

DRAGONBLOOD

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LUCAS YOUNG

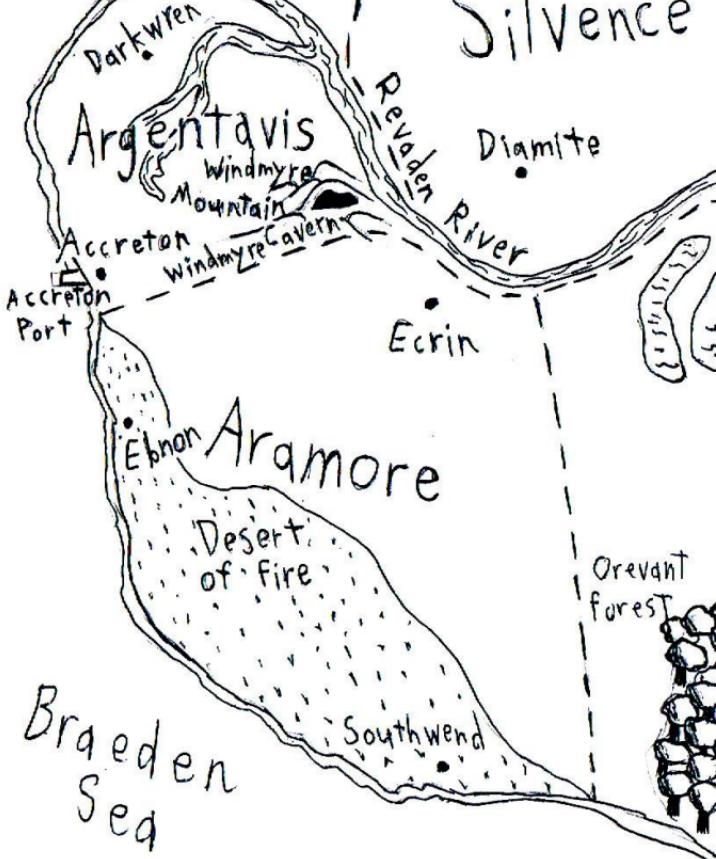
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*To all my friends
Who stood by me and wouldn't let me give up*

Tirion's Map of Aereden

Penshaw
Ocean





CHAPTER 1

He ran.

Ran so fast, he nearly tripped over his own two feet one too many times. He continued to run down the dark, shadowy corridor until his eyes had adjusted to the dark.

He knew exactly what was chasing him. He knew it was big, snarling, and wanted to kill him. He didn't dare look back though, for he feared if he did, he would see exactly what he *didn't* want to see.

He felt a pulse of heat brush over his back, and risked a glance over his shoulder. He cursed under his breath.

He had been right. What ran after him was a scarlet dragon, its mouth gaping, an orange, molten glow forming in the back of its throat. He turned his head back

around just in time to see the mouth of a gaping chasm widen just a few yards away.

Without thought, he leapt into the great chasm, barely dodging the plume of fire shot from the dragon's mouth behind him. He spun himself around mid-air once more to see the dragon looking down at him angrily as he plummeted farther and farther into the never-ending abyss.



Valian Ashryver awoke to his heart thumping rapidly in his chest. His thin thatch mattress and woven cloth blanket were drenched in sweat around him. He had had the dream again.

He had this dream on the same night, every year, ever since the King of Aereden had declared magic an evil force that was plaguing the world.

Twelve years ago, the King had told his Royal Guard to hunt down and kill any magic wielders or magical creatures they came across. Since then, the King's Royal Guard had killed over five thousand innocent beings purely because they were born with this "curse."

Valian's own parents had been magic wielders, both able to create and control flame. When he was only five years of age, he awoke with blood that was not his own covering his body, and his parents' bodies lying beside him.

He had been scared, weak, and heartbroken, but he tried to live life on his own soon after that. Tried to get people to give him scraps of food or a few coppers every now and then, but it was difficult for a five year-old child of two dead magic wielders to live alone in a world ruled by a magic-loathing tyrant.

About a month after Valian's parents' deaths, a man named Aldrev Syndrel had found him roaming the streets and taken him in. Aldrev was a retired mentor of combat protégées for past wars under a previous king, so he had trained Valian to be a brilliant fighter during Valian's time under Aldrev's wing. For ten years, Valian lived under Aldrev's roof, and trained under his keen, watchful eye. He had learned the skills necessary to protect himself in the world, and to bring justice for his parents' murders. Someday.

But now, Valian reached for the iron ring embedded with sapphire on a loose silk string around his neck. It was the only thing he had left of his parents. It

had been a gift from his father, who had given it to him on his fifth birthday as a symbol of protection, however it had been much too big for him at age five, so it had hung as a necklace ever since. Valian had been told that the ring was enchanted to protect him. However, since receiving it, he wished his father had kept it.

The gift was given just two months before his parents' deaths.

Valian glanced out the window to see a storm whipping the low hanging willow branches back and forth wildly in the night air. Valian got out of bed and threw on a red tunic and dark gray trousers. He walked out of his bedroom and to the door of Aldrev's sleeping chamber, which doubled as his workshop, in the hallway. Torchlight flickered from under the door. He heard Aldrev curse under his breath from the other side of it.

Knowing Valian was not allowed in, he walked past Aldrev's room and into his personal study across the hall, which was really just an unused closet which had been renovated with a window, desk, chair, and small bookshelf crammed into it. He sat down at the desk and reached for one of the many books perched across the wooden table precariously. The cover read, *An*

Adventurer's Guide to Dragons, a red silhouette of a dragon with its wings spread wide on a silver background behind the black lettered title. Knowing Valian would not be able to go back to sleep, he opened the book, and began reading.

He had barely finished the first few pages when he heard the door to Aldrev's workshop swing open. The old man dashed through the halls and into the kitchen, where he lay out a used torch, a piece of chalk, and a glass jar filled with an orange liquid onto the dining table. Valian rushed to the doorway, and peered around into the kitchen. He saw Aldrev pick up the chalk and begin to trace symbols in a circular pattern around the dead torch.

He took the container of orange liquid and poured it over the charcoal end of the torch. A strange chalk mark that looked like a diamond with inward facing arrows at all corners glowed on the torch's shaft. The marks traced on the table glowed a dim, yellow light, and the doused torch began floating a few inches above the table. It righted itself vertically, and then spewed sparks from its head. The torch now glowed with a strong flame that could only be achieved through magic. Aldrev grabbed the torch from the air and stared

at it for a moment. He then turned his head to look at Valian, still standing in the doorway to the makeshift study.

“Valian, my boy, I’ve done it, I’ve really done it!” Aldrev grinned wildly in excitement. “Everyone in Arakon doubted me, but oh, how they were wrong! I’ve really, actually done it!”

“Um, done what, exactly?” Valian asked, confused.

“Why, I’ve made an eternal torch! This torch will never go out.”

“Oh, that’s great, that’s, incredible even, but...” Valian trailed off, wondering if he should even be asking such a stupid question of his mentor. He looked at the floor and sighed. “Dragons, *aren’t* real, right?”

Aldrev gave him a sympathetic look. “Oh, Valian. You had the dream again, didn’t you?” Aldrev hung the torch on the wall in an open sconce, and walked over to the study closet as Valian nodded. “Of course they aren’t. They’ve been extinct for hundreds of years. All that remains are their legends told around campfires to scare young ones.” He paused for a while, contemplating, then sighed audibly. “Come, I think it’s time I talk to you about something,” Aldrev walked

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through the small kitchen and into the even smaller living space, where he then sat down in a wooden armchair. He gestured for Valian to sit in the chair next to him, and so he did.

“Your parents and I were very good friends, as you know. But when you were about a year old, your parents discovered something...” Aldrev faltered. “It’s finally time I tell you this story... One day, your parents witnessed something... very odd. Your eyes, they- they shifted. Instead of being your traditional, bright sapphire eyes, they turned, reptilian... Almost like a dragon’s. They were a deep shade of green with thin slits for pupils.” Aldrev said warily.

“W-what’re you saying?” Valian asked, amazed, yet very confused.

“I’m getting to that part, my boy. Anyway, as confused as you are now, your parents were twice the amount, and so they brought you to me, hoping I would know what was happening. They had good intentions, for I knew exactly what was going on. Dragons themselves are extinct, and have been for many years, but it appears, the Dragonblood Heir lives on through you.” Aldrev smiled at Valian.

“Wait, I-I’m a Dragonblood?” Valian rasped.

Aldrev nodded. “I-I’ve only heard rumors, I never knew they were true! How is this possible? So- so does this mean I can, *turn* into a dragon?” Valian asked in amazement. “Wait, how am I a Dragonblood if neither of my parents were?”

“Slow down, Valian. But, to answer your first question; with proper training, yes, you can turn into a dragon. But, you have only ever shifted once, when you were only a baby, and that was only a very small partial shift, at that. You must learn to control it, or perhaps your emotions may get the better of you someday, and you could shift at any time, out in the open, and the King could have you killed for it.” He looked up at the ceiling. “And, the other question; if the line dies out, it’s rumored that the gods themselves may choose a newborn to start the line again. You were not just given these powers for no reason. They chose you.”

He was amazed at the intake of all the new information. However, Valian’s wonder soon turned to anger. “Hold on, why have you never told me this!? I have grown up my whole life with this kind of magic, and you only decide to tell me now!? Why?”

Aldrev looked down at the floor, a little ashamed. “Yes, for this I am truly sorry. I know I would

feel the exact same way if I were in your position. But you have to understand, I did all of this to protect you. That's what I made a blood oath with your parents to do, after all."

