting it through our territories.

There was enough poison sitting in that wagon to take down the dragon guards protecting the palace and kill my cousin along with them. That didn't mean Zeyan was the intended target, but six jars of concentrated Dragonblight weren't being smuggled through our territory for no reason.

Whoever had ordered that shipment was preparing to kill dragons. And there was only one dragon in the realm whose death could change the fate of the entire kingdom.

CHAPTER FIVE

KAI

The possibility that someone might be planning to kill my cousin changed everything.

“Does the driver know what you found?” I asked.

“No. He and his assistant believe they're being held because of the inspection and our need to verify the paperwork. We have them in one of our offices, awaiting a verdict. Neither knows we found the hidden compartment.” The guard removed a folded document from his robe and placed it on my desk. “This was the authorization accompanying the shipment.”

I picked up the document and read it. The Iron Clan seal was stamped at the bottom. The format was right, the authorization marks were current, and according to the document, my clan had approved the wagon's passage through Iron territory. Nothing about it looked forged.

“Has this been verified against our records?” I asked the guard.

“It checks out in the official records. But not in the secondary records you all established.”

I looked down at the authorization again. We'd switched to a double-verification method after my cousin became King. We entered every authorization into our official records, just as we always had.

But it was also recorded in a secondary system known only to the three of us, our records clerk, our consigliere, the people responsible for verifying our records, and the shadow guards tasked with informing us of illegal smuggling.

Anyone trying to move illegal goods through our territory might be able to forge an authorization and manipulate the official records well enough to pass the first verification. But unless they knew about the second verification, they wouldn't know there was another record their authorization needed to match.

“The authorization number doesn't exist in the secondary records,” the guard continued. “So, this permit was not issued by the Iron Clan.”

I looked at Daemin and Zian. The significance wasn't lost on either of them.

"The first shipment of prohibited goods carried a forged authorization from the Assassin Clan," Daemin said. "The second carried one from the Shadow Clan."

"And now someone has forged an Iron Clan authorization to move six jars of Dragonblight through our territory," I said.

Zian took the document and examined it. "All three forgeries used each ruling clan's current seal to authorize the shipment. Whoever is creating these documents isn't working from outdated permits. They've somehow managed to copy our exact seals, which we updated when we took our positions as Triad leaders."

The people behind the shipments hadn't simply forged three authorizations. They had somehow copied the current seals belonging to all three clans and used them to move prohibited cargo through our territories without raising suspicion.

Worse, all three forged authorizations had made it into our official records. Whoever was behind this hadn't only gained access to our seals. They'd found a way into the system we used to record legitimate shipments.

That required more than skill with a brush and ink. They had to have seen the seals closely enough to reproduce them. Only a few in our inner circle had seen the new seals. Even fewer had come in contact with them.

"Was there anything else in the compartment?" I asked the guard.

"We found a delivery slip beneath the jars." He reached into his robe and produced another folded paper. "The shipment of DB is to be delivered tomorrow night at midnight to an address on the western side of the capital."

The first two shipments had left us with prohibited goods and forged authorizations but no way to trace them back to the people purchasing them or the seller. Both drivers had taken their lives once they realized they were caught.

With the Dragonblight, we actually had an address to investigate. Since the driver didn't know we'd discovered the hidden compartment, he had no reason to believe those instructions were compromised.

"Don't question the driver or his assistant again," I said. "They believe they're being held while we verify the authorization. Let them keep believing it."

Daemin looked from the delivery slip to me. “We’re letting the shipment continue?”

“We don't have a choice,” I told him. “Not if we want to find out who’s buying this shipment. And we will find out because we’ll be at the delivery location to prevent it from happening.”

Daemin and Zian’s eyes flamed up. Since Zeyan ascended the throne, we’d been forced to behave like royals, unable to get our hands dirty. But this issue required our involvement because we had no idea who’d copied our seals or how they’d done it.

Since we didn’t know who to trust, we had to handle this ourselves. I didn't like sending six jars of Dragonblight back onto the road. But whoever was expecting that wagon tomorrow night had to believe nothing had happened at the checkpoint.

We couldn't replace the jars without risking the driver checking the hidden compartment once he was safely away and discovering the deception. Stopping the delivery at the exchange site was the only thing we could do.

“We release him with everything exactly as he left it,” I instructed. “The Dragonblight stays in the compartment. So does the delivery slip. As far as he knows, we detained him long enough to verify his paperwork and found nothing wrong. But we put eyes on him and have our people send word if he veers off track with his delivery. And when the exchange happens, we’ll step in.”

“I'll put Shadow guards on the wagon to keep an eye on the driver,” Zian said. “He won't know they're there. I'll also have some go to the drop-off site to scout the area.”

I nodded, then looked at Daemin. “Daemin, bring members of the assassin clan with us, just in case things go south.”

Daemin nodded, glancing at the time and location on the slip.

“I'll contact my people tonight,” Daemin said. “We’ll need to be in position well before midnight.”

“We will,” I vowed. I looked at the guard. “Put the slip back exactly where you found it. Then release them once the authorization check is finished and give them no reason to think this was anything more than a delay over their paperwork.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The guard bowed, took the delivery slip, and left to carry out the order.

Someone had gone to considerable trouble to move Dragonblight through Iron territory under my clan's seal. Tomorrow night, we would be one step closer to finding out who was behind these forgeries.

Daemin and Zian didn't immediately rise from their chairs to leave and contact their people. Instead, Daemin glanced toward the closed door before looking back at me.

"What about Zuri? Should we check on her?" he asked.

I frowned. "Why would we do that?"

His brows lifted slightly, as if my answer wasn't the one he'd expected.

"She was drugged," I reminded him. "The best thing we can do is leave her alone and let her sleep it off. We'll speak with her tomorrow morning and establish the rules of this marriage once she's clearheaded."

Daemin leaned back in his chair, but something in his expression told me he wasn't satisfied with that answer. He opened his mouth as though he intended to argue, only for Zian to speak first.

"We can deal with our new wife tomorrow." Zian rose from his chair. "This Dragonblight issue must come first. Tonight, we need to prepare to intercept the delivery."

"I agree," I said quickly. "I need to check our weapons and make sure we have everything we'll need for tomorrow night's mission."

Daemin stared at me for a moment before finally pushing himself to his feet. "I'll make sure my guards from the Assassin Clan are ready to go."

"And I'll contact my Shadow Guards," Zian said. "I want them in position before the wagon is released from inspection. I'll send another team to scout the delivery location ahead of us."

I nodded. They had their clans to prepare, and I had my own work to finish before tomorrow night. They turned to leave.

"Only contact people you trust," I called out.

They both turned.

"Someone managed to copy all three of our current seals," I reminded them. "Until we know who did it and how they got access to them, we have to be careful about who knows what we're doing tomorrow night. We have a mole. And they're close to us."

Daemin's expression darkened. "Understood."

Zian gave me a nod. Then the two of them left, closing the door behind them. I remained in my chair long after they'd left. I just sat there, staring at

the far wall. I had things to do, yet Daemin's question kept replaying in my mind.

Should we check on her?

I still didn't understand why he thought we should. Zuri was probably asleep by now, which was exactly what she needed after whatever Orion had given her. There was nothing any of us could do for her tonight that couldn't wait until morning.

Despite knowing that, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I remembered how furious she'd looked when we mentioned her father drugging her. I also remembered the moment her scent spiked, filling the room with her sweet fragrance.

The aroma of strawberry and chocolate had wrapped around me so suddenly that my dragon had surged beneath my skin before I could stop it, almost triggering a shift. I'd never felt anything like it. And the word it had growled when my gaze met hers was on repeat in my head.

MINE.

My dragon had recognized her as his. How was that possible? She was a Bane. I was supposed to care for Mei Lin. The others hadn't said their dragons claimed her, only that they were affected by her.

What if only my dragon had claimed her? Would that leave me stuck with her while my pack brothers were able to be with Mei Lin? That would ruin all of our plans. I twisted the jade ring on my finger, something I'd been doing ever since I'd left her courtyard.

It was helping me stay grounded, preventing me from returning to her. Zuri Bane could not be my mate. It had to be the drugs. I would investigate this. And if Orion's clan had truly created a drug that could mimic the effects of mating, I'd have his entire clan destroyed.

My dragon roared, loathing me for my thoughts. Closing my eyes, I leaned back in my chair, trying to calm my pounding heart while ignoring the fire racing through my veins. Like my pack brothers, I'd been on suppressants for years.

Once we came off them before the wedding, I'd assumed my attraction to Mei Lin would change. I'd assumed I'd crave her fiercely and that it would be a struggle to resist touching her while we fulfilled the King's decree and produced an heir with Zuri.

Yet, there hadn't been one flicker of interest toward my Lin'er since the suppressants left my system. But the moment I saw Zuri, that changed. Why

her? I ran a hand through my green hair, tugging at it, wishing I could rid my mind of images of Zuri.

Finally, I lowered my hand. I would not go to her. I would not give in to my dragon. I would not fail Mei Lin because of some drug. I sat like that, eyes closed, twisting my jade ring, trying not to think about Zuri for a long time.

Once my dragon had ceased raging, once I'd overcome the compulsion to go to her, I opened my eyes. As soon as I did, I realized none of us had checked on Mei Lin tonight. None of us had wanted to.

Fuck!

ZURI

I woke up the next morning feeling hungover.

Whatever Orion Bane had given me was still kicking my ass. My head felt heavy, my mouth was dry, and even opening my eyes required more effort than it should have. I slowly sat up, rubbing my eyes as I tried to shake off the lingering brain fog.

For several seconds, I sat there, staring around the room, waiting for my mind to clear. My stomach growled loudly, reminding me that I hadn't eaten in... Well, I couldn't remember the last time this body had eaten.

I was hungry. And I didn't know about the old Zuri, but I became the queen of bitches when I went too long without food. Whenever one of my besties thought I was mad at them, they always sent food to my house as an apology.

It worked every time. Thinking of my besties sent a sharp pang through my chest. *Please be okay, Bri, Kena, and CiCi.* My stomach growled again, demanding I feed it. I tossed the covers back and stood, only to immediately regret moving so fast.

The room spun, forcing me to grab the bed railing before my knees gave out. I squeezed my eyes shut and held on, waiting for the dizziness to pass. My door suddenly burst open.

"Princess!"

I opened my eyes in time to see Allie rushing toward me. She grabbed my arm and wrapped the other around my waist before I could insist I was fine.

“Princess, why didn’t you call for me as soon as you woke up? I was just outside your door.”

Outside my door? Oh, right. The maids in this world were forced to rise early and wait outside their boss's door in case they were needed. Apparently, becoming a princess meant I now had someone sitting outside my bedroom waiting for me to wake up.

That was going to take some getting used to. Or some changing. Maybe I could have a small side room built for Allie to sleep in. That would be better than her sleeping in the servant’s quarters.

Better yet, she could just move into the guest room of my courtyard. It wasn’t like I planned to have guests anyway. I mentally added that to my to-do list as Allie slowly helped me sit back down.

Seated on the edge of the bed, I took several deep breaths as the room finally stopped spinning. Thankfully, that nauseous feeling that had come over me settled with it, leaving behind the far more pressing problem of my empty stomach.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked.

Allie frowned. “Um... Princess.”

“What is it?”

Her expression told me I probably wouldn't like whatever she was about to say.

“The kitchen staff here are the worst,” she complained. “They know you’re not favored by the princes, so they’ve already started neglecting our courtyard. They only sent you some cold porridge for breakfast. Yet they sent a breakfast feast to Mei Lin’s courtyard.”

“Oh, really?” I asked, the petty side of me perking up.

“Yes! I got so angry that I told them not to worry about cooking for you anymore because I’d handle it myself.”

She looked pissed off. A memory flitted through my mind of Allie and me in the countryside, getting into arguments with anyone who tried to mistreat us. We’d always held our own when others looked down on us.

“But,” she continued. “When I tried to use the kitchen’s ingredients, they told me I’d have to get permission from the princes first.”

I cocked my head to the side. "We need permission just to use the kitchen?"

She nodded. "So, I went in search of the princes."

That's my Allie.

"They're at Mei Lin's courtyard," she told me.

Of course, they are. I mean, where else would they be other than with their precious Lin'er?

"And the guard standing at her courtyard's entrance told me not to disturb the princes' breakfast with their princess. So, I wasn't able to get permission to make breakfast for you. And now the kitchen won't even resend the porridge. I'm sorry, princess."

"There's no need for you to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong."

Allie sighed. "I've failed you. All I was able to steal was some fruit from the kitchen before they kicked me out."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out two apples. I looked at the apples, then at her.

"You've been busy," I told her, unable to stop myself from smiling as I accepted one.

She tried to give me the other one too, but I pushed it back toward her.

"You keep one. We can snack on these later."

I turned the apple over in my hand as my stomach gave another angry growl. Two stolen apples weren't going to fill us up. I may not be the princes' beloved, but I wasn't going to let them mistreat me.

"As for breakfast," I started. "I'm starving, so we're going to eat. And we're not going to eat some cold porridge. We're going to enjoy a feast."

Allie blinked at me. "We are?"

"Yes."

I pushed myself to my feet again, much more carefully this time. The room didn't spin, and I no longer felt dizzy.

"Where are my clothes?" I asked. "I need to get dressed and go find the alphas who hate me. It's time for me to establish some rules around here."

Allie frowned. "But princess, what if they get mad at you?"

"Fuck their anger. They don't have to love me. But they're rich. So I expect them to at least make sure I have enough food to eat. She can have their hearts. But I'm going to get into their pockets. Let's hurry before they leave her courtyard."

Allie helped me dress. I'd chosen a dark-colored hanfu dress adorned with silver designs and a silver sash at my waist. The dress was a spaghetti-strap style, but I wore a light, sheer, kimono-style jacket over it.

I knew there was a proper name for it, but I just couldn't recall it from the books. I'd chosen a dress with a neckline that plunged a hint lower than the others. There was nothing wrong with showing off a little cleavage.

Allie complained about my choice the entire time she helped me into it. According to her, I should have worn one of the pale pink dresses in my wardrobe or even the pretty yellow one she'd pulled out for me.

She said they made me look more demure and sweet, which was what the princes liked. I gave zero fucks about what the princes liked. Plus, black was my favorite color. Brown was a close second.

If I'd had a black freakum dress, I would've worn that. *Hmm... maybe I should start a clothing line in this realm.* If I truly couldn't leave this place, the least I could do was introduce these people to some modern fashion.

I looked into the mirror over my vanity. This was one of the modern conveniences CiCi had sprinkled throughout the book. She'd done her research and learned that polished bronze or copper mirrors were the ones she should put in her book.

Yet, she'd insisted that in her dreams, the mirrors were modern and made of glass. In fact, this realm had tons of modern conveniences. Like bathrooms, refrigerators, and... well, I couldn't think of them all right now.

When she'd been writing this series, I'd laughed when she said those things had to be in the story because they'd been in her dreams. In later books, she revealed that witches and some realm travelers brought those modern conveniences from other realms to this one.

Now that I was living in this book, I was glad those things were here. *Thank you, witches and realm travelers.* I stared into the mirror. I'd styled my hair into a high ponytail, leaving curls to fall over my back and shoulders and pulling a few tendrils loose around my face.

"Princess, when did you get so good at doing hair?" Allie asked, impressed by this simple style.

Maybe it was because the old Zuri always depended on Allie to style her hair. Most noble ladies depended on their maids for everything, even bathing.

"I've been practicing in secret," I lied.

I styled hair for a living back in the real world. But I couldn't tell her that. I didn't have much jewelry, so I was wearing the jewelry my grandmother had given me. Well, the jewelry the original Zuri's grandmother had given her.

It wasn't the latest design, but I didn't care. She'd saved it for her granddaughter as part of her dowry, and I would wear it proudly and dare a bitch to say something about it. Of course, once I had some of the alphas' coins in my purse, I would buy more fashionable jewelry.

Speaking of purses, or rather, pouches, where were Zuri's poison pouches? I had a feeling I needed to remind some of these people what clan I was from. Maybe then they'd stop thinking they could disrespect my courtyard.

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CHAPTER SIX



ZURI

“Hey, Allie, didn't Zuri have a pouch...” I paused, realizing I'd just referred to myself in the third person. “I mean, didn't I have a collection of pouches that I used whenever we went out to hunt wild boars?”

The memory had come to me out of nowhere. Allie and I had really roamed the forests together, hunting for food and gathering berries. We'd used my sleeping powder to weaken the wild boars, making them easier to kill.

But it didn't work as well on the larger ones, so we got wounded a few times. My wounds always took longer to heal because I couldn't shift. Allie was the runt in her family, which was why she'd been sold to my grandmother to be my servant.

Her dragon was present, but she wasn't the best at shifting or using her fire abilities. Sometimes, the village kids had teased us, calling us the shiftless and the runt. We'd often beat them up, then got scolded by my grandmother.

We'd lived a hard life in the countryside. Nothing had been handed to us, and we'd learned how to survive with what little we had. But that life had also made us stronger. It was one of the reasons Orion Bane and his family here in the capital thought of me as uneducated and uncultured.

Damn, I was once again thinking of myself as the old Zuri. The old Zuri had been uneducated. But this Zuri had multiple degrees and owned her own businesses. Old Zuri's fighting strength paired with my intellect would make us unstoppable.

"Your poison pouches?" Allie asked. She immediately rushed toward my closet and started searching through it. "I stored them in a place I thought the alphas wouldn't find," she explained. "I didn't want them to see them and accuse you of anything."

Smart girl. Allie returned carrying a small chest and placed it on the floor in front of me. I crouched and opened it. A smile spread across my face. This was the collection of poisons Zuri had tinkered with while living in the countryside.

Some of them had even been stolen from Orion Bane's home. Unfortunately, I knew what the original Zuri had eventually done with them. In the book, she'd used this collection in her attempts to seduce the alphas, and she'd even tried to kill Mei Lin.

I wouldn't be doing either of those things. I had no intention of drugging men who didn't want me, and I certainly wasn't stupid enough to attempt to murder their beloved Lin'er. I was trying to get out of this marriage eventually, not get myself executed.

However, that didn't mean the entire collection was useless. Some of the non-lethal powders could definitely benefit me. Allie must have noticed the look on my face because she leaned closer.

"If we poison the alphas, the King will behead our entire clan," she whispered.

I turned my head and stared at her. Then I smiled and thumped her on the forehead.

"Vicious girl. Who said I was planning to poison the alphas?" I asked. "Trust me, I will not do anything that will lead to our deaths."

Allie rubbed her forehead as she watched me. I glanced back into the chest, still smiling.

"But I will teach unworthy people a lesson," I whispered.

Understanding dawned in her eyes. Smiling, she nodded. Allie led me through the manor to Mei Lin's courtyard. Her courtyard was bigger and nicer than mine, but that was to be expected.

She was their beloved Lin'er, after all. If the difference between our breakfasts was anything to go by, the princes weren't the only people in this

manor determined to make sure everyone knew which wife they preferred.

A guard stood at the gate. The moment he saw us approaching, he sneered. His gaze roamed over Allie before settling on me.

"Little maid," he said, but his eyes were on me. "Just because you went to fetch your *princess* doesn't mean my stance will change."

The way he said *princess*, paired with the look he was giving us, irritated the hell out of me. I almost regretted not bringing a more ruthless poison with me. I plastered a fake smile on my face and continued toward him.

The guard's sneer slowly disappeared. Apparently, he'd expected his little insult to make us fall apart, burst into tears, or turn around and run away. When neither of us gave him the reaction he wanted, discomfort flashed across his face.

"P-Princess," he stuttered. "If you're here to see the princes, you'll have to wait until they're done eating breakfast with my princess. If you disturb them now, you'll only anger them. Please go back. I'll let them know you're looking for them."

Oh, he was really asking for it.

I kept walking. His warning wouldn't stop me. I needed to get closer to him if I wanted to blow the powder in his face. Allie and I were immune to this particular poison, mainly because we'd repeatedly tested it on ourselves back when I was creating it.

Being immune didn't mean we planned on getting it on us, though. The guard took another step backward as we approached. His eyes darted between Allie and me. My maid and I were both smiling. He continued retreating until his back touched the gate.

With nowhere else to go, his hand moved toward his sword's hilt. But I was faster. I lifted the packet, opened it, and blew the powder directly into his face. Allie and I immediately covered our mouths and noses and took two steps back.

The guard coughed. He stopped reaching for the sword at his waist and clasped his throat as another violent cough tore through him. He stumbled to the side, choking on the powder he'd inhaled. I quickly closed the packet and passed it to Allie.

She slipped it into her sleeve. The guard kept coughing as he scratched at his throat. His face reddened, and his eyes bulged. Dropping to his knees, he tried to speak, but no words left his mouth.

In about ten minutes, the symptoms would clear, and he'd be perfectly fine. His inner dragon would burn away the remaining toxin long before it could do him any lasting harm. His life had never been in danger.

His pride, however, would be bruised. Maybe the next time he saw me approaching, he'd remember that I was also a princess of this manor. My courtyard might not be favored, but that didn't mean we'd allow others to disrespect us.

The guard collapsed onto his side. Unfortunately, he'd managed to fall directly in our path. Allie looked down at him and shook her head. She grabbed him by the back of his uniform and dragged him away from the gate, ignoring his weak attempt to push her hand away.

Allie was strong for such a little thing. Once he was no longer blocking our path, she opened the gate and stepped aside.

"You may enter, my princess."

I chuckled. "Thank you, Allie."

I walked through the gate with Allie following behind me, leaving the guard coughing on the ground behind us. There was a flurry of activity inside Mei Lin's courtyard. Servants hurried back and forth, carrying trays, linens, and other things as they went about their morning duties.

Which made me think: other than Allie, did I have any servants? I hadn't seen any in my courtyard. It didn't take long for Mei Lin's servants to notice me. Heads started turning. Some stared at me with pity in their eyes, perhaps thinking I was unlucky for marrying into a pack that already had an omega they loved.

Others looked at me with an air of superiority. Those were probably the ones who thought I was beneath them because their mistress was the favored wife. I ignored both groups. The old Zuri hadn't.

She'd hated these servants. At one point in CiCi's book, she'd gotten so angry over the way they'd treated her that she'd poisoned their well water and left them suffering from diarrhea for days.

I wouldn't be doing that. They weren't worthy of my time. Besides, I had bigger problems than a bunch of servants who thought serving the favored wife somehow made them important.

I already knew the way to the center of Mei Lin's courtyard thanks to CiCi's book, so I didn't need to ask anyone for directions. Allie walked beside me, glaring at every maid who stared at us for too long.

The deeper we walked into Mei Lin's courtyard, the quieter it became. We stepped through an archway and entered a flower oasis. This was Mei Lin's garden area. It didn't take long before I spotted the people I'd come looking for.

The three alphas were seated with Mei Lin around a large table covered with enough food to feed a small army. Several platters of meat, steamed buns, fresh fruit, pastries, bowls of rice, and other dishes were spread across the table.

A pot of tea sat among them, along with smaller plates filled with sauces. Meanwhile, they'd sent cold porridge to my courtyard. My petty side perked up again. Kai and Mei Lin were the only two actually eating.

Daemin sat staring down at the food on his plate, as though he was debating whether to eat it or kill it. Though Zian occasionally lifted his cup and sipped his tea, he didn't appear particularly interested in breakfast.

Mei Lin didn't seem to notice that neither of them was eating. She was too busy talking animatedly to Kai, telling him about things she wanted added to her courtyard and what she wanted to change.

Every few seconds, she'd gesture toward one area or another as she explained what she wanted done. Kai listened while eating, occasionally responding to something she said. Zian looked bored and on the verge of leaving.

Daemin actually scooted his chair back, preparing to leave. But then he looked up, and his gaze landed on me. His eyes widened slightly, and something that looked suspiciously like interest flared in them as his gaze moved over me. I swallowed, my throat suddenly feeling dry.

Get it together, body. Do not grow slick for him again. We are not savages. We don't get wet for just anyone.

I stood there, frozen, gaze locked with Daemin's, and all I could think was: *I wonder how it would feel to grip his long hair as he knelt in front of me, eating my pussy while I ground on his tongue.*

Damn it, slick. Not now!

The sweet scent of strawberries and a hint of chocolate filled the air. That was me. My scent. But the old Zuri didn't have a scent. So what the hell was going on? A low growl filled the air. I was pretty sure it was coming from Daemin.

Zian inhaled deeply, his teacup stopping halfway to his mouth. His eyes widened. And with a shaky hand, he slowly set the teacup down and then

looked my way. His dark eyes, which had stared at me with disdain last night, now held something else.

Desire and regret.

Was he regretting the fact that he desired me? *Well, same, Zian. Same.* I hated that my body was growing wet for alphas who didn't belong to me. If I could, I would tear this pussy off and toss it in a lake or something.

Since I was stuck with it, and this damn slick, I had no choice but to endure. Zian's gaze roamed over me slowly, causing me to shiver. Damn, why did his stare feel like a caress? I expected him to frown at the sight of my dress, considering it was nothing like what their Lin'er would wear.

But he didn't frown. Instead, another growl filled the air, mingling with Daemin's and wreaking havoc on my body. I mean, seriously, how wet could one pussy get? This was just embarrassing.

And the wetter I got, the stronger my scent grew. From the corner of my eye, I could see Allie looking over at me. Oh, right. I forgot that in the book, her sense of smell wasn't that good. But even she seemed to notice something was off about me.

I was not a true omega. I was a human trapped inside a fictional world. I was stronger than this hallucination or whatever it was. These omega hormones weren't going to control me. I could control my body.

Taking a deep breath, I strode forward. Damn it. I shouldn't have done that. All that did was force me to breathe in their scents. And they smelled divine. My mouth watered as I approached the table. Kai didn't look up. But his fingers tightened around his chopsticks.

Still, he kept his eyes glued to his precious Lin'er. Mei Lin continued talking, apparently unaware that she'd lost the attention of two-thirds of her audience. Kai's gaze narrowed slightly as she spoke.

Then he smiled at something she said. I knew a fake smile when I saw one. *Interesting.* I glanced at Daemin and Zian again. They were still looking at me. Their low growls were still rumbling through them.

Kai and Mei Lin had to be pretending not to hear it. I almost chuckled as I stood at the end of the stone path leading to their table. I didn't want to get any closer. Their scents were already wreaking havoc on me from this distance.

I cleared my throat and waited for Kai and Mei Lin to look my way. Kai didn't, not right away. But Mei Lin did. And she didn't seem surprised to see me. I knew she'd already noticed me.

She probably noticed me the moment I stepped into her courtyard. Omegas could sense when another was near. I'd caught a whiff of her lavender scent as I was walking this way. I wasn't a jealous woman.

Plus, I was a girl's girl. So, I never hesitated to give a woman her props, and I never compared myself to others. Mei Lin was gorgeous. I mean, she was the story's heroine. She had to be gorgeous.

Her Blasian roots were evident in her almond-shaped eyes, her warm caramel complexion, and her long hair that dropped to the small of her back in dark, luxurious curls. I could see why the alphas adored her.

However, there was nothing about her or any other woman that could make me lower my head or feel inferior. All women were beautiful in their own right. There was no need for competition.

Even so, I caught a hint of jealousy in Mei Lin's eyes before she smiled and turned in her seat to face me fully.

"Good morning, Sister," Mei Lin greeted, her voice sweet. "I wasn't expecting you in my courtyard this early in the morning. Especially not on the day after our weddings."

Sister? Oh, right. I guess we were sister wives in this harem.

"You're right. I shouldn't be here the morning after *our* weddings," I drawled. "Especially since the custom is for the secondary wife and the concubines to come to the primary wife's courtyard to kneel and offer her tea the morning after they marry into the manor."

I didn't miss the tick in Kai's jaw at my words. His gaze was still on Lin'er, though. As for Lin'er, anger flashed in her eyes. But she quickly composed herself, and as expected, her eyes began to shimmer with tears.

This was the part of the book that I hated. Lin'er was the heroine. Yet she cried at the drop of a dime. Mei Lin sniffled, then grabbed her handkerchief and covered the lower half of her face.

"I'm sorry, Sister," she said, sounding beautifully pitiful. "I just married in, and I'm not familiar with all the post-wedding customs. My alphas' original plan was to have only me as their omega. We never planned for there to be another wife in the manor. I apologize for not following the customs."

"You don't have to apologize for anything," Kai said, taking her hand and pulling her attention from me. "You did nothing wrong."

Before he could say more, I spoke over him.

“Of course you did nothing wrong, Mei Lin. It was the alphas who should’ve also been present when you presented tea to me this morning. Since they weren’t there, how could I expect you to be? Oh, well,” I said with a wave of my hand. “What’s done is done. Manners can’t be taught overnight. I’m not here to talk about that anyway. I’m here to ask *our* husbands why I only received cold porridge for breakfast.”

My gaze drifted over the spread on Mei Lin’s table before moving to Daemin and Zian. Both alphas had the nerve to look embarrassed.

Without looking at me, Kai said, “Isn’t that something you should take up with the kitchen?”

“You’re right. And my maid did. She even offered to cook my food for me, so that my little courtyard didn’t have to disturb the kitchen. However, they told her she needed the princes’ permission and kicked her out of the kitchen.”

Kai finally looked at me. The second his dark eyes met mine, it was as if something stirred beneath my skin. Heat rushed through my body, making that damn strawberry-and-chocolate scent more potent.

I clenched my thighs together and forced myself to remain still. But everything in me wanted to walk over to this bastard and see if his lips were as soft as they looked. Kai’s nostrils flared, and for one brief second, his pupils dilated before his expression hardened.

Looking away from me, he grabbed his cup of tea and downed it in one gulp. Then he slammed the cup onto the table so hard that Mei Lin jumped.

“Calm down, alpha,” she muttered, slowly reaching for his hand.

I noticed the way he pulled away from her and faced forward to glare at me. Was there trouble in paradise already? There hadn’t been trouble in the book. Mei Lin noticed too. Her wounded gaze drifted to Daemin and Zian, possibly seeking comfort.

However, both men were looking my way. Anger flashed in her eyes, but she said nothing. She simply picked up the pot of tea and poured Kai another cup. What was really going on? My nosy ass had questions.

“What do you want, Zuri?” Kai asked through clenched teeth.

“I just want to have a hot breakfast befitting my status as the primary wife. I presume that’s not asking for too much. Is it?”

Kai took a deep breath and then released it slowly.

“Whatever arrangement exists between us has nothing to do with the way the servants are expected to treat you,” Kai said. “You’re a princess of

this household. We expect them to treat you as such.”

Well, damn. I hadn't expected him to say that.

“I'll speak with the steward,” he continued. “Your courtyard will receive the same quality of food as ours. And your maid will have access to whatever she needs from the kitchen. Have your maid tell them your preferences, and they'll cater your meals to your needs.”

Shocked, all I could do was whisper, “Uh, thank you, Kai.”

Kai's brows rose slightly, almost as if he hadn't expected me to say that. I wasn't unreasonable. Give me what I wanted, and I could be downright pleasant.

“You're welcome, Zuri,” he whispered, gaze softening.

The way he said my name made butterflies take flight in my belly. I wanted to look away from him. I really did. But his dark eyes held mine captive. And for a moment, for one very brief moment, I could've sworn something deep within me whispered...

MINE.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZURI

MINE.

What the hell?

Why had I just thought that? Kai wasn't mine. I didn't even want him to be mine. I didn't even like him. I mean, sure, he was handsome as hell. And he had a body that made me want to ride him like a bull.

And that mouth of his had my pussy throbbing. Let's not forget that scent of his, like fresh pine after a summer rain. It made me want to bury my face in the crook of his neck and breathe him in. A sudden urge to do just that came over me.

It was so strong, it almost made my knees buckle. I took a shaky step back, needing some distance between us. What I was feeling wasn't real. These feelings belonged to the old Zuri. It wasn't my fault this omega body of mine was craving a knot.

And there just happened to be three right in front of me. *Practically knot heaven.* So, of course I would react to him this way. But wanting him physically didn't make him *mine*. Were these the urges that pushed the original Zuri into doing the things she'd done?

If so, I could kind of understand her more now. Kai was still staring at me. I think I liked him better when he glared. The way he was looking at me right now left me unsettled. My gaze drifted to the other two alphas.

They were wearing similar expressions. Let me hurry up and say what I had to say, then get the hell out of here before I pounced on these three men in front of the woman they loved.

"There's something else I want to discuss," I said, hating how squeaky my voice sounded.

Some of the softness disappeared from Kai's gaze. "What else do you need?"

Yes. Start being mean to me again. That makes resisting you easier.

"I need money," I told him.

His brows drew together. "Money?"

“Yes. I didn't exactly arrive here with a purse full of coins.”

Kai's gaze drifted briefly to the jewelry I was wearing before returning to my face.

“I came here with very little of my own,” I continued. “But there are things I need for myself and my courtyard.” I stared around Mei Lin's courtyard.