The blood oath part, Valian knew, at least. So he knew in the end he could not be mad. He forced himself over the seething, for he was often quick at forgiveness, and looked at his father figure again with solemn eyes.

"Well then, how am I supposed to train? It's not like there are any other "Heirs to the Dragonblood line" I can go to for guidance, are there?"

"No, no there aren't, but perhaps," Aldrev gazed off in thought. "Perhaps, I could do my best to train you. Come, come. I know the perfect place."

Aldrev turned swiftly on his heel and headed for the yard, where a shed stood in the left corner by the house. The storm had ended. A sign hung on the door reading, *No Entry*. Aldrev swung the creaky door open and stepped in, Valian close behind.

What waited within was a spiral staircase leading deep down to the gods knew where. Aldrev lit a torch on the wall and headed downward, with Valian close behind. They wandered down the dark passageway for what seemed like a millennia until they reached

another wooden door.

Aldrev opened the door, and what lay behind it was an enormous, stone room.

“What in Aereden is this place?” Valian asked quietly in awe. He glanced to the far wall, where a small wooden shelf sat. Atop the shelf was a beautifully crafted steel long sword, with intricate gold and silver designs embedded in its hilt, an assortment of armor and other less detailed weapons below.

“This is, or, *was*, my training room. Before you, I had many protégées that practiced fighting in this very room for war. None of them were as good as you, however, which I have not told you for fear of you developing an ego. I realize now however, that, maybe it’s because you are the only one who *didn’t* train in this stuffy, stone room, but anyway, this is no time to praise you, this room should be big enough for you to attempt a shift at any time, hidden from most people. So, go ahead, try it.” Aldrev walked to the other end of the room and grasped the sword from the top of the shelf and attached the locket of the scabbard to his belt.

“Once you master the task of simply shifting back and forth, we should try to master your fighting as a dragon. I’m sure you’ll be an expert fighter in both

forms, but nonetheless, it doesn't hurt to practice.”

Valian nodded and walked to the center of the room. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He pictured in his mind a simple dragon. The basic dragon that would come to most minds. A large lizard with enormous wings folded over its scaly back, four powerful legs, all ending in razor sharp claws, its neck, back, and tail covered in horns and spikes. And then... Nothing happened. Not a thing changed. There was no sound, no movement around him. He opened his eyes and looked to Aldrev, who simply shrugged. Valian tried again, even harder than before, but still, nothing.

Then again.

And again.

And again. An hour had passed and still no result.

“How about this; instead of simply picturing a dragon in your mind, try to imagine yourself turning into that dragon. Imagine your human body being transformed into one of the great beasts themselves.” He said, trying to sound inspiring.

Valian nodded and closed his eyes again. He imagined himself becoming covered in scales. He envisioned wings sprouting from his back. He pictured a

long, serpentine tail grow out from behind him. He thought of his teeth becoming sharp as knives protruding from a long, reptilian snout. He visualized sharp spines running along his back and tail ending in a spade tail tip.

Then-

An odd rush of wind and red light and a pulse of what must've been pure magic exploded around him.

The sensation was impossible to explain, but it was truly something.

His body erupted in a mass of thick scales. He felt spikes run down his spine, felt wings extend from his shoulder joints. He raised his draconic head up to the ceiling where he felt horns scrape against the cold stone ceiling. He opened his eyes, and heard Aldrev gasp.

“By the gods... You’ve done it! You’re a dragon! A magnificent looking one at that! Come, see for yourself, my boy!” Aldrev dashed over to a corner where a fairly large mirror sat. Valian glanced into it and saw what his mentor was talking about. What stood on the other side of the crystal surface was a juvenile scarlet dragon. It had a magnificent mane of red spiked plates around its the back of its head, and two long, black horns sprouting from its head, a small one from above its nose on its muzzle. Shining, obsidian claws extended from its

fingertips, and great, leathery wings a deep shade of crimson red folded neatly over its back, which was shielded with thick plates and other spikes. A brilliant vermillion spade tail tip sat sturdily on the end of his long tail.

Valian took a step back and purred in shock and wonder. He looked to Aldrev to say, *is that really me?* But all that came out was a long and low snarl. It made sense he couldn't talk, he supposed.

Aldrev was barely able to keep in his excitement. "Oh, wait! Valian, I'm fairly sure I have read in a book somewhere that the Dragonblood Heir can turn into more than one dragon. This is the scarlet dragon you see in your dream each year. You turned into this dragon because it was the one you were thinking of during the shift, yes?" Valian nodded his large, scaly head, just barely missing hitting his horns on the low ceiling again. "If you try to think of your own dragon species, you should be able to turn into them." Aldrev said with a smile across his face.

Valian grunted in confirmation and walked over to the center of the room once again and closed his fiery orange reptilian eyes.

He envisioned himself turning into an aquatic

dragon, now. A cobalt colored reptile with a large teal fin running along the spine suited for a marine animal. The dragon had aquamarine underbelly scales, bright, pearl-white claws, and aquatic ear frills a brilliant shade of royal blue jutting up and back a bit from the skull. Just as before, Valian felt his whole body, change. He felt the spikes on his back grow and link together into the large aquatic fin. He felt his wing and tail design change and mold for better atlantic travel. He heard the scrape of his claws on the stone floor as they shifted, and once again, Valian opened his bright, turquoise lizard-like eyes. He slowly and awkwardly made his way over to the mirror with his webbed claws and saw exactly what he envisioned in his mind. The brilliantly colored cobalt dragon stood on the other side of the mirror, perfectly built for aquatic means.

Valian gazed in amazement once more, and shifted back to his human self, easier than before but still with a bit of difficulty, so he could talk. “It appears I can take multiple forms, then, but do you know how many different forms I can take, exactly?” Valian asked, eager to learn more about his new profound abilities.

“I’m not too sure to be completely honest, but as I said, I have never had experience in training a

Dragonblood before.” Aldrev said with great interest.

“But of course, there is only one true way to see; try shifting again.”

And so Valian did.

Together they practiced Valian’s shifting abilities over and over again for hours on end. By dusk, he could turn into six different dragons, all built for their own individual purposes.

Valian finally shifted back to his human self and yawned. “We should head back,” Valian said drowsily from the practice. “It’s getting...” He yawned again. “kind of late, and I’m exhausted from the shifting. It drains you, somehow, deep down, more than just physical exhaustion. It’s almost mental, maybe more spiritual, if that makes sense.”

“Very well, we have made good progress today. I’m very proud not only to call myself the trainer of the best seventeen year old combatant in the land, but also the trainer of the new Heir to the Dragonblood line.” He detached the sword from his belt and placed it neatly on the wooden table again. He had not used it, though, so Valian guessed it was either just for show to scare or impress Valian, or that Aldrev had expected Valian’s progress to go a bit faster and that he would have used it

today. Valian walked back up the staircase, into the house, and into the kitchen. He grabbed what they happened to have lying around in the way of foodstuff, which was just bread from the pantry, and headed to his study to write down the information they had learned in the room far below. He plopped down in his polished wooden chair in front of his desk, opened his journal, and began sketching the fiery scarlet dragon he saw in the mirror.

“Good work today, my boy.” Aldrev said from around the doorframe. Valian gave him a sleep-induced half hearted smile and ate the bread before passing out.

CHAPTER 2

Valian clawed at Aldrev, but the man deflected it seemingly effortlessly with his shield. He darted around behind his trainer as the sleek, black, midnight dragon designed for stealth in the shadows of night. He had been training in the underground stone practice room for about a week now, and his fighting skills were very much improving. Now standing behind Aldrev, Valian lashed his spiked tail at his trainer's glistening steel armor, sending him flying across the room. He crashed into the shelf full of armor and collapsed weakly beneath all of it. Valian spread his shadowy wings and half bounded, half glided across the open space to Aldrev's side, he had not meant to hurt him, they were only training, and although he knew training sometimes

involved pain, he often felt bad for the weak old man when injuring him.

It appeared Valian did not quite know his own strength.

He held out a long, pointed claw to help Aldrev up, but his mentor gave a wicked smile and dashed to the side, where he swiped his blade across Valian's forearm. "Never let your guard down, Valian, no matter the circumstance. You would never help your enemy like that, would you?"

Valian roared at the pain, but then quickly angled himself towards the man. He opened his mouth and shot a thin stream of whitish blue flame, but as easily as he deflected his claws with his shield, Aldrev blocked the fire with his somehow flame retardant cloak, which had been burned charcoal black after years of use.

Valian panted and looked to Aldrev as if to say, *you are far too good at this for someone your age.*

Aldrev smiled a reply.

Valian bared his teeth and stood on his haunches and tail for balance to spread his wings. He beat them wildly, for he was running out of ideas, but sending a rapid rush of air towards Aldrev didn't work. His mentor leaned far into the gust and held his ground.

Valian looked to Aldrev in exhaustion as he purred pleadingly to ask to stop. But Aldrev simply shook his head sternly as he said, “You do not give up in a fight halfway. You win or you lose. There is no in between.” He ran at the dragon once again.

Valian lunged at his mentor yet another time, his mouth wide, teeth bared, saliva dripping from his forked tongue. The elderly man attempted to dive out of the way yet another time, but Valian’s teeth clamped down on his shielded arm, and yanked him up in the air then back down to the floor hard.

Valian roared in victory as he put a clawed hand over Aldrev’s chest, trapping him to the floor.