I didn't even think I had a garden area like this. How unfair. I faced Kai again and noticed a hint of guilt on his face.

Good. Feel guilty. You should.

“I need access to the household funds,” I continued.

For several seconds, Kai said nothing. The warmth that had briefly entered his expression was gone now, but he didn't look angry either. I almost tapped my foot impatiently as I waited for him to speak. But I held back. Still, why was he taking so long to reply? They were rich, after all.

“That shouldn't be a problem,” he finally said.

I smiled brightly. “Really?”

Kai blinked, his gaze lingering on my face. Then, to my surprise, one corner of his mouth slowly lifted. Was this rude alpha trying to smile at me? The poor man needed practice.

“How much do you need?” he asked.

I stared at him for a second. “You're serious?”

His almost-smile grew a little. “I wouldn't have asked how much you needed if I wasn't.”

Well, damn. Maybe I needed to smile at him more often. But how much did I need? I hadn't thought that far ahead. I had no idea what constituted a reasonable allowance for the primary wife of three ridiculously wealthy princes.

Asking for too little would shortchange me, but asking for too much might make it look like I was trying to rob them. Although, technically, could I rob my own husbands? Before I could even come up with an amount, Mei Lin spoke up.

“Alpha Kai,” Mei Lin drawled sweetly.

His gaze immediately moved to her. And I won't lie, a sliver of pain drifted through the original Zuri's heart at that moment. Something deep within me stirred as I watched the softness return to his gaze. But that softness was no longer directed at me. Could this feeling be... jealousy?

Oh, no! Be gone, you green-eyed devil. I don't want to be jealous.

Still, seeing him look at her that way hurt more than it should. The pain was irrational as hell. Distance. That was what I needed. I had to keep my distance from these alphas, or I'd end up falling for them and following the predetermined path CiCi had created for me.

"I haven't had a chance to go over the household account books yet." Mei Lin offered him a gentle smile before looking at me. "With the weddings yesterday and everything that needed to be prepared beforehand, I haven't had time to review this month's expenses."

Oh, really? She wasn't finished.

"I was planning to start going through the accounts today," she continued. "Perhaps it would be better to wait until I've reviewed everything before deciding how much should be allocated to Sister Zuri's courtyard. That way, we'll know exactly what is available after the household expenses have been accounted for."

The woman had spent breakfast telling Kai about the things she wanted added to her courtyard, but apparently my request required an audit. Kai didn't answer immediately. His gaze remained on Mei Lin for a few seconds before drifting back to me.

For one brief moment, I thought he might tell her it wasn't necessary. Then his expression changed. His jaw tightened, and whatever softness I'd thought I'd seen directed at me earlier disappeared completely. It was almost as if he'd remembered who I was and, more importantly, who she was.

"That makes sense," he muttered.

Did it? Did it really?

"Once Lin'er has reviewed the accounts, we'll determine what can be allocated to your courtyard," he told me.

He was back. This was the Zhen Kai from the book. The one who'd hated Zuri. Who hated me. I needed to remember that! This was the man who was cold, distant, and completely devoted to his Lin'er.

I'd almost been swayed by his smile, by his kindness. Never again. I looked at Mei Lin. She smiled at me in that demure way of hers. I smiled right back, understanding why the original Zuri had poisoned her ass!

"I understand," I told them, holding back my anger and frustration.

Kai's brows drew together. "You do?"

"Yes. I do."

He stared at me as though he were waiting for the argument that wasn't coming. The original Zuri would've thrown a fit. She would have accused Mei Lin of interfering, demanded money immediately, and turned the entire thing into another reason for these men to hate her.

That wasn't my style. I glanced at the table again. There was enough food sitting there to feed half the manor, and Mei Lin had just spent breakfast discussing improvements to a courtyard that was already bigger and nicer than mine.

Yet somehow, before anyone could determine whether I could have money of my own, she needed to review the accounts. Message received. If I wanted money, I would have to make it on my own.

I turned to Allie. "Come on, Allie. Let's go get our breakfast."

"Yes, Princess."

We turned to leave. If these alphas and their precious little omega thought I was going to fall apart over this, they were dead wrong. I'd grown up in an orphanage and worked my ass off for everything I had.

If I could build a life for myself in the real world, I damn sure could do it here. I could feel the alphas' eyes on me as I walked away.

Behind me, I heard Mei Lin whisper, voice shaky, like she was on the verge of crying, *"I hope I didn't upset Sister. I'm just trying to do what's best for the manor. I wasn't prepared to take care of another omega. I only prepared to take care of my alphas."*

Whatever Kai or the others said, I didn't hear it. By the time Allie and I reached the gate, the guard was back on his feet. He took one look at us and turned away without a word. I guess he'd learned his lesson.

By the time Allie and I returned to my courtyard, my anger had cooled enough for me to think clearly. I wasn't going to waste the rest of my morning being mad about money. I needed breakfast, and then I needed to think of a way to get the funds I needed.

"I'll go get our food," Allie said once we stepped inside my room. "The kitchen shouldn't give me any trouble this time."

She hurried out, leaving me alone. I walked over to my vanity and sat down. For a moment, I simply stared at my reflection in the mirror, thinking about how I couldn't depend on these alphas to take care of me.

Women needed the means to care for themselves. Even princesses. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the vanity as I tried to remember what happened around this point in CiCi's book.

What happened after the wedding? Hmm....

The alphas had spent the night in Mei Lin's room. Yet, they hadn't touched her intimately. They'd planned to have an heir with Zuri before consummating their union with Mei Lin.

But when Zuri kept doing deceitful things, they'd given up on an heir with her and focused all their attention on their Lin'er. But Lin'er wasn't their whole world. They still had Triad issues to deal with. *Oh, right!*

"The smugglers," I whispered.

It all came rushing back to me. The night after the wedding, the alphas had gone on a mission to stop a group of smugglers. A fight had broken out, drawing the smugglers away from their wagon and warehouse until the battle was over.

During that time, their wagon and all the money on it had been left unguarded. I slowly sat up straighter. In the book, the alphas had confiscated everything after the smugglers were defeated.

The goods, the wagon, the money, all of it had been seized. The King had rewarded the princes by granting them some of the seized funds, which they'd spent on their precious omega.

But what if some of that money disappeared before they got to it? A smile tugged at my lips. This couldn't be considered stealing from my alphas. Technically, the money didn't belong to them yet.

It belonged to the criminals. And stealing from criminals wasn't a crime. Was it? No, it wasn't. If I arrived at just the right time, the criminals, my alphas, and their guards would be too busy fighting for their lives to notice someone sneaking into the wagon.

My smile grew. If the events of CiCi's book played out the way they were supposed to, all I had to do was get there, sneak inside, grab as much money as I could carry, and leave before the fighting ended. *Easy peasy.*

I pushed away from the vanity and rushed toward my closet. If I was going to rob the smugglers, I couldn't do it dressed like this. I moved clothes aside, searching for something black and light.

I needed to blend in with the night, but also be able to run, jump, and fight if I had to. A short while later, the door opened behind me.

"Princess, I brought breakfa..." Allie started.

"Allie, come here."

I glanced over my shoulder to find her standing in the doorway carrying a large platter. Her eyes moved from me to the clothes I'd already started

pulling from the closet.

“What are you doing, Princess?”

“Forget the food for now. Put it down and help me find something to wear tonight.”

Allie's brows furrowed. “Tonight? Are you preparing to see the alphas tonight?”

“Hell no. It's something better than that.” I grinned. “We're going to rob a group of smugglers tonight.”

Allie sighed. “Again?”

Had we done this before? Then a memory flitted through my mind. *Damn.* We'd gotten into a lot of trouble in the past. We'd even robbed bootleggers who were smuggling whiskey into the countryside.

Grandmother had scolded us, but she'd drunk the liquor with us that night.

“Put the food down and help me put together an outfit for our mission.”

“Okay, Princess,” Allie said with another sigh. “Oh, and I have something that would be perfect for us to wear.”

That's the spirit!

It was great to have a ride-or-die friend by my side.

KAI

Night had fallen by the time I finished preparing for the mission.

I stood in my room dressed in all black, fastening the leather guards around my wrists. My tunic and trousers were made from lightweight material that wouldn't restrict my movements during a fight.

My sword rested on the table beside me. I picked it up and inspected the blade. This steel was forged by my Iron Clan. Our insignia rested at the center of the blade. The sight of that alone would make my enemies bow.

Yet, I had no idea what enemies awaited us tonight. Whoever they were, they would pay for trying to smuggle DB into the capital. After inspecting the blade, I slid it into the sheath at my waist.

My thoughts drifted again. I groaned, frustrated with myself and my wayward mind. I should be completely focused on the mission. We were walking into a situation involving smugglers who had managed to move Dragonblight through our territory using forged clan authorizations.

This was serious business. Dangerous business. Yet, my mind kept straying to Zuri, who was slowly becoming the bane of my existence. I tightened my jaw. I needed to get that woman out of my head.

Unfortunately, I couldn't erase the image of her standing in Lin'er's courtyard, her eyes solely on me as her entire face brightened. She'd smiled because of me. *Not Daemin. Not Zian. Just me.*

It had happened when I'd told her that giving her access to our money wouldn't be a problem. She'd looked at me as though I'd given her something far more valuable than a few coins, and my heart had done something strange in my chest.

Even now, I couldn't explain what I'd felt. But what I did know was that, in that moment, I would've given her anything she wanted just to keep that smile on her face. At the time, all I could do was stare at her, stunned by her beauty.

Then, without meaning to, I smiled back, something I rarely did. I shook my head, irritated that the memory of her expression almost made me smile again. Nothing about this situation was amusing.

Especially considering that, during those few moments while I'd been talking to Zuri, I'd completely forgotten Lin'er was sitting beside me. Her whispered words, *Alpha Kai*, had washed over me like ice-cold water, leaving me irritated with her and myself.

My dragon had snarled at the interruption. The irritation was immediately followed by guilt. Lin'er was my omega. She was the woman my pack brothers and I had cared for all these years.

Yet I'd been so focused on another woman that hearing Lin'er's voice had irritated me. I'd immediately turned toward her and gentled my gaze, hoping she hadn't noticed anything was wrong.

But something was definitely wrong. I walked over to the table and reached for the black outer robe I'd laid there earlier. As I pulled it on, my thoughts shifted to my pack brothers.

Through our bond, I'd felt their interest in Zuri that morning as clearly as I'd felt my own. Even before she arrived at Lin'er's courtyard, Zian and Daemin had been restless. Both had wanted to leave to check on Zuri.

Then she'd appeared like an answer to our dragons' prayers. I'd felt the desire to leave melt away from both of my pack brothers, replaced by something I'd never felt from them upon seeing Mei Lin: *Pure happiness.*

Their dragons were reacting to her. So was mine. And I had no idea how to make it stop before it went too far. Just this morning, when we sat down to eat breakfast with our Lin'er, she'd asked us when we would give her our mating marks.

She said she understood we couldn't yet consummate our marriage with her. However, she was ready for all three of us to sink our teeth into her neck, marking her as ours forever. And she wanted us to mark her before any of us consummated our union with Zuri.

Her words had made my dragon recoil. Daemin and Zian had looked away from her. I'd forced a smile and told her we would have to get the King's permission first. That was the first time I'd ever lied to her.

Since we were kids, I'd always told her the truth. Likewise, she'd done the same. Even now, she rarely had contact with her family because she feared her father's ambition and his hatred toward my cousin would affect our relationship.

She'd sacrificed so much to be with us. Yet, all three of us were craving another woman. For years, I'd believed that once the suppressants were out of my system, I'd start to see Mei Lin differently.

I thought I'd start to desire her the way an alpha was supposed to desire his omega. That wasn't happening. My dragon didn't want to mark her. He wanted Zuri. My body didn't crave her. It craved Zuri.

My pack brothers didn't get happy when they saw her. Only Zuri could make them feel that way. I'd wanted to blame it on the drug Orion had given his daughter. But the drug had worn off. Yet, our feelings for Zuri were growing stronger.

I closed my eyes. Was Zuri Bane truly our Fated One? Just last night, that possibility horrified me. Now, something inside my chest settled at the thought, as though my dragon had been waiting for me to come to terms with that.

I opened my eyes. I couldn't do this right now. Tonight, I had a mission that demanded my full attention. Tomorrow, I would talk with my pack brothers about our feelings for Zuri and figure out what this meant for Mei Lin and us.

I didn't want to break Mei Lin's heart. But if Zuri was my mate, then there wasn't room in my heart, in my bed, in my life for another omega. My dragon rumbled in agreement. I sighed.

If we annulled our marriage to Mei Lin, we'd have more than her broken heart to deal with. We'd have her father, the Prime Minister. He would consider the annulment an insult to his daughter and a humiliation for his family.

And I had no doubt he would look for someone to blame. My jaw tightened. Due to the situation, I knew he'd blame Zuri. If we chose Zuri over Mei Lin, we could be putting her life in danger.

And we'd risk losing our Fated One before we had a chance to apologize for how we'd treated her.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



KAI

We'd been in position for nearly an hour when the wagon finally appeared. Two lights emerged in the distance, their glow growing brighter as the wagon traveled along the narrow road leading toward the abandoned warehouse.

I was crouched on a thick branch beneath the cover of the trees. Daemin occupied a tree several yards to my right, while Zian waited in another to my left. Like me, both wore all black, their faces covered with masks.

It had been a while since the three of us had gone into the field together. Before Zeyan decided to overthrow the tyrant King, he'd been training me to replace him as Triad leader one day. I alone would've ruled over the clans.

But when he became King, he'd decided to make my pack brothers co-leaders. That way, the clans couldn't complain about Iron Clan controlling both the throne and the Triad through Zeyan and me.

The three of us ruling the clans together made the other two founding families feel secure. Since Zeyan became King and made us princes, most Triad problems were handled by our clans. We gave the orders. Our people carried them out. Tonight was different. Tonight, we were going to get our hands dirty.

Though we appeared calm on the outside, anticipation thrummed through our bond. All three of us were ready for a fight. Zian had brought

along several of his best Shadow Guards. Daemin had selected a handful of assassins he trusted with his life.

My Iron Guards controlled the roads farther out, ensuring no unexpected travelers wandered into the area, and no one escaped. The men hidden with us had two purposes tonight.

Capture the smugglers alive, if possible, and secure the DB along with any other illegal substances or weapons we found.

We could not let our targets kill themselves once they realized they were caught. The warehouse sat beyond the western edge of the capital, isolated enough that whatever happened here tonight was unlikely to draw unwanted attention.

Time had taken its toll on the building. Part of the roof sagged, vines crawled along one wall, and the wooden doors looked as if one strong wind would blow them down. Zian's guards had searched the building before we arrived.

It had been empty. Since then, five men had shown up. Three arrived shortly after we took our positions. Two more came several minutes later. They'd all arrived in their dragon forms before shifting into their skin forms.

Without uttering a word to each other, they entered the warehouse and hadn't exited since. Though we didn't have eyes on the men in the warehouse, we'd planted listening devices inside.

So far, they'd only been chatting about the latest gossip in the capital. Apparently, the King's guard had found a spy sneaking around the King's hunting grounds last night. They'd imprisoned the woman and were interrogating her.

Many in the capital were wondering how she'd gotten past the guards on duty and made it so close to the King's hunting tent. This was news to me. Through our bond, I could feel my pack brothers' surprise as well.

Tomorrow, I would visit the castle to see what was going on with my cousin. A buzzing noise sounded within the warehouse. It only lasted for a few seconds, then all was quiet again.

I frowned. What could they be doing in there? The wagon finally turned onto the dirt path leading into the clearing. A pulse of anticipation traveled through my bond with my pack brothers.

The driver guided the horses into the clearing and brought the wagon to a stop several yards from the warehouse. Then he climbed down. His

assistant followed. I studied both men carefully.

Neither appeared nervous or suspicious. But their guard was up. One went left, the other right, as they took in their surroundings. After a moment, they turned to look at each other. The driver gave a thumbs-up, then moved to stand at the back of the wagon.

His assistant started toward the warehouse. He knocked twice on the shabby door, causing it to rattle slightly. After a few seconds, he knocked three more times, then took a few steps back.

A moment later, the warehouse door opened. Two men stepped outside. One remained near the entrance while the other approached the assistant. They exchanged a few words before the man from the warehouse glanced toward the wagon.

Then he nodded. The assistant turned and motioned toward the driver. The driver released the latch at the back of the wagon and lowered the rear panel. Then he stepped back. The man from the warehouse approached the vehicle, leaving the other to stand guard at the entrance.

Warehouse Guy peered inside, climbed in, and shifted crates aside in the wagon. A moment later, he emerged carrying one of the concealed jars. My dragon growled low. There was our confirmation that the buyers were here for the DB.

The man carrying the jar set it on the ground near the wagon, then said something to the assistant. I couldn't make out the words from this distance, but the assistant nodded. The Warehouse Guy produced a large brown envelope from his jacket and handed it to the assistant.

Smiling, the assistant took the envelope to the driver, then followed the guy back to the warehouse. The driver remained beside the wagon where the jar was still on the ground. He kept looking left and right, making sure the coast was clear as he shoved the envelope into his jacket.

About a minute later, the other men in the warehouse came out and headed toward the wagon. One of them carried a large wooden chest. Another held a crossbow. They hadn't brought those items with them when they arrived. Neither had our guards reported seeing those items when they checked the warehouse.

Where had they come from?

Unease ran through my bond with my pack brothers as one of the warehouse men climbed onto the wagon and began handing jars of DB to

the men waiting outside. One of them stood guard with his crossbow as the others loaded the DB into the chest.

I raised my hand. It was almost time to give the signal to attack. I waited until the last jar was loaded into the chest.

“Now,” I whispered, then lowered my hand swiftly.

My pack brothers and I dropped from the trees at the same time. The man with the crossbow spotted us first. His eyes widened, and he swung the weapon in my direction.

“Ambush!” he yelled, then fired.

I twisted to the side. The bolt whizzed past my shoulder, close enough for me to feel a rush of air before it buried itself in a tree behind me. I raced forward as the clearing erupted into chaos.

The crossbowman reached for another bolt. I wouldn't give him a chance to use it. The moment he saw me charging toward him, he abandoned the bolt and swung the crossbow at my head instead.

I ducked beneath it and drove my shoulder into his stomach. The force knocked him backward. He stumbled but managed to stay on his feet. Before I could reach him again, he gripped the crossbow with both hands and swung it toward my face.

I caught it. For a second, we struggled for control of the weapon. Then I jerked him toward me and drove my knee into his stomach. His breath left him in a grunt. Before he could recover, I slammed my forehead into his. His head snapped back.

I ripped the crossbow from his hands and tossed it aside. With blood pouring from his nose, he reached for the dagger at his waist. Reminding myself that I wanted them alive, I slammed the hilt of my sword against his temple before he could draw his weapon.

He swayed, and then his body crumpled to the ground. *One down.* By the time I straightened, two more men were already down. One lay motionless several feet from Daemin, while another was sprawled near Zian's feet.

I hadn't even seen either of my pack brothers take them out. *Three down. Four left.* The driver must have realized how quickly the odds were turning against them. He leaped onto the wagon and reached beneath a tarp, pulling out several swords.

“Weapons!” he shouted.

He tossed the first sword to one of the remaining men. The smuggler caught it and rushed toward me while the driver threw the others to his companions. I tightened my grip on my sword and met him halfway.

Steel clashed against steel as I brought my weapon down. He staggered beneath the force of my strike, but I didn't give him time to recover. I swung again. He blocked, barely. Our blades scraped together as I drove him backward.

His boots dug into the dirt, but I was stronger. I shoved him away and drove my foot into his chest. He flew backward and crashed into the wagon. I spun as movement flashed at the edge of my vision.

Another blade came toward my neck. I ducked beneath it and drove my elbow into the attacker's ribs. It was the driver. He grunted and stumbled sideways. I grabbed the back of his tunic before he could fall and slammed him face-first into the side of the wagon.

Once. Twice.

I released him when his body went limp and let him collapse at my feet. I spun around, blade positioned in front of my face. Daemin had caught one of the smugglers by the throat. The man stabbed at him with a dagger, but Daemin caught his wrist before the blade reached his stomach.

The smuggler's eyes widened. Daemin twisted. Bone snapped. The man screamed. Daemin ripped the dagger from his useless hand and drove the hilt into his temple. The smuggler crumpled to the ground.

To my left, Zian caught his opponent's wrist as the man swung at him. He twisted the smuggler's arm behind his back and drove him face-first into the ground. Before the man could recover, Zian wrenched his arm higher until a sickening crack filled the air.

The smuggler screamed. Zian released the man's broken arm, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and slammed his face into the dirt repeatedly. Blood splattered across the ground. On the fourth strike, the smuggler's body went limp.

Zian let the guy's head drop and rose calmly to his feet, as though he hadn't just beaten a man unconscious with his bare hands. They'd been light work. We'd taken them down in no time. I was about to order the guards watching from the shadows to tie them up and prepare them for transport when I heard a noise near the wagon.

My gaze snapped in that direction. The man I'd kicked into it was back on his feet. I'd made the mistake of assuming he'd stay down. He wasn't

trying to fight us, though. He was backing away.

One hand disappeared beneath his tunic and came back gripping a chain around his neck. From it hung a glowing blue pendant. The man whispered three words. My dragon immediately stirred. Something wasn't right.

"Stop him!" I shouted.

Daemin was already moving, but the smuggler ripped the necklace free and raised his arm. Before Daemin could reach him, he threw the necklace against the ground and stomped on it. The pendant shattered. A pulse of power exploded through the clearing.

The force struck my chest and sent me stumbling backward as the air around us grew colder. For a moment, everything between us and the warehouse appeared to bend and ripple beneath the moonlight.

Daemin and Zian moved to stand on either side of me as ten enormous shapes began taking form within the distortion. One moment, there was nothing there. The next, ten creatures stood in the clearing.

"What the hell?" Daemin muttered.

The nearest creature lifted its head. It resembled a man only in shape, standing nearly nine feet tall with massive shoulders and arms thick enough to crush a man. Gray stone covered its body instead of flesh.

Strange symbols had been carved across various parts of its massive body. The markings glowed the same eerie blue as the pendant the smuggler had shattered. One by one, the creatures opened their eyes.

There were no pupils, no whites, nothing remotely human about them. Only pale blue light. My dragon snarled as ten pairs of glowing eyes turned toward us. I tightened my grip on my sword.

"Golems," I sneered.

Daemin cursed under his breath while Zian lifted his blade. My attention remained fixed on the creatures in front of us and the magical markings glowing across their bodies. Golems didn't create themselves.

And they didn't just appear out of nowhere. Someone had made them from stone, enchanted them, and somehow bound ten of the damn things to the pendant that smuggler had worn around his neck.

Whoever was moving Dragonblight through the capital wasn't working with dragons alone. They had magic users helping them. That realization barely had time to register before the first golem charged.

"Spread out!" I roared.

We scattered as its massive fist crashed down, aiming for the three of us. The ground shook beneath my feet. Dirt sprayed into the air where I'd been standing seconds earlier. I rolled across the ground, then rose into a crouch, sword ready.

Daemin darted around the creature's left side while Zian went right. The golem turned toward Daemin and swung one massive arm at him. Daemin ducked, and the stone fist continued past him before smashing through the side of the wagon.

Wood exploded across the clearing. One of the horses neighed loudly and reared against its harness while the other fought desperately to pull away.

"Guards, join us. Someone, move the wagon and DB out of the way. Don't take your eyes off the DB!" I shouted. "No shifting. We can't risk breaking those jars."

Around us, our men emerged from the shadows. Zian's Shadow Guards appeared from between the trees while Daemin's assassins moved into the clearing, weapons already drawn. There was no reason to keep them hidden anymore.

From the corner of my eye, I saw someone moving the wagon. Another group of guardians protected the Dragonblight. A second golem charged toward Zian while two more started toward our men.

The others spread across the clearing, forcing everyone farther apart. My dragon pushed beneath my skin, riled by the sudden appearance of a threat we hadn't anticipated. Before I could determine which creature to attack next, a shadow fell over me.

I looked up to find one of the golems charging straight toward me. I tightened my grip on my sword and waited. The creature thundered closer, each heavy step shaking the ground. Twenty feet became ten, then five.

Behind me, I could hear a guard battling one of those big bastards. The creature before me raised both arms above its head, preparing to bring them down on me as it grew closer.

"Kai!" Daemin shouted.

I dove aside at the last second. The golem couldn't stop its momentum. Its massive body slammed into the creature behind me, and the impact sounded like two boulders colliding. Both staggered.

I was already moving. Before the nearest one could recover, I jumped onto its back and drove my sword into the narrow gap between two sections

of stone at the base of its neck. The blade sank deep.

The creature roared. A massive hand swept over its shoulder. I ripped my sword free and jumped before it could grab me, landing hard enough that pain shot through my knees. I rolled away and came back to my feet.

The golem turned toward me. A deep crack now ran through the stone at its neck. *Good*. They could be damaged. Across the clearing, Zian's blade struck one of the glowing markings carved into a golem's chest.

Blue light flashed from the symbol. The creature jerked backward so violently that it nearly lost its footing. To my surprise, a few pebbles fell from its form. I saw it. So did Daemin.

"The markings!" I shouted. "Aim for the markings!"

Our men changed tactics immediately. Instead of attacking wherever they could land a blow, they began targeting the glowing symbols carved into the creatures' bodies. The clearing descended into chaos.

Stone fists crashed into trees. Steel rang against enchanted bodies. Men shouted warnings to one another while the horses screeched behind us. One of the golems caught an Iron Guard across the chest and sent him flying several yards through the air.

Another tore a tree from the ground and swung it toward a group of Shadow Guards. They scattered before it struck. My gaze swept across the clearing, assessing the battle.

The golems had forced most of our men away from the smugglers, and several of the bastards we'd already taken down were beginning to stir. Then I saw movement near the trees. Two of the smugglers were running.

"Don't let them escape!" I shouted.

Several Shadow Guards immediately went after them, disappearing into the darkness. The decision cost us men we needed here, but I couldn't allow our leads to vanish. Another golem charged toward me.

I raised my sword, ready to go toe-to-toe with a creature made of stone. The clean ambush we'd planned was over. No matter what happened from here on, one thing had become painfully clear...

This Dragonblight operation was bigger than we'd realized.

CHAPTER NINE



KAI

The golem barreled toward me, its massive feet pounding against the earth. I waited until it was close enough to swing before diving beneath its arm. The stone fist sailed over my head, and I came up behind it, driving my sword into one of the glowing symbols carved into its back.

Blue light exploded around the blade. The creature released a roar loud enough to make my ears ring as cracks spread outward from the marking. I twisted the blade deeper, trying to break the symbol completely.

But the golem spun around faster than I'd expected. Its arm caught me across the chest. Pain exploded through my ribs as I flew backward and crashed onto the dirt. I rolled several times before finally digging my sword into the ground to stop myself.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. My dragon roared inside me, furious at the attack. I inhaled deeply and pushed myself onto one knee. The golem was already barreling toward me. Blood filled my mouth.

I spat it onto the ground and rose, tightening my grip on my sword. Damaging the smaller marking had hurt the bastard, but it hadn't slowed him for long. My gaze landed on the larger symbol glowing in the center of its chest.

That was the marking Zian had struck earlier. The one that had nearly brought another golem to its knees. The creature before me raised both fists

above its head as it charged my way.

This time, instead of waiting for it to reach me, I ran straight toward it. The golem swung. I veered right, barely avoiding its fists before jumping onto its arm. I planted my boots against the rough stone and launched myself toward its chest.

I drove my sword straight into the glowing symbol. Blue light erupted around me. The creature froze. I hung there for a heartbeat with both hands wrapped around the hilt as cracks spread through the marking beneath my blade.

The golem's massive hand came toward me, but I ripped my sword free and dropped before it could grab me. Its fingers closed around empty air. The instant my feet hit the ground, I rolled away and came back up with my sword raised.

The golem took one step toward me and swung. I ducked beneath its fist and slashed the back of its knee as I passed. The blade struck a gap between the sections of stone. Its leg buckled. The creature dropped to one knee, bringing its chest within reach.

I spun around and charged. Before it could rise, I planted one foot on its bent thigh and launched myself upward. I gripped my sword with both hands and drove the blade straight into the crack I'd already made in the center of its chest.

A loud clap split the air. I twisted the blade and shoved it deeper. The symbol fractured beneath my sword, blue light spilling through the widening cracks. The golem's massive hand came toward me.

I ripped my blade free and pushed away from its body, landing hard on my feet before rolling out of reach. The light intensified, shining through the stone until the entire thing shattered.

With a rumble, the creature exploded. Chunks of rock crashed into the dirt. One struck my shoulder, knocking me sideways. I felt my joint pop out of place as I hit the ground.

"Fuck!"

Pain tore through my shoulder and down my arm. I rolled onto my back and gritted my teeth. My arm hung at an awkward angle, useless at my side. I grabbed it with my other hand and shoved the joint back into place.

A sharp pop sounded. Another burst of pain shot through me, followed by immediate relief as the joint slid back where it belonged. I rotated my shoulder once, testing it. It hurt like hell, but it worked.

I grabbed my sword and rose to my feet. Damaging the other markings weakened them. Destroying the one on the chest killed them. Now I knew how to take the bastards down.

“The markings on their chests!” I shouted. “Destroy them!”

The golem attacking Zian swung one massive fist toward his head. He ducked beneath it and jumped onto the creature's arm before it could pull away. Zian ran two steps up the length of its arm and launched himself toward its chest.

His sword struck the glowing symbol, sending blue sparks flying, but the marking didn't break. The golem backhanded him. Zian flew through the air and slammed into a tree hard enough that pain ripped through our bond.

My stomach clenched as he hit the ground, but before I could go to him, he groaned and pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

“I'm fine!” he yelled.

The golem was already coming for him again. Zian lifted his head. The creature swung one massive fist toward him. Zian rolled aside, and the golem punched straight through the trunk of the tree behind him.

Wood splintered as the tree tilted dangerously. Zian came up beside the creature. Before it could pull its arm free, he jumped onto its back and climbed onto its shoulders. The golem thrashed violently.

He reversed his grip on his sword and drove the blade downward toward the center of the golem's chest. The point struck the glowing marking but didn't penetrate deeply enough. The golem reached for him.

Zian ripped the blade free and struck again. Blue light flashed as a crack appeared through the center of the symbol. The creature roared, spun, and threw itself backward, slamming Zian into the damaged tree.

Zian's face twisted in pain as the creature stepped forward, then moved to slam him into the tree again. But Zian was faster. He drove his sword into the marking one final time. The symbol shattered.

Zian kicked away from the creature as cracks raced through its body. He hit the ground and rolled while the golem collapsed into a pile of broken stone behind him.

Across the clearing, Daemin sprinted toward a third golem. He'd apparently abandoned his sword at some point because he now had two daggers in his hands. The golem swung at him.

Daemin dropped low and slid beneath its arm, dragging one dagger through a glowing symbol along the creature's side as he passed. Blue sparks followed his blade. He came back to his feet without slowing.

The golem turned after him, but Daemin had already changed direction. He raced toward a fallen tree, planted one foot against the trunk, and launched himself backward. He landed on the creature's shoulders.

Both daggers came down, sinking into the glowing marking at the base of its neck. The golem jerked violently and reached over its shoulder, but Daemin ripped the blades free and jumped before it could grab him.

"Aim for the chest!" I shouted as golems crumbled around me, the guards working together to take them down.

The golem charged at Daemin. Daemin threw the dagger. It struck the glowing symbol in the center of the creature's chest. The golem staggered, giving Daemin enough time to send a second blade flying.

It struck beside the first. A crack split the symbol. The third dagger left Daemin's hand almost immediately. It buried itself between the other two. He'd pulled it so fast, I hadn't even seen where he'd pulled it from.

The marking shattered. Blue light spread through the creature before its massive body broke apart and crashed to the ground. Around us, our men had already begun adapting to the new command.

Instead of wasting their strength striking stone wherever they could, they worked together to create openings to the center markings. Shadow Guards moved in pairs and groups, drawing the golems' attention before another guard attacked from the opposite side.

Daemin's assassins darted between the creatures, using speed rather than strength to get within striking distance before disappearing out of reach. Blue light flashed throughout the clearing as more golems fell.

Another explosion of stone sounded somewhere behind me. I searched for the next threat and caught movement near the edge of the clearing. One of the remaining golems was heading straight for the warehouse.

"Where the hell is that one going?" I shouted.

The golem slammed through the wooden doors instead of opening them, disappearing into the darkness. We followed. Moonlight poured through holes in the sagging roof, illuminating old crates, broken pieces of furniture, and rotting beams.

I could hear the golem's heavy footsteps moving toward the back of the building. Then I heard something else. A low buzzing sound. The same

noise I'd heard earlier while we'd been waiting outside. The golem reached the back wall. Blue light flashed. Then the creature vanished. All three of us stopped.

"What the hell?" Daemin muttered.

I stared at the wall. There was no doorway. No opening. Nothing but old wood stretching from one side of the warehouse to the other. Yet a nine-foot stone creature had just disappeared in here. Zian started forward.

"Wait," I called out.

He stopped. The buzzing continued. I moved closer without touching the wall. At first, I saw nothing unusual. Then the moonlight drifted across the boards and revealed the faintest ripple.

Magic.

I bent, picked up a broken piece of wood from the floor, and tossed it toward the wall. The wood struck the boards and dropped to the floor. I stared at it for a moment, then remembered the flash of blue I'd seen when the golem disappeared through the wall.

"Daemin, go outside and get a few pieces of those blue shards that fell from the golems. Don't touch them with your bare hands."

Daemin didn't waste time asking why. He turned and rushed out of the warehouse.

Zian moved closer to me, studying the faint ripple. "You think that's the key to following wherever that golem went?"

"It's worth a try."

A few minutes later, Daemin returned carrying several blue fragments bundled inside a piece of cloth. With my gloved hand, I took one of the shards. I tossed it toward the ripple. The blue shard disappeared.

For a second, none of us spoke. Then I reached into the cloth and took another fragment. Closing my gloved hand around the shard, I walked toward the wall.

"Stay behind me," I told my pack brothers.

Daemin snorted as he handed Zian a shard. "Why do you get to go first?"

"Because I'm older."

"By three months."

"Still older."

Before he could argue, I stepped through the wall. Cold tingled across my skin for an instant before I emerged on the other side. The concealed

room was larger than I'd expected. Shelves lined two of the walls, but unlike the abandoned warehouse outside, everything in here was organized and clean.

Wooden boxes held stacks of documents. Several weapons rested against one wall beside the same type of wooden chest the smugglers had carried outside. Sealed containers were stacked in one corner, while two heavy chests sat beneath a narrow table covered with papers.

There were also objects I didn't recognize, including several pieces of stone etched with symbols similar to the markings we'd seen on the golems. The final golem stood in the center of the room.

It charged toward me. I jumped aside as its fist slammed into one of the shelves. Wood splintered, sending boxes and papers crashing to the floor. Zian and Daemin came through the barrier behind me.

"Watch what you hit!" I shouted. "We need whatever's in here intact."

The golem swung at Zian. He ducked while Daemin went low, slicing behind the creature's knee. Zian's dagger found a gap between two sections of stone. The golem stumbled.

I went for its chest. My blade struck the glowing symbol before the creature knocked me back. Zian attacked from the opposite side, striking the same spot. Blue light flashed. A crack appeared.

"Again!" I roared.

Daemin darted in and drove his dagger into the damaged symbol. The golem staggered, giving me the opening I needed. I gripped my sword with both hands and lunged, aiming for the blue symbol. The marking shattered.

"Move!" I yelled.

All three of us backed away as cracks raced across its body. A second later, the final golem collapsed into a heap of stone. For several moments, the only sound in the room was our breathing.

Then Daemin looked around. "What the hell is this place?"

That was exactly what I intended to find out. I approached the nearest shelf. Now that the threat was gone, I could examine the room more carefully. The documents weren't arranged randomly.

They'd been sorted into labeled wooden boxes. I recognized shipping records among them, along with folded authorizations bearing clan markings. My jaw tightened.

More forgeries.

Zian moved closer to one of the boxes. "They've been operating out of here for a while."

"It looks that way."

Daemin crouched beside one of the heavy chests beneath the table. A blue symbol had been carved into the lid.

"Want me to open it?" he asked.

"No."

He looked up at me. "Why?"

"We just fought ten golems summoned from a necklace. Nobody touches anything marked with magic until we know what it does."

"Fair point."

While he stood, I moved toward the table. A thick ledger rested beneath several loose papers. I opened it and scanned the pages. Dates, quantities of DB, quantities of forbidden poisons, payments, and delivery locations filled the columns.

Most of the addresses changed from shipment to shipment, but one appeared repeatedly. I flipped back several pages. There it was again.

"Zian," I called, flipping to another page. When he came over, I pointed to the address. "They've made several deliveries to this particular location."

Zian studied the entries. "Well, damn."

"Have your guards find out what's at this address," I told him. "Then put someone on it. I want to know everyone who comes and goes. Show them this room and explain that if the facility looks empty, that could mean magic is at play. Make sure they have some of the golem's shards to enter any of these types of rooms they find."

"I'll handle it," Zian told me.

I closed the ledger and looked around the room. There were weapons, forged documents, shipping records, DB containers, and objects etched with the same type of symbols we'd seen on the golems.

This wasn't a meeting place a few smugglers had chosen for one transaction. Someone had built an operation here and used magic to hide it. And they probably had more places like these, all around the capital.

"Post guards outside this room," I ordered. "Nobody touches anything until we've documented it and brought in someone who understands magic."

Daemin glanced toward the chest again. "I think there's money in this one."

I looked at him. “Based on what?”

“That lock isn't protecting vegetables. This could be where they store the money used to pay for their shipments.”

He had a point. Still, I wasn't opening anything until we knew it was safe. At the mention of money, my thoughts briefly went to Zuri.

I need money.

Her words drifted through my mind. There could be a fortune sitting three feet from me while my own wife had been forced to ask us for access to enough money to take care of herself. I would fix that tomorrow.

She was the one who should be in charge of the household funds, not Mei Lin. As for this chest, if there was really money in it, once I made sure it was safe, I would give that to Zuri also.

“Come on,” I said. “We still have prisoners outside.”

When we returned to the clearing, the Shadow Guards I'd sent after the two fleeing smugglers had already returned. But only one prisoner stood between them. His hands were bound securely behind his back, blood ran from his nose, and he was barely putting weight on his left leg.

I looked behind the guards. “Where's the other one?”

One of the Shadow Guards stepped forward. “He got away, Your Highness.”

My jaw tightened. “Which one?”

“The wagon driver.”

He was the one who'd taken the large envelope from the assistant earlier and shoved it inside his jacket. We needed that money as evidence.

“How the hell did you lose him?” I roared.

“He doubled back near the western ridge. We picked up his trail again twice, but every time we got close, he disappeared. The last time we saw him, he was holding pieces of blue stone marked with the same symbols as the golems.”

Magic. He knew how to work the blue shards.

Daemin joined us. “I'll find him,” he volunteered.

“Take two of your assassins with you,” I told Daemin.

He motioned toward two of his men. They immediately joined him. Together, they headed in the direction the guards said the driver had run off to.

“Daemin,” I called out.

He glanced back at me.

“I want him alive. We need answers.”

He nodded before he and the two assassins disappeared into the trees. I turned my attention to the remaining smugglers. They'd been gathered under heavy guard, and most were conscious now, including the bastard who'd shattered the pendant.

He was on his knees with his wrists bound behind him and additional restraints around his ankles. I walked directly toward him.

“Where did you get the pendant?” I asked.

He smiled, blood seeping between his teeth.

I crouched and grabbed his jaw. “Who gave it to you?”

He said nothing. My dragon stirred, wanting to be set free.

“You brought Dragonblight into my territory using forged clan authorizations. You had an enchanted object capable of summoning golems, and there's an entire operation hidden inside that warehouse.” I tightened my grip. “You're going to tell me who you're working for.”

His smile widened. “You think this ends just because you caught us?” He leaned in as far as my grip allowed. “You have no idea who you're dealing with.”

I leaned closer until our faces were inches apart.

“Leave this one for me,” I told the guards without taking my eyes off him. “I want to personally torture the information out of him. By the time I'm finished, there won't be an inch of skin left on his body. If that doesn't make him talk, I'll force him to shift and start peeling scales from his dragon.”

I lowered my mask. His smile disappeared. It was my turn to smile.

“Soon, I'm going to show you who *you're* dealing with.” I released him and stood. “Search him again. Every seam in his clothing, every pocket, his hair, his mouth. Then gag him. After what that necklace did, I'm not taking any chances.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

I turned toward the others. “Search all of them again. Thoroughly. Then separate them for transport. No more than two prisoners with each group. Everyone goes directly to the dungeon.”

Several of our men had been injured during the battle, but everyone was alive. That was what mattered.

“Prince Kai.”

I turned as an Iron Guard approached, carrying a piece of cloth. Several glowing blue fragments rested inside. *The pendant.*

“Wrap each piece separately and put them with the evidence. No one touches them with bare hands.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

As he walked away, Zian came to stand beside me.

“We'll need someone who understands magic to examine everything we found,” Zian said.

“I know.”

“The witches and warlocks of the Runeborne kingdom are our allies,” he continued. “Do you think that’s changing?”

“I’m not sure if rogue magic users are behind this. Or if this is something bigger. I’ll report it to the King and see what he thinks. But if these weren’t rogue magic users helping dragons just for money, then we would have a bigger problem on our hands. War could be coming to Ashborne. Either way, we’ll be ready.”

Zian glanced toward the trees where Daemin had disappeared. “How long do you think it’ll take him to catch the driver?”

“He's Daemin. It shouldn’t take long. I just hope he doesn’t kill him.” I nodded toward the bastard who'd shattered the pendant. “You take him. Bring four Shadow Guards with you.”

“I'll make sure he gets to the dungeon.”

“Alive.”

Zian sighed. “I thought I would be able to get my hands dirty on this mission. Instead, I fought rocks, and now I have to babysit smugglers. Do I at least get to torture them for information?”

“Torture them all you want,” I told him.

He walked away with a smile. I shook my head as I watched him go. My pack brothers were tired of sitting around our princely manor. They preferred being in the field. I had to admit, I enjoyed this better than just giving orders from the safety of my office.

Within minutes, Zian and his group were gone. The other prisoners were divided into separate groups and sent toward the capital while I remained behind with enough Iron Guards to secure the warehouse, protect the evidence, and tend to our wounded.

I surveyed the clearing. Broken stone covered the ground where the golems had fallen. Splintered wood surrounded the damaged wagon, and

Iron Guards stood watch over the confiscated Dragonblight.

Beyond them stood the warehouse and the magically concealed room no ordinary person would've known was there. We'd come here expecting to capture a handful of smugglers and learn who was bringing Dragonblight into the capital.

Instead, we'd uncovered forged clan authorizations, enchanted golems, a hidden operation protected by magic, and records that might lead us straight to whoever was behind it. The men we'd captured knew something too.

Maybe they didn't know who sat at the top, but somebody had recruited them, paid them, supplied the DB, and given one of them a necklace capable of summoning ten fucking golems. Someone would talk.

And the one man who'd managed to escape wouldn't stay free for long. Daemin was hunting him. Once everything here was secured, I'd meet my pack brothers at the dungeon and start getting answers. After that, I was going home.

My thoughts immediately went to Zuri. A strange restlessness had been sitting beneath my skin for the last few minutes. I'd blamed it on the fight, but now that the danger had passed, the feeling remained.

My dragon stirred, wanting me to go to her. I frowned. I couldn't go to her yet. Besides, she was probably asleep in her bed, completely unaware of what we'd been dealing with tonight. Still, I wanted to see her. I wanted to make sure she was safe with my own eyes.

"Soon," I told my dragon as I rubbed my chest. "We'll go home to her soon."

CHAPTER TEN



ZURI

I couldn't believe we'd gotten lost in this damn forest!

"This is all your fault," I hissed.

Allie stopped walking and faced me. Her long braid swung as she turned. I could tell she was frustrated from the way she put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. Only her eyes were visible beneath the black material covering the lower half of her face.

"My fault?" she said.

"Yes. We could've left hours ago, but you decided we needed costumes."

"They're *disguises*," she corrected.

"They're costumes. My cleavage wouldn't be showing if this was a disguise."

I adjusted my top again, covering up the girls that were on display. Allie looked down at herself. She was dressed in all black from head to toe. Black fitted pants. Black shirt that clung to her.

Black boots. Black gloves. She'd even made black coverings for our faces, leaving only our eyes exposed. Oh, and our hair. My curls were on full display. If my alphas saw us, they'd know exactly who we were. We were not in disguise. We were in costumes.

“We needed disguises,” she insisted. “What did you want us to do? Walk up to a bunch of criminals with our faces exposed?”

“We needed black, loose-fitting clothes. And head coverings that covered our entire heads. No hair out. All I wanted was for you to find us some black clothes. But you turned it into a DIY project.”

“A what?” she asked, frowning.

“A... never mind. It was you who decided we needed to look like pretty assassins and then spent hours making us these outfits.”

“First of all, we look authentic,” she told me. “This is how all of the female martial artists dress.”

“We’re thieves, Allie. And we look ridiculous.”

“We look intimidating.”

“We look like two women wandering around the woods in the middle of the night, lost, because one of them took too long making cute matching outfits,” I hissed.

Her eyes narrowed. “My outfits didn’t get us lost, Princess. You did. You said you knew where we were going.”

“I do.”

“Then where is the warehouse?” she asked, stretching her arms out. “Where is it, Princess?”

I looked around at the endless trees surrounding us.

“That way.” I pointed left.

“You said that an hour ago. And an hour before that.”

“And technically, it's still that way.”

“Zuri, we're lost.”

“We are not lost. We're just... temporarily unsure of our exact location.”

“That's called being lost.”

“I don't appreciate your negativity.”

Allie made a sound beneath her mask and started walking again. I followed, refusing to acknowledge that she might have a point. This was not how tonight was supposed to go. The plan had been simple.

Find the warehouse, wait for the smugglers to finish whatever illegal business they'd come there to conduct, rob them, and go home richer. Instead, Allie had decided that if we were going to commit a crime, we needed proper criminal attire.

I'd agreed at first because the outfits had sounded like a good idea. That was before I'd realized she intended to make them herself. By the time she'd

finished sewing, adjusting, changing things, adding gloves, and insisting we couldn't possibly sneak around with our faces exposed, we'd left much later than I'd planned.

That still wouldn't have been a problem if I'd known how to get to the warehouse. Unfortunately, I didn't. I knew *where* it was. The book described the warehouse as an abandoned building beyond the capital's western edge.

The book said it was surrounded by forest and far enough from the main roads that the smugglers could do business without attracting attention. However, the book hadn't told me which roads to take to get there from the manor.

The book hadn't included directions. And it hadn't specifically stated the address. Apparently, the author hadn't considered the possibility that one day her friend would get sucked into her story and need to find the warehouse herself so she could rob the criminals she'd written about.

Inconsiderate, really. At this point, I was giving this story 2 stars. I do not recommend.

Allie stopped ahead of me. "Didn't we cross this stream already?"

I looked past her at the narrow stretch of water cutting through the trees.

"No," I told her.

"Yes, we did."

"This one is different."

"How?"

I stared at it for a moment. "It has more rocks."

"It's the same stream, Zuri."

"There are thousands of streams in the world."

"And we've somehow found the same one three times."

"Twice."

"Three."

I stepped across it. "We're wasting time arguing."

"We're wasting time because we're lost."

"Temporarily directionally challenged."

"That isn't a thing."

"It is now."

Allie muttered something under her breath and followed me across. Another half hour passed before even I had to admit this wasn't working. Not aloud, obviously. There were limits to personal growth.

My legs hurt. My feet hurt. I was hungry, and I was beginning to suspect the robbery had already happened without us. Eventually, I spotted a large rock beside the path and dropped onto it.

"I need a minute to regroup," I told Allie.

Allie didn't argue. She sat beside me and pulled the black material away from her mouth.

"We should go home, Princess. We can find some different smugglers to rob tomorrow night."

"But," I started.

She spoke over me, which further showed how frustrated my poor maid was.

"We've been out here forever," Allie continued. "Even if we find the warehouse now, what if they've already left and taken the money with them?"

That was exactly what I'd been thinking. I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. All that work for nothing. I'd had one job tonight. *Get money*. And I'd failed. I needed that money so I wouldn't have to depend on Kai, Daemin, and Zian for every little thing.

I didn't even need a lot of money. Just enough to take care of myself while I figured out what the hell I was going to do with my new life inside this crazy ass book. I sighed, angry with myself for knowing this story well, but still not being able to navigate it properly.

"I guess you're right," I muttered. "It's my fault. I got us lost. I'm sorry."

Allie's eyes widened. "What?"

"You heard me. I said I'm sorry."

"No, before that. You just said I was right. I wish I had something to write with. I'd like to record the date. Whenever I was right before, you always refused to admit it. Now, you're even apologizing too."

I nudged her with my shoulder, and she laughed.

"Don't worry, Princess. We'll figure something else out," she said.

"There are other ways to get money. We could sell something."

"You mean, like working at a brothel?" I asked.

"Uh, no. Not that. I meant like setting up a food stall and cooking for people."

"Ohh. You want us to sell food."

I'd thought she wanted us to do something strange for a little bit of change.

"If I, the Princess, was caught selling food in the market, those alphas would have a fit."

"You're right," she said. "I forgot, we're no longer those two wildlings from the countryside."

"I think living life in the countryside would be easier than being a Princess without any money," I muttered.

Allie nodded. For a long time, we just sat there on that rock, both lost in our own thoughts. Finally, I admitted defeat.

"Let's go home," I told Allie. "We'll figure something else out tomorrow..."

Before I could get that last word out, my chest tightened, and suddenly it was hard to breathe. I sucked in a breath and pressed my hand against the center of my chest. The sensation wasn't exactly pain.

It was more like pressure. Like a sudden, terrible heaviness had taken up residence beneath my ribs, making it difficult to pull in a full breath. My heart started pounding as panic rushed through me.

"Princess?" Allie whispered.

The pressure intensified.

Allie jumped from the rock and turned toward me. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," I rasped.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. I..." I pressed my palm harder against my chest. "I think I'm having a heart attack."

"What?" Allie's eyes went wide. She immediately grabbed my shoulders. "Can you breathe? Does your chest hurt? Should I get help?"

"I can breathe. Just give me a second."

Another wave of panic rushed through me. I closed my eyes. Something was wrong. This sort of felt like a panic attack. Yet, not really. Then a single word drifted through my mind.

Mine.

My eyes flew open.

Allie stared at me. "What? What's wrong?"

This feeling. I'd felt it before. This morning in Mei Lin's courtyard, when Kai had looked at me and almost smiled. Something inside me had reacted to him. Something warm and possessive had risen from somewhere so deep inside me that I'd immediately blamed Old Zuri.

Mine.

I'd ignored it then. I couldn't ignore it now. The presence inside me wasn't warm this time. It was agitated. Frightened. Urgent. I slowly lowered my hand.

"Kai."

Allie's brows drew together. "What about him?"

"I think something's wrong with Kai."

Allie continued staring at me. "You just grabbed your chest and told me you were having a heart attack. Now you're telling me you somehow know Prince Kai is in danger."

"Yes."

"How do you know he's in danger?"

"I... I don't know. Something inside me keeps whispering *mine*. And I feel like it wants me to find Kai."

Allie's eyes widened. "Princess, is your... is your inner dragon finally awakening?"

I shook my head. "No. That's impossible."

That never happened in the book.

"Listen, Princess. Remember that time I lost you near that cave. We got separated because of bandits. It was my inner dragon that helped me find you. My dragon isn't the strongest. But it led me to you. I was lost, crying, and hoping you were okay. Then suddenly, a warm sensation came over me, and I could hear my inner dragon. She wasn't really talking, more like pushing me to go a certain way. I listened. And she led me to you in that cave."

"Could it really be my inner dragon communicating with me?" I whispered, staring down at the ground.

"I think so. And if it's saying mine, and leading you toward Kai... Princess, that could mean that Kai is your Fated One."

My gaze snapped to Allie. "Fuck that. But this could be a good thing."

"How?"

"This feeling can lead me to Kai. Kai is where the smugglers are. The smugglers have the money." I grabbed Allie's hand and stood up. "Allie, we still have a chance to rob someone tonight."

"But your dragon wants you to help Kai, Princess."

"Fuck Kai. He's a grown man. He can take care of himself. Or maybe his precious Lin'er will get the same feeling I just got and come save him."

That's not our problem. Our problem is money. Now, let's go find it."

I started walking in the direction my inner dragon was leading me. I had an inner dragon. After I secured my funds, I would see if this dragon could shift. This was not what had happened in the book. Had me coming here changed things?

"But..." Allie started.

"No buts," I told her, continuing forward, pulling her along. "It's either this, or we'll have to sell our butts in the brothel."

"I don't want to sell my butt, princess."

"Then come on, Allie. I know how to find the warehouse."

"Okay, okay. I'll follow you. Please release my hand, Princess."

"Oh, sorry."

I let her hand go. We moved faster now. For the first time all night, I didn't have to guess which direction to take. Whenever I veered too far one way, the strange pressure inside me changed.

We were going in the right direction. A smile crept across my face as I continued following my instincts. We'd reached a small clearing when Allie grabbed my arm. I looked over at her. She placed her finger on her mouth, wanting me to be silent.

I nodded. She stared around us. I followed her gaze, taking in our surroundings. At first, I heard nothing. Then a branch snapped somewhere ahead of us, followed by another. Something was moving through the forest.

Allie pulled me behind a thick tree, and I ducked beside her, pressing my back against the trunk. Footsteps pounded closer, heavy and uneven. Someone was running, but stumbling as they did so.

We exchanged a look. For all the complaining I'd done about our ridiculous outfits, I suddenly appreciated them. With the moonlight blocked by the canopy of branches above us, our black clothing blended almost perfectly into the darkness.

I stared around the edge of the tree just in time to see a man burst through the bushes. He nearly fell when his foot caught on a root, but he caught himself against a tree and kept moving. Blood covered one side of his face.

His clothes were torn and filthy, and he was breathing so hard I could hear him from where we hid. He staggered several more steps before

stopping almost directly next to our tree. Leaning back some, I held my breath as he bent forward and braced both hands against his knees.

“Damn it. I only have one shard left,” he muttered.

Shards? What shards? He'd come from the direction of the warehouse. He had to be one of the smugglers. In the book, none had escaped. Why was this man here? I glanced at Allie. She was watching him too.

The man straightened and looked over his shoulder. That's when I saw it. A large brown envelope protruded from inside his jacket. The man noticed it too and immediately shoved it deeper beneath his clothing.

My gaze snapped toward Allie. She was already looking at me. Her eyes narrowed. She shook her head. I nodded, then looked back at the envelope. He had to be the driver who'd received the payment for the Dragonblight.

He was badly wounded, and I didn't see any weapons. I believed we could take him. Allie's fingers closed around my sleeve. I looked at her, and she shook her head again. I gently removed her hand.

This was my last chance. I was doing this. Her eyes widened, and she stared behind me. I looked back and saw the man watching us.

Well, damn. So much for a surprise attack.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZURI

Allie had already slid her mask back in place. The man's gaze drifted from me to Allie before returning to me. For a few seconds, none of us moved.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Did they send you?"

I had no idea who *they* were, and I didn't care.

"We're just two women taking a walk through the forest," I lied.

His eyes narrowed. "Dressed like that?"

"We like black."

Beside me, Allie made a small choking sound that I knew damn well was her trying not to laugh. And at a time like this! The man wasn't amused. He straightened and winced, one hand going to his side.

Whoever he'd encountered before us had done a number on him. Blood covered one side of his face, and from the way he kept one arm tucked against his ribs, those were probably injured too. If Allie and I targeted his existing injuries, we stood a decent chance of taking him down.

"Move away from the tree," he ordered.

"No, thank you. We like standing right here," I told him.

His expression hardened as one hand disappeared beneath his jacket. Allie's fingers brushed mine.

"Princess," she whispered.

"I see it."

The man's hand emerged holding a dagger. So I'd been wrong about him not having a weapon. As a fan of this book, I was getting a lot of things wrong.

"We don't want any trouble," Allie told him.

"Then take off the masks."

"No," I said.

"Bitches," he muttered, stepping forward.

Why we gotta be bitches? Allie looked at me and nodded. We'd done this dance many times before. As if on instinct, I nodded back and took a

step in the other direction. He couldn't come after both of us at the same time.

When he came after one of us, the other could attack from the side. Which of us would he choose? I guess I looked like the weakest link, because he lunged my way, dagger raised, poised to strike.

I jumped back as the dagger sliced through the air. Damn, he'd almost sliced my belly open with that move. Before he could swing again, I grabbed his wrist, just as Allie attacked from the side.

She drove her boot into the side of his bad knee. A cry escaped him as his leg buckled. I slammed my fist into his face and then twisted his wrist harder.

"Drop it!" I yelled.

Instead of dropping the blade, the bastard slammed his forehead into mine. Pain exploded across my face, forcing me to release him. He immediately slashed the dagger toward my stomach again.

With my face throbbing, I caught his forearm and shoved it aside before driving my knee between his legs. His entire body froze. The man made a strangled sound and bent forward. I could feel blood trickling from my nose.

My anger rose as I tasted blood on my lips. I was officially pissed off. If my alphas' guards had allowed Allie to bring our weapons into their manor when I married in, I would be weaponed up right now.

Instead, I had to fight with my hands. That was fine too. Growing up in the orphanage, I'd learned to hold my own against kids who called me a motherless child. I punched the smuggler in the face again, loving the satisfying crack that filled the air.

Blood poured from his nose as Allie planted her boot firmly against his chest, sending him crashing onto his back. But he was fast. He swept Allie's legs from beneath her with one quick move. Allie hit the ground hard, gasping for air. The driver immediately went after her.

Oh, hell no.

I jumped onto his back and wrapped an arm around his neck. He grabbed me and staggered backward, slamming me into a tree hard enough to send pain shooting down my spine. When I didn't let go, he did it again.

"Get off me, bitch," he roared.

I didn't want to let go. But the pain in my head and back was making me dizzy. My grip broke. I hit the ground. He spun around and grabbed the

front of my shirt before I could get away.

He hauled me up until my boots left the ground and drew back his fist. Another punch would probably knock me out. I couldn't let him hit me. Lifting my arms, I shoved my thumbs toward his eyes.

He jerked his head back, but not fast enough. One thumb caught him directly in the eye, sinking into something warm, wet, and disgustingly soft. His scream ripped through the forest as I pushed harder, my thumb driving deeper into the socket.

For one sickening second, I felt the curve of his eye shift beneath my thumb. Then his eye slipped free. My stomach rolled at the horrible sight. I jerked my hands back in horror as the eyeball popped from its socket and dangled against his cheek, still attached by a bloody strand of tissue.

"Oh, God!" I screamed.

For half a second, I forgot the bastard was trying to kill me. I'd wanted to stop him from punching me, not pull his damn eye out. He screamed and dropped me, both hands flying toward his face.

I stumbled backward, staring at what I'd done. Then I looked down at my hands. My thumb had eye socket juice on it. *Ew!* Wiping my hands on my pants, I looked over at Allie, who was now standing beside me, gripping a thick branch in both hands.

"Damn, Princess," she whispered, half in awe, half in disgust.

"I didn't mean to do that!"

The man roared and turned toward me with one eye still dangling against his cheek.

"I will kill you both for this," he yelled.

I raised my fists again. But Allie stepped forward and cracked the branch across his shoulder. *That's it, Allie. Hit him again.* When she swung again, he caught it, ripped it from her hands, and backhanded her hard enough to send her sprawling.

Fuck that! I charged forward and drove the heel of my boot into his injured ribs. He doubled over. I grabbed the back of his head and slammed my knee into his face. Blood sprayed across my pants.

I went to hit him again, but he caught my fist and squeezed. Pain shot through my hand. Allie slammed into him from behind and wrapped an arm around his neck. The second he released me to grab her, I kicked his injured knee.

His leg collapsed beneath him. Something slipped from inside his jacket as he fell. *The envelope*. It hit the ground and burst open, spilling a thick stack of money into the dirt. The smuggler slung Allie away from him and went after the money.

But Allie kicked his hand away as I dove forward and snatched the envelope, shoving the loose bills back inside. The smuggler started after me, but Allie had already risen to her feet and jumped onto his back.

I shoved the envelope into the hidden pocket Allie had sewn inside my fitted black shirt. She'd sewn a bunch of hidden pockets into our clothing to make it easier for us to carry the money.

With the money secure, I rushed forward to help Allie. The smuggler threw Allie away from him. She slammed into me, sending me stumbling back, but we both managed to stay on our feet.

We stood side by side, facing off with him. We'd done a number on him. Blood covered his face, his eye still dangled against his cheek, and he could barely put weight on one leg. His remaining eye dropped to where I'd slid the envelope into my shirt.

"Give me that back," he roared.

I shook my head.

Allie touched my arm. "Princess, we should go."

Yeah, we should. With his injured leg, there was no way he could catch us if we ran. We started backing away. Then the smuggler's body trembled. His shoulders widened as bones cracked beneath his skin.

My stomach dropped as his fingers lengthened and dark scales spread over his body. I'd been so focused on beating his ass and taking his money that I'd forgotten one very important detail. The smugglers were dragons too.

I grabbed Allie's arm. "Can you shift and fly us away from here?"

"I don't know," she said, looking nervous.

The smuggler's roar shook the branches overhead as he transformed.

"Try," I yelled.

"Okay." She closed her eyes. "Come on, dragon. You can do it. Don't fail me now."

I watched her. But nothing was happening. She just looked constipated. I looked back at the smuggler. He was almost done with his transformation. A loud roar escaped him as his neck elongated.

"Princess," Allie whispered.

I looked back at her, hoping for some progress. There was none.

"We should run," Allie said.

We ran. Branches whipped across my arms as we raced through the trees. Behind us came another roar, followed by cracking wood and the heavy pounding of the dragon gaining on us. A tree snapped somewhere behind me.

I made the mistake of looking back and nearly stumbled. He was moving fast. Blood streaked his scales, and one side of his face was badly damaged, and he was missing an eye. But the injuries that had nearly crippled him as a man weren't slowing his dragon nearly enough.

"Princess!"

Allie grabbed my arm and yanked me sideways just as a massive claw tore through the space where I'd been. We stumbled down a steep slope, sliding through dirt and leaves before crashing behind a fallen tree. Everything hurt. I looked over at Allie.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded, then winced. "What about the money, Princess?"

I lifted my hand and patted my chest. The envelope was still there.

"I've got it," I told her. "I almost lost my life, but I didn't lose this money."

For one ridiculous second, we stared at each other. Then we both started laughing. After everything we'd just gone through, we'd still managed to steal the damn money. I guess we weren't bad thieves after all.

A roar thundered above us. Our laughter died as the dragon appeared at the top of the slope, staring down at us.

"Do you think he can get down here?" I asked.

The dragon started forward. Well, that answered my question.

"We should run," I yelled.

Allie and I scrambled to our feet and took off through the trees. Behind us, the dragon roared and gave chase. This shit had not happened in CiCi's book!

DAEMIN

MINE.

I ignored my dragon, who kept trying to distract me with thoughts of Zuri. I needed to focus. A smuggler had gotten away. We couldn't let him escape. I crouched beside another dark spot on the forest floor and dragged two fingers through the blood staining the leaves.

Still wet. He couldn't be more than a few minutes ahead of me. I'd split from the other assassins when the trail disappeared, sending them in different directions to cut him off before he reached one of the roads leading back toward the capital.

The trail had finally picked back up and led me deeper into the forest where blood marked leaves and tree trunks, while broken branches and deep impressions in the dirt showed where he'd stumbled.

I continued forward. Inhaling deeply, trying to get a hint of the smuggler's scent on the wind. But my nose wasn't working. One of those golems had gotten a good hit in on me, cracking my nose.

It had healed. But all I could smell was blood. I stopped walking when I noticed that the footprints had become larger and deeper in this area. A nearby bush lay crushed on its side, and a massive print had sunk several inches into the dirt. He'd shifted. My dragon stirred.

MINE.

A flash of heat rushed beneath my skin as I pressed a hand against my chest.

"What now, Beast?" I hissed.

A growl vibrated inside me. *Move.*

I frowned and started forward again. "I'm moving."

Faster.

My dragon was never this chatty. The only time it talked so much was during battles when it chanted, "*Kill. Make them bleed. Destroy them.*" It had been agitated since the fight with the golems, but this was different. He pushed against me again, harder than before.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I hissed.

The answer struck me so suddenly that I stopped dead in my tracks.

Mine. Here. Danger.

My head snapped up. "Zuri? She's here? Impossible."

Mine. Danger. Save her.

There was no reason for her to be anywhere near this place. But my dragon was raging inside me, telling me to find her. I trusted my beast. I

raced forward, ducking under low branches, leaping over fallen trees.

Hurry.

I moved my legs faster, panic making my heart race. Why was she out here? Had she been kidnapped? Was she afraid? My anger mounted. Fuck not killing the smuggler. If he'd touched Zuri, he would die.

A dragon's roar echoed in the distance. Dread chilled me to my core. Then I heard a woman scream. *Zuri!* A fear unlike anything I'd ever experienced took hold of me. I ran faster. Branches tore at my clothes as I raced through the forest, no longer bothering to dodge.