“You got me at last!” He said theatrically. “Good job, Valian. Now, will you just look at the time,” Aldrev glanced to a small clock by the door. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m afraid I have to cut training short today. The monthly Village Council Meeting is today at two o’clock, and if I don’t show up, everyone in Arakon will be furious.” With that, Aldrev removed his armor and sword, set it on the shelf, and hurried up the staircase. Valian shifted back into his human self, and felt a surge of pain in his right shoulder. He rolled up his tunic sleeve glanced down to find a shallow gash across his

upper arm.

It appeared his dragon body handled pain much better than his human one did.

He winced as he touched the open wound tentatively. “Too bad these gashes have to show up in both forms...” He murmured to himself under his breath.

Valian bandaged up his shoulder and headed to the house.

He plopped down on his bed exaggeratedly leaving his legs to dangle off the edge, and took in a deep breath as he glanced out his window and across the street, where he saw his friend, Oran, standing in his own yard. Realizing he had not talked to Oran since he discovered he was a Dragonblood, he threw on his tattered black cloak, walked outside, and crossed the wide dirt road to Oran’s small shed of a house.

Because Oran was what people called a Vulpitt, he could shapeshift into an animal form, and those animal’s traits transferred over to the human form, so he had incredible hearing. He heard Valian coming the second he opened his door. Oran’s head turned rapidly, making his matted brown hair flick to the side. Oran gave him a grin, showing his elongated vampire-like canines. “Long time no see.” Oran said, cheerily, his

eyes gleaming a bright forest green.

“It’s only been a week, hasn’t it? I’ve lost track, things have been so busy!” Valian remarked.

“Well yes, but you used to come by practically every day. Used to get lonely all the time, wasn’t it?”

“Oh ha ha, *funny*. But anyway, I need to show you something.” Valian bit his lip as he now stood in front of his lifelong friend, wondering if he should even be telling anyone but Aldrev about his newfound magic.

He was a Vulpitt, which meant “Animal Warrior” in the old tongue, he had the ability to morph into an animal. He had magic just as much as Valian did, and he was being hunted as well, or would be if people knew about him. Valian had no reason to be worried with entrusting him with the secret.

So he said, “We can’t talk just out in the open like this though, can we go inside?”

“But of course. Come on in.” Oran led him through his small dwelling dramatically, where he sat on the bed, and gestured for Valian to sit at his desk. “So, what’s the problem, exactly?”

“Well, no, there isn’t a problem, it’s just, you deserve to hear, being my, well, only friend and all. Something you can never tell anyone about. It has to do

with magic...”

“My kind of magic?”

“Yes and no. A different kind of magic in and of its own, but with similarities.” Valian took a deep breath, willing himself to tell this secret to someone besides his mentor whom had told him to tell no one.

“Well, you have heard stories about the dragons and how they went extinct once the King killed off most magic, correct?” Valian asked.

“Of course, I don’t think anyone in Aereden hasn’t heard the stories of the King’s conquest, if they weren’t alive during that time, already.” Oran replied.

“Now, you may have heard about the dragons themselves, but do you know the legends of Dragonbloods?” Valian asked, looking down at his ragged boots, almost in a whisper, as if someone were in the room with them.

“Um, yeah, I... think so. A Dragonblood is, a person who can turn themselves into a dragon, right?” Oran asked, a bit unsure.

“Yeah, that’s a Dragonblood. Well...” Valian trailed off, being all too paranoid. “It turns out, *I’m* a Dragonblood. Aldrev’s known this for quite a while, and he only told me a week ago. That’s why I’ve been so

busy lately. Aldrev's been training me; training me to shift properly and to fight as a dragon.” Valian smiled at Oran, hoping he would understand.

“So, you can turn into a dragon.” It was more of a statement than a question as Oran’s eyes grew brighter with amazement.

Valian gave a soft laugh and crossed his arms in a somewhat-cocky gesture. “About six, actually.”

“By the gods that’s insane! Can you show me? Turn into a dragon. We’re inside, nobody will notice.”
Oran was as eager as Valian had been when he found out a week ago.

“Fine, but before I do, promise me one thing; promise to never tell anyone I have this kind of power. If you tell anyone, word could spread out of control and reach the King and he could have me, and you, y’know, killed.”

Oran nodded somewhat slowly.

“Okay, good.” And with that, Valian stood, closed his eyes, and envisioned himself turning into his smallest dragon form he had so he would fit in Oran’s chamber. His skin shimmered in a flash of yellow light, which ended in yellow scales as he grew to be the somewhat small yet incredibly fast golden dragon. He

opened his piercing light green eyes and turned to give Oran a toothy grin. He sat back on his haunches and curled his long, thin, whip-like tail around his sand colored front talons, letting Oran stare in awe.

The golden dragon was small and thin compared to his other forms, with a very sleek, shimmering body, few spikes along his spine and tail, simple, aerodynamic wings, and streamline gazelle-like horns the same color as his talons.

“Wow...I’ve never seen a dragon before.” Oran whispered, frozen in place at the sight of the creature that now took his friend’s place.

Valian just smiled and purred in a quiet laugh as he got up to stand on all fours again and prowled forward. Oran took a step back as if he was not sure the dragon in front of him would attack him or not.

Valian simply gave Oran a humorous smile and shifted back into his human body. “I should get going. Aldrev will be back from his meeting soon, I think, and he expects me to be home cleaning.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow, then?” Oran asked. “You have to show me every different form. This is really damn interesting.” Oran was quite a bookworm, and he thoroughly enjoyed learning new things like this.

“I don’t see why not.” Valian left the house and walked into the warm summer afternoon air. He took off his cloak and walked back over to Aldrev’s house. He nudged open the door and walked to the washroom. He had not bathed in a week, so he stripped out of his clothes and did so.



It was the next day, and Valian had just finished showing Oran his last dragon form, and was finally returned home for a well deserved meal, when unexpectedly the Royal Guard of Aereden rode into Arakon on all black stallions. Villagers peeked out of their doors and window frames to see what the uncommon commotion was about.

The man at the front of the fleet jumped off his horse, threw his crimson hood attached to his cloak back off his head, and shouted, “I’m looking for the one known as Valian Ashryver.” The relatively young man had clean, relatively pale white skin, short but somewhat-curly blonde hair, and icy-blue eyes. He looked to be about Valian’s age. He wore knee high black leather boots, gray leggings with iron armor over

the front of the thighs, a golden chest plate with the royal seal of the red hippogriff blazed across the chest, and his crimson cloak trailing him in the wind.

Why had they come here looking for him? Had they found out about his secret? How had they found out Valian was a Dragonblood, and in such a short period of time, as well? The only people who knew were Aldrev and Oran. Surely Aldrev would never tell anyone, but it couldn't have been Oran either, could it? Oh fire, he didn't even know if they were here because he was a Dragonblood though.

He breathed deep to keep his thoughts from racing.

"Why must you ask?" Valian piped up through the silence.

The young man laughed, quietly. "Well, we certainly don't wish to harm him, that's assured, whereas he has been summoned by the King himself in honor. He should not be afraid, but rather... complemented." He squinted his eyes at Valian. "Are you Valian Ashryver?"

Valian pressed his lips together. "Mmmm, so what if I am?" Valian crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Why should I go with you? Hypothetically, of course."

“Rumor has spread you are the long lost Heir to the Dragonblood line. *Hypothetically.*” The Captain mocked him.

So rumor *did* spread somehow. Great...

“Don’t worry, the King promised he won’t have you killed, rather, he would like to grant you the offer of being the King’s Champion. He says he would feel very much protected if a Dragonblood were his Champion, instead of some apparent random fighter recommended to him by his peers and disciples.” The Captain held his cool, yet powerful tone as he spoke.

Valian nodded. “Very well, I *am* Valian Ashryver and I will take the King’s “*offer*,” but I ask of two things; one, that I’m allowed to bring along one other person on our journey, and two, that I get paid, and paid well, when I do his bidding because he is too lazy to do so himself. I need a way to support myself in a completely new surrounding, that, you must understand. You either take the deal and I go, or decline and I do not take one step into the capital city of Elderon. Your choice, Captain.” Valian stayed cool and calm, trying his best to mock the Captain’s tone back.

The Captain sighed and gave a low chuckle as he said, “As you wish. Pack your belongings. We leave

in an hour.” He waved off the Guard and they dismounted from their horses and brought them to troughs in front of a small oak inn to drink. Valian walked off his porch in attempt to tell Oran the news, but he felt a hand grasp the back of his tunic collar, choking him mid-step.

“What in Aereden do you think you’re doing!?” Aldrev exclaimed, practically seething with anger.

“I’m taking the King’s offer. This is a great chance to earn us enough money to actually do something in life! Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. I’ll be fine. You know more than anyone that I can look after myself. I learned from the best, right?”

“That exact, cocky tone is why I *don’t* believe you know what you’re doing! You aren’t ready! Your shifts still need to be practiced!” Aldrev remarked, his breath hot in Valian’s face.

“Please, Aldrev. Grant me this one wish. You know that isn’t true, you just don’t trust me enough. Not yet, anyway-” He was interrupted.

“You’re right! I don’t trust you! You can’t possibly go through with this!”

“But I can prove myself to you!” Valian retorted. “Let me show you that I’m not that scared,

alone little boy anymore. I can *take care of myself*. I've had lots of training and practice. You said it yourself; I may be the best protegee you've ever had. Plus, I'll have Oran with me."

"*That's* who you're bringing!?" Aldrev's anger grew hotter. "By the gods, he doesn't even know how to use his magic to the full extent! All he does is turn into a, a *wolf* of all animals! He could've chosen a powerful creature like a griffin or a chimera or a basilisk, but no, he chooses a mere wolf!"

"Aldrev, relax! Now you're just letting your anger get the best of you! Look, he chooses a wolf because it blends in more. A chimera in a nearby forest outside of town would stick out like a torch in the night. He knows what he's doing, and *I* know what *I'm* doing. Just, trust me, okay?"

The man closed his eyes and sighed, quelling his temper slowly. "Very well. But then you need to promise me you stay safe. And now you better hurry up. You don't have long to pack your things. I'll go tell Oran." Aldrev shoved him through the front door and into his chambers.

Valian mouthed thank you to the man as he still wondered how rumor had spread of him being a

Dragonblood, for it simply couldn't have been Oran, he would never double-cross him like that.

But he didn't have time to think about that now. What was done was done. Valian had told the Captain of the Royal Guard he would go into Elderon with him, and so that was what he would do. He pulled out a satchel from under his bed and began to unload the items in his dresser into the small leather bag.



With his clothes finally packed, Valian moved on to his study. He grabbed as many books, papers, quills, and ink jars as he could fit in his bag and sighed. He reached for his journal sitting at the far edge of his desk. He opened the cover and read the quote that had been written there by Aldrev when it had been given to him.

'With a smart mind, bright imagination, and a keen eye, carry this journal as long as you live.'

He stuck the journal into his satchel and walked into the kitchen, where he found Aldrev, reading a book.

"Aldrev," Valian said, quietly from the kitchen door frame, "I'm gonna miss you."

“And I shall miss you too, every minute of every day, my boy. But we don’t have time for small talk, the King’s waiting, and you don’t want to have him wait too long.” Aldrev made a fist with his thumb sticking out, and moved his thumb across his neck quickly before turning his head to the side. Valian smiled at the attempt to lighten the mood, and headed towards the door. “Oh, and one more thing, Valian,” Valian glanced in his trainer’s direction. “Good luck.” He smiled.

Valian smiled as well and said, “I don’t need luck. This is Valian Ashryver you’re talking to.” He smirked in a joking manner and walked out the front door as Aldrev laughed.

“Don’t ever let that confidence die, my boy. I wish to hear all about it when we next see each other.”



“It’s about time! I’ve been ready for ages!” Oran remarked as he saw Valian step through the door.

“Well, I apologize, but I do have people I need to say goodbye to.” Valian grimaced while glaring at the sun and the silhouettes of his party, trying to will himself into being fully ready to depart this small town he had

lived in his whole life.

He mounted a brown horse next to the Captain, who immediately grabbed Valian's tunic collar and pulled him in close. "Valian, you did not tell me your friend was a *Vulpitt*." The Captain whispered in Valian's ear so Oran would not hear. "Fire, what is to stop me from killing him right here and now? He should have been killed years ago in the slaughter!"

Valian felt like an idiot. He should have known Oran's sharp teeth would give him away. "Yes, he is, and his name is Oran Brinn, and as I said, you can take the deal or leave it, but I am not changing anything. If you kill him, do not ever expect me to follow you. Besides, you aren't killing *me*. What makes me so different? We both hold magic, do we not?" There was a bit more attitude in Valian's tone than he intended to use, but it seemed to get the point across just as well. Oran threw his bag onto an ash gray horse on the other side of the Captain and mounted it.

"Fine." The Captain shifted his attention from Valian to the Royal Guard. "We depart now!" The Captain told the group behind him, all wearing the same uniform as the Captain except for the chestplate. The Captain was the only one with a gold chestplate while all

the other Guard members wore iron.

A gold chestplate must mark his position as Captain, then.

“Yes, *Captain*, it’s about time. Speaking of, what am I to call you? Surely I’m not expected to call you simply, ‘Captain’ the entire journey, am I?” Valian took off his cloak, realizing how warm the early afternoon sun had become, and crossed his arms, smiling slyly at the Captain.

“My name is Tirion Fordragon, but you are to call me none other than, Captain Fordragon if you must add a name after Captain.” He returned Valian’s attitude as he crossed his arms and smiled slyly as well, mirroring Valian’s position perfectly.

“Well, good to know you are not entirely kind and polite, as a loyal Captain of the Guard *should* be. It’s reassuring to see the King has not molded you into the perfect, boring soldier-teen just yet, *Captain Fordragon*.” Valian replied, playing with Tirion’s title as much as possible.

“I thought we were leaving?” Oran asked from behind Tirion.

“Yes, of course. We depart for Elderon immediately!” The Captain shouted, switching back to

his commanding, powerful tone. Tirion rode his horse to the edge of Arakon, the Royal Guard, Oran, and Valian close behind. Valian turned just in time to see Aldrev smile and wave at him from the porch. Valian smiled and waved back, for this was the last he would ever see of his mentor for a long, long time.



Night had fallen over Orevant Forest, and Valian heard numerous creatures stir in the shadows around their camp. He sat by the fire, his brown leather boots sitting next to the open flames, still damp from crossing the Drakloom River. Oran had already gone to sleep in his tent, so he would have to wait another day to discuss how rumors had spread, and Tirion and his soldiers talked about the gods knew what. Valian could not be bothered to listen, for he had other questions on his mind.

What kind of things would the King have him do as his Champion? What if he were to fail the King? Would his rewards for doing the King's dirty work be enough? Why was he even serving the man who had butchered his parents and countless others, anyway?

Was the money really necessary? Aldrev had seemed to be doing fine, hadn't he?

"Valian?" Tirion's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I was just thinking, is all." Valian replied, just realizing Tirion had asked him a question.

"I asked if you would like more chicken." Tirion held out a chicken leg to Valian.

"Oh, um, no. I'm- I'm good. Besides," Valian yawned an incredibly over exaggerated fake yawn. "I think it is time I get some rest."

"Very well. Good night, Valian."

"Night, Captain." Valian smiled, half asleep, and slipped into his tent.



It was around half past seven in the morning by the time Valian awoke. He had a rough time falling asleep the night before with so many questions on his mind, so he was still very tired. He changed into the same tunic and trousers he had worn yesterday, and shrugged on his black cloak. He popped outside to see Tirion and the Royal Guard already packing up camp.

Oran sat by the dim morning fire, his tent and belongings already packed.

“Ah, you’re awake! You should probably start breaking down your area of camp if you want to leave with us. We are not fond of waiting.” The Captain said, awake and energized. Valian cursed under his breath, feeling very tired and querulous, but did as the Captain told him.

He loaded his belongings back into his satchel, rolled up the woven sleeping mat he had borrowed from Tirion, and deconstructed the tent. He loaded the items onto his horse’s back and in the bags at its sides, and hoisted himself up onto the saddle once again. Oran, Tirion and the Royal Guard did the same, Tirion called out commands to his soldiers, and the group set out for Elderon once more.



They had trekked on through Orevant Forest for about half the day, and walked across the green, yellow, and pink meadows of the state of Chryslith for the second half. By nightfall, the group had reached the city of Elenis, where they rested their horses in stables, and

headed into a nearby inn. It was not a terribly big inn, so many soldiers were to share a room. Thankfully, Valian was partnered with Oran, and none of the soldiers he knew as complete strangers.

“Well, today was not quite as exciting as I thought this journey would be.” Oran said with a sigh. He was always in search of some sort of adventure or another.

“Well, no I guess it wasn’t, but it’s only the second day. We have at least two more to go.” Valian smiled in Oran’s direction, but he was simply staring at his belongings dumped on his cot.

“Well, I guess you’re right.” Oran replied with a half-smile.

“What were you expecting to see, anyway? This trek was not exactly meant to be, “exciting,” it is simply for us to get from Arakon to Elderon. A point A to point B trip.” Valian explained as he opened his satchel and unpacked very few of his belongings.

“Ugh, you’re such a downer. I don’t know. I spent the first seven years of my life living alone by the Archren River, then for the next eight years until now, I’ve stayed in Arakon. I’ve never explored the world beyond Arakon’s small borders, to be honest. I thought

it'd be more exciting compared to the life I grew up with, something different, maybe, but I guess I was wrong.” Oran sighed again, Valian presumed to add dramatic effect, but he was never sure.

“Don’t worry. Tomorrow’s a new day; we trek across more of Chryslith’s boring meadows, yes. But then we come across the Orilon Lake, the Revaden River, and finally we reach Elderon. It’s the capital city of Aereden, it’s bound to be full of wonder and excitement, right?” Valian smiled at Oran again, and noticed he had changed into his wolf form. Oran gave a smile, or, as best of a smile as a wolf could give, and curled up on his mattress to sleep.

Valian did the same. He did not bother to change from the clothes he had worn for two days straight now, for he was as tired as the dead. He crawled under his blankets and fell asleep within a matter of minutes.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, the party of travelers had gotten up just before dawn. “We need to set out early today.” Tirion had said. Valian was too tired to question him. They paid their dues to the innkeeper and set off again on their long journey to Aereden’s capital.



It was around noon when they reached the Orilon Lake, and the group had taken some time to relax and freshen up in its crystal clear waters.

Maybe that was why Tirion wanted to leave early; so they could spend more time at the lake.

Practically everyone had bathed behind large rocks or trees in the water, everyone except for Valian,

who could not get over what Oran had said last night. It had just sparked his doubts again.

What if the city of Elderon *was* boring? What if it was so boring the King would not even bother to pay Valian with rewards for doing his dirty work. Gods, he hoped not. He would really need that money sooner or later...

Valian had no interest of panicking himself with these thoughts, however, so he decided to do what he had always loved as a hobby. He had always been a fan of simply climbing rocks and ledges with his bare hands as a child around the rivers and small mountain ranges by his home, so he figured he would attempt climbing the rock ledges above the far end of the Orilon Lake, for old time's sake. He mentioned his small detour to Tirion, who had simply told him it was fine, but that he should be quick about it. They didn't have all day to spend at Orilon Lake.