I needed to get to her. I couldn't lose her. I hadn't even told her how I felt. I hadn't had a chance to apologize for marrying another omega or for not treating her with the love and dignity she deserved.

I blinked back tears. *Fuck.* I never cried. *Never.* Yet, my eyes were going blurry. I couldn't lose this woman. I just couldn't. Another roar thundered ahead. Then I heard her voice.

"Run faster, Allie!"

Damn it. The maid was here too! A scream filled the air.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Save her. Destroy him. Faster.

"I know!" I shouted.

My dragon wanted out. For once, I didn't fight him. The shift ripped through me while I was still running. Bones expanded, muscles tore and reformed, and scales rushed over my skin as my body grew. Fabric ripped as my clothes shredded around me.

Shit.

I'd been so focused on getting to Zuri that I'd forgotten to activate my Raiment. Too late now. My clothing was destroyed. Fuck those clothes. I needed to get to her. My hands struck the earth as claws, and suddenly every scent in the forest sharpened.

Blood. Dirt. Magic.

And her. Zuri Bane. My mate.

In my dragon form, I crashed through the trees until a slope appeared ahead. Zuri and Allie were at the bottom, dressed entirely in black with only their eyes showing. My gaze landed on Zuri's cleavage that heaved with every breath she took.

What the hell was she wearing? The thought disappeared the instant I saw the dragon approaching them. Everything inside me went cold. The

bastard raised one massive claw. Allie grabbed Zuri and tried to pull her away, but they weren't going to make it.

The claw came down. Zuri shoved Allie aside to get her out of the way. Zuri wouldn't have time to dodge. I roared and launched myself from the top of the slope, my wings snapping open as I soared toward him.

He looked my way. But he was too late. I slammed into him. We crashed through the trees together, trunks snapping beneath our combined weight before we hit the ground hard enough to shake it.

The bastard twisted beneath me and sank his claws into my shoulder. Pain burned through the muscle, but I didn't release him. My jaws closed around his neck. He roared and thrashed beneath me, raking his hind claws across my stomach.

Pain tore through me. My grip loosened just enough for him to twist his massive body and roll us both. I hit the ground hard. Before I could regain my footing, his tail slammed into my side, sending me crashing into a tree.

The trunk cracked behind me. The bastard charged. I dug my claws into the earth and launched myself at him. We collided, and it sounded like a building collapsing. The bastard staggered backward, but recovered quickly and lunged, jaws snapping toward my throat.

I twisted before his teeth could close around my neck and slammed my shoulder into his chest, knocking him back several steps. He was already injured. Now that I was close, I could see the damage covering his body.

Blood streaked his scales, one side of his face was mangled, and one eye was completely missing. Several of the wounds were too fresh to have come from the battle at the warehouse.

She'd hurt him.

Pride surged within me despite the rage burning beneath it. *My little omega had fought back.* The bastard lunged again. I dodged his jaws and raked my claws across his ribs as he passed. Blood sprayed the ground.

He spun, his tail whipping toward me. I jumped back before it could strike and lunged the instant it passed. My claws sank into his side between two rows of scales. He roared. I ripped downward.

Scales tore free beneath my claws as he twisted away. He stumbled, his injured leg nearly collapsing beneath his weight as he tried to get away from me. I followed. There would be no dungeon for this bastard. No interrogation. No questions. He'd tried to kill our omega. My dragon wanted his life.

So did I.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



DAEMIN

I hit the bastard again before he could regain his footing, driving my entire weight into his side. We crashed into another tree hard enough to split the trunk. He tried to kick me off him, but he was too injured, and I'd had enough.

I planted my claws against his shoulders and pinned him to the ground. His throat was exposed. This bastard had chased Zuri through the forest. He'd tried to tear her apart with his claws. If I'd arrived seconds later, my mate would've been killed. My dragon surged forward.

End him.

I lowered my head, opening my jaws over his throat. The dragon beneath me convulsed. His body began to shrink as scales disappeared and bones shifted beneath my claws. His massive shoulders narrowed until there was suddenly a broken, bloodied man where the dragon had been.

I moved back. In my dragon form, I was too large to pin him the way I had before. The bastard lay on his back, barely moving. Blood covered him, and one of his legs was bent at an unnatural angle. He couldn't even maintain his dragon form anymore.

Pathetic.

Yet, he'd managed to use his Raiment to keep his clothing in place. At least he wouldn't die naked in the forest. But he would die here, now. I

lowered my head toward him. One bite would end this. His hand moved. Something blue flashed between us. A shard!

The bastard drove the shard beneath the scales along my side. Agony exploded through me. I roared and reared back as cold fire ripped through my body. The smuggler rolled away before I could crush him beneath my claws.

“Daemin!”

Zuri's scream tore through the forest. The fear in her voice nearly made me turn toward her, but I didn't. Not yet. The bastard was still alive. I forced myself toward him, but my back leg buckled.

I caught myself before I fell and looked down. A jagged blue shard protruded from beneath my ribs. Blue light spread through the scales surrounding it. What the fuck? The pain worsened, burning and freezing at the same time as it burrowed deeper into my body.

My dragon recoiled, and for the first time since I'd shifted, my hold over him faltered. Across from me, the smuggler began changing again. Bones cracked. His body expanded. Dark scales spread across his skin as he forced his battered body back into its dragon form.

Damn. He'd only shifted so he could stab me. The shard must've been hidden in his clothing. I tried to go after him. My leg nearly collapsed beneath me again. The smuggler rose as an unnatural cold spread outward from the shard, sinking deeper with every heartbeat.

Even my dragon couldn't fight the chill taking hold of us. Pain tore through me. Not ordinary pain. This pain was cold, deep, wrong. The magic seemed to spread beneath my scales, burning through muscle while freezing everything it touched. My leg buckled again.

The smuggler was hurt badly now. One leg dragged, and blood poured from his side. But he was smiling as blood spilled from between his sharp teeth. Then his gaze moved beyond me. Toward Zuri.

The bastard lunged for her. The pain disappeared beneath my rage and my desire to protect my mate, even if it cost me my life. My body slammed into his before he made it three steps. We rolled.

He clawed at my face. I snapped at his throat. This time, I didn't hesitate. My jaws closed around his neck. He tried to shake me off. I bit down harder. His claws tore down my shoulder, tearing at my scales.

I tightened my jaws until flesh gave way. Blood flooded my mouth. The dragon jerked beneath me. *This ends now!* I ripped my head back. Part of

his throat came with me, flesh pulling away from him. I spat it out as a final raspy breath escaped him. His body went limp beneath me.

Victory, my dragon roared as silence fell over the forest.

I stood above him, blood dripping from my jaws. My breathing came hard. My vision blurred. The trees shifted strangely around me. Something burned in my side. The blue shard. I looked toward Zuri. She was staring at me. My dragon went still.

She sees us. Like this.

Blood covered my mouth. Another dragon lay dead beneath my claws with its throat torn open. She should've been afraid. Instead, she rushed forward, staring up at me with tears in her eyes.

"Daemin?" she whispered.

Mine.

My dragon wanted me to go to her. I tried. My leg collapsed. I caught myself before I hit the ground.

"Daemin!" She moved closer.

Allie followed. I tried to tell them to stay back. What came out was a low growl. Zuri slowed. For one horrible second, I thought she'd finally become afraid. Then she pulled the covering away from her face.

"It's me," she told me.

As if I could ever mistake her scent. *Strawberries and chocolate.* But it was mixed with the smell of blood. She was wounded. If I could kill that bastard again, I would. Zuri approached carefully and lifted one hand.

My dragon lowered his head. Her palm touched the scales along my face. Everything inside me quieted. I breathed deeply, breathing her in. *Home.* That was what her touch felt like. Finally. I had a home.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I've got you."

My eyes closed.

My omega.

"Yes," I thought. "*She's ours.*"

We protected her.

"Yes, *Beast.* We did."

That was all that mattered.

"Daemin, you're bleeding."

She moved toward my side. The moment her fingers came near the shard, my dragon snarled.

Zuri snatched her hand away. "Okay! Sorry. I wasn't going to pull it out."

That wasn't why we snarled. We didn't want her to touch it and hurt herself.

"Princess." Allie had moved around me. "Look at it."

Zuri crouched. I followed her gaze. Blue veins of light had spread outward from the wound. Allie's face paled.

"What is that light?" Zuri asked.

"I don't know," Allie told her.

I wanted to tell her it was a magical shard. But I couldn't. Not in this form. Zuri looked toward the dead dragon. Then back at me.

"Can dragon scales normally be stabbed through that easily?" she asked Allie.

"No," Allie told her. "No shard should've done this kind of damage. And it shouldn't cause these blue lines to form on his side."

"With these types of lines, I think he's..." Zuri swallowed. "He's been poisoned."

Poisoned? Kai needed to know these shards could poison a dragon. Zian needed... My vision blurred again. The ground tilted. I was falling. No. I was shifting back into my skin form against my will.

My dragon was weakened. What kind of poison was this? My scales disappeared as my body contracted. Bones snapped and reformed until my hands struck the ground. I dropped onto one knee.

"His clothes are gone," Zuri screamed. "Look away, Allie, before he shifts completely."

I heard the scuffle of feet and assumed Allie had turned around. I couldn't see her. Everything was blurry. Only Zuri's face remained in focus. And that was only because I was using all of my strength to keep my eyes on her.

"Daemin!" Zuri screeched.

She caught my arm before I could hit the ground. Her body wasn't strong enough to hold mine, but that didn't stop her from trying.

"Lie down."

"No," I groaned.

My voice sounded strange. Thick. Distant.

"You can barely stand," she rasped.

"I can stand."

I tried. The forest tipped sideways. Apparently, I couldn't stand. I allowed Zuri to help me lie down. The shard remained buried beneath my ribs. In my skin form, it looked worse. Blue light pulsed beneath my skin around the wound.

Zuri stared at it. "That needs to come out."

"No," I said, reaching out to stop her.

She looked at me. "No?"

"Don't know what will happen... if you remove it."

"Well, if I leave it in, you'll die. So, there's that."

Smartass. I almost smiled. Then pain tore through my side. My hand hit the ground.

"Daemin?"

Her voice sounded farther away. I forced my eyes open. She was right there by my side. But why wasn't she at home, where it was safe?

"What are you doing here?" I rasped.

Her eyebrows rose. "This is really not the time for that."

"Zuri."

"Daemin, you're bleeding badly, and there's a glowing shard in your side. Why I'm out here isn't important. You are."

I'm important to her.

My weakened dragon practically purred in approval. I'd deal with why Zuri was here later. First, I needed to get her somewhere safe.

Zuri turned to Allie. "Go to the warehouse and get help. It's just over the slope. Keep straight. You won't miss it."

Allie's eyes widened. "I'm not leaving you here."

"You need to find Kai. Or Zian. Or one of their guards. I don't care who you find. Just tell them Daemin's hurt."

"Princess, I'm not leaving you alone with..."

"With my husband?" Zuri asked.

Allie stopped. Zuri apparently realized what she'd said because her mouth snapped shut. But it was too late. Something warm moved through me despite the freezing pain spreading through my body.

Husband.

I liked that word on her lips far too much. I wanted to be her husband in every sense of the word. I wanted to belong to only her. I didn't need or want a harem. I just wanted Zuri Bane, the woman dressed like a cute assassin and who'd dared to go up against a shifter in his dragon form.

Zuri cleared her throat. "He saved us. I'm not leaving him here alone."

Allie's gaze moved between us before she reluctantly nodded. "Fine. But I'm coming back."

"I know." Zuri grabbed the brown envelope from the ground and shoved it into Allie's hands. "Take this."

"Princess..."

"I can't carry that and help him. I may lose it. And after everything we've been through, we can't lose this."

Allie tucked the envelope beneath her clothing, pulled Zuri into a quick hug, and promised she'd be fast before disappearing through the trees. I watched until I could no longer see Allie. *Good*. One less person to protect.

Now I only had to worry about Zuri. Then I heard it. A branch snapped somewhere in the darkness. My head lifted. Zuri didn't seem to notice, but my dragon did. Even weakened, my hearing was good.

Leaves rustled somewhere beyond the trees, followed by another crack farther to our left. Then came the faint sound of something moving through the underbrush. It wasn't Allie. She'd gone in the opposite direction.

Another sound came from the darkness, followed by a low animal growl. Whatever it was, it was drawn here by the smell of blood. There was enough of it covering the ground to attract every predator for miles. My dragon pushed against me.

Home. Take her home.

Yes, I needed to take her home. I needed to get her to safety. I pushed myself upright.

Zuri immediately grabbed my arm. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving."

"No, you're not. You can barely stand."

"Something's out there."

Her head turned toward the trees. Another branch cracked in the darkness, louder this time. Zuri moved closer to me. That settled it.

"Help is coming," she whispered.

"Too slow."

I took one step and my knee buckled. Zuri caught me around the waist, struggling beneath my weight.

"You are not walking anywhere like this," she told me.

"Not... going... to walk."

She stared at me. "What does that mean?"

I let my dragon surge forward.

"Step back," I whispered.

Her eyes widened as scales appeared on my skin.

"Daemin, don't you dare," she hissed.

Too late. The shift tore through me, worse than before. The poison seemed to ignite as my body expanded, blue fire burning through my side while bones cracked and reformed. I nearly lost consciousness before scales finally covered me and my claws sank into the earth.

Zuri stood several feet away with both hands planted on her hips. Even through the haze clouding my mind, I recognized that expression. She was pissed. *Good.* Pissed meant alive. I'd rather have her angry than dead.

"What part of *you're injured* are you not understanding?" she yelled.

I lowered myself in front of her and nudged her with my snout.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I nudged her again.

Home.

She needed to get on. I pushed my nose against her shoulder hard enough to make her stumble.

Don't knock her over.

I wasn't trying to knock her over. I momentarily forgot how much stronger than her I was like this.

"Stop pushing me!" she snapped.

I rumbled and glanced back, trying to make her understand.

Her eyes narrowed. "You... You want me to climb on you and ride you?"

Ride me? My thoughts took a dirty turn. I took a deep breath to calm myself down. I couldn't think like that right now. But fuck yeah, I wanted her to ride me.

"I mean, ride you like a dragon, not like a..." She paused, her cheeks heating in embarrassment, her sweet scent permeating the air. "Never mind. I'm not riding you, Daemin. You're injured."

I lowered myself farther. Zuri looked at my back, then at the wound in my side.

"Daemin, you're bleeding. Help is coming."

Another growl sounded somewhere in the forest. Her head snapped toward it. The forest creatures had caught the scent of blood. They would

come for the dead dragon. We had to leave. I nudged her again. She tapped my snout hard.

“Stop it, Daemin. I'm thinking.”

My dragon blinked at her. No one had ever slapped us. Apparently, our omega did. Something about that pleased my beast. I believed anything our omega did would please him. Zuri sighed and looked toward the darkness surrounding us.

“We can't stay here, can we?”

I shook my head.

“If you die while I'm on your back, I swear I'm going to kill you.”

That made absolutely no sense. But I would go along with it, for her. I lowered my wing. After one last worried look at my wound, she climbed onto my back. The instant her weight settled against me, some of the frantic rage inside my dragon eased.

Mine. Safe.

I rose carefully. Zuri wrapped her hands around one of the ridges along my back.

“Please tell me you've carried someone before.”

Never. I spread my wings.

“Daemin?”

I launched. Her scream nearly deafened me before her arms tightened around me.

“Daemin, you better not drop meeee!” she screeched. “If you do, I'll remove all of your scales and make a dress out of themmmmm!”

I wanted to chuckle. But I was using everything I had just to keep us in the air. The first few wingbeats came easily enough. Then the cold spread farther through my side. Flying caused the pain to intensify.

My right wing faltered, and we began to drop.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



DAEMIN

Zuri screamed and flattened herself against my back. I forced my wing open and caught the air before we hit the trees.

“Daemin!”

Fear filled her voice. My dragon pushed harder.

Home.

The estate wasn't far. I'd bought it years before we three pack brothers moved into the Princes' Manor. It sat outside the busiest part of the capital, surrounded by enough land that I could be at peace, away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

It was mine. My territory. Here, no one could threaten my mate. My dragon remembered the way. I flew while the world blurred around me. Zuri said my name once, then again, but I couldn't answer.

My mind was becoming fuzzy. The magical poison from the shard burned colder with every beat of my wings, which felt like they were beating slower and slower.

“Land!” Zuri shouted. “Daemin, you need to land!”

No. Not yet. We were so close. I could hear her fear, feel how tightly she held me. My dragon refused to put her down anywhere except

somewhere he considered safe. The trees finally began to thin. There. Stone walls rose beyond them, followed by the familiar dark roof of my estate.

Home. Almost there.

I wanted to say something to my dragon, but my thoughts were becoming cloudier. My vision began to fade. My right wing folded, crumpling to my side. I couldn't hold on. The world went black around me, and suddenly we were falling.

"DAEMIN!" Zuri's scream cut through the darkness trying to swallow me.

I forced my eyes open as the ground rushed toward us. I had to save her. She was on my back. She wouldn't survive the crash. But I couldn't control my movements.

"Dragon," I whispered, my voice faint, weak. *"Take over. Save her."*

I was giving my dragon permission to take control. I couldn't save our mate now. Only my beast could.

Cannot stop. Will try to turn.

My dragon took over. My body twisted in the air. Zuri screamed as she lost her grip. I caught her before she could be thrown off. I curled my arms and legs around her and pulled her against my chest, folding my body around hers as we fell with my back toward the ground.

"Daemin!" Zuri yelled.

Will. Protect. Zuri.

My back slammed into the earth. Pain tore through me as we skidded across the estate grounds, carving a path through grass and dirt, knocking over statues and small trees. I held Zuri tighter while my body bounced and dragged across the ground, refusing to let the force of the crash tear her away from me.

By the time we finally came to a stop, pain burned through nearly every part of me, but she was still protected against my chest.

Alive. Safe. Unhurt.

We'd made it home, and now, my dragon's voice was starting to fade.

"Daemin?" Her voice shook. "Daemin, let me go."

I loosened my hold enough for her to move but couldn't make myself release her completely. I needed to feel her. Needed to know she wasn't hurt. Zuri pushed herself upright against my chest and pulled the black covering away from her face.

Dirt streaked her clothing, and her hair was coming loose, but I couldn't see any fresh blood or wounds. The crash hadn't hurt her.

"Are you insane?" Tears filled her eyes as she stared down at me. "You turned us over in the air."

So she wouldn't take the impact. I tried to tell her that. Only a weak rumble escaped me. Then another wave of pain tore through my side. My body jerked beneath her.

"Daemin?"

I couldn't hold the shift. My dragon was fading. Scales began disappearing beneath Zuri's hands. My body contracted against the torn earth as bones snapped and reformed. She gasped when she realized what was happening but didn't climb off me.

Good.

I didn't want her to move. My arms and legs changed, but never released her. The enormous chest beneath her shrank. My wings disappeared. Scales became skin, and the cold night air struck my bare body.

Zuri ended up straddling my waist, her hands braced against my chest as she stared down at me. *Beautiful*. Even dressed like some kind of tiny assassin, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. My vision blurred. *No*. I wasn't ready to stop looking at her yet.

"Daemin?" She touched my face. "Stay with me. We're at your house. I'll get you inside somehow, but you must stay awake."

Her face drifted in and out of focus. I lifted one hand and caught her wrist, needing to feel her. I held her palm against my face and breathed in her scent.

Mine.

My dragon's voice was barely more than a whisper now. I looked up at her.

"Mine," I managed.

Zuri's eyes widened. I tightened my fingers weakly around her wrist. There was something else I needed her to know before the darkness took me.

"You're safe now, my omega."

Her expression crumpled. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Daemin, you're going to be okay. I won't let anything happen to you."

I didn't matter. She was safe. She was alive. She was with me. I'd gotten her home. That was all that mattered. With some rest, my dragon would fight off whatever this shard was doing to me.

For now, my eyes drifted closed with Zuri above me and her warm hand pressed against my face as the darkness finally pulled me under.

ZURI

“Daemin?”

I was still straddling his waist, one hand pressed against his face where he'd held it before his eyes closed. His fingers had slipped away from my wrist and fallen to the ground beside him, and no matter how many times I called his name, he didn't move.

I patted his cheek, gently at first and then harder when he didn't respond. *Nothing*. Fear squeezed my chest as I leaned closer, watching for any sign that he could hear me.

“No. No, no, no. You do not get to drag me through the sky, nearly kill both of us crashing into the ground, and then decide you're done participating. Wake up.”

My voice cracked on the last two words. I climbed off him and immediately regretted it when pain shot through my ribs. Apparently, being wrapped in a dragon's arms while he used his back to break our fall had saved me from serious injury, but it hadn't made crashing into the ground pleasant.

But I couldn't complain about my little pain when Daemin was this hurt. He lay naked on his back. Dirt streaked his skin, and deep scrapes covered parts of his body from the crash. None of those injuries frightened me as much as the wound beneath his ribs.

The blue shard was still buried in his side, and thin lines of unnatural light had spread beneath his skin around it. I moved closer, but before I could touch him, something inside me surged forward with enough force to steal my breath.

MINE. Help him.

The presence I'd been feeling since earlier was suddenly impossible to ignore. My dragon pressed against me, frantic in a way I hadn't felt before, and one thought filled my mind with absolute certainty.

Can't let him die.

"I know," I whispered, placing my hand against Daemin's chest. "He saved Allie and me. There's no way I'm letting him die."

His skin was cold beneath my palm, far colder than it should have been. And he was sweating. I sighed when his chest rose and fell beneath my hand. He was alive. For the moment, that was all that mattered.

But my dragon wasn't satisfied with that. It wanted me to help him, to heal him, to hold him. She pushed against me, filling me with a sense of possessiveness. And she kept repeating one word: *Mine*.

"I get it," I whispered. "You've claimed Kai. And now you've claimed Daemin. No wonder the old Zuri had gone crazy over these guys. You were probably pushing her to believe they were truly hers."

But in the book, they hadn't been. So why had Daemin risked his life to protect me? And why did I suddenly have an inner dragon that wouldn't stop screaming for me to save what was mine? This made no sense to me. But I couldn't worry about that right now. I had to focus on Daemin.

Help him. Help our mate.

I froze with my palm against his chest. "Mate? As in the Australian word for friend, buddy, pal?"

She answered with another wave of certainty so powerful I didn't need words.

"Okay, okay," I hissed. "I'm going to help him. But not because you called him my mate. But because it's the right thing to do."

The pressure inside me eased slightly, although I could still feel her hovering close beneath my skin. I turned my attention back to Daemin's wound. Blood coated the skin around the shard, but the blue lines worried me more.

They had spread since we'd been in the forest. The light pulsed faintly beneath his skin, almost in rhythm with his heartbeat. I needed to get this thing out of him right now. I sat back on my heels and looked around for the first time since we'd crashed.

We were at an estate. Stone walls surrounded the property. Though it was night and I couldn't see much, I could tell the property was big. Most

importantly, it seemed vacant. I needed to get Daemin inside and see if there were any supplies that could help me save him.

I looked back the way we'd come. Allie had no idea where I was. Even if her dragon tried to lead her to me, it would take her forever to find me, since she couldn't shift properly. And even if she managed to find Kai or Zian quickly, none of them knew where Daemin had taken me.

Eventually they might figure it out, but I had no idea how long it would take. Which meant Daemin only had me right now. I stared back down at him.

"How am I going to get your big behind in the house?"

His eyes remained closed. My gaze dropped toward the shard again. The blue lines had spread another fraction farther beneath his skin.

"Okay." I rubbed my palms against my thighs and forced myself to think. "Allie is getting help. You're still breathing. There's a house right there, and there has to be something useful inside it. I can work with that."

My dragon urged me again, quieter this time but no less determined.
Save mate.

"Don't rush me," I hissed, feeling like I was talking to myself.

The first problem was getting him inside. My gaze traveled over him. I quickly looked away when I reached his private parts.

Don't think nasty thoughts, Zuri. Now is not the time. A man's life is on the line. But damn, how is it that big when he's not even hard? And that thing at the base, was that his knot? How could all of that fit into any woman? Poor Lin'er. They're going to tear you up, girl.

"Focus," I told myself.

I couldn't lift this man on my own. I needed him awake, so he could help me get him inside. I patted his cheek gently.

"Daemin. Come on. Wake up. Hey, buddy."

I tapped him a little harder. Slowly, his eyes opened. His gaze found mine.

"Zuri," he whispered.

Relief flooded me.

"Yes. It's me. I'm here, Daemin."

His hand lifted. It shook badly. He tried to stretch it toward my face. But his strength gave out. I caught it before it fell. I grabbed his hand and placed it against my cheek. I don't know why I did it. I was too emotional to overthink it.

“Hurt,” he slurred.

I frowned. “What?”

His eyes searched my face. “Are you... hurt?”

“You’re asking if *I’m* hurt?”

He nodded, then winced. My heart melted for this man who was badly wounded, yet he woke up asking me if I was hurt. Why couldn’t you be mine instead of hers?

I swallowed, then whispered, “No. I’m not hurt. Thanks to you.”

Something surged in his gaze. Pride maybe. Relief. Both.

“Good,” he rasped as his eyes drifted shut.

Something inside my chest squeezed painfully.

“I need you to stay awake, Daemin.”

“I’m awake,” he whispered, eyes closed.

“I’m going to try to lift you. I need your help, okay.”

“Let’s... just lay here.... for a moment.”

“No, Daemin. We have to get inside.”

“Want to... lay with you.”

My cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

“That shard must be making you delirious. I’m Zuri. Not Mei Lin,” I told him, hating the jealous feeling that came over me.

“My Zuri,” he rasped. “My mate.”

Be still my beating heart. I shook my head to clear it.

“We need to get you inside. I think this place is vacant. We may be safe here.”

His eyes opened again. “Home. Safe.”

I glanced toward the house. “This is your home?”

He gave me a small nod.

“I thought the Princes’ Manor was your home.”

“Not always... been... a prince,” he rasped.

Understanding dawned.

“This was where you lived before you moved in with Kai and Zian?”

Another nod. That explained why his dragon had brought us here. It had taken him somewhere familiar. Somewhere it considered safe. I looked toward the house again. It wasn’t far. Maybe a hundred yards. The problem was getting Daemin there. He was considerably larger than me. I looked down at him. His eyes had drifted shut again.

“You’re going to have to help,” I told him.

“I... can walk.”

“You can't even keep your eyes open.”

The corners of his lips lifted in a smile. How could any man be so handsome?

“Okay,” I said. “Let's do this.”

Ignoring my own pain, I slid one arm behind his back. Getting Daemin upright was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. He tried to help, but the moment he stood, his legs nearly gave out. I ducked beneath his arm and wrapped mine around his waist. His weight settled against me.

“Damn, you're huge,” I complained.

“It'll be more impressive once I'm feeling better.”

“What?” I asked, frowning.

Then my gaze dropped to the monster between his legs. It was swaying with each step we took.

“Daemin!” I yelled. “Stop being nasty.”

His light chuckle was music to my ears. Just last night, this man was vowing to never love me. And now I was carrying his naked behind into his house while he joked about his cock. This was not the book I'd read.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ZURI

“You weigh a thousand pounds,” I grunted as we neared the steps.

“All muscle.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can tell you work out.”

A weak laugh escaped him. But he wasn’t lying. He was solid, all muscle. Every few steps, Daemin stumbled. Every time he did, my dragon pushed harder.

Get closer to him.

“I literally cannot get any closer to him, or I’ll be crawling up his ass.”

Daemin looked down at me. “What?”

“Um... Nothing.”

I had to stop talking out loud to my inner dragon. His arm tightened around my shoulders. My dragon practically rolled around inside me like a happy cat. We reached the house. The front door was locked. I looked at Daemin.

“Damn it. We don’t have the key,” I told him.

His eyes were barely open, sweat covered his forehead, and his skin still felt frighteningly cold against mine.

“Please tell me you have a key hidden somewhere around here. Under a rug maybe.”

He shook his head, then pulled his arm from around my shoulders. For one terrifying second, I thought he was falling, and I grabbed for him. Instead, Daemin braced himself against the door and raised one hand toward the lock.

Dark scales appeared over his fingers. I watched as his nails lengthened into black claws, his dragon rising just enough to partially transform his hand. His breathing became harsher from the effort.

He slid the tip of one claw into the lock, twisting it. There was a faint click. Then another. The lock released. I stared at his hand as the claws slowly receded. Daemin had just picked a lock with a dragon claw. For a few seconds, all I could do was look at him.

“Okay,” I finally said. “That was impressive.”

A weak smile touched his mouth before his legs gave out. I caught him against me with a grunt.

“And now show-off time is over. Come on.”

I pushed the door open and helped him across the threshold. Moonlight filtered through the windows, giving me just enough light to make out dark furniture, shelves lined with books, and a few paintings on the walls.

Thankfully, I spotted a couch in the sitting room.

“That's as far as we're going.”

Daemin glanced toward the hallway as if he might argue.

“Don't even think about suggesting a bedroom. I am not carrying your giant ass another foot farther than necessary.”

“Giant?”

“Focus.”

I got him to the couch and lowered him onto it as carefully as I could. The second his weight left me, my knees nearly buckled from relief. Daemin sank against the cushions, his eyes closing.

I took a moment to check his wound again, trying to remember if anything about this had been in the book. I leaned in closer. Wait a minute. This *was* mentioned in the book. This shard was part of a bigger crystal that originated in the Runeborne Kingdom.

In the book, the magical kingdom of Runeborne was allied with the dragon kingdom of Ashborne. In the magical kingdom, its people spelled crystals to perform different kinds of magic and sold them for profit.

Some crystals created portals. Some made people invisible. Others created storage spaces that could hold or hide things. What the crystal did

depended on the spell placed inside it, but the magic itself was contained within the crystal.

Damn it. I only have one shard left.

That was what the smuggler had said in the forest before he'd spotted us. Oh, shit. Okay. It was coming back to me now. The smugglers worked with witches who sold invisibility crystals and golem warrior crystals. I'd forgotten all about the golems. Damn, I should've warned the alphas about that.

The smuggler had stabbed Daemin with a shard from one of those crystals. The shard itself wasn't poisoned. But some crystals only worked when you broke them. And this one was already broken.

So, its magic was seeping out, and right now, that magic was seeping into Daemin, making him weak. The fragment pulsed. Another blue line crept beneath Daemin's skin. My stomach dropped. The magic was still coming out of it.

"Daemin, I have to take this out," I warned, knowing he probably couldn't hear me.

I was surprised when his eyes drifted open. "Okay, mate. Do what you have to do."

There he goes with that mate stuff again.

"Um," I started, flustered. "I can't just yank it out without something to stop the bleeding. I need water. Cloth. Bandages. A nurse. A doctor. Some liquor."

He chuckled. "I don't have a nurse or a doctor. But the rest is in the kitchen. Including liquor."

"Kitchen. Okay, where's the kitchen?"

He pointed weakly toward a doorway.

"Stay here." I took two steps before turning back and pointing at him. "And don't try to get up."

"Yes, Princess."

His eyes were already closing again. Yet, here I was, blushing because he'd called me princess. I needed to get it together. I hurried through the doorway and found the kitchen. My gaze landed on the ice chest.

If I wasn't in a life-or-death situation, I would've chuckled at seeing the modern item CiCi had written into the book. Looking away from it, I found a basin, filled it with hot water, and started opening cabinets and drawers until I found clean cloths.

There was even a small collection of medical supplies tucked inside one cabinet, which I grabbed. In another cabinet, I found a bottle of moonshine. Perfect. And in an adjacent room, I found some clean linen.

Anything that could clean a wound or soak up blood came with me. I washed and dried my hands before picking up my supplies and heading back to the living area. When I returned, Daemin hadn't moved. I set the basin on the floor and dropped to my knees beside him.

"Daemin?"

His eyes opened slowly. "I'm here."

"Good. I'm going to start cleaning the area around the wound now."

"Okay, mate."

I dipped one of the cloths into the warm water and wrung it out before carefully cleaning the blood around the wound. His stomach contracted beneath my touch, but otherwise, he barely reacted. Considering how deep the fragment looked, that bothered me.

"Can you feel this?" I asked, praying he hadn't lost feeling in the area.

"Yes, I feel it."

"Oh. Why didn't you react then?" I asked.

"Trying not to scare you any more than I already have," he whispered.

My hand stilled.

"Are you talking about when you tore another dragon's throat out in front of me?"

His eyes opened and met mine. "Did that scare you?"

I'd watched Daemin become something terrifying. I'd seen his dragon covered in blood. I'd watched him tear through another dragon because that dragon had tried to kill me. It should have scared me.

But when I thought about that moment, fear wasn't what I remembered. I remembered him getting between us, shielding me from that beast. I remembered his dragon carrying me away even as poison spread through his body.