Valian had glided across the lake as the cobalt dragon, skimming his quartz claws across the water's surface, and shifted back while hovering above a shallow rock platform. He meandered his way up a set of stair-like footholds with ease, then turned around to gaze at the sparkling waters of the Orilon once he found strong,

secure hand and footholds. He stood there for a moment, letting his troubles and worries drop into the expanse of water itself without a sound. He turned again to face the sandstone and granite cliffs and gazed straight up, realizing how high the cliffside really was from the point where he had landed.

Still he climbed. He would not stop until he stood at the top of the lake's far wall. He found a crevasse in the rock and shimmied up it, using every inch of it as a handhold. He had forgotten what it felt like to climb, but it felt good.



He had climbed for about ten minutes, now, and was so close to the apex, he could almost smell the moss growing at the top.

Just a few more feet, and he would be able to pull himself over the edge. He grasped a small handhold and swung himself to another about a foot up. He found another ledge and held on to it, but once he put his full weight on it, the rock broke off. Valian quickly shifted into his near silent serpentine indigo dragon to save himself from falling. He hovered by the cliff side and

watched the chunk of rock plummet and splash into the waters below. What he had just done was such a rookie mistake.

Maybe Valian should use his new abilities to the full extent. It would certainly make things much more convenient and time saving, even now.

Instead of landing back on the wall and shifting to climb the remaining way up, he simply flew to the top and perched there, overlooking the entire vicinity containing the sparkling waters of the Orilon. From up here he could see the entire lake, and then some, thanks to his enhanced draconic eyes. He used his diamond blue dragon eyes to see Tirion gesturing for him to come back to shore. Valian loosed a breath, and practically dive bombed down the cliff to fly back across the water.

“Well, did you have fun?” Tirion said, cheerfully yet somewhat-sarcastic as ever.

“‘Fun’ has never been the word I use for rock climbing. It was more, calming, or peaceful, but sure, why not call it fun.” Valian replied with a fake grimace-y smile after shifting back. It had been so long since he had actually gone rock climbing like that, and he definitely had not had to save himself from falling by shifting quickly in midair, for Aldrev had never let him

shift outdoors while they trained.

“Alright men, you’ve had your fun, time we set off for Elderon for the last time.” Tirion commanded over the Royal Guard of Aereden.

Valian threw his satchel over his shoulder, and loaded his other belongings onto his horse. He hoisted himself up onto the brown stallion and rode to Tirion’s side.

Tirion glanced in Valian’s direction and said, “Are you ready to finally set foot in the capital?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, Captain.” Valian smiled at Tirion, and turned to Oran, who also gave a bright smile. He did not quite trust the Captain just yet, but he figured making new allies would be helpful later on.



They had ridden past the small town of Njordril and crossed the wide Revaden River about an hour ago now, the sun was minutes away from being below the horizon, and the glowing capital of Elderon was in view. Valian had fallen asleep, and Tirion was glad his passenger was finally getting some proper rest. He turned to check on his Guard, and counted fourteen

soldiers, not fifteen. The missing soldier had been riding in the back of the group. He was one of Tirion's newest recruits, just over the age of fourteen. His name was Goldrynn Hellcast.

"Has anyone seen Hellcast recently?" Tirion boomed out over the silence, very confused as to where his soldier might be. Every soldier shook their head or shrugged. Tirion swore under his breath, beginning to grow angry rather than confused.

Where had Goldrynn ran off to? And how had nobody noticed?

He halted the group and ordered them to rest their horses as he went in search of the missing soldier.

"You want some help?" Valian asked from behind him, awake from his nap but still clearly drowsy. "You never know what could be lurking in the Silvence grasslands."

Tirion weighed his options. On one hand, it would be good to have the protection of a Dragonblood, but on the other hand, if Valian was harmed in any way, it would be entirely his fault, and the King could have Tirion executed as a very likely possibility.

He finally said, "Why not. It might be nice to have the company." Valian could protect himself,

couldn't he? Gods, Tirion sure hoped so.

He ordered his men to stay on high alert, and that if they did not return within the hour, to carry on without them and alert the King of their absence. Tirion and Valian trekked quietly through the tall grass, keeping a keen eye out for Hellcast.

They were far enough into the brush that they could no longer see the torch light of their traveling party, and the only sound around them was the faint crunching of dead grass under Tirion's feet.

Somehow Valian made little to no sound as he stepped through the grass.

Interesting. Something his trainer must have taught him. Tirion thought about learning it, himself, then teaching his Guard.

Tirion was about to turn around and give up when he heard Valian's breath catch. Tirion turned and asked, "What? What's wrong?"

Valian raised a hand and pointed. "Look."

Tirion followed his gaze and saw what he was pointing at. The mangled body of Goldryn Hellcast lay against the side of a rock. His innards were clawed out and sprawled across the floor, or at least what was left of them: it was clear most of them were missing, possibly

eaten. Three long, nasty looking marks were scratched across his face, making it barely recognizable. Blood pooled around his body, the rock, and some nearby shrubbery, giving off a repulsive stench.

“By the gods, how did this happen? Who would do this?” Valian asked, puzzled.

“I have no idea,” Tirion walked over to the body and knelt down, inspecting the damage. “Not who, *what*. This wasn’t done by some raider or thief, these are claw marks.”

Valian joined Tirion by the body and studied the scratches across Goldryn’s face. “Wait, I’ve seen these before. Those are- they must be dragon claw marks.” Valian stood, contemplating. “No, this can’t be right, I thought dragons were extinct. There is no way in hell a dragon did this.”

“Unless...” Tirion’s jaw set. “When you began to shift, you must’ve somehow started a great awakening of dragons in hiding who had not been killed off across Aereden, or something.”

“Yeah, or something...” He murmured as Valian looked from the body to Tirion. “But how is that possible,” Valian knitted his brow in confusion. “dragons themselves are *extinct*, because of your kind.”

“You said it yourself, damage like this can only be done by a dragon. Look, everyone in Aereden thought the Dragonblood line went extinct as well, but obviously it didn’t, you’re here with me. So maybe, everyone was wrong about the dragons going extinct as well. Maybe when the King expelled and killed magic, the dragon race went into a sort of, hibernation, to avoid being killed. I don’t know, maybe they just migrated to a different continent, but have now returned because they felt you re-opening your own power.”

“I guess it could be possible...” Valian shook off his thoughts and inspected the body once more, looking closely at the hole where Goldryn’s insides should have been.

Tirion was scared now. He had never faced a dragon before, he had only ever seen Valian, and he knew he would never purposefully harm him. He stood, walked a few paces away, and turned to think.

The rush of hot air that went over his back interrupted Tirion’s thoughts.



Valian felt heat brush over the top of his head,

and looked up. What stood less than ten feet away from him was another dragon, its scales a shade of jade green, with a light mint green underbelly. Two large horns jutted out from its gator-like muzzle like a rhinoceros's, with beady yellow eyes just visible at the sides of the head. Its tail was well muscled and powerful, but for the most part unadorned, aside from the two rows of small, dull, spiked plates that ran down from its nose to tail tip like a crocodile. It had well muscled, powerful green legs, all ending in three large dark green, metallic claws. Its wings were large and spread open as if to challenge Valian. Maybe it smelled his draconic blood coursing through his system.

“Hey, Tirion, you might want to see this.”
Valian said with as much calm in his voice as possible.
“ I’ve already seen it, Valian.”



The dragon’s breath was hot in Valian’s face, a billow of smoke curling from its nostrils and up around its horn into the crisp evening air.

Valian didn’t think before instinctively shifting into his scarlet dragon, which had the most firepower,

and snarled at Tirion over his shoulder as a warning to stay back. Tirion did not hesitate to move out of the way of the two dragons in a standoff before him.

Valian snaked to the dragon's side and shot a bright plume of orange fire. The dragon was quick, however, and leapt out of the way. The dragon roared and spread its wings as it leapt high above Valian, and flew straight down, claws extended, crushing Valian into the ground as it rammed him with it's rhinoceros-like horns. He roared in pain as the rough dirt and rocks below him jabbed at his side. He rolled himself onto his back and lashed out with his claws, scratching the scales on the dragon's underbelly. Valian kicked as hard as he could against the Dragon's gut with his hind legs, throwing it off of him. He righted himself and snarled as he felt a streak of blood run down his muzzle.

Gods, this dragon was quick, how had it even managed to scratch him there?

Valian stood on his hind legs and released another plume of fire from his gaping maw. It hit the dragon square in the face. Although a dragon's outer hide was fireproof thanks to their thick scales, the inside was still very delicate and easy to burn, like any other creature. The fire spread quickly, burning through the

dragon's mouth, nostrils, and eyes. It reeled back and yelped at the sudden burning. It turned its singed head to glare at Valian with hatred-filled burnt turquoise eyes. Valian flared his nostrils as a challenge in response and circled the dragon until he was facing its side again. The dragon, fed up with fighting, roared at Valian, and leapt into the evening air above the barren grasslands on the border of Silvence and Chryslith. Valian attempted to shoot another spiral of flame at the dragon, but it was already flying far away.

Good. Valian had never wanted to kill the dragon. He was simply not in the mood and in the end just dead tired.

Valian harrumphed in victory and satisfaction as he watched the dragon's green wings fade out of sight.

"I didn't realize how well you could fight as a dragon, Valian," Tirion said, emerging from the grass behind him. "I mean, I knew you could use a sword, or a dagger, or a bow even, but that, that was something else. You should feel honored to hear that from me." Tirion gloated.