I remembered falling and realizing he'd deliberately turned beneath me so that his body hit the ground instead of mine. I didn't fear this man because of what he'd done tonight. I feared what he made me feel. I feared that come morning, I'd lose him to the omega he truly loved.

"No," I said quietly. "You didn't scare me when you killed that dragon."

"No?"

“No.” I rinsed the blood from the cloth before returning it to his side. “Your dragon had plenty of opportunities to hurt me tonight. He didn’t. He protected me. Thank you.”

“But you don’t look... happy.”

I sniffled. “I guess I’m still in shock,” I lied.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

I looked his way again. “For what?”

“For not recognizing you sooner.”

I frowned. “What?”

He started to say more, but his eyes drifted shut again.

“You can’t just drop words like that on me and then pass out,” I muttered, then finished cleaning around the wound.

It was time to pull the shard out. I grabbed a clean cloth and folded it around the exposed end of the fragment. My hands began shaking before I’d even closed my fingers around it.

“What if I make it worse?” I whispered.

“You won’t.”

Oh, so he wasn’t out. He just hadn’t wanted to answer my question a moment ago.

“I trust you,” he told me as his eyes fluttered open again. Daemin watched me through half-lidded eyes.

“You trust me?” I whispered.

“Yes. I trust you with my life, mate. It’s yours anyway. Do with it what you will.”

My vision blurred. I blinked hard, annoyed at myself for feeling all flustered and shit.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” I whispered, voice shaky.

Daemin’s gaze remained on mine. “I was able to save you. So, it was worth it.”

Warmth spread through me as my dragon swooned. I was starting to feel overwhelmed with emotions I didn’t have time to process.

“Saving me wasn’t worth all the pain you’re experiencing,” I whispered when he winced again.

“You’re alive. So, yeah, it was.”

“You could’ve died, Daemin.”

“As long as you lived, I would’ve died without regret.”

“But,” I started, confused and hopeful at the same time. “I thought you hated me and...”

“Mate,” he rasped. “Look at me.”

Blinking back tears, I obeyed.

“I’ve never hated you,” he told me. “It’s impossible for me to hate you when everything in me beats for you, breathes for you, yearns for you.”

“Daemin,” I whispered.

“Listen to me, Zuri Bane. I never truly knew what love was until my eyes landed on you that very first time. Before, I thought love meant family and closest friends. I thought loyalty meant love. Then I saw you and realized that love is a woman who stares at me with defiance blazing in her pretty brown eyes. Love is a woman who demands money from her alphas while staring at them with disdain. Love is a woman who snores when she sleeps, while whispering about wanting a meat lovers pizza in her sleep.”

“You... you watched me sleep last night?”

He didn’t answer. He just smiled and said, “And love is a woman who makes my dragon roar, begging me to be closer to her. Love is...” He coughed, wincing from the pain that act caused.

Only then did I realize I was crying.

“Stop talking,” I told him. “Why did you suddenly become so chatty? Now you’re bleeding again.”

I felt his hand against my cheek, brushing away my tears. I found it hard to meet his gaze. I was confused. I was in pain, physically and emotionally. And I was frightened because in the book, he hadn’t gotten stabbed with a magical crystal.

Yet, because of me, he was here, hurting. And now he was saying he loved me. He’d even entered my room and watched me sleep. What type of romantic stalker shit was that? Who wrote this story, because I’ve never read it?

“Don’t cry, pretty omega,” he whispered. “I’m sorry for putting this on you at a time like this. We’ll talk later. For now, just pull the shard out. I can handle it. I promise I won’t die. I haven’t had a chance to show you how much I yearn for you.”

My dragon swooned again. So did I. This man was a smooth talker. He better be careful because I was a sucker for sweet words. *Focus Zuri!* I wrapped the cloth more securely around the fragment and tightened my grip.

"I'm going to pull it out now."

Daemin nodded.

I placed my other hand against his side to steady him. "On three."

His fingers curled into the couch cushion.

"One." I tightened my grip. "Two." Then I pulled.

The damn thing didn't come out. His entire body came off the couch as his back arched beneath him. Black scales flashed across his chest, and the hand gripping the cushion transformed, claws ripping through the fabric as his dragon surged toward the surface. I almost released the fragment.

"Daemin!"

"I'm okay," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Keep pulling."

I tried again. The fragment resisted, lodged deep enough that for one horrible second, I thought I couldn't get it free. Daemin's claws tore deeper into the couch while a growl vibrated through his chest.

"I've got you," I whispered. "It's going to be okay."

"Help me, dragon. Help me save our mate."

I could feel my dragon lending me some of her strength. I planted my hand more firmly against his side and pulled harder. The fragment slid free. Blood poured from the wound.

"Oh, shit," I gasped.

I dropped the bloody fragment onto the floor and immediately pressed a folded cloth against his side. Daemin collapsed against the couch, breathing hard as his claws and scales slowly receded. Blood soaked through the cloth almost immediately.

"No, no, no."

I grabbed another cloth and pressed it over the first instead of removing it. Daemin groaned beneath the pressure, but I didn't ease up.

"I'm sorry. I know it hurts."

"I can handle it," he grunted, his expression pained.

My hands were covered in his blood now. I kept pressure on the wound, watching the cloth darken while trying not to panic. Then I noticed that the blue lines beneath his skin were fading.

"It's disappearing," I whispered.

Daemin's eyes barely opened. "What?"

"The blue lines. They're fading." Relief made my voice shake almost as badly as my hands. "The magic was coming from the fragment. Now that it's out of you, your dragon must be burning away what was left inside."

His eyes closed again. Now his dragon had to do the rest. I kept pressure on the wound until the bleeding finally began to slow. Only then did I lift the soaked cloth enough to clean the blood from around the injury with warm water.

I worked as carefully as I could before replacing the ruined cloth with a clean one and folding a long strip of linen into a makeshift bandage. Getting it around him was going to be my next issue.

“Daemin, I need you to help me for a second.”

He opened his eyes.

“I need to get this underneath you.”

He tried to lift himself. His arms immediately shook.

“That's enough.” I worked the linen beneath him as quickly as I could before lowering him again.

I wrapped the linen around his torso several times, making it tight enough to keep pressure against the wound without restricting his breathing. When I finally tied it, I sat back on my heels and looked at my work. It wasn't pretty.

But the blood wasn't pouring out anymore. That was all I cared about. Daemin shivered. I grabbed another piece of cloth and wiped the sweat from his forehead. His skin was still cold, far colder than it should have been. I grabbed the final length of linen I had and draped it over him, tucking him in.

His eyes opened slightly. “Zuri.”

“I'm here.”

His hand moved across the couch, searching blindly until his fingers found mine. I closed my hand around his. He stared at me for a moment, fighting to keep his eyes open. The energy reserve he'd been holding himself together with since the forest was slowly disappearing.

“Stay by my side,” he whispered. “Don't run away. Don't leave me. Please.”

My heart melted for this alpha.

“I'm not going anywhere. Rest. Let your dragon heal you.”

His lips parted like he was about to say more. But then his eyes closed again.

“Daemin?”

He didn't answer. Fear slammed into me until I saw his chest rise and then fall. He was breathing. *Good.* I touched his face, then his neck,

reassuring myself that he was still here, he was still alive, he was still with me. His skin remained cold, but I thought I could feel the faintest warmth blooming beneath it.

Mate safe.

“Yes, he is,” I whispered.

I stayed on my knees beside him until they started hurting. Then I lowered myself onto my bottom, too exhausted to find a chair and unwilling to move too far away. I wanted to be able to see his chest rising and falling.

The events of the night finally caught up with me. My ribs hurt. My clothes were filthy. Daemin's blood covered my hands, and I was pretty sure there was still dried dragon blood on me too. Allie had no idea where I was.

Kai and Zian were probably looking for both of us, and somewhere in the middle of all of this I'd apparently acquired an inner dragon who'd decided one of my husbands was our mate. Yeah, those were all problems for tomorrow.

I rested my head against the edge of the couch near his arm. My hand was still wrapped around his, and even unconscious, his fingers remained loosely curled around mine. For once, my dragon had nothing demanding to say.

Her presence settled quietly beneath my skin, focused on Daemin without the frantic fear that had driven her earlier. I watched his chest rise and fall until my eyes became too heavy to keep open.

The last thing I remembered was his thumb moving faintly against the back of my hand. Then I fell asleep beside him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ZURI

I slept fitfully. I kept waking up to check on Daemin, who slept soundly. I wanted to check his wound, but didn't want to wake him. I was happy that his body temperature was back to normal and he was no longer sweating.

I fell back asleep beside him. It was then that I dreamed of my headmistress back at the orphanage. In the dream, darkness stretched around me, endless and still. A woman with beautiful dark brown skin and long curly hair stood in the distance.

I knew her immediately. Especially since she was dressed in one of those long floral dresses she always wore. And her hair was pushed back with a floral headband. But this time, her eyes were different. They seemed to glow as she stared at me.

"Ms. Ellora?" I whispered.

This was the woman who'd raised me, who had raised all four of us. The woman who'd given me my name when I hadn't had one of my own. A blood moon hung behind her, enormous and red, outlining her body in crimson light. Her lips moved.

"Ellora, I can't hear you," I called out.

I walked toward her, but instead of getting closer, the distance between us grew. I moved faster. She floated farther away.

"What are you saying?" I yelled.

Her lips kept moving. Something told me to stop chasing her and listen. So I stood perfectly still and strained to hear. Ellora's voice came through the darkness, faint at first, then suddenly clear.

"It's real, Zuri. It's not from Ciori's imagination. This world is real."

What did she mean, this world was real?

"She's a seer. CiCi is a seer from Runeborne. You're a shifter from Ashborne. It's all real."

"What?" I yelled when her voice started to fade a bit.

I'd heard something about CiCi and Runeborne. But that was about it.

"Her visions are of a future. Though she can see into the future, she cannot see into the hearts of people. She cannot see the true intentions hidden behind their smiles. And the futures she sees are not set in stone. One change can cause a ripple that changes an entire timeline."

I squinted, thinking that would help me hear her better.

"Did you say CiCi has visions?" I yelled.

"Yes. Those dreams of this world were visions she unknowingly turned into a book. This place is real. This place is your home. Your deaths returned you to your rightful places."

The blood moon behind her seemed to grow brighter.

"The blood moon is the celestial event that helped you return home safely."

"Return home?" I yelled.

Ms. Ellora began to fade.

"Wait!" I reached for her. "Ms. Ellora! I don't understand. If this place is real, then am I the real Zuri? But that's impossible."

"I will find you one day, little Zuri. When I do, I'll tell you everything. Protect each other until I arrive. Stay strong, little one."

I woke suddenly and rubbed my eyes, only to find that I'd been crying.

"What kind of dream was that?" I whispered.

It had felt so real. Yet, it couldn't be. Then again, given my current predicament, anything could be real. I rubbed my forehead and felt a slight scar there. Ignoring it, I tried to rub away the headache that dream had brought me.

Ms. Ellora had said that CiCi was a seer from Runeborne. In her book, that's exactly what she was. Was my mind just creating dreams based on the books? And if I was in a coma, why was I dreaming at all?

But what if I wasn't in a coma? What if this place was real? What if I was really Zuri? That thought process only made my head hurt worse. That couldn't be true. How could I be the real Zuri?

I couldn't be in two places at once: my world and this world. I was tripping. The battle with the smuggler and the fall with Daemin had my mind spinning up crazy theories. Lowering my hand from my head, I stared around the room, my heart still beating fast from my dream.

A noise from somewhere deeper inside the house pulled me from my thoughts. I froze, listening. It sounded like something closing, followed by the faint creak of a floorboard. I immediately looked toward the couch. It was empty.

"Daemin?" I called, pushing myself upright.

No answer came. Outside the windows, it was still dark. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. It could've been twenty minutes or several hours. My body certainly felt like I'd spent several days curled up on the floor.

Wait, I wasn't on the floor. I was on the couch opposite the one Daemin had been on. And a clean blanket was covering me. I smiled. He wasn't just a smooth talker. He was also considerate.

Tossing the blanket back, I started to stand, then caught the familiar scent of leather and cloves drifting through the house. My dragon raised her head the second she caught his scent. She pushed at me, urging me toward him.

Mate. Go to mate.

"I'm going. I'm going," I whispered as I slowly pushed myself to my feet.

Every muscle in my body protested. My ribs ached, my back was stiff, and my legs felt like I'd done a thousand squats. Between fighting that smuggler, running for my life, riding a dragon, falling out of the sky, and sleeping on the floor, I was surprised I could stand at all. I looked down at my filthy black clothes and grimaced.

"Damn, I need a bath."

As if summoned by the thought, Daemin walked into the room. I damn near stopped breathing at the sight of him. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and another in his hands as he dried his long black hair.

The one around his waist hung dangerously low on his hips, revealing those deep V-lines disappearing beneath the fabric. His sun-kissed skin was still slightly damp, and without blood, dirt, and blue magic covering him,

there was absolutely nothing distracting me from the hard planes of his chest, stomach, and arms.

And those tattoos. A girl like me could spend hours tracing them with my tongue. My gaze traveled lower. I could see where the tip of his cock stopped. This alpha was hung. This had to be a fictional man.

They didn't make men like this in the real world. Daemin lowered the towel from his hair. I slowly looked up and met his eyes. He smirked. He'd caught me looking at his junk. *Damn*. I started to say something sassy, then I remembered his wound.

"Oh!" I rushed forward. "Your side. Let me check it."

Grabbing his arm, I turned him to see where the shard had been lodged. The blue lines were completely gone. So was the wound. There wasn't even a scar left behind. His dragon had healed everything while we slept, and his bath had washed away the blood and dirt from last night.

Which suddenly made me horribly aware of what *I* looked like. I stepped away from him and smoothed my hands over the wrinkled top of my black outfit. He was all fresh and clean, while I was standing here, looking like a raggamuffin.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I should be asking you that."

"I'm feeling great, thanks to you." His expression softened as he looked at me. "Thank you for taking care of me, Princess."

Heat crept into my cheeks. I looked away and pretended to be extremely interested in straightening my shirt again.

"No problem. But next time, I'm going to have to charge you."

Daemin chuckled. "Let me repay you now. Let me take care of you."

"Take care of me?" I asked, looking back at him.

"Yes. You're in pain, aren't you? I've got some pain medicine. And you need your wounds tended to."

"I'll take the pain medicine. As for my wounds, I can clean them in the shower and bandage them when I get out."

Daemin stepped closer to me. "You're in no condition to take care of yourself, Zuri Bane."

"I'm fine. See." I stretched my arms out to prove my point, only to wince when pain shot through my ribs.

"Yeah. I see."

He stepped forward, and before I understood what he was about to do, one arm slid behind my back while the other went beneath my knees. My feet left the floor.

“Daemin, what are you doing?” I screeched, grabbing his shoulders.

“I’m taking care of you,” he told me as he started walking toward the back of the house with me in his arms.

“Daemin, I’m capable of taking care of myself. Especially bathing myself.”

“Mate, I need to do this for you. My dragon won’t relax if I don’t.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the sincerity in his voice stopped me. My own dragon was practically purring now that we were pressed against him. *Traitor*. I held still as Daemin carried me down a long hallway, his bare chest warm against my side.

My mate.

My dragon was practically cooing in contentment. After my dream, I was really starting to wonder what was real and what was fake. So many things were happening differently than in the book, making me think what Ms. Ellora said in my dream could have some truth to it.

Could I really be Daemin’s mate, and somehow CiCi’s vision got it wrong? I stared up at the alpha who was determined to take care of me. Though the hallway was dimly lit, I could see his face clearly.

When had I started to fall for this man? Was it when he’d shown up in his dragon form to save me? Or maybe it was last night, when I’d caught a whiff of his scent, leather and cloves. Unable to stop myself, I asked the question that was haunting me.

“You keep calling me your mate. But when you say mate, do you mean, like, what Mei Lin is to you? Are you saying you have two mates now?”

Daemin stopped walking. My stomach immediately dropped. *Damn, I shouldn’t have brought up his precious Lin’er*. For several seconds, he said nothing. I stared down at my lap, regretting bringing it up.

“Look at me,” Daemin insisted.

I didn’t want to. I didn’t think I could handle what I saw in his eyes if he told me that whatever existed between us didn’t change how he felt about her. Yet, I found my gaze lifting toward his.

“I apologize for marrying Mei Lin,” he said, expression filled with regret. “I was wrong. At the time, I hadn’t recognized you as my Fated One. And in truth, I didn’t think I had a Fated One.”

I stared at him, not knowing what to say. Not recognizing me didn't excuse his behavior. But he wasn't finished talking.

"Mei Lin has always been our friend. She rescued Kai from a lake when he was a child. Back then, he hadn't known how to swim. He'd fallen in, and she'd saved him. Afterward, she'd been sick for a week with a high fever. When she recovered, he learned she'd always be frail because of that incident. After that, she began following us around everywhere. And he felt guilty for what had happened, so he allowed it. We found out her mother died when she was young, and her father wasn't the kindest man. He didn't step in when she was bullied by her older sisters and stepmother. Since she was weak, Kai let her follow us around. We became her protectors."

That wasn't how I remembered the story. But I couldn't tell him that.

"As we got older, she continued following us. Naturally, others thought we would take her as our wife one day," Daemin continued. "But we were waiting for our dragons to recognize her as ours. That never happened. We only married her because the king decreed that we marry a Bane daughter, and Mei Lin worried our primary wife would bully her in the future."

I rested against him, listening to his version of the story that didn't match what I'd read in the book. In the book, Mei Lin had been loved by her father and stepmother. In the book, the alphas had been obsessed with Mei Lin.

Every damn thing she'd done had been precious to them. Yet, since that first night, I hadn't really seen any signs of that obsession. Sure, they were kind to her. But obsession? Love? I hadn't seen any signs of that.

"So, you're not in love with Mei Lin?" I asked.

"No. What I feel toward her is more like friendship. A friendship that has grown strained over the years because she is constantly demanding things of us."

I wasn't sure what to do with that information. CiCi's book had been wrong about too many things already, and after the dream I'd just had, I wasn't sure I could keep dismissing those differences.

"But what about Kai and Zian? Do they love her?"

"They do not. They feel friendship. Kai feels protective of her because she's a weak omega. But even he is starting to feel... exhausted by her."

"That's not fair to her," I told him, thinking of the Mei Lin in the story who had been devoted to them. "You can't string a woman along, just to let her go because you think you've found your mate."

“I don’t think, my pretty omega. I know I’ve found my mate,” he told me.

Heat immediately crept into my cheeks again.

“As for Mei Lin, we’ve never truly dated her. It was just expected of us to marry her since she was our friend. And we went with the flow since we’d never met anyone we were interested in. I even once pushed her to try meeting other alphas, to see if she could find love.”

“Why would you do that?”

And why wasn’t that in the book?

“I did it because I’d felt sorry for her. I knew we couldn’t give her what she truly wanted. I’d seen my cousins with their wives, even those who’d married their Chosen Ones. How we treated Mei Lin wasn’t how they treated their partners. How she looked at us wasn’t how their partners looked at them. And I knew I could never give her what they had. I tried telling Kai that, but he kept telling me to give it time. And Zian had no opinion on it, because he’s never been one to care about love and emotions. But even if I didn’t understand love, I’d known that what Mei Lin felt toward us wasn’t what my cousins felt toward their partners”

“How so?” I asked.

“I’d always noticed that something was strange about Mei Lin’s actions and her affections toward us. I couldn’t understand it until this morning, when she stopped Kai from giving you money. You never once complained or argued with her. Yet, she teared up anyway and suddenly, she seemed like the one who didn’t have money for her courtyard. That’s when I realized what I’d been sensing all this time was a form of manipulation. I feel like she’s been manipulating Kai with her frailty all these years. And as his pack brothers, we went along with whatever decision he made, willing to follow his lead. Not anymore, though. If following him leads to Mei Lin, then I must take a different path.”

“But you’ve already married her,” I reminded him.

“Annuling a marriage because a Fated One is found is not uncommon. It has happened before. We will compensate her, and in the future, she will be able to remarry whomever she pleases. Love can’t be forced.”

“Still, it’s unfair to her.”

“What would be unfair is going one more day without showing you the adoration you deserve.” His hold on me tightened slightly. “You’re our true omega. We should be worshipping you.”

Damn it. Why was I blushing again?

“Well, you know, I do like to be worshipped,” I joked.

“Good. Because you have three alphas who want to do just that.”

I scoffed. “Not three. Just one. The others haven’t apologized yet, and they haven’t told me if they plan to leave Mei Lin. Listen carefully, Daemin. I do not share what’s mine. Also, my dragon hasn’t claimed them.”

That last part wasn't entirely true. I didn't mention the way my dragon had first whispered *Mine* while I'd been staring at Kai's smile. Daemin, however, went strangely quiet.

“Has your dragon claimed me?” he asked.

For the first time since I'd met him, Wu Daemin actually looked unsure of himself. I considered teasing him. After everything he'd put me through, I probably deserved at least thirty seconds of watching him sweat.

But then I realized everything I was blaming him for hadn't even happened yet. Sure, he was rude last night. But he hadn't mistreated me, ignored me, taken Mei Lin's side, rejected me, and then tossed me into a tower.

None of those things had happened yet. So, I couldn't keep blaming him for what he'd done in the book. Last night, he'd almost died saving me. That was the Daemin my dragon had claimed, not the Daemin from the book. And that Daemin was making my heart melt for him.

“Yes,” I admitted. “My dragon has claimed you.”

The uncertainty disappeared from his face. Daemin smiled. I'd thought him handsome before, but when he smiled, he was downright gorgeous. My dragon stretched toward him again, pleased with herself, as if she'd personally accomplished something. Daemin adjusted me in his arms and started walking again.

“I will take care of you now, mate. I plan to take care of you well.”

Look at my silly ass, blushing again as I snuggled closer to his chest.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



ZURI

The bathroom was at the end of the hallway, decorated in the same dark tones as the rest of Daemin's home. Dark stone covered the floor and walls, and black wood framed the large mirror above the washbasin.

A glass shower occupied one side of the room. Daemin carried me inside and carefully set me on my feet. My hands remained on his shoulders for a moment while I made sure my legs weren't going to betray me.

"Can I undress you?" he asked.

Suddenly, I felt shy. Me? Shy? I didn't know what the hell was wrong with me. I'd never been a shy woman. However, having Daemin standing in front of me, wearing nothing but a towel while asking permission to take my clothes off had apparently awakened a bashful bitch I hadn't known existed.

Instead of trusting my mouth, I nodded. Daemin stepped closer. His hands went to my clothing, and I noticed the slightest tremble in his fingers.

"Are you nervous?" I asked, unable to hide my smile.

"I've never done this before," he admitted.

Oh, right! In CiCi's book, all three of my alphas had been virgins. Somehow, I'd forgotten that little detail while staring at the impressive

package beneath Daemin's towel.

My smile widened. "Take your time."

He started undoing my clothing with an intense concentration that made me want to laugh, but I held it in. The man could kill a dragon without hesitation, but my clothes were giving him problems.

"Are you ready to tell me why you were in the forest?" he asked while fumbling with my shirt.

"I went out because I was hoping to rob some smugglers along the road," I admitted.

Daemin froze. He slowly raised his gaze to mine. I could practically see him replaying my words in his head.

"You were trying to get money for your courtyard, weren't you?"

I nodded. A flash of anguish appeared in his eyes. The next thing I knew, he was lowering himself to his knees in front of me with his head bowed.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

I was stunned silent for a moment.

"Wh-what are you doing?" I asked.

"I should have cared for you properly from the moment you became my wife. You should never have needed to leave our home in the middle of the night and risk your life because you needed money. I've failed you."

"Daemin, get up."

"No. I need you to hear me. I will never allow you to worry about anything like that again. Whatever you need, just ask me. If it is within my power to give it to you, it is yours. And if it's not in my power, I'll kill whoever has the power to make sure you get what you want."

Uh, swoon! He made murder stuff sound so romantic.

This man was really on his knees apologizing to me. A smile slowly pulled at my lips. I squatted in front of him, ignoring the protest from my sore muscles, and slipped my fingers beneath his chin. When I lifted his face, my smile disappeared. Tears shimmered in his eyes.

"We've failed you, mate," he whispered. "We don't deserve you."

My chest tightened. This wasn't the cold assassin from the book who'd eventually thrown me away for another woman. This was the man who had nearly died protecting me, who had trusted me with his life, carried me beneath him when we fell from the sky, covered me with a blanket while I

slept, and now knelt before me because the thought of me needing something hurt him.

“We're starting over, alpha,” I said softly. “Let's forget the past.”

Daemin swallowed as I took his hands and helped him stand.

“I don't deserve your forgiveness,” he mumbled.

“You haven't done anything undeserving of forgiveness.” I let the words settle between us before glancing down at myself. “Now, I could've sworn you promised to take care of me.”

His gaze followed mine. I was still completely dressed.

I looked back up at him. “Why am I still fully dressed, alpha?”

Literal flames flared in his eyes. Daemin stepped closer, and suddenly his hands no longer trembled. He returned to the task of undressing me, moving slowly, careful of my injuries. He eased my arms free of my clothing without pulling against my ribs, then helped me step out of my pants. When he reached my underclothing, he paused.

“Don't get shy on me now,” I whispered.

A growl rumbled from his chest. My dragon practically melted. Daemin slowly eased me out of my remaining clothes. My strawberry-and-chocolate scent strengthened in the warm bathroom, mixing with the spicy aroma of leather and cloves surrounding him.

When the last piece of fabric was gone, I stood completely naked in front of him. Daemin stepped back. His gaze traveled over me slowly, and suddenly that bold woman who'd teased him about being shy wanted to cover herself.

“I look better when I'm not bruised and battered,” I muttered, staring down at myself, realizing I wasn't as bruised as I'd expected. “I'm already starting to heal.” I lifted my gaze to his. “Is it because of my dragon?”

Daemin nodded. “I thought you weren't able to shift.”

“I'm not. And until meeting you all, I'd never heard my dragon's inner voice.”

He considered that for a moment. “My dragon didn't become this chatty until I met you. Perhaps meeting us awakened your dragon. In time, you may even be able to shift.”

I smiled. “Awesome.”

Then I noticed where Daemin was looking. His eyes had dropped between my thighs. Heat flooded my entire body.

I cleared my throat. “I'm going to get in the shower now.”

Daemin nodded. He walked to the shower and opened the glass door for me. I stepped inside, grateful for the chance to escape his stare before my scent gave away even more of what his attention was doing to me.

I turned and reached for the door. Instead of closing it, I was forced to take two steps back when Daemin stepped into the shower with me.

My eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"Taking care of you."

His hands went to the towel around his waist. Daemin pulled it free and tossed it onto the bathroom floor. I made a valiant effort to keep my eyes on his face, but I failed miserably. My dragon perked up with entirely too much enthusiasm.

Daemin reached behind him and closed the glass door, shutting us inside the shower together. I moved to the rear of the shower stall as Daemin reached for the controls. Water sprayed from above, and he positioned his body between me and the stream while he adjusted the temperature, keeping the cold water from touching me.

With his back turned, I took a moment to admire him. His shoulders were broad and strong, leading into a large, muscular back that narrowed at his waist. My gaze traveled lower and settled on his tight ass. I smiled. The man looked just as good from behind as he did from the front.

Once the water was warm enough, Daemin turned around. The first thing he did was order me to face away from him. And then he shampooed and conditioned my hair for me, his fingers untangling my wild curls gently.

I closed my eyes as he massaged my scalp. Somehow, being close to him, being cared for by him, eased some of the pain in my muscles. Or maybe it was the hot water of the shower.

It's our mate, my dragon moaned in contentment. *Our mate is the only medicine we need.*

At this point, I was willing to agree with her. Once he was done washing and rinsing my hair, he turned me to face him again. My eyes never left him as he grabbed a towel and poured body wash onto it, working it into a thick lather.

The scent of bourbon and vanilla filled the bathroom as he stepped closer and carefully began bathing me. I glanced around the shower while he rubbed the towel gently over my arms, careful not to press too hard against my remaining bruises.

Dragon-scale-looking tiles covered the walls of the shower stall, and I found myself thankful for this particular modern convenience CiCi had placed in the book.

“Did you design this bathroom yourself?” I asked.

“No. This home was built by a company that travels to other realms and brings back designs they've seen in other places.”

I nodded as he moved the towel from my arm to my neck. He washed me slowly, his touch careful as the warm towel passed over my skin and traveled across my collarbone. I swallowed when his hand moved lower, and the towel rubbed over my breast. A low purr filled the shower.

“Your dragon purrs beautifully,” he whispered.

Only then did I realize the sound was coming from me. When the roughness of the towel grazed my nipple, I shivered, my sweet scent spiking. My gaze met Daemin's, and I found his eyes already on me.

“You shiver beautifully,” he told me.

I chuckled. “Is everything I do beautiful?”

“It is. You are the definition of beautiful.”

His gaze dropped as he trailed the towel over my stomach. I was thankful for all the time I'd spent in Kenadi's gym. Her intense workouts had me looking right. Daemin trailed the towel over my abs before moving lower.

He slowly squatted in front of me and began cleaning my thighs and legs, bringing him directly eye level with my pussy. And damn it, that little traitor decided the shower didn't have us wet enough. It needed to add its slick to the mix.

My pussy fluttered beneath his gaze, growing wetter as he stared at me. I knew he could smell the sweet scent of my arousal because his nostrils flared slightly before he licked his lips. My heart raced, stomach tightening.

Daemin rubbed the towel over my leg, but his eyes remained on my center as he lifted one of my feet and carefully cleaned it. He lowered it and moved to the other, washing that foot just as thoroughly.

All the while, I stood there trying to pretend I wasn't ready to climb him like a tree. When he finished, he didn't immediately move. Daemin stared up at me, lust blazing in his dark gaze.

My pussy throbbed, growing slicker for this man as I stared down at him. There was no hiding what his attention was doing to me, especially when he could smell every bit of my arousal. Daemin slowly stood.

“Turn around,” he ordered, voice deep.

I nearly slipped down in my haste to obey.

Get it together, Zuri.

He tossed the used towel into the corner of the shower, then grabbed another and lathered it to clean my back. He was just as thorough as he'd been with my front. I found myself arching when he reached my lower back. When he dipped lower, he actually cupped my ass with the towel.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, making more slick leak down my legs.

How embarrassing. My inner dragon was begging me to bend over, to let him get a glimpse of our pussy. I wouldn't be that wanton in the shower. But when we left the shower, all bets were off.

After he was done cleaning the back of me, he stood and pulled me up against him, my back pressed against his front. I felt his thick cock against my ass.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

I obeyed. He pulled me back until the water sprayed over us. He reached around me and rubbed his hands over my front, caressing my breasts as the water washed over me. I kept my eyes closed as his hands trailed down my abs, then lower until he found my bare pussy.

His fingers rubbed over my nub, spreading my lips and letting the water trail down there. I was so damn aroused that I wished he'd bend me over and shove that thick cock in me right here, right now.

Instead, he turned me around and pulled me close, my chest against his. Then he rubbed his hands over my back, helping the water rinse away the suds. When he reached my ass, he cupped it.

“So much ass,” he whispered.

Unable to help myself, I stared up at him as water trailed over my face.

“Is it too much ass for you?” I asked, feeling naughty.

“This ass was made for me,” he answered. “Every inch of you was made for me.”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. But I wanted his lips pressed against other parts of me. Parts that were growing slicker by the second.

“Step back,” he whispered. “It's time for me to clean you there.”

There? I stepped back. He opened the shower door and went to retrieve a third towel, which he used to clean me there. He had me place my foot on the edge of the tub, and he went to his knees before me.

“You’re even more beautiful here,” he whispered, leaning closer to my most intimate place. He inhaled deeply and shivered. “Strawberries and chocolate,” he groaned. “Mate, do you taste as sweet as you smell?”

“Find out,” I whispered as he rubbed the towel along my pussy.

“Can I?” he asked.

“I’m yours, alpha. You can do whatever you want to me.”

The towel stilled as his gaze jerked to mine.

“Anything?” he whispered.

I nodded.

He swallowed. “Mate, be careful with your promises.”

I chuckled. “What is it you want to do to me, alpha?”

“I want to take you to my bedroom and lick this pretty pussy until I’m full of your slick. Then I want to knot you for hours, filling you up with my cum.”

My dragon purred.

“Do it, alpha,” I whispered. “Knot me.”

Before I could blink, this man had dropped the towel, turned the shower off, then scooped me up in his arms. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he exited the bathroom, carrying me down the dark hallway and taking me to his room.

I’d read about this hundreds of times. But I was finally about to know what it felt like to be knotted by my alpha.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ZURI

Daemin didn't slow down until we reached his bedroom. He carried me through the doorway as though I weighed nothing, his arms firm around me while my heart raced. My dragon had gone from content little purrs to practically clawing at me from the inside, demanding our alpha.

Mate. Ours. Want him. Now.

Daemin lowered me onto the bed carefully. For all the hunger I'd seen in his eyes, he didn't immediately climb on top of me. He stood beside the bed and stared down at me. There was something almost reverent in his expression.

"What?" I asked, suddenly feeling shy again.

"I imagined this last night as I watched you sleep."

"You did?"

"I did." He climbed onto the bed and settled over me, supporting his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't hurt my bruised ribs. "I never knew I could yearn for something so badly until I laid eyes on you, Zuri Bane."

This man had a way with words. I reached up and touched his face.

"I think I understand what you mean, Wu Daemin. I find myself yearning for you also."

"Mate," he whispered, turning his head to kiss my palm. "I feared I'd never find you. But my dragon held out hope, telling me you were out there. I'm sorry for not believing him. I'm sorry for thinking my heart would always be lonely. In doing so, I left you out there alone. I left your heart lonely."

"Our hearts aren't lonely anymore," I whispered, tears glistening in my eyes. "We've found each other. We've recognized each other. And now, it's time for us to claim each other."

A low growl rumbled through his chest. My dragon joined in, her soft growl mingling with his. The sounds vibrated between us, against us, through us.

I could feel them all over my body like a caress. Daemin lowered his head and kissed me. I'd expected something rough after the way he'd talked to me in the shower, but his first kiss was surprisingly gentle.

His lips moved against mine slowly, almost cautiously, as though he was giving me every opportunity to change my mind. I didn't. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. That was all the encouragement my alpha needed.

His restraint loosened. His mouth became more demanding against mine as one hand slid carefully around my waist, pulling me closer without pressing against my injuries that were healing fast.

I moaned into his mouth, and the sound earned me another deep growl from his chest. My strawberry-and-chocolate scent flooded the room, mingling with his leather and cloves. The scent was intoxicating. I rolled my body against his, unable to be still. Daemin broke our kiss and inhaled.

"Zuri," he rasped.

"Yes?" I panted.

"You're making it very difficult for me to remember that I promised to take care of you. I'm supposed to be gentle with you."

I smiled and ran my fingers through his damp hair. "This is taking care of me, alpha. And you are being gentle. But I'm not fragile. I won't break."

His eyes flashed. He kissed me again, deeper this time, his tongue sweeping against mine, leaving me breathless. Then he trailed heated kisses down my jaw and neck. His mouth explored me without rushing, peppering kisses over my collarbone before traveling lower.

My back arched, and my breathing grew heavier when his tongue twirled around my nipple. His teeth grazed my nipple gently, sending tendrils of pleasure straight to my clit. When another moan escaped me, Daemin paused simply to listen.

"Don't stop," I whispered.

"I wasn't planning to. I just love the sounds you make, my beautiful omega."

Those words earned him another little moan. He continued kissing his way over my body, worshipping me exactly as he'd promised. Nothing about his attention felt careless. Even consumed by desire, he remembered every bruise he'd seen while bathing me and avoided them.

The tenderness nearly undid me more than the desire did. For a moment, my mind was blown away by the fact that I was being kissed all

over by Daemin. This wasn't supposed to happen. I'd planned to survive this world by avoiding becoming attached to these men.

I was supposed to eventually get divorced and live my life somewhere far away from the tower where the original Zuri Bane had died. Instead, I was lying naked in Daemin's bed, wanting him so badly that my entire body seemed to ache for him.

More importantly, I trusted him. That realization scared me. But damn it, I trusted this alpha with my life, my heart, and my body. I knew he would never hurt or betray me. Likewise, I'd never hurt or betray him.

And he was mine. All mine. I would never share him. Daemin kissed his way down my stomach, his damp hair brushing my skin as he moved lower. His hands slid beneath my thighs and drew them apart before he settled between them.

Seeing him in that position sent heat rushing through me. He kissed the inside of one thigh, then the other, slowly kissing his way higher. My pussy was embarrassingly wet. He leaned in close and breathed in my scent.

"I haven't even tasted you yet," he whispered. "And I'm already addicted."

My pussy fluttered. I guess that was her way of saying thank you. They would be able to talk better once he put his lips against hers. He spread my thighs wider, placing my legs over his shoulders and holding them there.

And then he began kissing his way to my center once more. Anticipation had me clutching the sheets. When his mouth finally found my sensitive spot, I moaned, my back arching as his hands tightened around my thighs.

"Daemin," I moaned.

He answered by trailing his tongue over my clit, sending pleasure radiating over my entire body. He sucked my clit, grinding his mouth against my body as his tongue flicked back and forth over my sensitive nub.

I squeezed my eyes shut as I lifted my hips, rubbing my pussy against his tongue. I couldn't believe he felt this good. He was a virgin. He'd never had pussy in his mouth before. Yet, he was devouring me like he'd done this hundreds of times.

"Dreamed about this all night," he groaned as his tongue dipped between my slick folds. "Tastes so fucking good. My tongue can't get enough."

More slick spilled from me at his words. And he slurped it up, drinking me down, licking me until I gave him more. And my body seemed to have an endless supply on hand for him. I gyrated against his mouth, unable to be still, unable to catch my breath, unable to think straight.

My fingers slid into his hair, gripping the dark strands as pleasure rolled through me. My scent thickened around us, strawberries and chocolate filling the room. Daemin inhaled deeply, and a possessive growl vibrated against my skin.

My dragon immediately answered with a purr. Daemin continued worshipping me with his mouth and hands, paying attention whenever my breathing changed or my thighs trembled.

When something made me arch, he did it again. When I moaned louder, he lingered, applying more pressure to that spot with his tongue. He was an attentive lover, and I couldn't wait to worship him the way he was worshipping me.

My hips bucked, and my fingers tightened in his hair as another moan escaped me. Heat gathered low in my stomach, growing stronger with every swipe of his tongue. I was close. So close.

"Don't stop," I breathed.

"Never," he growled, tongue delving into my tight channel.

I groaned, my body jerking. "I'm about to cum, Daemin."

Then my back arched, my eyes squeezed shut as I rocked my body faster, no longer in control of myself. My slick spilled over his tongue. And he drank it all in.

"Daemin," I cried out as the pleasure peaked and my entire body arched off the bed.

His mouth followed, never separating from my pussy. Daemin held my thighs and continued tasting me as my body slowly floated back down to the bed. Aftershocks rocked me. And he even licked me through that.

He didn't lift his head until I released his hair, arms falling to my side, my breaths raspy. When he finally raised his head, his dark eyes were burning. His lips were coated in my slick. I'd never seen a more erotic sight.

"Come here, alpha," I whispered. "I want to taste that cock."

He shook his head. "Not yet, mate. I need to knot you before I explode."

"Then knot my mouth," I told him, hungry for a taste of him.

He smiled and whispered, "My knot won't fit in your mouth, my love."

My eyes widened. Oh. Well, damn. Pussy it is, then.

Daemin lowered my legs from his shoulders, then kissed his way up my body. I was still sensitive from my orgasm, so each kiss caused me to shiver. My hands roamed over his broad shoulders as he made his way up my slender form.

"I never knew a body could be so perfect," he told me before tracing the shape of my waist and hip with his tongue. "You are beautifully made, my omega," he whispered.

His praises had my sated pussy growing hungry again. My alpha pressed kisses over my stomach, then my breasts, my collarbone, and up my neck. By the time he finally pressed his mouth to mine, I was ready for him to fill me with that thick cock.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pulled him against me, no longer remotely shy about showing him how badly I wanted him. In fact, I told my alpha exactly what I wanted.

"I want that thick cock in me," I whispered against his mouth. "Show me how big that knot is."

He groaned and claimed my lips in a fierce kiss. I could feel his cock against my thigh, hot and ready, throbbing against me. I couldn't wait any longer. I lowered my hand and slid it between our bodies.

He hissed against my mouth when I gripped his cock. I stroked him once, my thumb trailing over the tip of him.

"Mate," he groaned, resting his forehead against mine and lifting his body, giving me more room to touch him. "That feels so good," he whispered.

I stroked him again, my hand bumping against his knot when I reached the base of him.

"Touch me there," he whispered. "Touch my knot."

I slid my hand down until it was wrapped around his knot. And he was right. That thing was huge. I didn't even know if my pussy could take it. I gave it a gentle squeeze. His entire body jerked, and precum leaked onto my thigh.

"Fuck, mate," he groaned, sounding out of breath. "Need to be inside you."

"I'll put it in," I whispered.

"Do it, Princess. Put this cock inside you."

His words had me growing slicker as I grabbed his cock and slid it between my slick folds, loving the shudder that wracked his body. My pussy was so damn wet, you would think she hadn't just cum all over his tongue.

I lined his tip up with my entrance, and then he eased in a bit. His chest rumbled with a growl as he went deeper. I moved my hand and let him take over. He sank into me slowly, filling me up, stretching me wide.

My pussy bloomed for him, taking him like a champ as my dragon purred in delight. But he was so damn big... long and thick. I tightened my arms around his shoulders and held on to him as the overwhelming sensation of him going deeper made me gasp.

"Daemin."

"I've got you," he promised, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

He paused for a moment, giving me time to adjust. I buried my face against his neck and breathed in leather and cloves while his hand stroked soothingly along my side. His cock throbbed within me.

"You're so tight," he whispered. "So damn wet."

My dragon purred so loudly that I could feel the vibration inside me.

Mate.

When I was ready, I moved against him. Daemin understood. He pushed into me, going deeper. I held my breath until he filled me completely, then I released it in a rush. I'd never felt so full or been stretched so wide. But I'd taken every inch of him. My body was made for this, made for him. But that knot... that was going to be a challenge.

"You okay?" he whispered.

"I'm perfect. Ready for you to fuck me," I told him.

With a groan, he slid partially out of me, then sank deep again, repeating those actions slowly. The pleasure built with each thrust. The tenderness between us gradually became something hotter.

His movements found a rhythm that had me clutching his shoulders while pleasure pulsed through me. He moved faster, thrust harder, his knot pushing at my entrance, enticing me with promises of what was to come.

"Damn it, omega. Never knew such a feeling existed," Daemin groaned.

Neither did I. This encounter proved that all my past experiences had been so basic. Here I was thinking I was a freak. Yet, this missionary position had me losing my mind. He eased out of me.

My pussy clenched, trying to hold on to him and keep him from leaving me. He thrust deeply, making me gasp.

“This pussy is clutching my cock so tightly,” he growled as he thrust faster. “I think she’s just as addicted to me as I am to her.”

“She is,” I assured him. “I hope you’re ready to fill me with this cock on the regular, alpha.”

“My princess can have whatever she wants,” he growled as he fucked me harder.

His hands slid underneath me and cupped my ass as he pounded my body. My nails were scraping against his back as I lifted my hips, fucking this pussy onto his cock. Our bodies rocked together, faster and faster, causing the headboard to slam into the wall.

His growls filled the room along with the spicy dark aroma of leather and cloves. It blended with my sweet scent, creating a fragrance that had us both inhaling and shivering. The scent was driving our dragons wild.

I could feel the rumble of his dragon’s growls against my body, vibrating me, arousing me further. And his body jerked each time my dragon moaned. I’d never felt such a connection in my life.

I now understood what it meant to be Fated. When you were Fated, even your spirits felt like they were joined together. I wrapped my legs around Daemin’s waist, causing him to sink even deeper into me. His knot pushed at my entrance, seeking entry.

“Need to knot you,” Daemin groaned against the crook of my neck. “May I knot you, my omega?”

I wanted his knot. But I won’t lie, I was nervous. I was already full of cock. There wasn’t any room for his knot.

“Will it fit?” I whispered as he rocked into me.

“It will fit, love. It’s yours. It was made for you.”

Well, they must’ve given him the wrong size, because my pussy couldn’t take that. But damn it, I wanted to try.

“Do it,” I whispered, growing even more nervous.

I expected him to pull back and thrust deeply, forcing his knot into me. I squeezed my eyes shut, body tensing in preparation. Instead, he slid a hand between our bodies and began massaging my clit.

That was... unexpected, but it felt good as hell. More slick poured from me as he fucked me and massaged my clit.

“That’s it, sweet omega. Bloom for this knot.”

His words made my pussy flutter. Was I truly blooming for him? His knot eased in a bit. I grew even more tense.

“It’s okay, love. You can relax. I won’t go further until you’re ready.”

But I could feel his body trembling as he held back from knotting me fully. I tried to relax. He kissed my cheek, then claimed my mouth in a kiss as he rocked into me, still massaging my clit.

“My sweet omega,” he whispered in between kisses. “My life had no meaning before you entered it. I was simply existing. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’m living.”

Tears sprang to my eyes.

“I didn’t think I was missing anything when it came to sex. Other alphas bragged about having an omega. I thought it was strange to be so obsessed with someone else’s body. Because of you, I understand that obsession. Zuri Bane, I am completely obsessed with every inch of you.”

My dragon purred loudly, and my pussy bloomed, growing wetter. He thrust forward, and his swollen knot entered me, locking us together. There was pain, a burning stretch that made me gasp.

But there was also pleasure. *So. Much. Fucking. Pleasure.* The moment we locked together, pleasure crashed through me harder than anything I’d ever experienced, overriding the burn. In fact, it overrode everything.

All I felt now was pleasure. All I could think of was Daemin. My body belonged completely to him in that moment. And as he continued rocking into me, moving as much as his knot allowed, my pussy continued convulsing until another orgasm tore through me.

“Mine,” Daemin growled against my throat.

“Yours,” I rasped, clawing at his back as my body shook.

“Fuck, Princess. I’m about to cum,” Daemin roared.

And cum he did. His body jerked violently as his seed flooded me, triggering another orgasm from me. How the hell was that possible? With our bodies locked together, we rocked against each other, our moans, our scents, our dragons’ growls filling the room.

My dragon roared inside me, triumphant and possessive, while Daemin buried his face against my neck and held me through every trembling second of it. I felt his teeth against my neck, grazing me there, and for a second, I thought he would mark me, claiming me as his forever.

But then he kissed me there, and my dragon pouted. It was a long time before our bodies ceased moving. A long time before we caught our breath.

Still locked together, we lay there, holding each other as he pressed kisses against my throat.

“Want to mark you,” he whispered. “Resisting is so hard.”

“Why are you resisting?” I asked, suddenly wondering if it had something to do with Mei Lin.

“I’m part of a pack.”

“With Mei Lin?” I asked.

“No. With Kai and Zian. I must talk to them before I mark you. It has nothing to do with her. None of us have marked her. She’s not a part of our pack. And if either of them doesn’t want me to mark you, then I’ll leave that pack, and we’ll be our own pack. I choose you, Zuri Bane, over everything else, over anyone else.”

Silly tears blurred my vision. I blinked them back.

“Thank you, Daemin.”

“You’re welcome, Zuri.”

He kissed my shoulder as my eyes drifted shut. I fell asleep with my alpha's knot still locked inside me. But before I drifted off, I heard him whisper...

“Sleep well, omega. We’ll return to the princes’ manor soon. And I’ll be moving into your courtyard.”

I don’t know how long I slept, but I awoke to find myself wrapped in Daemin’s embrace. However, we weren’t in bed. We were in a carriage, and he was holding me close. I stared up at him and asked him who dressed me.

He let me know he’d dressed me in some of his clothing. I smiled and snuggled closer to him as he continued talking. He told me that Allie had been found by one of their guards, who’d thought she was a smuggler.

Before I could ask if she was okay, he hurried and assured me that she was fine. The guard had eventually believed her and turned her over to Kai. Kai had reached out to him through their connection, but Daemin ignored him for a long time, wanting to spend time with me alone.

When he finally opened up the connection, he let them know I was okay. He said that Kai and Zian were pissed. I didn’t care. I’d wanted to be alone with Daemin. He told me that Kai wanted us home as soon as possible because he had something to share with us.

He said Kai stated that it was an emergency. That’s why Daemin had carried me into the carriage while I’d slept. Whatever Kai wanted, it probably had something to do with Mei Lin. I’d worry about that after we

arrived in the manor. For now, I snuggled closer to Daemin as he tightened his arms around me. I drifted back to sleep in my alpha's arms.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



ZIAN

It was an hour ago when I felt through our connection that Daemin was returning to the princes' manor. A fucking hour, and he still wasn't here yet. I'd been standing here ever since then, waiting for her.

He touched her, my dragon growled.

I rubbed my hand through my short hair, trying not to get angry. But I was pissed. He'd touched her. Just last night, after we'd snuck into her room to get a whiff of her scent and see how our dragons responded, we'd agreed that we would have a discussion with her before claiming her in any way.

We'd agreed to apologize to her for how the wedding incident went down. We agreed to apologize for marrying Mei Lin as a secondary consort and talk with Kai about annulling the wedding.

Yet, this bastard hadn't stuck to the plan. He'd touched her. No, from the feelings coming from him before he closed the connection, I knew he'd done more than touch her. He'd become *one* with her.

He'd knotted her. A low growl rumbled through my chest. My beast was angry because we'd been left out. I wanted to touch her. I wanted to knot her. I wanted her to smile at me the way she'd smiled at Kai in the garden.

I wanted some time alone with her to apologize for not recognizing her right away. I also wanted to know how she'd known where to find

smugglers. According to her maid, they'd gone out looking for bad guys to rob because their courtyard was neglected.

That was my fault. Fuck what Kai wanted. Zuri deserved to be in charge of the manor. And after the way mine and Daemin's dragons had reacted to her last night, she also deserved to be our only wife.

Last night, when I'd leaned close to her and breathed in her sweet scent, my dragon had gone crazy in a way I'd never experienced. He was already an insane, bloodthirsty bastard.

But when we'd inhaled her scent, he'd damn near forced me to shift so he could smell her with his nose. I'd had to leave the room to calm him down. We'd never reacted that way to Mei Lin.

I never should've agreed when Kai said he wanted to marry her to keep her from being bullied. It wasn't even Zuri doing the bullying. It was Mei Lin who was demanding all sorts of things for her courtyard.

Yet, the moment Zuri asked for something, suddenly the accounts had to be in order before that could happen. *Fuck that.* I'd held silent because Kai claimed that sometimes Mei Lin feared me and my blunt way of talking.

But I couldn't remain silent any longer. It was time to accept the fact that Mei Lin couldn't be anything other than a friend to us. And if our omega didn't want her to be a friend, then she couldn't be that.

We owed her nothing. The wedding, that was her idea. Hers and Kai's. I would've been just fine never making her our bride. In the past, I'd gone with the flow too much. That ended now.

They're here.

My dragon was right. A carriage was coming down the road, moving entirely too slowly. I stared down at my clothing. I was dressed in my official prince's robes, which I rarely wore. Tonight, I'd worn them for her.

Before the carriage even came to a stop, I was approaching the door and pulling it open. Daemin looked my way. The satisfied grin he wore made me want to punch him in the face. The carriage came to a stop as my gaze dropped to the woman in his arms.

MINE.

"Yes, *mine*," I thought as I stared at her, looking so tiny in Daemin's arms.

All mine.

"No, beast. We have to share her with our pack brothers."

But she's been all his... all night.

“True. I want to hit him for that. But I can’t in front of her.”

Hold her. Take her from him and hold her close.

That was the plan. She was sleeping soundly, dressed in his clothes. I wanted to strip them off and replace them with mine. I wanted my scent on her, in her. I wanted to hold her close and breathe in her sweet scent.

“Move, so I can bring her inside,” Daemin insisted.

“Give her to me,” I demanded, reaching for her.

“She hasn’t given you permission to hold her yet,” Daemin told me, pissing me the fuck off.

“I’m going to hurt you,” I told him.

His smile widened, then he stared down at her and whispered, “Go ahead. She’s worth it, Z.”

I’d never seen such a soft look in his eyes before.

His gaze returned to mine. “We’ve finally found our Fated One,” he whispered. “I never imagined she could be this perfect.”

“I know,” I told him. “It feels... surreal.”

How could a guy like me, with an insane dragon, a guy who missed the old days, when I’d been a spy for my clan, free to kill and battle whenever I wanted, deserve such a beautiful mate?

For her, I’d willingly lay down my sword and live a prince’s life, leaving the dirty work to my enforcers. Zuri snuggled closer to Daemin and mumbled his name in her sleep. Jealousy shot through me.

“No fair,” I growled.

Shit! My words woke her. Daemin glared at me. I started to apologize, but then she looked over her shoulder at me, and suddenly I couldn’t speak. It had been this way on our wedding night also, when we’d strode into her room.

As Kai had talked to her, all I’d done was stare, too tongue-tied to speak. How could anyone be so beautiful? *And her smell.* I clenched my hands into fists as my dragon pushed me to tear her from Daemin’s arms and hold her close.

MINE. ALL MINE. WANT TO HOLD HER. NOW!

“Are we home?” she asked Daemin as she stretched and sat up in his lap.

“Yes, mate,” he told her.

Mate. He’d called her mate. I wanted to call her mate.

“Well, let’s go inside,” she said, leaning away from him.

Grab her, my dragon insisted.

I couldn't just grab her. That wouldn't be right.

"Zuri," I started.

She looked over at me. "Yes?" she said, with none of the softness she'd gifted Daemin.

I won't lie, my heart broke a little at the look of disdain in her gaze.

"It rained recently," I started, not bothering to say it was last week. "If you want, I can carry you inside."

She rubbed her eyes and whispered, "Rained?"

"Yes. I'll carry you since you don't have any shoes on."

She looked down at her feet and then wiggled her toes. Such cute toes.

"You're right, I seemed to have forgotten my boots," she whispered.

She'd forgotten all her clothing! More jealousy shot through me.

"Okay," she whispered, surprising me.

"I can carry you?" I asked.

She nodded, then moved across the seat and straight into my arms. The jealousy melted away as I scooped her up and held her close. My eyes met Daemin's, who was shaking his head and smiling.

Through our connection, he was calling me a liar. I wasn't lying. It had rained. Last week. Zuri rested her head against my chest, and my ordinarily insane dragon calmed instantly.

Home, it whispered.

Was that what this feeling was? *Home*. I'd never felt at home anywhere. Not at my own estate, where I'd mostly felt lonely. Not here, where the loneliness followed even though the princes' manor was bustling with servants and even my pack brothers were here.

Nothing had ever felt like home to me. Not even the house I'd grown up in with my strict father and brothers after my mother passed away. But holding Zuri Bane in my arms, knowing she was safe and sound, this felt like home.

Zuri rested against my chest as I carried her through the manor, one arm beneath her legs and the other wrapped securely around her back. Her weight felt right in my arms. My dragon had been strangely quiet since I'd picked her up, no longer growling about Daemin or demanding that I steal her away from him. He seemed content simply knowing we were the ones holding her now.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

“Better,” she said, shifting closer against me. “A lot better, actually.”

Relief moved through me. I hadn't been there when Daemin found her. I hadn't seen what happened in the forest, but I'd felt enough through our connection to know how close we'd come to losing her.

The thought had been tormenting me all night. Well, I guess it was morning now, though the sun wasn't up yet. Zuri lifted her head and glanced around as I turned down another corridor.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“To Kai's office. He wants to talk to all of us.”

Her brows drew together. “About what?”

“He didn't say.”

But it had to be serious. I could sense through our bond that he was anxious. Whatever he'd discovered at the warehouse had left him stunned. He'd locked himself in his office as soon as he returned to the manor, going over the documents we'd recovered.

As for the smugglers, they were still being interrogated by my guards. I'd rushed back to the manor as soon as I sensed something was wrong. Zuri looked over my shoulder. I didn't have to turn around to know who she was looking for. Daemin was following close behind us.

“He's still there,” I told her.

“I was just checking.”

My dragon grumbled. *She likes him.*

“He's her mate, too. She's supposed to like him.”

She likes him more than us.

“We'll work on that. We'll show her that we can be a good alpha to her. We'll be number one in her heart soon.”

The doors were already open when we arrived at Kai's office. He stood behind his desk with several documents spread across its surface, along with two thick folders and boxes of documents in the corner.

He looked up when we entered. His eyes immediately dropped to Zuri in my arms. Then they moved to me. I waited for him to say something. He didn't. But I felt the jealousy through our bond.

He cannot hold her. It's our turn, my dragon roared.

There was a guard standing at attention in the corner. Daemin walked into the office behind us and closed the doors. There were two chairs positioned in front of Kai's desk. Kai looked at the chairs, then at Zuri.

I crossed the room and sat in one of the chairs without putting Zuri down, settling her comfortably across my lap instead. She chuckled. The sound made my dragon purr. Zuri tilted her head back and stared up at me.

“Are you sure it's okay for me to sit here?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Won't Mei Lin get mad when she comes into the office?” she countered.

My arms tightened around her. “Her feelings do not matter to me. Plus, she isn't part of this meeting. And fuck anyone who gets angry with me for holding my mate,” I told her.

Her eyes widened slightly. She looked stunned. My dragon went completely still as we awaited her response. Finally, her expression softened into a smile.

“Oh, okay,” she whispered.

I was still tongue-tied from her smile. It wasn't the same smile she'd given Kai in the garden. It wasn't the sleepy affection I'd watched her give Daemin when the carriage arrived. This one was all mine.

Something tight inside my chest loosened. As if it were confirmation that she was willing to give me a chance. She rested her head against me again as if there was nowhere else she'd rather be, and I had to remind myself that Kai had called us here for a reason.

Otherwise, I would've been perfectly content to sit in that chair holding her for the rest of the day, listening to her breathing, letting my dragon purr for her. Zuri turned her attention toward Kai.

“All right,” she said. “What's going on? Why was I needed at your meeting?”

Daemin plopped down in the chair beside mine. He glanced at Zuri curled comfortably in my lap, then looked at me with that same irritating smile he'd worn when the carriage arrived.

I was definitely going to hit him later. From the other side of the desk, Kai looked at Zuri for several seconds before pulling his chair out and offering it to her.

“Zuri, you can have my chair,” he said.

A growl slipped from my chest before I could stop it. Zuri tipped her head back to look at me, amusement dancing in her eyes. The jealousy dispersed instantly. Then she looked at Kai.

“No, I'm comfortable here,” she told him.

My dragon immediately began to purr. I sat a little straighter. Across from us, Kai clenched his teeth. Daemin made a suspicious sound beside me that might've been a laugh, but I didn't bother looking at him.

I was too busy enjoying the fact that our omega had been offered a perfectly good chair and had chosen to remain in my lap.

She likes us. She chose us.

"She chose our lap."

Same thing.

Kai glared at me, jealousy raging through our bond. I held back my smile. I knew the feeling. But there was no way in hell I was letting her go. I'd just gotten her. Finally, Kai tore his gaze away from me and turned his attention to the folders stacked on the corner of his desk. He pulled several free and placed them in front of him.

The change in his demeanor wiped away most of my amusement. I'd known Kai too long not to recognize when something was wrong. Whatever he'd found in those files had kept him occupied for hours, and now he'd summoned us here to discuss it.

More importantly, he'd asked for Zuri to be present. What did these files have to do with our mate? Kai looked toward the corner of the office where the guard stood silently awaiting orders.

"Go outside," Kai told him. "Stand guard at the door. No one comes in, and no one gets close enough to listen."

"Yes, Your Highness." The guard left the office and stepped into the corridor.

Daemin rose and closed the door once the guard was outside. The lock clicked into place. Zuri shifted slightly in my lap. I tightened my arm around her waist, sensing that she was growing nervous about what Kai had to say.

I, too, had an unsettling feeling in my gut. Kai waited until Daemin was seated before his gaze drifted around the room, looking at each of us. His eyes lingered on Zuri. Then he placed his hand on the first folder.

For Zuri's sake, he took a moment to explain our mission from last night and described the room we'd found. She listened without a word, not even seeming shocked to hear about the golems.

"These are folders from the hidden room in the smugglers' warehouse," he said. "I've spent most of the night and these wee hours of the morning going through them."

Zuri lifted her head from my chest to stare at the folder.

“Some of what I found concerns the Triad,” he continued. “Some concerns Mei Lin and her father.” His fingers moved to another folder. “But there's something else in these records.” He looked directly at Zuri.

“Something I believe you have a right to know about, Zuri Bane.”

She tensed, and my dragon began purring, wanting to comfort her. What the hell was in that folder?

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

ZIAN

Kai remained standing behind his desk instead of sitting in his chair. He opened the first folder, but his attention stayed on Zuri.

“If you need me to stop at any point, tell me. Some of what I found concerns things that were done to you when you were an infant. You don't have to hear all of it today.”

“No. If it's about me, I want to know,” Zuri told him.

“Then I'll tell you everything I know.” Kai turned the folder around and slid it across the desk so she could see the documents for herself. “The hidden room we found in the smugglers' warehouse contained more than records of their current operation. There were documents stored there that are almost thirty years old. Most concerning experiments involving children.”

Zuri tensed in my arms.

I lowered my mouth near her ear and whispered, “It's okay. We're here with you.”

She released a slow breath and nodded. Beside us, Daemin dragged his chair closer and held out his hand. Zuri slipped hers into it, and his fingers closed around hers as Kai continued.

“The researchers were experimenting with golems, but not the kind we encountered at the warehouse. These were considerably more sophisticated. They learned how to create golem bodies physically identical to living people. The bodies ate, slept, grew, felt pain. Anyone looking at one would believe they were looking at an ordinary person.”

“Why would anyone want to do that?” Zuri asked.

“Creating the bodies wasn't the real experiment. They wanted to determine whether a living person's essence could be divided between two bodies.” Kai removed another document from the folder. “They called the process splicing. The original child remained alive while portions of the child's essence were transferred into the golem counterpart.”

I frowned. “Why children?”

“Children were easier because their emotions weren’t as evolved as adults’. The researchers got the idea from another realm where fallen angels possessed shadows that housed emotions they were unable to endure after their fall from Paradise. In that realm, the Fallen angels had multiple shadows that looked exactly like them and contained the emotions the fallen angels’ bodies couldn’t hold now that they were cast aside from the heavens. They wanted to reproduce the phenomenon artificially.”

“So they experimented on children,” Daemin said.

There was no emotion in his voice, which meant he was furious.

Kai nodded. “They tried for years, but the children and the golems never survived for long. The first successful trials involved six children. However, those children’s golems didn’t survive longer than a few months. And if their golems died first, the traits and abilities returned to the original child. The researchers changed the process and eventually recorded four infant subjects who survived along with their golems. They successfully transferred some of the children’s emotions and abilities into their golems. And the golems were hard to tell apart from the original hosts.”

Zuri shifted slightly against me. Kai looked at her before pulling another sheet from the folder.

“The first surviving infant was a dragon shifter.” His voice softened. “Her name was Zuri Bane.”

Her entire body went rigid in my arms. For a moment, she didn't speak, but she trembled slightly against me.

“Breathe,” I whispered. “I’ve got you.”

“What the fuck?” she finally whispered.

“I checked the records several times,” Kai said. “Your name, parentage, date of birth, and shifter category are all here.”

Zuri stared at the folder. “You said there were four.”

“Yes. The second infant was a witch, identified as the daughter of a seer. Her name was Ciori.”

Zuri jerked in my arms. “What did you say?”

Kai's brows drew together. “Ciori.”

She stared at him as if he'd spoken a name no one in this world should know. “What's the next name?”

“Kenadi. The records identify her as a vampire.”

“Oh, my God.” Her fingers tightened around Daemin's. “And the fourth?”

“Brielle. Cheetah shifter.”

Zuri covered her mouth. Tears gathered in her eyes, and I wrapped my arms more securely around her as she stared at the documents spread across Kai's desk.

“What happened to them?” she asked.

“Sometime after the four successful procedures, a witch discovered the facility and took the four golem infants. From what I can tell, she believed she was rescuing the children themselves. The researchers sent people after her, but she was believed to have escaped to another realm.”

Zuri slowly lowered her hand. “Does it say who the witch was?”

“Yes, her name was Ellora Nightingale. It says she had the ability to realm travel and to block the abilities of others, rendering them unable to shift or use their magic.”

“And the original children?”

“They were returned to their families after the golems were taken. In your case, the records eventually match what we already know. You ended up with your grandmother. Your ability to shift was transferred to the golem. That’s why your omega traits never fully appeared. The researchers watched the four of you for a few years, until the lead scientist died and your files were archived. Without the golems, there was no reason to continue watching the four of you.”

“Yes,” Zuri whispered. “My grandmother. No omega traits.”

Something about the way she said it bothered me. I looked at Daemin and found him already studying her.

“But Zuri's dragon has been talking to her,” he said.

Kai looked at him. “What?”

“She told me she never heard her dragon before she met us. She couldn't communicate with her, couldn't shift, and didn't feel her the way she does now. Her healing is changing too.”

I remembered our wedding night and the sweet fragrance that had filled the room. She was supposed to be a cold omega.

“Her scent isn’t the perfume of a cold omega,” I stated, staring down at her.