Valian shifted to his human self again as he said, "Your compliments are great and all, but we should probably join back up with the group. They're going to

leave without us soon.” He was too tired to make a clever comeback, and winced at the pain at his side and above his nose. The dragon had hit him pretty hard during the fight, even if he had “won.”

“We can fix you up when we get back to the group, I’m sure we have some supplies.” Tirion said, noticing Valian’s pain as he walked back through the grass. Valian followed.



Valian had just finished bandaging up his side and cleaning the gash across the right side of the bridge of his nose when they mounted their horses and headed off for Elderon for the final time.

“Any sign of Goldryn, Captain?” One of the soldiers had asked from behind. Tirion glanced at Valian, who raised one corner of his lip and knitted his brows in contemplation, deciding whether it was a good idea to tell the men about what they had found.

“Not a single trace of him,” Tirion lied. “we didn’t find anything. No body, no horse, no nothing.” Tirion hated lying to anybody, but if he told the Royal Guard the truth, they would become either too fascinated

and ask too many questions, or become panicked and scared, and a panicked Royal Guard was a bad Royal Guard, especially if they were panicked about non-extinct wild dragons in the area they were no longer ready to face. He would have to introduce the idea and help them train for it slowly.

“Well, but what if he’s still alive, still breathing? We can’t just leave him there to die.” Another soldier explained.

“In the short time he was gone, he couldn’t have gotten far. If we didn’t find him, I’m sure he is in the stomach of a bear or torn apart by a pack of wolves.” Tirion replied, growing agitated by the questions, and his own lies. “Now, no more questions. He will get a funeral when we get back to the city, but for now, we have a mission, and that mission is to deliver Master Ashryver to the King in one piece, understood?”

His men nodded.

“We’re almost there, just keep an eye out.”

They rounded a cliffside and trudged down a winding path until they were no more than a few miles away from the walls of the kingdom. Soon, Tirion would be back home, and he could go back to serving the King of Aereden, with leathery wings or serrated claws of

wild dragons nowhere to be found.

Hopefully.

The front gates to the capital of Elderon were truly a sight to behold. Valian could hardly keep his mouth closed in awe. He had always taken an interest in shiny things, whether it was a sparkling gem or crystal or the glint off a kitchen knife in the morning sun.

He now suspected it was because of the dragon's blood coursing through his veins, as most things seemed to be, nowadays.

The arch towering above the iron gates seemed to glisten as if they were half made of gold, and the carvings winding up the sides were encrusted with jewels ranging from blood red rubies to emeralds the color of trees in mid-spring.

"This place is amazing." Valian whispered to Oran, who was equally amazed by the gates.

"I know, I don't quite believe it myself." Oran responded with a soft laugh.

Tirion nodded to one of the sentries in a tower by the gate, and the latter slowly began to open the gates in front of them. The young Captain led his men through the front gates and into the streets of the city.

Everywhere you looked there were shops and

kiosks selling things from ball gowns to alcohol. People bustled through the streets carrying bags of items and gifts purchased from the stores, and many of them stopped to wave and cheer for the Royal Guard as they rode through the streets on their stallions. Not many soldiers payed attention to the fans, they simply kept their heads forwards and on the cobblestone roads before them, a few rarely giving a sideways glance or faint smile to the crowd.

All except Tirion.

He waved and gave bright smiles and winks to many of the girls his age, who simply giggled amongst their friends or blushed in response.

“Well someone is certainly popular,” Valian whispered to Oran jokingly, jerking his head in Tirion’s direction. “Who knew he would be so loved by the young women here?”

“If you asked me, I’d say he bathes in the glory a bit too much.” Oran murmured.

“Hey if I were him, I’d probably be doing the same things, to be honest.” Valian gave Oran a half-kidding smile, and Oran just smiled back as he shook his head and looked back out to the street.

Tirion eventually stopped waving to his fans and

slowed his horse until he was next to Valian. “So, what do you think? Elderon’s pretty great, right?” Tirion nudged Valian’s side with his elbow.

“I’ll admit, this city is truly a sight to behold.”

“Hey, the city *is* great and all, but it’s almost dark out now, and I’m exhausted. Where are we going to be staying for these next few months, years maybe, anyway?” Oran asked, putting an end to Valian and Tirion’s quick conversation.

“Ah, of course. Well, you two *are* the King’s guests after all, so you both get your own rooms in the castle.” Tirion smiled in amusement as Oran smiled from the good news. “Are you not excited, Valian?”

“I am, I just want to know how much longer it’ll take to finally get a proper bed instead of a thatch mat or old cot.” Valian replied, sleep wanting to fully engulf him in its grasp for quite a while.

“Not long. You can see it above the rooftops of the city. It’s only a few more blocks from here, then I can show you to your room and you can finally sleep, okay?” Tirion asked, for some reason growing agitated with Valian’s lack of respect for his *prized* city. Valian simply laughed to himself at how much his escort cared about the capital of this wasted country covered in death

and bloodshed, but then realized he should not laugh about that at all.



They had finally reached the great spruce doors to the castle, and even though he was tired, Valian had to admit the castle looked just as awe inspiring as the front gates, probably even more. The foyer of the castle was at least seventy yards tall and about ninety wide, entirely made from great walls and pillars of stone, gold, and quartz, all carved with intricate designs and encrusted in an assortment of gems. Off of the foyer, there were two wings jutting out from the left and right sides, both ending in tall watchtowers with sentries and archers stationed, ready for whatever dared attack the Golden Kingdom. From the back of the foyer was the courtyard, surrounded by a line of trees, and other buildings behind that. Valian was not allowed in the tall buildings beyond the line of trees near the back of the courtyard at the moment, so he suspected they must be buildings like the great hall, the royal kitchens, the hospital ward, the throne room, and the royal family's chambers.

The group parked their steeds in the stables to

the far left of the doors, and walked in. Tirion signaled the Royal Guard down the left wing, where their chambers and training rooms must be located, and led Oran and Valian through the right.

“This is the wing of the castle where all of our members of the kingdom besides the chefs and healers, the Royal Guard and the royal family stay. This includes, respected travelers and traders invited by the King, royal visitors like Lords and Princesses, Masters and Mistresses and such from far off lands, hired entertainers for certain events, and other special guests, such as you two.”

Tirion guided Oran and Valian through the hallway for a short while until they reached a small oak door. “These are your chambers, Oran. This is where you will be staying in the castle for as long as Valian is the King’s Champion. It’s not the best of the guest chambers, I’m afraid, and for that I’m also terribly apologetic, but on such short notice, it was all that was available.”

“Thank you.” Oran replied as he slipped through the door and into his new living quarters.

They had walked quite a while now, going deeper and deeper into the right wing of the castle. The

farther they went, the more intricate and detailed the doors became. At the beginning of the hall were the simple, small oak doors, like the one for Oran's chambers, then came birch doors with detailed iron handles, and finally dark spruce and copper doors. They finally reached Valian's chambers, which were near the back of the right wing, where the game room and library stood when you turned left into the far right wing of the castle leading back down the right side of the courtyard.

“This is where you’ll be staying,” Tirion gestured to a large spruce door on the left side of the hall. “Since we knew you would be coming for quite a while now, we were able to get you quite a nice room. Just, try not to tell Oran until he learns to like his own room, he might get a bit jealous.”

“Oh, nah, don’t worry about that, Oran’s always been a fan of small spaces.” Valian replied as he reached for the copper door handle. “And thank you for the room.”

Valian opened the door and began to step inside, but Tirion interrupted him. “Oh, I almost forgot to mention, the King wishes to see you tomorrow at two in the afternoon, and I suggest you try to look decent for

your first meeting with him. Go down to the shopping district tomorrow morning to buy some better clothes than the simple tunics and trousers you already own.” Tirion pulled a small bag from his pocket and tossed it to Valian. “Don’t spend it all at once.” Tirion mused as he turned and walked back down the hall.

Valian walked into the foyer of his chambers, around the coffee table, couch, and chairs in the center of the room, and into his new bedroom. He threw his satchel by the wardrobe in the corner and plopped down face first onto his new bed.

CHAPTER 4

Valian awoke to bright, morning sunshine streaming through his windows and the almost entirely glass balcony door. He glanced to the grandfather clock opposite his dresser on the left wall and saw it was already eleven. He jumped out of bed, stripped off the trousers and tunic he had been wearing for three days straight, and threw on the nicest clothes he had in his satchel. He grabbed the sack of money from the bedside table and walked through the entry room and into the kitchen. Waiting for him on the table sat a small plate holding an assortment of pastries.

Seems someone had already brought him breakfast this morning.

Good. He was starving.

Valian grabbed what seemed to be three raspberry and chocolate puff pastries and headed out the door. He walked down the hallway, and out the front gates on his way to the shopping district as he downed the pastries in three large bites.



The shopping district was the most crowded place Valian had ever seen. People of all ages rushed in and out of shops carrying armfuls of bags and boxes. Smells of cakes, pastries, candies and other goods filled the air. Valian did not have time to grumble about the extent of people or stop for sweets however, so he shoved the bag of coins into his pocket and walked down the cobblestone streets.

He stopped at the first clothing store he stumbled across. He stepped through the whitewashed wooden door and meandered through the shelves until he reached the section full of nice tunics, doublets, jackets, and coats of all different colors. He browsed through the shelves for a good twenty minutes and found... nothing.

Absolutely nothing in the entire store caught his eye. He had always hated shopping, yet he had a very

specific taste in clothing. He knew Tirion had told him to buy something nice, but Valian wanted the King to see him for who he really was, and he never wore fancy clothing much at all.