Zuri closed her eyes. The records told us what had happened to her as an infant. She shouldn’t be able to hear her dragon. She shouldn’t have such a sweet scent. Only her golem should. A golem that would look and sound

just like the real Zuri. Kai must have reached the same conclusion. He closed the folder instead of reaching for another document.

“Zuri, you don't owe us an explanation simply because I found your name in these records. If there's something you're not ready to tell us, I'll wait.”

Her eyes opened, and she stared at him for several seconds before looking at Daemin and then me.

“You're all going to think I'm crazy,” she whispered.

“No, we won't,” Daemin said.

“You haven't even heard it yet.”

“I don't need to,” he told her. “You're my mate. Mine. I want you no matter what.”

A shaky laugh escaped her. She leaned back against my chest, and I rubbed my hand slowly over her arm.

“Whatever it is,” I whispered. “Only tell us when you're ready. We will not rush you. And we'll always protect you.”

Zuri took a deep breath. “I know the other three children from the experiment. I know Ciori. I call her CiCi. Kenadi is Kena, and Brielle is Bri. They're my best friends. We grew up together.”

Nobody interrupted her. Even my dragon had gone silent inside me.

“We grew up somewhere called Earth,” she continued. “It's another world, another realm, whatever you want to call it. We grew up together in an orphanage run by a woman named Ms. Ellora. She raised us. She named me. Or, at least she said she did.” Her voice grew softer. “And a few weeks ago, I think I died in that realm.”

Daemin surged halfway out of his chair, but Zuri tightened her hand around his before he could rise completely.

“I'm here,” she assured him. “I'm fine now. But that night, there was a car accident. I was with the women I grew up with, CiCi, Bri, and Kena. Our car flipped over on the night of a Blood Moon. And the next thing I knew, I woke up here in the bridal chamber.”

Our wedding night. Suddenly, I remembered everything differently. The confusion on her face when we'd entered the room. The way she'd stared at us as if she recognized us while simultaneously having no idea what was happening around her.

Zuri swallowed. “My best friend CiCi is an author. She wrote about this world. She wrote about all of you. She dreamed of this world, of our lives

here.”

A cold sensation moved down my spine.

“I knew your names before I met you,” she continued. “Zhen Kai. Wu Daemin. Hao Zian. Mei Lin. I even read about Zuri Bane. I thought you were characters in a book. I thought she’d named this character after me.” She gave us a watery smile. “Turns out, she’d been dreaming of the real me, of a real world. See? Crazy, huh?”

“No,” Kai said immediately. “You’re not crazy. Keep going.”

Zuri’s smile disappeared. “I thought I’d died on Earth and somehow woken up inside the body of a woman from CiCi’s story. That’s why I knew things I shouldn’t know, like where the smugglers would be,” she said, glancing at Daemin. “I thought this body belonged to somebody else. A character from a book.”

My dragon pushed forward so violently that a growl nearly escaped me.

That body belongs to her. She’s real. She’s our mate.

I agreed with him. I didn’t understand what had happened to Zuri yet, but everything inside me rejected the idea that she was living inside something that didn’t belong to her.

“Last night, I had a dream,” she continued. “I saw Ms. Ellora from the orphanage. She told me this world was real. CiCi didn’t create it. She said CiCi was from Runeborne and that her dreams were visions she unknowingly turned into books. She told me I was from Ashborne.” Zuri looked at the documents. “She said our deaths returned us to our rightful places and that the Blood Moon helped us return home safely.”

My dragon stirred. *Home. This is her home. We are her home.*

Kai suddenly opened the folder again. He flipped through several pages, scanning each one before moving to the next.

“There was something I read earlier.” He turned another page.

“Something about what happened if one of the golems died. I want to read exactly what it says.”

Kai found the page he wanted. His eyes moved over the writing before he looked at her. Daemin’s fingers tightened around Zuri’s hand.

Kai looked back at the document. “The file says that if the golem’s body died, the divided spirit would return to the original body, and the individual would become whole again with its abilities restored.”

“I died there,” she whispered. “And then I woke up here.”

Her fingers trembled inside Daemin's hand as understanding slowly settled over her face.

"I was the golem," she whispered.

"On Earth," Kai said softly. "But the golem died. You've returned to your original body. You're no longer in the realm where Ellora took you to. And her abilities are no longer dampening yours."

Tears spilled down Zuri's cheeks. "Then what happened to the real Zuri?"

Kai frowned. "Who?"

"The other me. The Zuri who lived here." Her voice broke. "What happened to her when I came back?"

"You are her," I told her.

Zuri turned in my arms and looked up at me.

"You're Zuri," I told her. "The files say you were divided. Part of you lived there, and part of you lived here. When you died there, that part of you returned here. You woke up in the part of you that was here in our manor. Now, you're whole, returned to the realm you were born in. You're Zuri Bane, our mate. There is no other."

Her eyes searched mine as if she were trying to decide whether she could believe something that simple after everything she'd just heard. My dragon purred inside me.

Mate.

I brushed my thumb across the tears on her cheek. "You're Zuri Bane, the one my dragon purrs for."

For a while, none of us spoke. Zuri remained against my chest with one hand clasped in Daemin's while Kai stood across from us, giving her time to absorb what she'd learned. Eventually, Zuri looked at him. Kai's expression had changed.

She noticed it too. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"Yes. I found records showing how some of the children became part of the experiment. Yours included."

Zuri straightened in my lap. "What does it say?"

"There are authorization documents." Kai removed a page and placed it on the desk in front of her. His expression hardened as he pointed toward the signature at the bottom. "Orion Bane."

Zuri stared at her father's name. The hand resting against my arm went completely still.

“He signed off on the experiment?” she asked.

“Yes. He knew what the experiment involved when he gave them permission to use you,” Kai told her. “He signed off, saying he understood the risks.”

A growl rolled through my chest, and this time I made no attempt to suppress it. Zuri had been an infant when someone decided she could be divided into pieces, and the man who should have protected her had willingly handed her over to them. She stared at her father's signature for a long time before finally lifting her eyes to Kai.

“Why did he do that to me?” she whispered.

My heart broke for my mate.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



ZURI

“The records say your father agreed because he believed the experiments would benefit the Bane Clan,” Kai told me. “His authorization is there, Zuri. He knew they intended to use you as a subject.”

I stared at him. I knew Orion Bane was a piece of shit, but this was too much. This wasn't drugging a grown woman and forcing her into a marriage because his preferred daughter had run away. I had been a baby.

A fucking baby.

Zian's palm moved slowly over my back. He hadn't stopped touching me since Kai started explaining what they'd found in the warehouse. His dragon was purring for me, and I was grateful for it.

I leaned farther into him and breathed deeply. Black tea and vanilla filled my nose, the vanilla warm beneath the stronger scent of tea, and some of the pressure in my chest finally eased. Daemin still held my hand. His thumb rested over my knuckles, warm and soothing.

“So he knew they were experimenting on children,” I said. “And he gave them his own.”

“Yes,” Kai said.

I laughed once, but there wasn't anything funny about this. My father could probably find a way to justify throwing a newborn into a volcano if

somebody promised him the Bane name would look impressive carved into the side afterward.

“What's going to happen to him?” I asked.

“We're going to deal with him.” Kai rested one hand on the open file.

“But not right now.”

My eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“Because arresting Orion now could warn the people connected to the operation we found in that warehouse. There are more recent records in these files, and some of the names in them are people we cannot afford to alert before we're ready to move.”

Daemin stopped moving his thumb over my hand. Zian's palm remained warm against my back.

“Who?” I asked.

Kai reached for another folder. He pulled several pages free and laid them on top of the others.

“Mei Lin,” he said.

For a second, nobody said anything.

I looked from the papers to Kai. “Mei Lin is connected to the smugglers and the experiments?”

“She's connected to the same research team that experimented on you and your friends.” Kai turned one of the pages so the writing faced us.

“These are medical records. Some are several years old. From these records, I learned that Mei Lin was born a beta.”

Daemin's fingers tightened around mine. Behind me, Zian went completely still.

“What?” I asked. CiCi hadn't foreseen that.

“When she came of age, she presented as a beta,” Kai explained. “The omega characteristics she has now were induced through treatments arranged by her father. The lavender scent, the changes that allowed her to present as an omega, none of it occurred naturally.”

I stared at him, waiting for the rest because there had to be more. There was.

“Her father signed off on her being part of an experimental drug that changes a person's designation,” Kai continued. “The experiment failed. Though the drug can't change your designation, the researchers found that it could mimic other designations. But you have to take the drug once a month. The early records show her father signing off on each shot she

received. The later ones include Mei Lin's signature. She knew what the treatments were for. She consented to continuing them."

Daemin released my hand long enough to take the paper Kai offered him. His eyes moved over it quickly before he passed it back without comment. His hand returned to mine. Zian's hand had stopped on my back.

"She lied to all of us," Zian said.

"There's more," Kai said. "Turns out, this research team belongs to her family. Her great-grandfather oversaw the first experiments. Her father oversaw the latter ones. The splicing, the designation-changing drugs were all experiments her family hired people to research. And Mei Lin has been working for her father. There are communications in the records too," Kai said. "Between Mei Lin and her father."

Zian's hand started moving over my back again, slower this time.

"What kind of communications?" Daemin asked.

"Information about us. Meetings. Deliveries. Changes in security measures. Intel on some of our Triad operations, including making a copy of our authorization seals."

"For how long?" Daemin sneered. "How long has she been giving them information about us?"

"Ever since she met us," Kai answered. "Even more intel has been passed between them since we became princes. She sends intel by her maid."

Zian swore quietly behind me.

Kai pulled another set of papers from the folder. "I can't tell you how much Mei Lin knew about what her father was doing with the information. These records don't prove she knew about the Dragonblight shipment or every part of the warehouse operation. They do prove she knowingly passed information to him. Information he'd planned to use to overthrow my cousin."

"So she was spying on you this entire time," I drawled.

"On all of us," Zian replied.

Daemin's eyes settled on the files. "Does Zeyan know? I mean, does King Zeyan know?" he corrected.

"I sent word that we uncovered evidence requiring action. I haven't sent the records themselves." Kai gathered the loose pages back into order. "I'm not putting details like these into a message that can be intercepted."

That made sense. Unfortunately, the rest of this made no fucking sense. I had woken up believing I was trapped inside my best friend's book. Now apparently, I had lived two lives, and my father had knowingly handed baby-me over for experiments.

Oh, and my husbands' other wife was secretly a beta who'd been taking treatments to pass as an omega, and her father was planning to overthrow the King. Damn, I missed the days when all I had to worry about was whether I wanted fries with that or not.

"What are we going to do with Mei Lin?" Zian asked.

Kai looked at him. "I've already sent word to the King requesting that our marriage to her be annulled."

Then his eyes moved to me. I caught the look. But said nothing. Just because he annulled the marriage didn't mean I forgave his sorry ass. I rolled my eyes and looked away. Daemin chuckled.

"What's funny?" I asked him.

"Nothing, mate," Daemin said, no longer smiling. "Nothing is funny."

"An annulment isn't good enough," Zian said. "That's not punishment enough."

Thank you!

Kai finally stopped staring at me and returned his attention to the other two men. "Tomorrow is the post-wedding family visit Mei Lin has been asking us to make. She expects the three of us to accompany her to her father's home."

Daemin understood before I did. "We'll go as planned."

"Yes," Kai agreed.

I sat straighter in Zian's lap. "You're going to confront them there?"

"Yes. We're going to let Mei Lin believe nothing has changed," Kai said. "If we confront her tonight, her father could be warned before we reach him. If we arrest the Prime Minister first, Mei Lin may realize something is wrong before we can deal with her. Tomorrow gives us an opportunity to put both of them in the same place without either one knowing we've uncovered the records."

"And then?" I asked.

"We confront the Prime Minister with the evidence connecting him to the operation. Mei Lin answers for the lies and for the information she passed to him. Once he's secured and can no longer warn anyone, we deal with Orion."

“Does Mei Lin know about the family visit?” I asked.

“She reminded me about it yesterday,” Kai said.

“So she thinks tomorrow she's taking her three husbands home to see Daddy?”

Daemin glanced at me. “Yes.”

“And instead you're showing up with proof that Daddy is running a criminal operation and freaky science experiments?”

“Essentially,” Kai said.

“That might be the worst family visit in history,” I joked.

Kai's mouth almost lifted in a smile, and I looked away, hating how handsome that man was.

“What about me?” I asked. “What do you need Allie and me to do?”

“You're staying here,” Zian insisted.

I twisted around in his lap. “Excuse me?”

“You're staying here tomorrow,” he reiterated.

I looked at Daemin. He nodded. *Traitor.*

Zian's arm stayed around my waist. “We're deliberately walking into the Prime Minister's home to expose him. And we can't take too many guards because he'll know something is up. We don't know how many people in his household are involved, and we don't know what he'll do once he realizes we have proof. Taking you will give us a weakness for him to exploit.”

“We'll leave guards here with you,” Daemin said. “We'll be able to work better knowing you're safe. Once we've taught you how to shift and trained your dragon to fight properly, we'll start taking you with us more.”

“Fine,” I said, understanding why having me there could be a problem. “I'll stay here.”

“The guards will be positioned around your courtyard and throughout the manor,” Kai told me. “You won't be confined to your room. We're just asking that you remain on the manor grounds until we return.”

“All right,” I told them. “Don't worry about me. I'll stay in with Allie while you go out and take down the Prime Minister.”

The meeting ended not long after that. Zian stood, still cradling me in his arms.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Taking you to your room,” Zian told me.

“I can walk.”

“It rained.” Zian looked down at me with a completely serious expression.

I kept silent, knowing he just wanted to carry me. That realization warmed something inside me that learning about my past had left cold and numb. I settled against his chest instead of arguing. Zian's arms tightened around me. Behind us, Daemin laughed.

Zian carried me all the way back to my courtyard despite the complete lack of mud, puddles, or any other evidence supporting his claim that last week's rain had made walking dangerous. Daemin followed us into my room. The moment I saw Allie waiting inside, I tapped Zian's shoulder.

“Put me down.”

He lowered me to my feet, and I went straight to her. Allie threw her arms around me before I could say anything, and I hugged her just as tightly.

“Are you all right, Princess?” she asked when we pulled apart.

“I'm fine. How are you?”

“Better now that you're back.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Here's the money, Princess.”

My eyes lit up as she slipped the money we'd taken from the smuggler into my hand.

“We'll split it later,” I whispered, tucking the envelope into my pocket without hesitation. Behind me, Daemin and Zian chuckled.

“There's more,” Allie told me.

“More?”

She pointed toward the other side of my room. Five large chests sat against the wall.

I stared at them. “Where did those come from?”

“They were delivered while you were gone.” Allie caught my hand and pulled me toward them. “They're from Zian's courtyard,” she whispered.

I looked back at Zian. He smiled at me. I crouched beside the nearest chest and lifted the lid. Gold. Actual gold. Gold bars filled most of the chest, mixed with jewelry and fine silks.

“We're rich, Allie,” I whispered.

She leaned close and whispered, “We no longer have to sell our butts in the brothels.”

I chuckled. “Nope. We can give our butts away for free now.”

Allie burst out laughing. I turned to look behind me and found Zian watching me.

"All of this is from you?" I asked.

"Yes. It's all my treasures. They belong to you now, mate."

"Zian, thank you."

He blushed. Actually blushed. How adorable!

"You're cute when you blush like that," I told him.

The color in his face deepened. Daemin laughed, and Zian gave him a look that only made him laugh harder.

I looked back at the open chest. "This is way more than I need."

"It's yours," Zian said. "You can never have too many treasures."

"It's ours. I'll put it up for us," I told him.

"Whatever you want, mate."

Allie looked from him to me, and apparently decided she'd seen enough. She gave me an enthusiastic thumbs-up behind Zian's back before heading for the door. I narrowed my eyes at her. Her grin widened, and then she was gone.

"I'll give you and Z a moment to talk alone," Daemin said before winking at me. Then he added, "I'll be back. I'm still moving into your courtyard."

"Okay, alpha," I told him.

He left my room with a smile on his face, leaving me alone with Zian. I moved to sit down on the edge of my bed and met Zian's gaze.

"I'm sorry," he whispered out of nowhere. Zian took a deep breath, releasing it slowly before continuing. "When you came here, I saw things I should have challenged, and I said nothing. I let Kai make decisions because that was what I'd always done. It was easier to stay out of it than tell him I thought he was wrong. That wasn't fair to you. I didn't know you, but I didn't need to know you to know you deserved better than that. And I was rude to you. I'm sorry. You'll never know how sorry I am for that."

I looked at the five chests behind me.

"Is the gold part of the apology?"

Zian shook his head. "The gold is yours because I've been collecting it for years just in case I one day found my Fated One. I've found her. It's yours now. Whether you accept me or not, this treasure was collected for you. The apology is because I was wrong."

That made me smile. If he thought money could buy my forgiveness, he would've been wrong. But I was getting money and an apology; of course, I was willing to let the past go.

"Okay," I told him.

His brow furrowed slightly. "Okay?"

"I accept your apology."

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Very serious, my alpha."

Some of the tension left his shoulders, and tears shimmered in his eyes. He wiped them away.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't expect you to forgive me so easily. I was prepared to kneel in front of your courtyard all night to earn your forgiveness."

I rose and strode over to him. I stared up at him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"I now have a second chance at life. So, I'm willing to give you a second chance. But there won't be a third."

"No third needed," he told me. "I'd rather die than hurt you in any way."

"Well, then, let's leave the past in the past, Zian. Let's start over. After you finish with the Prime Minister, and after my father is no longer an issue, let's put all of that behind us and start over."

Zian hugged me back. I rested my cheek against his chest, breathing in the familiar warmth of black tea and vanilla.

"I'm definitely keeping the gold," I mumbled.

His deep laugh rumbled through me. "As long as you keep me too, I'll bring you a chest of gold every year."

I smiled and hugged him tighter. Being his princess was going to be fun. And lucrative!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



KAI

Mei Lin talked almost the entire ride to her father's estate. She sat beside me, turned slightly in my direction, filling the carriage with stories about people I didn't care about and plans I knew would never happen.

Daemin and Zian occupied the opposite seat, both unusually quiet, though Mei Lin barely seemed to notice. Why would she? As far as she knew, this was the family visit she'd been requesting since our wedding.

We'd finally agreed to accompany her to her father's home, and I was sitting beside her just as I had countless times before. Nothing had changed. At least, that was what I needed her to believe.

She touched my sleeve. "Are you listening?"

"Of course," I told her, forcing a smile.

Her answering smile came easily. My dragon hated every second of it. I could still see her name in those records. The dates of the treatments. The payments. The communications she'd sent to her father. Information about us. Information about the Triad.

I could still hear Zuri asking why her own father had allowed strangers to experiment on her as an infant. And beside me sat a woman I'd trusted,

chatting as though yesterday hadn't torn apart nearly everything I'd believed about her.

"I've been thinking about Sister," Mei Lin said, referring to Zuri.

My attention returned fully to her.

She sighed. "She's from the countryside. It's going to take her a while to get used to civilized life, so we don't want to overwhelm her with too much money."

"I think Zuri can decide how much money she can handle," I said.

Mei Lin blinked. I softened my expression before she could read anything into my tone.

"Of course," she said quickly. "I only meant that everything here is new to her. I want to help. I don't want her to be overwhelmed."

"I know."

That seemed to reassure her. She settled back against the seat, but only for a moment.

"I feel like I made Sister mad yesterday."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, eyes filling with tears. "It was something about the way she stared at me." She forced a shiver. "The way she looked at me disturbed me all day." Mei Lin frowned. "I kept thinking about it afterward. I don't know what I did wrong."

"There's been a lot happening," I told her.

"I suppose. I just don't want her to hate me. And today, you're leaving her alone again. What if it makes her upset with me?"

"Don't worry about it."

She relaxed again. "Maybe she's simply overwhelmed."

"Perhaps."

Mei Lin smiled and returned to talking about the visit. I glanced across the carriage. Daemin was looking out the window. Zian met my eyes once. Nothing needed to be said. We'd already agreed on what mattered.

Get inside. Take the Prime Minister into custody under Zeyan's authority. And keep Mei Lin unsuspecting until we did. By the time the carriage rolled through the gates of her father's estate, my face hurt from smiling. A servant opened the carriage door. I stepped down first and turned. Mei Lin placed her hand in mine.

"Thank you," she cooed as I helped her down.

Daemin and Zian followed. The three of us escorted her toward the house. She seemed happy. The doors opened before we reached them, and servants bowed as we entered. Mei Lin immediately began greeting people by name.

Not cautiously. Not like someone returning to a home filled with painful memories. Comfortably. Naturally. The Prime Minister waited for us in a large receiving room. He wore dark formal robes embroidered heavily enough to advertise his rank before he ever opened his mouth. His gaze traveled over Daemin and Zian before settling on me.

“Prince Kai.” He bowed exactly as much as etiquette demanded. No more.

“Prime Minister,” I said.

His mouth curved. “I’m pleased my daughter finally managed to convince you to visit. I was beginning to wonder whether the leaders of the Triad had forgotten the importance of family obligations.”

There it was. The same superiority he’d always carried around us. Titles had never impressed him unless they were attached to bloodlines he considered worthy.

“Father.” Mei Lin hurried forward and hugged him.

He accepted her embrace without hesitation. Then her stepmother approached.

“My darling.”

Mei Lin smiled brightly and went into the woman’s arms. Her stepmother kissed her cheek.

“You’ve stayed away too long.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You always say that.”

They laughed. I looked at them. Mei Lin’s sisters came next. One hugged her around the waist. Another complained that Mei Lin hadn’t answered her last letter. The youngest immediately began asking whether Mei Lin had brought whatever she’d apparently promised during their last correspondence. Mei Lin laughed again.

“I brought it. Stop worrying.”

Her sister squealed and hugged her. I looked at Daemin. He was already watching me. Zian’s attention remained on the family. Mei Lin had told us she wasn’t close to them. She’d made her childhood sound lonely.

Her stepmother had supposedly tolerated her. Her sisters supposedly resented her. Before we married, every time we wanted to meet her family, to see what they were truly like, she told us her father was busy or that her stepmother didn't like visitors.

She'd told us that her sisters weren't kind to her. She'd said she never wanted us to witness how they treated her because she was embarrassed. Now I knew the truth. It wasn't because her family didn't want her.

It was because she'd never wanted us close enough to discover she'd been lying about her life. Now that we were married, she considered us hers. She no longer had anything to fear. Or so she thought.

"Come," the Prime Minister said. "Dinner should be ready."

I followed him without comment. Shortly afterward, we were seated around a long dining table. Mei Lin took the place beside me. Daemin sat on my other side, with Zian beside him. Servants filled the table with food. I didn't touch mine. The Prime Minister ate several bites before looking at me.

"You know, Kai, I've always thought you were the most reasonable of the three clan leaders," the Prime Minister said.

Neither of my pack brothers said anything. They didn't even react. I waited.

"You're certainly less hot-headed than your cousin," the PM continued.

"Zeyan?" I asked.

"Who else?" The Prime Minister chuckled.

"Father," Mei Lin whispered nervously.

"What?" He lifted his cup. "Surely Prince Kai isn't so delicate that mentioning our King will upset him."

"Not at all," I said.

"Good." He drank from his cup. "Zeyan has always been impulsive. He managed to get rid of a tyrant king and apparently decided enthroning himself was the best idea."

His wife lowered her eyes. Nobody else at the table spoke.

The Prime Minister mistook our silence for agreement. "Removing Jinyu was one thing. Restructuring the kingdom around himself was another. A man should understand the difference between being capable of taking power and being suited to wield it."

I stared at him.

He smiled. "And now there are these decrees."

“What decrees?” I asked.

His smile widened slightly. “The nonsense concerning your primary wife, for one.”

My dragon stirred.

The Prime Minister continued eating. “His decree about your primary wife, I don't think we need to take it seriously. Wait a few months, then divorce her for not being able to conceive an heir.”

My hand stopped beside my untouched plate.

“I'll supply you with a drug that will make her sterile,” he continued.

A low growl rolled from my chest. Every conversation at the table stopped. The Prime Minister slowly lowered his chopsticks.

Mei Lin touched my arm. “Kai?”

I looked at her father. “You seem very comfortable supplying drugs to women.”

His expression changed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I was wondering if you used the same connections when you had drugs supplied to Mei Lin.”

Mei Lin's fingers slipped from my arm.

Her stepmother frowned. “What drugs?”

One of her sisters looked at Mei Lin.

I turned toward her.

She had gone pale. “Kai...”

“You were born a beta,” I told her.

Her sister gasped. Mei Lin stared at me. Her father pushed his chair back slightly.

“Be very careful about what you're accusing my family of,” the Prime Minister snarled.

“I'm not accusing you.” I looked directly at him. “I'm telling you what we found.”

His face hardened.

“In my possession, I have records of the original designation-altering treatments. Payments to doctors. Treatment dates. Maintenance doses. Those all bore your signature.” I looked at Mei Lin. “And later records contained yours.”

Tears immediately filled her eyes.

“Kai, I can explain.”

“Can you explain the communications you gave your father too?” I asked.

She froze. Her father didn't. He looked at me with the expression of a man calculating how much I actually knew. I answered the question for him.

“We have proof of everything. Mei Lin copied our seals, and the Prime Minister used them to smuggle in forbidden goods like Dragonblight. We have delivery and payment records. Along with proof that she even passed Triad intel she overheard to you.”

Mei Lin shook her head. “I didn't...”

“We found the forged authorizations,” I continued. “The illegal shipments. Enchanted contraband. Golems. Dragonblight.”

The Prime Minister's wife covered her mouth.

“Dragonblight?” she whispered.

One of his daughters stared at him. “Father, what is he talking about?”

Damn. His wife and other kids truly had no idea how despicable he was.

“Husband, tell me he's lying,” his wife said. “Mei Lin, tell me this is a joke.”

“Enough.” The Prime Minister's roar silenced her.

Mei Lin reached for me. “Kai, please let me explain.”

I shrugged her hand off. She stared at me as though I'd struck her.

“I didn't know about the Dragonblight,” she whispered. “I swear I didn't. I didn't know everything he was doing.”

“You betrayed us,” I told her.

Mei Lin began crying. “It wasn't my fault. Father made me do it.”

Her father stood. “Shut up.”

She stood too, tears running down her face. “No. He needs to know.”

“Mei Lin!” he roared.

She looked at me. “Kai, I didn't want to lie to you. I was young when it started. He told me to approach you. He told me what to do. He wanted access to the Triad,” she continued. “Even back then he knew you'd one day be the leader.”

Her father came around the table. “Be quiet.”

“He made me push you into the lake,” she continued.

For a moment, I couldn't speak. I remembered that day. The water. The rescue. Mei Lin getting sick afterward. Then her constantly following us. All the while, it was a setup.

Mei Lin stepped toward me. "I didn't want any of this to happen. I swear. I love you, Kai. I really love you. I love Daemin and Zian too. Sort of."

"Shut up!" the Prime Minister roared.

His hand struck her face. Mei Lin stumbled into the table. Her stepmother screamed. I stood. Daemin and Zian rose with me.

The Prime Minister pointed toward the doors. "Guards!"

Five men rushed into the room. Each carried a sword. I looked at them. Then at him. I smiled.

"It's going to take more than that to stop the leaders of the Triad," I snarled.

The Prime Minister smiled back. "I have more."

Another door opened. Five more men entered. His wife screamed as the women scrambled away from the table. Two of the sisters pulled their mother toward the corner while the youngest began sobbing.

Daemin drew his sword. The sound of steel leaving its sheath filled the room. Zian drew his. I drew mine last. The Prime Minister looked at us as though ten men should have frightened us.

"Before you make an exceptionally stupid decision," I said. "You should know why we're here."

His smile faded.

"King Zeyan has decreed that you be brought before him for investigation. If you cooperate, we'll deliver you to him alive. If you refuse, I've been given permission to execute whatever justice I see fit."

The Prime Minister laughed. Actually laughed.

"You?" he sneered.

"Yes."

His gaze moved from me to Daemin, then Zian.

"You're all just Triad scum. You're not noble." His contempt filled every word. "I only married my daughter to you to get access to Triad resources. It doesn't make you my equal."

Mei Lin made a broken sound behind him. I smiled.

"Then I have excellent news," I told him.

His eyes narrowed.

"I've also received a decree annulling the marriage between Mei Lin and us."

Mei Lin's wail filled the air. I didn't look at her.

“We only have one wife,” I told him. “And that’s Zuri Bane.”

His face twisted. “Kill them! And send in more guards!”

The first guard lunged. I opened his throat before his second step landed. Blood sprayed across the table. The room erupted into chaos. Two men came for me at once. I caught the first blade against mine, twisted, and drove my sword beneath its owner's ribs.

He screamed as I ripped it free. The next swung for my neck. I ducked. His sword passed over my head. I drove mine through his stomach. Behind me, a man screamed. Daemin's blade sliced across his chest.

Another guard rushed Daemin from the side. Daemin caught the man's wrist, snapped it hard enough that bone broke through skin, then buried his sword through the man's throat. Zian kicked one attacker backward into the table.

Dishes shattered. The man barely regained his footing before Zian's blade cut across his stomach. His insides spilled onto the floor. Another came behind him. He turned. The man's sword descended.

Zian stepped inside the strike, caught the attacker's arm, and drove his own sword beneath the man's jaw. The blade came out through the top of his skull. He ripped it free. Another guard rushed forward with a roar. I blocked his first strike. Then his second. He raised his sword again. I cut through his forearm. His severed hand hit the table, still clutching the weapon.

He screamed. I shoved my sword through his chest and kicked him off the blade. Someone grabbed me from behind. I slammed my head backward into his face. Cartilage crunched. His grip loosened.

I turned and sliced across his throat. Hot blood sprayed my face. The man collapsed at my feet, choking on it. A chair shattered against the wall. Daemin drove one guard face-first onto the broken remains and stabbed him through the back.

Zian finished another with one clean cut across the throat. The last man looked around. Bodies covered the dining room. Blood soaked the rug. One of his companions was still twitching beneath the table.

He dropped his sword. “Wait...”

Daemin killed him before another word left his mouth. Silence fell. Heavy breathing. Soft sobbing from the corner. Blood dripped from my sword onto the floor. I wiped my blade across the robes of the nearest

corpse and looked toward the head of the table. The Prime Minister wasn't there. Neither was Mei Lin.

"Where the fuck are they?" I roared.

Daemin turned. Zian scanned the room. The Prime Minister's wife stared at us from the corner, terrified. I could not let the PM get away. I couldn't risk him going after Zuri. I turned and headed for the exit. That bastard was fleeing without his family. Coward.

"Kai!" Daemin shouted.

I was already through the door. I tore down the corridor, nearly knocking a servant aside as I reached the entrance. The front doors stood open. A carriage was pulling away. The Prime Minister pulled the carriage's curtain closed.

"There he is!" I yelled when Daemin and Zian came outside behind me.

I ran after the carriage. The driver saw me. His whip cracked. The horses surged forward. I caught the back of the carriage before it gained enough speed to leave me behind. My boots dragged against the road for a second before I hauled myself onto the narrow platform. I ripped the door open. The Prime Minister spun toward me. I climbed inside as the carriage raced away.

"Find Mei Lin!" I shouted to Daemin and Zian. "Don't let her get away!"

The Prime Minister swung at me. The weak-ass blow landed against my cheek before I drove my boot into his chest. He flew backward onto the opposite seat. I planted my foot against his sternum and pinned him there. He grabbed my ankle. I pressed harder. His face reddened.

"You're just mafia scum," he spat. "You'll never be a true prince."

I smiled. "I've never wanted to be a prince."

His fingers tightened around my boot. The carriage bounced hard over the road.

"But I must thank you," I told him. "If it wasn't for you, the King never would've forced us to marry a daughter of the Bane family. And we never would've found our mate."

His eyes widened. Then his mouth twisted into a sneer.

"Your mate isn't even a whole woman."

My smile vanished.

"You may not believe it, but she was experimented on," he continued.

"I know."

That stopped him. I leaned closer.

“Her golem died. My mate is whole now.”

His face lost some of its color. I drew my sword.

“But you’re about to be in pieces,” I told him.

I took my foot off his chest and leapt over the space between us. My fist smashed into his face. His head snapped backward. I hit him again. Blood burst from his nose. Again. His lip split against his teeth.

He tried to cover his face. I grabbed one wrist, ripped his arm away, and drove my fist into his mouth. Blood splattered the window. He swung blindly. I took the hit against my shoulder and punched him again.

His head struck the carriage wall. Once. Twice. Again and again. His face disappeared beneath blood. I thought of Zuri sitting in my office looking lost and helpless when she’d learned about what her father had done to her.

I thought of the man beneath me casually offering to make her sterile. I hit him again. His body sagged. The carriage began to slow. I grabbed his hair. His swollen eyes opened. I put my blade against his throat.

He tried to speak. I didn’t care what he had left to say. I cut and continued cutting, taking him out the Triad way. Blood poured over my hand. His body convulsed beneath me before going still.

The carriage rolled to a stop. By the time footsteps approached outside, the Prime Minister’s head rested on the carriage floor. His arms lay beside it. The door opened. Daemin stood there. Blood covered part of his clothing from the fight, but that wasn’t what caught my attention. He looked panicked.

“Kai.”

I straightened. “What?”

“The onlookers said Mei Lin shifted. They saw her flying toward the princes’ manor.” Daemin’s breathing was hard. “I think she’s going after Zuri.”

Cold dread slivered down my spine. Zuri. We’d left her there because we’d believed she’d be safe. My dragon roared inside me. I shoved past Daemin and jumped from the carriage.

“We have to get to our mate,” I roared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ZURI

“I think the fire pit should go there.”

Allie followed the direction of my finger toward the far side of the courtyard.

“Princess, the fire pit you want will be too big to fit in that area,” she told me.

I put my hands on my hips. “Okay, fine. What about over there? Fire pit in the corner, barbecue grill beside it, table closer to the doors. That way, when everybody comes over, we can sit outside and eat.”

Tapping her chin, Allie considered the new location. We'd been walking around my courtyard for the better part of fifteen minutes, trying to decide how I wanted to arrange everything.

I'd already decided that if this was going to be my home, I was going to make it feel like one. Five chests of treasure also meant I could buy whatever the hell I wanted without asking anybody for permission.

And I wanted a barbecue grill. I didn't know if Ashborne had anything exactly like the one I'd had on Earth, but somebody in this magical-ass world could figure it out.

“That could work,” Allie said. “You'd have enough room for seating.”

“Exactly. And I want a big grill. Not some little thing that can only cook four pieces of meat at once.”

Allie laughed. “How many people are you planning to feed?”

“I don't know yet. We'll see.”

I turned toward the courtyard again, already imagining it. A fire pit, comfortable chairs, a table big enough for everybody. Maybe some lights. CiCi would've loved being here to help me decorate. Kena too. Bri would've kept us on a budget.

Thinking of them made my smile fade a little. If their golems had died also, they could be here too, somewhere in this world. I needed to look for them. I sniffled and was just about to wipe my eyes when the air in front of us rippled.

I stopped. Allie stopped beside me. For half a second, neither of us moved. Then a dragon appeared in the middle of my courtyard. I screamed. The dragon was large enough that its sudden arrival seemed to swallow the open space between us. Its wings spread wide, knocking over one of the chairs near the doors.

“Run!” Allie screamed.

I didn't need to be told twice. We turned at the same time. I made it three steps. Claws sank into my sides. Pain ripped through me as my feet left the ground.

“Zuri!” Allie's scream followed me upward.

I kicked wildly, grabbing at the enormous claws wrapped around me as the dragon's wings beat hard enough to send dirt and leaves flying across the courtyard. Guards shouted somewhere below us, but we were already rising above the roof.

“Allie!”

She ran beneath us as far as she could, screaming my name. More guards poured into the courtyard, several looking upward as the dragon carried me higher. Below me, the guards began to shift.

Would they get to me in time to save me? I twisted, trying to see what had grabbed me. Then I saw the scales. My stomach dropped. In the book, Mei Lin had been a dark burgundy dragon with black eyes.

“Mei Lin, you crazy bitch!”

Wind tore the words out of my mouth. I screamed again when she climbed higher. The manor shrank beneath us until the guards were nothing more than tiny figures in the courtyard. I couldn't even hear Allie anymore.

Wind swooshed past my ears and whipped my hair across my face. Mei Lin's claws hurt like hell, but I stopped trying to pry them away when I looked down and realized exactly what would happen if I succeeded. There was nothing beneath my feet but air.

“Put me down!” Then I immediately reconsidered. “Not here! Don't put me down here!”

Mei Lin kept flying. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second and tried not to throw up. My dragon was there. I could feel her, warm and restless beneath my skin, but feeling her and turning into her were apparently two completely different fucking things.

“Can you do something?”

Warmth rolled through me.

Release all fear and let me take over.

I stared at the claws around my waist.

"That is not helpful right now."

No answer came. The city had fallen behind us. Mountains and trees stretched beneath us, and something tall rose in the distance. At first, I couldn't make out what it was. Then Mei Lin flew closer. Stone. A narrow structure rising above the surrounding land. My heart stopped.

"No."

She kept flying toward it.

"No, no, no."

The tower. I had never seen it before. But I knew. Some part of me recognized it before we were even close enough for me to see the dark openings in its stone walls. The tower where Zuri Bane died. The place CiCi had written about. The ending I'd spent every day since waking in this world trying to avoid.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Mei Lin flew straight toward an opening near the top. Her claws opened. I dropped. My scream barely left my mouth before I crashed through the opening and hit the stone floor. Pain shot through my shoulder and hip as I rolled several feet before slamming into a wall.

For a moment, I could only lie there and breathe. Everything hurt. My sides burned where her claws had punctured my clothes and skin. My shoulder throbbed. One knee felt like I'd scraped half the skin off it.

But I was alive. I pushed myself onto my hands. Outside the opening, Mei Lin's dragon disappeared from view.

"What the fuck?"

Blue light flashed next to me. I spun around. Mei Lin appeared inside the tower. She was back in her skin form, and she looked nothing like the polished woman who had sat across from my alphas at breakfast or floated through the manor pretending she had everyone's best interests at heart.

Her hair was a mess. Tears streaked her face. Her clothing was disheveled, and one side of her face was red and beginning to swell. But my attention went straight to her hand. She was holding a crystal shard. A faint blue light still pulsed inside it.

"You used a shard."

Mei Lin laughed through her tears. "You finally figured something out."

I pushed myself upright, keeping one hand against the wall until I was certain my legs would hold me. My gaze returned to the shard. That was my way out if I could get it away from her. I looked around the tower.

There was almost nothing inside. Bare stone. Dust. Open windows cut into walls that were far too high above the ground. Exactly the kind of place somebody could disappear inside and never be heard from again. I looked back at Mei Lin.

“You were supposed to be jealous of me,” she hissed. “You were supposed to be mean and cruel to me so they could protect me from you. You were supposed to make them hate you. Then I would’ve convinced them to send you here, to this tower, to live out your days, unable to get out because you couldn’t shift and fly away.”

“You wanted them to imprison me here?”

“Yes!” Mei Lin’s scream bounced off the stone walls. Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. “You weren’t supposed to take them from me!”

“I didn’t take anybody from you.”

“You took Kai!” Her voice cracked on his name.

I looked at her for a moment. Then I understood.

“This was never really about all three of them, was it? You really only wanted Kai.”

Her mouth twisted. “I don’t need Zian and Daemin. They never liked me anyway,” she said bitterly. “Not really. Daemin barely tolerated me. Zian hardly spoke to me unless he had to. I tried to win their love. Do you know how hard I tried?”

“You can’t force love.”

“I can! I would have, if it wasn’t for you”

I glanced at the shard again. Mei Lin noticed where I was looking and tightened her fingers around it.

“I was supposed to be their one and only,” she said. “Not you. Me.”

“According to who? Your father?”

“My father had a plan. The king was never supposed to remain on the throne. You’ve messed up my father’s plans to have him killed. You’ve ruined Kai’s chances of being king.”

“What?”

“My dad wanted Kai to become king. Once Zeyan was gone, Kai would’ve taken the throne, and I would’ve been his queen. My son would’ve

been the crown prince. One day, my family would've become the royal family."

"And Daemin and Zian?"

"I told you, I don't need them!" She was crying harder now. "They could leave. They could have whatever lives they wanted. Without them around, Kai would've finally seen me. Really seen me."

I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

"You think killing his cousin and getting rid of his pack brothers would've made Kai fall in love with you?"

"He would have! You don't know him!"

"I know him well enough to know murdering his family isn't the way to win his heart."

Her face twisted. "He would've loved me eventually. Whether he was my fated one or not," she continued. "I would've made him love me."

"You can't make somebody love you."

She rushed a step closer. "You walked into their lives, and suddenly they can barely breathe without knowing where you are. You're the one they've been waiting on. You're their precious omega, so everything is simply handed to you. Omegas get everything!"

"I'm pretty sure getting thrown into a tower wasn't part of my omega benefits."

Her scream cut me off. "Omegas aren't the only ones who deserve love!"

"You're right."

Mei Lin blinked.

I kept my eyes on her. "Betas deserve love. Omegas deserve love. Everybody deserves the chance to be loved."

Her breathing slowed.

"But nobody owes it to you," I added.

Her face hardened.

"You don't get to drug yourself into another designation. You don't get to lie to people, spy on them, help your father use them, and try to destroy another woman's life because you decided somebody else's love belongs to you."

"You stole my life."

"No. Your father sold you a fantasy, and you helped him build it."

Her fingers clenched around the shard. I needed that damn thing. I reached for my dragon again.

"Okay. Now would be a great time to take over."

Warmth spread through my chest.

Release all fear and let me take over.

I nearly screamed. *"How?"*

Release all fear and let me take over.

I looked at Mei Lin. Then at the shard. Then at the open window. I was trapped hundreds of feet above the ground with a crying psychopath who could teleport around the room whenever she wanted. And my dragon wanted me to stop being afraid. *Wonderful*. I couldn't depend on my dragon, so I had to depend on my fists. I bent my knees slightly.

Mei Lin frowned. "What are you doing?"

I rushed her. Her eyes widened. Blue light flashed. She disappeared. I stumbled through the space where she'd been. Something moved behind me. A foot slammed into my back. I flew forward and crashed into the wall. Pain exploded through my shoulder. Mei Lin laughed.

"You can't touch me," she sneered.

I pushed away from the wall. "Keep telling yourself that." I rushed her again.

She lifted the shard. Blue light flashed, and she was gone. This time, I didn't keep running. I spun around. Mei Lin appeared behind me. My fist was already moving. It slammed straight into her nose. Her head snapped backward.

Blood immediately poured over her mouth. She stumbled. I didn't give her time to recover. I kicked her in the chest. Mei Lin hit the floor hard. The shard flew from her hand. I lunged. It struck the stone once and bounced away from my fingers.

"No!" I scrambled after it.

The shard bounced again. Then slid straight through the open window. I reached the ledge a second too late. The crystal glittered as it fell. Farther. Farther. Until I couldn't see it anymore. My way out was gone.

"Go fetch it, bitch," Mei Lin sneered.

I turned. Her foot hit me square in the chest. For one impossible second, my world seemed to stand still. One moment, there was stone beneath my feet. Then there wasn't. I fell. A scream ripped from my throat.

My arms flailed uselessly as the sky and ground switched places over and over. I was tumbling through the air, rushing to meet the earth. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Couldn't grab anything. I was going to die. After everything I'd survived, I was actually going to fucking die because of Mei Lin.

I thought of CiCi. Kena. Bri. They might be here. Somewhere in this world, my girls might be walking around right now with no idea I was here too. I hadn't found them. I hadn't even gotten the chance to try.

I stared up at the tower. Mei Lin stood at the edge. Watching. Smiling. Victorious. I thought of Daemin, who'd saved me from the smuggler and then carried me to safety even though he was poisoned and in pain.

I thought of Zian carrying me across a dry courtyard because it had rained a week ago, then giving me five chests of treasure because he'd understood that I needed something of my own.

I thought of Kai. Stubborn, controlling, infuriating Kai, whom I'd only just begun to see beyond the man who had treated me like an inconvenience on our wedding night. I wanted to know them. All of them.

I wanted to know what being their mate actually meant when nobody else was deciding it for us. I wanted time. I wanted to find my friends. I wanted my ridiculous barbecue grill. I wanted to sneak out and rob people with Allie.

I wanted to spend Zian's treasure. I wanted to see whether Kai could actually learn to stop making decisions for everybody. I wanted to taste Daemin and see if I could fit his knot in my mouth.

I wanted to live this life that should've been mine all along with alphas that had always been mine. And now I was going to lose everything because of Mei Lin and her father. Fuck that. Fuck the tower. Fuck the ending of CiCi's book. And fuck Mei Lin. She was not going to win.

"Dragon!"

Heat exploded through me.

I'm here.

The ground rushed closer. My heart hammered so hard that my chest hurt, but I stopped fighting the heat.

"I'm not afraid. I want to live. I want to fight. I want to win. I want my alphas. Take over."

My dragon roared. Heat consumed me. My bones stretched. My body expanded. Power surged through muscles that hadn't existed a heartbeat

earlier. The wind changed. My scream became a roar.

Wings burst outward. For one terrifying second, I was still falling. Then instinct took over. My wings caught the air. My body jerked upward. I wasn't falling anymore.

I was flying.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ZURI

A roar sounded somewhere to my left. Then another. Then a third. I turned my head. Three dragons tore through the sky toward me. My alphas. I knew them. I didn't need anyone to tell me which dragon was which.

Something inside me recognized all three instantly. They had come for me. But they wouldn't reach me in time. They didn't have to. I was already flying. And I wasn't flying toward them.

I turned toward the tower. Mei Lin was still standing at the window. Even from this distance, I saw the moment she realized what had happened. She stumbled backward. My dragon roared.

Prey. Kill.

I beat my wings harder and flew straight toward the tower. Mei Lin disappeared from the opening before I reached it. She thought moving away from the window would save her. I slammed my body into the tower.

Stone cracked. Pain shot through my shoulder, but I barely felt it beneath the rage. I flew back. Turned. And hit it again. A section of stone broke loose and crashed toward the ground.

Behind me, the other dragons roared. I rammed the tower again. The entire structure shuddered. Cracks raced through the stone. Dust poured from the openings. I could hear Mei Lin screaming inside.

I flew back farther this time. Then I drove myself into the tower with everything I had. Stone exploded inward. The upper section buckled. Part of the wall collapsed, and Mei Lin tumbled out with it.

She screamed as she fell. For a second, satisfaction rushed through me. Then I saw her body begin to change. No. I folded my wings and dove. Mei Lin twisted in the air, trying to shift. I reached her first.

My jaws closed around her throat. Her scream stopped. I bit down. Bone crushed between my teeth. Blood sprayed into my mouth as her body went limp before she could finish transforming. I released her. Mei Lin fell away from me.

I watched her body disappear toward the ground. It was over. The thought barely formed before exhaustion hit me. The energy holding my dragon form together flickered. *Wait.* My wings faltered.

Wait, wait, wait.

I tried to flap harder. My body didn't listen. I was falling. I heard my alphas' roars as my dragon form fell to earth. I landed hard. The moment my feet touched the earth, the warmth inside me gave out. My dragon form disappeared.

Everything contracted at once. Scales became skin. Wings vanished. My knees buckled. I didn't even have the strength to cover myself before I started falling. Arms caught me. More than one pair. Warm bodies surrounded me as my vision blurred.

"Kai?"

"I have you."

"Zuri." Daemin's hand cradled the back of my head.

"We've got you," Zian whispered.

All three of my alphas had come for me. I tried to open my eyes enough to see them, but their faces blurred together above me. I could smell pine and clean rain, leather and cloves, black tea and vanilla. *Safe.* I was safe. My eyes closed, and I passed out in the arms of my three alphas.

I woke surrounded by warmth and three familiar scents. For several seconds, I didn't open my eyes. My body felt heavy, sore in places I hadn't known could hurt, but there was something comforting beneath all of it.

Pine and clean rain mixed with leather and cloves, while black tea and vanilla lingered closest to my face. An arm rested across my waist, another hand was wrapped around mine, and something warm supported my legs.

I breathed them in before memory returned in one violent rush. The tower. Mei Lin. Falling. My dragon. I jerked upright, and three men moved with me.

"Easy," Kai said, his hands catching my shoulders. "You're safe, Zuri. You're home."

I looked around wildly. I was in my room, tucked into my own bed, and evening light filtered through the windows. Daemin sat beside my legs while Zian occupied the other side of the bed, still holding my hand.

Kai was closest to my head, and none of them looked as though they'd gone anywhere since bringing me home.

"Mei Lin?" My throat felt dry when I spoke, and Daemin reached for the cup on the bedside table before I could ask for it.

"Dead," he said, helping me drink. "Very dead."

I swallowed the water and stared at him as everything came back. I remembered the tower crumbling beneath my body as I rammed into it. I remembered Mei Lin falling, my jaws closing around her throat, and the awful crunch that had ended everything.

"I killed her."

"Yes." Daemin took the cup when I finished and set it aside. "But she deserved it. She tried to kill you first."

A strange feeling moved through me. I expected guilt, maybe horror, but what came instead was relief so deep my shoulders sagged beneath it. Mei Lin would never poison me, frame me, manipulate my husbands, or put me in that tower again.

She would never make another woman pay because the world hadn't given her the love she believed she deserved. Then I remembered something much more important.

"I shifted." I looked between the three of them, hardly believing the words even though I could still remember the sensation of my wings catching the air. "I actually turned into a dragon."

Zian's fingers tightened around mine. "You were beautiful."

"Beautiful and destructive, like your alphas." Daemin leaned back against the bedpost. "You destroyed half a tower. It was a wonderful sight to see. But we have to pay the county for the damage. Don't worry, we've got the funds."

I laughed, then immediately grabbed my side. "Ow. Don't make me laugh yet."

Kai pulled the blanket higher around me, his attention dropping toward the wounds beneath my nightclothes.

"The punctures from Mei Lin's claws are almost healed. Your dragon has been working on them since you shifted back."

"Gotta love dragon healing," I said, settling carefully against the pillows.

Damn, these pillows were so soft. I loved them.

Daemin's mouth curved, but Kai didn't smile. He was staring at me with an expression that made me uncomfortable for an entirely different reason. I remembered looking through the air while falling and seeing three dragons coming toward me. They had been too far away to catch me, but they had been coming.

"You saw me fall," I said quietly.

Kai looked away first. "Yes."

Zian's thumb moved over my knuckles. "We couldn't reach you."

There was so much contained inside those four words that I stopped smiling. Zian didn't need to explain what that flight had been like for them. I could imagine seeing someone I cared about falling from that height and knowing I couldn't get there in time.

"But you did it," Daemin said, and his hand settled over my ankle beneath the blanket. "Before we could reach you, you shifted. You didn't need us to save you, my love. You saved yourself."

That's right. I saved myself from the tower, from Mei Lin, from a tragic ending. I was my own protector.

"My dragon kept telling me to release my fear and let her take over." I rolled my eyes. "Which was not particularly useful while a homicidal woman was trying to kill me."

Zian's lips twitched. "You figured it out."

"Gravity was very motivating."

That finally got a quiet laugh from Kai, and I looked at him. Something between us still felt unfinished. Maybe it would for a while. Two days of revelations and near-death experiences couldn't erase how badly our relationship had started, and I didn't want them to.

If Kai and I became something real, I wanted it built on what actually happened between us, not some convenient version where being mates magically fixed everything.

His expression sobered again. "There's something else you should know," Kai said. "Zeyan received the evidence concerning Orion. The Bane Clan has been stripped of its lands and holdings, and the clan has been exiled from the capital. You and Daveah were specifically exempted from the decree. Zeyan recognized you as the victim of what Orion did, and Daveah had no involvement. Plus, she married out of the family and has cut all ties with them."

Orion had sacrificed his own child because he believed doing so would advance the Bane Clan. Now the clan he'd valued more than me had been stripped of everything he'd tried to build. *Good*. He would live in exile knowing the daughter he'd sold was living as a princess. A fitting punishment for someone like him. Death would've been too merciful.

"And the Prime Minister, what happened to him?" I asked.

"He's dead," Zian said. "He died Triad style."

"Kai removed his head and both arms," Daemin explained.

I stared at Kai. "Impressive," I whispered.

Kai smiled. Daemin chuckled, and even Zian smiled. I opened my mouth to say something else, but a strange wave of heat moved through my body. At first, I ignored it. The room was warm.

Three large men were crowded around my bed, and I'd apparently spent hours healing after turning into a dragon for the first time. Feeling overheated didn't seem particularly alarming after everything else that had happened.

Then another wave hit. This one started low in my stomach and spread outward so quickly that I sucked in a breath. Daemin stopped smiling. Zian's head lifted. Kai went completely still.

"What?" I asked, looking between them. "Why are all three of you looking at me like that?"

Nobody answered immediately, which made me nervous. Then Daemin inhaled slowly, and something about his expression made warmth crawl higher beneath my skin.

"Zuri," he said, his voice lower than it had been a moment ago. "Can you smell yourself?"

I frowned until strawberry and chocolate suddenly filled my senses. The scent was stronger than I'd ever smelled it. It wasn't merely lingering around me anymore. It seemed to pour from my skin, warm and sweet, filling every corner of the room.

Zian released my hand. Not because he wanted to move away. Because his fingers had started trembling. I looked at Kai. His eyes had changed too, the pupils narrowing as his dragon pushed close to the surface, scales appearing and disappearing on his skin. What the hell?

Daemin leaned forward, forearms resting on his thighs. "Your first complete shift awakened everything dormant within you."

"What do you mean everything?"

His gaze held mine. "I mean your heat, baby. Your shift has triggered your first heat."

Another wave rolled through me. *Oh. My. Gosh.* I was in heat! My skin felt too sensitive beneath my nightclothes. The scents surrounding me suddenly seemed stronger too. Leather and cloves wrapped around me because Daemin was closest to my legs, followed by Zian's black tea and vanilla and Kai's pine and rain. My dragon stirred inside me with such immediate interest that I almost cursed her.

Mine.

Another pulse of heat made me press my thighs together beneath the blanket. All three men noticed, which was deeply unfair considering I was already struggling to think straight. Kai stood. I looked at him.

"I'll leave and stand guard at the door," Kai said. "I'll also get food and water ready. You guys are going to need it."

Something about the distance in his voice irritated me.

"Why are you leaving?" I asked.

Kai paused. "You're entering your first heat."

"I gathered that."

His gaze met mine. "And you haven't chosen me. You've chosen Zian and Daemin. But not me. I won't dare touch you until you forgive me and accept me. But I will stay close. I'll stand guard. You all will be safe."

The room became very quiet. I understood then. He wasn't rejecting me. He was refusing to use my heat to make a decision for me. I looked at the man I'd married only days ago, the same man I'd disliked almost immediately.

He had been rude, controlling, and so convinced he knew what was best for everyone that I had wanted to throw things at his head more than once. But he'd listened yesterday. He'd believed the evidence when it condemned someone he cared about.

He'd sought the annulment. He had gone after the people who hurt me. And now, when every instinct in the room was probably telling him to come closer, he was walking away because I hadn't told him he could stay.

"Kai," I called out when he started toward the door.

He stopped.

"I still think you were an asshole on our wedding night," I told him.

Daemin made a suspicious choking sound beside me.

Kai's mouth twitched. "I know."

“I haven't forgotten everything else either. You don't get instant forgiveness because we're mates.”

“I know that too.”

“But I didn't tell you to leave.” I pushed the blanket away from my legs and sat straighter despite the warmth moving through me. “If you want to stay, do it because you truly want me. Not because my heat started and not because some bond says I'm yours. Stay, because you want me. Do you... Do you want me?”

Kai rushed over and shocked me by going to his knees in front of my bed.

“I want you, Zuri Bane, more than I've ever wanted anything,” he told me. “If you let me, I'll spend this heat worshiping you the way you deserve. And then I'll spend the rest of my life cherishing you the way you deserve to be cherished. And I'm... I'm sorry for not being a better alpha to you. For not putting you first. That will never happen again. I swear it.”

We still had a lot of bonding to do. But I believed him when he said he'd spend forever cherishing me.

“Then stay,” I whispered. “Stay and take care of me, alpha.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ZURI

Daemin showered with me, bathing me slowly as Kai and Zian prepared the manor for my heat. They had guards protecting us from a distance. And Allie was in charge of all the servants in the manor, making sure they did their jobs well and had food and beverages ready for their princess.

Kai and Zian had made sure I had a proper nest. I'd forgotten all about a nest until the moment I started rearranging pillows on my bed and feeling irritated when I couldn't get them right.

Kai and Zian had gotten me some of their clothing with their scents on it to add to my temporary nest. Along with pillows and blankets. After this heat, I would choose a room that felt right to build my permanent nest in.

After my shower, Daemin dried me off and carried me to bed. I was a bundle of nerves, and every touch set my body on fire. My dragon was pushing for more, wondering where my other alphas were.

Daemin climbed into bed behind me and held me close. Around the room was water and food. Enough to last us for days. But where were my alphas?

"Where are they?" I asked.

"They went back to their rooms to shower," Daemin told me, kissing my neck. "If my omega is impatient, I can take the edge off."

I turned over and stared up at him. "I'm impatient," I admitted.

He turned onto his back and said, "Come sit on my face, beautiful."

My dragon purred, and my pussy fluttered as he helped me into position. The first swipe of his tongue made my entire body shudder. I rode his mouth fast and hard, desperate for an orgasm.

I leaned forward, needing to finally taste him. He hissed against my pussy as I wrapped my lips around his thick cock. I sucked him deep, my body on fire with need. He thrust into my mouth, his knot pressing against my lips.

I'd never experienced anything like this. I was hungry for more. I wanted to be filled. I wanted to be fucked. I wanted to be knotted.

"More," I growled around his cock. "I need more."

With a growl, Daemin turned me around, and I somehow ended up on my back beneath him. I parted my legs, my pussy dripping slick. And he slid into me in one thrust. I cried out in pleasure, wrapping my legs around him, urging him to fuck me harder, faster.

He pounded my body, moaning my name as he fucked me. I was delirious with need. My nails dug into his back. I lifted my hips fucking onto his cock, hungry for his knot. And when he finally gave it to me, I saw stars.

Our bodies were still locked together when Kai and Zian returned to the room. They saw us, inhaled our scents, and immediately started undressing. Daemin turned with me in his arms until he was on bottom and I was on top, our bodies still locked.

I stared hungrily at my other alphas, ready for them. Zian approached first, rubbing his hand over my back.

"So beautiful," he whispered, cupping my ass. Then he pressed kisses from my shoulder, down my side, until he reached where he was cupping me. "My omega, may I fuck you here?" His finger slid along my puckered hole.

"Yes," I cried, hungry for him.

He moved behind me. Then I felt his tongue against my ass. Kai approached and handed him something. I realized it was lube. They were prepared. I held my hand out, reaching for Kai. He tried to give me his hand. I swatted it away.

"Cock," I moaned. "I need your cock in my mouth."

With a growl, he climbed onto the bed and gave me what I wanted. He fucked my mouth as Daemin rocked into me, still locked with me. Kai's tongue teased my ass, making me hungry for his knot.

Slick poured from me. My scent permeated the room. Then I felt the lube against my ass, and I knew what was coming. Just as Zian started easing into my ass slowly, Daemin's knot slipped from me.

But he wasn't done with me. He was still hard and ready. So he thrust deep, fucking me again as I devoured Kai's cock. Kai's fingers threaded through my hair, gripping my tresses as he fucked my mouth.

Behind me, Zian was whispering sweet words and pressing kisses against my shoulder as he sank into my ass, filling me, stretching me, pleasing me. And then he was fully seated. And I wanted more. I wanted his knot.

The heat within me would not be denied. I rocked my body as they fucked me. My pussy, my ass, my mouth... all were full of cock, and it still wasn't enough.

"Harder," I groaned around Kai's cock.

My alphas obeyed, fucking me harder, giving me what I wanted. Because they were my Fated Alphas, and I was their naughty little princess. Zian grabbed my hips from behind as he thrust into me, his knot pressing against my ass.

"So tight," Zian groaned. "Fuck, baby, you're so tight. This ass is squeezing my cock. Will you squeeze my knot just as tightly?"

"Mmmhmmm," I hummed around Kai's cock, precum spilling from the corners of my lips as I continued sucking him.

"That's it, pretty omega," Kai groaned. "Your mouth feels so good on my cock, Zuri."

Both of Kai's hands were buried in my hair now, holding my head steady as he fucked my mouth, his knot caressing my lips with each deep thrust.

"Fuck, Zuri," Kai growled, tilting his head back as his body shuddered.

Beneath me, Daemin drilled my pussy, driving into me with a force that rocked the bed. His lips were sealed around my breast, tongue flicking over my nipple, driving me wild with need.

My body was on fire. Yet still I wanted more. I wanted their knots. I wanted their cum inside me. And soon, they granted my wish. My dragon purred loudly as Daemin and Zian thrust deeply at the same time, both knots sliding into me, locking my body with theirs.

I tightened my lips around Kai's cock as my alphas rocked into me. Then, with a roar, all three of them came, filling me up. So much cum. I had

cum dripping from the corners of my lips as Kai continued thrusting against my tongue.

Zian and Daemin were still rocking into me, moving as much as their knots would allow as their cum filled me. After our first round, I passed out, exhausted, with Daemin and Zian still locked within me while Kai lay next to me, telling me how beautiful I was.

But one round wasn't enough. I awoke, reaching for a cock. It was Zian who fucked me as the others slept. He climbed on top of me, spreading my legs, and aligning his cock with my entrance.

The feel of him sliding into me made me gasp. His cock was curved, and that hook kept hitting just right, and I was crying out in no time. He held me close as he fucked me hard while whispering filthy things in my ear.

"This pussy is mine, Zuri Bane," he growled, voice low. "I need it on my cock, on my knot, on my tongue, every day."

I moaned some incoherent words that pretty much meant, "Okay, alpha."

"So much slick," he groaned. "You're soaking my cock, baby. It feels so damn good."

His words made me shiver, causing more of my slick to rain all over his cock. He fucked me until I was screaming his name. Then he gave me that knot, and my body thanked him by coming all over his cock.

It was a long time before we recovered. When we did, he slid from me, kissing my forehead. And then he offered me food and water. I fell back to sleep against his chest, stomach full of food, pussy full of cum.

I awoke later that night and reached for Kai. He awoke and smiled at me, pulling me over to him. I straddled him, wanting to be on top. He smiled up at me, hands going to my hips.

"Do whatever you want to me, my beautiful omega," he whispered. "I'm all yours."

I took what was mine. I rode him long and hard. I even grabbed his wrists and pinned them above his head, my dragon pushing me to tame him.

"Who do you belong to, Zhen Kai?" I growled, wanting to hear him say it.

"You, my omega," he told me, rocking into me as I fucked him.

"Say my name," I demanded, grinding against him.

He hissed, then rasped, "Zuri. I belong to Zuri Bane."

I leaned forward and claimed his lips in a heated kiss as I bounced on his cock.

“That’s it,” he moaned. “Take this cock, baby. It’s all yours. Take whatever you need.”

“I need your knot, Kai,” I moaned, releasing his wrists.

“It’s yours,” he answered, gripping my hips and thrusting deep, locking our bodies together.

I cried out, shattering into a thousand pieces as my orgasm gripped me. He followed, roaring my name as his seed filled me, pumping into me as he held me close. And that was how the next couple of days passed.

It was a marathon of fucking, eating, and sleeping. It was sometime during our seventh round that my alphas all marked me, leaving their bite marks on my neck, claiming me as theirs forever.

And I, in turn, gave them my bite mark, claiming them as my alphas for eternity. My first heat only lasted for two days. And for those two days, I was full of cocks and knots. My dragon was pleased.

And my alphas were worn out. My next heat could last far longer, and they were already preparing ahead of time so they could have everything they needed before we locked ourselves away for that long.

The day my heat released me, I showered with my alphas. All three kept trying to get as close to me as possible. It was hilarious. I decided that we needed bigger showers and bigger beds. All in all, my life in this world was looking sweet.

The only thing missing was my friends. I believed they were here in this world. And I planned to find them with the help of my alphas. If the files were correct, their original bodies had survived just as mine had.

CiCi was a witch, the daughter of a seer. Kena was a vampire. Bri was a cheetah shifter. Their golem bodies had died in the crash, which meant whatever part of them had lived on Earth should have returned to this realm.

Wait, in CiCi’s book, she’d been captured by the dragon King. He’d thought she was a spy and imprisoned her. Damn, how had I forgotten that? Maybe it hadn’t happened yet. I needed to tell my alphas this so they could help me find her before she suffered in his dungeon.

Kena, Bri, and CiCi, don’t worry, your bestie, your sister, is coming to find you.

And I’ll make sure you all get your happily ever afters, just as I have.

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What To Read Next

Thank you for reading Zuri's story. I hope you enjoyed her journey to love with her alphas. You'll see her again in the Knot Crowned series.

Ciori's story is up next in this world:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0H6M3DSHB>

READ MORE KNOTTED BY THE MOBSTERS:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GYQMV11H>

Meet the Fallen Angels and their shadows:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CHQ1NB24>

Set in a different world is my omegaverse, Knotted by Her Wolf Shifters:

<https://books2read.com/kbhws>

Looking for mafia romances, check out these series from my alter ego, M'Renee Allen:

Cattaneo Crime Family:

<https://books2read.com/DangerousContractPartOne>

Brutal Bloodline: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0F9ZGQQCG>

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