Gods, this was going to be a long day.



Valian had gone through about four different shops and stores, and had finally found one nice cream white formal doublet, a rather royal blue waistcoat, black, form fitting breeches, and simple but nice black boots. He had even bought a new sapphire cloak detailed with silver embroidery, for if he wore the same shadow black cloak everywhere he went, people might become suspicious.

Not everyone knew he was the King's Champion, and he wanted it to stay that way. It was about one in the afternoon, and he was finally headed back to the castle. He rushed past the crowds of people huddled around the kiosks on the streets and-

Was that chocolate he smelled?

Gods, Valian loved chocolate. He always had during his childhood, partially because sweets had been

hard to come by back in Arakon.

Valian decided to give into his indulgence and walked into the chocolate shop, what was left of the coin bag in hand.



Valian walked out of the store holding a small white package filled with a wide variety of different chocolates. He opened the box, pulled out one of its contents, and brought it up to his mouth and ate it.

As he began to walk down the street, he noticed a girl who stood out against every other person around her.

She was the prettiest girl Valian had ever seen, and even though he hadn't met too many girls his age throughout his life, that was still saying something.

She had luscious, wavy brown hair that reached down to her shoulder blades, fair skin, and freckles on her rosy cheeks below her light brown eyes. The other thing that really made her stand out in the crowd besides her pure appearance was the necklace hanging loosely around her neck.

Unlike the young women of Elderon who wore

fancy shining pieces of jewelry adorned with gems and precious metals, her necklace was a near oval shaped, rust colored, thin, flat stone with a strange symbol carved into it. The symbol looked similar to a capital *P* with an *X* where the base of the *P*'s curve met its straight line. The necklace hung from a thin copper toned string, and from a distance, the symbol seemed to emit a faint red glow.

She also stuck out due to the simple clothing she wore compared to everyone else of high stature around her, but then again, so did Valian. They both wore tunics and trousers with cloaks draped over their shoulders and nothing more. He began to walk faster down the street as he glanced towards the clock tower and realized it was a quarter past one.

Valian had to head back to his chambers, bathe, change, and get ready for his meeting with the King immediately.

With one last longing and curious glance at the girl, Valian rushed towards the castle gates and was gone. He hoped he would later get another chance to get to know her another day.



Valian flung his door open, and ran to the washroom through his bedroom. He stripped from his clothes, bathed, and pulled the nice white doublet, the formal blue waistcoat adorned with gold thread over it, and the finely crafted black leggings with a dark leather belt from the shopping bags. He pulled the fancy clothing on with great discomfort and opened a drawer by the sink, pulled out a comb, and brushed his messy, windblown brown hair as best he could. He used the privy, washed his hands, and headed into the main room as he heard a knock at the door. He opened it to find Tirion and Oran standing on the other side.

“Well, I see you went to the shopping district. Good. The King probably wouldn’t let you in unless you were wearing something at least half-decent. Now hurry, he’ll have my head if I bring you late.” Tirion turned on his heel and walked quickly down the hall, Oran close behind, Valian following.

They walked briskly down the right wing hallway until they reached the foyer of the castle, where they turned and walked through the courtyard. They weaved their way through trees and bushes all budding with flowers and fruit, stumbled upon a fountain or two, one of them much larger than the others, made entirely

of quartz with rose diamonds studded in patterns along it, and finally they came across an opening archway made of rose bushes. They walked through it, and entered a large set of dark oak doors behind.

The room was beautiful. It had marble floors, dark gray quartz pillars in each corner, tapestries hanging from every wall, and a stained glass roof that cast yellow, red, and natural white light into every nook of the room. At the wall opposite the dark oak doors stood a marble dais holding three thrones encrusted with gold and jewels.

On the left throne sat the Queen, Rose Synderith, on the right throne sat the Princess, Lena Synderith, a bright green eyed baby hippogriff with a yellow collar sitting on her lap, and on the center throne sat the King of Aereden himself.

His golden chest plate sparkled in the refracted light from the stained glass, and his crown seemed to almost give off a glow of its own. The King's eyes were a shade of extremely dark brown. So dark they almost appeared to be black, or corrupt. The true embodiment of darkness living in one's soul. However, the King's smile was even worse than his stare. It was a pure wicked grin, the smile of a demon that enjoyed the torment and

suffering of innocent souls.

The King was now the demon, and Valian was the innocent soul about to endure his first test.

Tirion walked to the foot of the dais and bowed as he spoke, “Your Majesty.” He glared at Oran and Valian to do the same over his shoulder, and so after brief hesitation, they did.

Another moment passed and they stood up again, as Tirion stepped forward to say, “Your new Champion wished to bring an acquaintance along for the journey, and so I let him. I hope that is not a problem, your Majesty.”

“That’s no problem at all. We have plenty of room here, and if our new guest would feel more comfortable with a friend from home, then let him bring the Vulpitt boy along. A deal is a deal, so I suppose I will not kill him.” The King said the word Vulpitt in a strange way that Valian could not decipher the meaning of. The former’s glance shifted from the Captain to the nervous Oran, and he simply smiled again as he turned his gaze to Valian. Valian was just as nervous as Oran, probably far more, for this was *his* deal after all. Oran had simply been brought along for the ride. However, Aldrev had trained him to hide pain, fear, and nerves in

situations like this, so Valian did his best to recall his old training.

“So, Valian Ashryver, is it? How does it feel, to be your King’s new Champion?”

Oh, the King did not give a damn about Valian’s answer to the question he had just asked him at all. No, this was all a test, a game, even.

And so Valian played along with the King’s game as best he could.

He might have been terrified of this man and his actions when he was five, but now he knew how to take care of himself. How to protect himself from tyrants like him. Both from physical and mental harm.

He maintained a calm, cool, yet somewhat-respective tone at all times. He made sure never to make eye contact, and to only answer the questions the King asked him directly. He also made sure never to even look in the Princess’ direction. Doing this would just be sending the King’s mercenaries hunting you down in the night. Although Valian was the King’s new and only mercenary, to his knowledge, so he couldn’t really be sent to hunt himself, now could he?

Still he didn’t risk it.

Valian wasn’t worried about the conversation he

held with the King. At least, he hadn't been until the man gave his final test.

"So Valian, if you are to be my Champion and promise to do the things I of as long as you are under my leadership, you must be under an oath. The only problem is, I just don't know which oath to use! Perhaps, you may have one in mind?" The King leaned forward in his chair slightly to see how Valian would react.

Valian had thought about every answer, every possible solution to any question the King could possibly ask. He prepared himself for everything the King threw at him. Everything *except* an oath.

Valian didn't like oaths. He had wished to spend the rest of his life for the most part independent, so he didn't know of many oaths. He knew of the Swordsman's Oath, but that could easily be broken by simply breaking the sword the oath had been performed with. He knew of the Flame's Oath, but that involved a week-long process of burning a non-stop bonfire and then cutting off a finger or toe and feeding it to the fire as each person chanted an incantation to Ignia, the Goddess of Fire. Then there was the oath that very few tried.

The Blood Oath.

The Blood Oath involved drawing a dagger across each person's palm, and then smearing the blood of the open wounds together in a firm handshake. The only true problem with a Blood Oath was that no one had ever tried to break it, and no one really knew how, for the last Blood Oath recorded in Royal Lineage was over two hundred years ago. However, Valian knew this was the oath the King wanted him to choose. The only reason the King asked the question was because he wanted to see how far Valian would really go with this new "partnership."

But Valian had no choice. It was either perform the Blood Oath with the King, or be sent back to Draconis and Arakon with no more than a few wasted days of traveling.

And so Valian did the unthinkable.

He did what Oran and Tirion would be scolding him about for at least a few days.

Valian looked into the King's eyes and smiled as he said, "Why not perform the Blood Oath?" Gods, he really hoped he knew what he was doing.

CHAPTER 5

Valian was walking back to his chambers with Tirion, the cut across his right palm cleaned and bandaged by the healers. Valian was right. Tirion had been scolding him for giving his soul to the King through the Blood Oath. He claimed it was idiotic to give your life debt to someone you met five minutes ago, even if they *were* the King of your continent, and that not even he, the Great Tirion Fordragon, would perform the Blood Oath like that, with that man.

But after that, Valian didn't bother to listen, he simply kept his gaze straight down the long hallway and let Tirion yell in his ear and let him believe Valian was actually listening by nodding or rolling his eyes every minute or so. Valian ignored Tirion during their long

walk, for all he could think about was the girl from the shopping district, and wonder why he hadn't just gone and spoken to her. He was going to regret it for a while, but-

Tirion grabbed his shoulder. "Hey, you alright? You've been staring straight ahead for the past few minutes ignoring me, and don't think I haven't noticed."

"Um, yeah, I'm fine," Valian didn't want to particularly discuss girl troubles with Tirion, so he kept his answer short as he realized they were now standing outside his door. "Hey, you know what, after that meeting, I could go for a friendly game of billiards. You up for it? I think I'm pretty damn good at it, so I'd like to test my hand against the great Captain of the Royal Guard." Valian wanted to change the topic and needed to clear his head.

"I don't see why not. I have nothing else to do today. But I should warn you, I'm pretty damn good, too." With that, Valian walked into his room to change into more comfortable, casual clothing, then left his room and walked down the hall, turned left past the library, and into the game room.



They had been playing billiards for hours. Time slipped away as the two seemingly new friends challenged and mocked and cursed at and praised each other during each match.

They had just finished their eleventh game, and Valian was growing hungry again. He looked to the grandfather clock and realized it was already seven at night. “By the gods, it’s already dark out, and if I don’t eat something soon, I may shift and go on a killing spree.” Valian joked.

“Oh please don’t, but yeah, I could eat. Head back to your chambers, and I’ll meet you there with food in a few minutes.” Tirion hung the billiard cues on their racks, rolled the balls into the pockets, and walked to the door.

“Sounds like a plan.” Valian smiled and trudged down the hall back to his room.

When Tirion had returned, they ate the steaks and potatoes on their plates within a matter of minutes. They had talked a bit and Tirion had left and went back to his own room, while Valian was left alone in his small dining room with nothing to do but think about the girl once more.

About ten minutes after Tirion had left, Valian

had driven himself crazy with his own thoughts as he often did, and walked onto the low balcony leading from the corner of his bedroom.

It was a beautiful summer night. The stars were shining bright in the open sky above. The flowers and plants that sat in the small garden below danced quietly to the silent song of the warm night breeze.

Valian looked past the metal fence around the castle to the city beyond. It was beautiful at night. The lights from the shops and houses seemed to taunt the darkness of the shadows in an almost playful manner.

Valian wanted to fly.

He wanted to shift to the stealthy midnight dragon and soar above the City of Gold in the cover of the shadows, admiring the things the King had butchered so many people to build.

And so he did.



Valian landed quietly on the gray rooftop of a pale blue house in the far corner of the residential district as a faint, undetectable shadow. He shifted back, and sat down, letting one leg dangle from the edge of the roof

and wrapping his arms around his other knee against his chest.

He looked out to the other houses across the street, noticing every detail, every design carved into the walls, the window frames, and the garden walls. He turned his head to look at the fountain in the plaza of the residential district and-

He heard the sound of steel scraping across stone. He jerked his head toward the alleyway between the house he was sitting on and the house to his right. Standing in the alleyway were three men, two holding bronze daggers, one dragging a steel longsword across the cobblestone floor, and another figure wearing a faded light blue cloak being backed against a brick wall.

The man in the middle holding the sword spoke up and said, “You can’t keep pushing this aside. You want to buy this house from me-” He jerked his chin towards the gray and blue house beneath Valian’s feet. “Then you better pay up. This house wasn’t free, y’know, so you either give me the three hundred silvers now, or we kill you.”

“You want your money, Siv, well here it is,” It was a girl’s voice. A girl no older than Valian. The girl pushed aside the folds of her cloak by her hip and pulled

out a small leather bag. “Three hundred silvers, just as you asked.” She tossed the bag to the man and said, “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get some damn sleep for once. Good night, gentlemen.”

She walked down the alleyway about halfway past the three men when the one addressed as Siv chuckled low and said, “You must take me for a fool, don’t you? Because this bag contains small rocks, not silver.”

The girl stopped walking. “Okay, calm down. Look, I was gonna get the money to you, but—“

“I don’t wanna hear it, girlie. You had a deadline, and you blew it. Boys,” Siv glanced to the two men beside him. “kill her.”

Valian had heard enough. He leapt from the rooftop and slid down the drainpipe, landing in a crouch a few feet away from the girl. “I don’t think so.” He looked to the girl as she began to pull her hood off.

His heart skipped a beat.

The girl Valian was in the process of saving was the same girl he had seen in the shopping district earlier today.

“Hey, you’re the boy who was staring at me outside the chocolate shop, right?” The girl smiled at

him.

“I was not staring! I was just- Whoa!” Suddenly one of the men attempted to stab at Valian with a dagger, but Valian sidestepped out of the way, grabbed the dagger from the man’s hand in one quick motion, and sliced it across his upper arm. The attacker grabbed the open wound with his opposite hand, and stumbled backwards, seething in pain.

The other attacker lunged at her. “You’re pretty fast, and I appreciate the help and all, but I can take care of myself.” Flame formed in her right palm, and she threw it at the man like a ball, hitting him square in the chest and sending him flying back, smoking.

“Well, it just seemed wrong to leave you to fight three guys on your own.” The man attacking Valian had stood up now, and was walking toward him again, anger visible in his dark eyes. He attempted to punch Valian in the jaw, but Valian was too quick. He ducked, and sent the dagger plunging up into his lower arm, still extended from the punch. The man reeled back again, blood dripping down his arm.

“Ha, you’re cute. I like your whole vigilante hero thing.” She shot another fireball with her other hand at the man who had gone after Valian.

“Um, thanks? And how the hell did you do that?”

“Do what, hun?” The man attacking her had stood up again, knife in hand. He ran towards her with his teeth bared and the knife held high above his head. Once the man was within five feet of Lithean, she shot another fireball hurtling towards his face with both hands.

He yelped, dropped the knife, put a hand to his face, and ran out of the alley and down the street, screaming.

“Do *that*,” Valian said as the other attacker took his hand off of his shoulder and ran away as well. “And um, it’s Valian. Valian Ashryver.”

“Lithean. Lithean Riddian. And oh this?”

Lithean sent a wall of white and yellow fire in Siv’s direction. “It’s called magic.” Siv was pinned against the brick wall at the back of the alley, his near-black eyes wide with fear, the flames around him licking at his skin, but not burning him. “Now if you’ll excuse me for one second, Valian,” Lithean shifted her gaze from Valian to Siv. “If I *ever* have to see you again, Sivven Blasius, I’ll let the fire really burn you. Understood? I’m done with your rowdy group of clumsy, murdering drunkards, so leave me the hell alone.” Siv, trembling with fear, ran

through the cool flames and out of the alleyway after his two lackeys.

“Wow, you were right,” Valian wiped the simple, blood soaked, bronze dagger on his cloak and tucked it into one of his belt loops before turning to face Lithean. “It seems you can take care of yourself just fine.”

“I told you I could, but you had to stay and fight for me. Which leads me to ask; why were you here, anyway? Did you go from just staring to *stalking*? ”
Lithean lowered the non-burning flames to cinders and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I uh, no, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, I guess.” It wasn’t a lie. He hadn’t intended to save anyone when he leapt from his balcony earlier tonight, but he still felt his cheeks redden.

Lithean smiled and said, “Very well. Why don’t you come inside, I can stitch up that gash across your side, if you’d like? ”

Valian’s brows rose again as he looked down at his side. He hadn’t realized he’d gotten cut. When had it happened during the fight? It didn’t hurt, probably due to the adrenaline. “If it’s not too much trouble?” Valian looked up from his cut to Lithean and smiled. She unlocked the front door, and led Valian inside.

CHAPTER 6

Lithean told Valian to wash the blood off his arms, face, and side in the washroom before she started stitching his wound, so he went in, took off his tunic, and did so.

He dried himself off and tugged the ripped tunic back on. Once he exited, they both sat down on a couch in the foyer.

Lithean told him to lift the side of his tunic and raise his arm as she pulled out a needle and threading.

“So, what brings you to Elderon? You’ve gotta be new around here, right?” Lithean asked, trying to make small talk as she began stitching.

Valian winced as the needle pulled the thread

through his injured skin, but he spoke through the pain. She was trying to keep his mind off the wound, after all. “Well, I was summoned by the King-” he winced again. “to be his, uh... Champion. He believes my combat skills are fit to protect him at certain public events and other things like that.” Wince. “Plus, I really needed the money, despite of my hatred for the man.” Valian smiled through gritted teeth.

Lithean’s face fell for a split second, but then she smiled back. “That’s what I thought. The second I heard your name I knew it sounded familiar. News of the King getting a new Champion who was only seventeen years old spread through the city like a wildfire, as you could imagine.” Valian could tell by the way Lithean spoke of the King that she wasn’t a big fan, either. Good.

There was silence between them for about a minute until Lithean suddenly said, “Okay, that’s it. That should heal soon.”

Valian pulled his tunic back down. “Thank you, again, for all this.”

“Oh please, I’m the one who should be saying thank you. The only reason you’re hurt is because of me.”

He smiled at her. “Well, you’re a girl worth

getting hurt for, I suppose.” Valian winced at his own attempt of... flirting? It hadn’t sounded as smooth as it had sounded in Valian’s head...

She giggled at his comment nonetheless.

“You’re sweet.” There was another pause between them before Lithean jumped up and said, “Oh! where are my manners? This is my home, and you’re my guest now, so can I get you something to drink, maybe?”

“Oh, I appreciate the offer but no, I think I’m alright.” Valian leaned forward from his seat and rested his elbows on his knees.

“Oh, please? I’m pretty big on making good first impressions, serving drinks is a big part of that, to me at least.”

“Well, you’ve left a great first impression already, but I can’t really say no to that, now can I?”

“Great. I’ll have something out in a minute.”
Lithean slipped from the living room and into the kitchen, where she poured a glass of a golden beer-looking liquid on the countertop. She walked back into the room, handed Valian the glass, and sat back down next to him.

He took a sip of the golden liquid. “What kind of a drink is this, because whatever it is, it’s amazing.”

“Well, let’s just say I used to work as a barmaid for Siv’s men before I got to work alongside them in the streets. I learned to make this beverage from an older barmaid who had worked there before me.” Lithean crossed her legs.

“Well then, I guess I should be thanking that barmaid.” Valian took another sip of the drink. “But that reminds me, who is this Siv character, anyway? You certainly don’t seem too fond of him, and vice versa.”

Lithean sighed. “You really want to hear the story of how I met him?”

“I have the time.”

“Well,” She sighed. “it all started with my childhood in the village of Valindale. I lived with my parents and my older sister, but none of them took too kindly to my magic, my mother especially. She always told me I had to hide it and keep it a secret from the world, for if I didn’t, the King would hunt me down and have me killed. That much I understood, but she just took it too far. She wouldn’t let me do anything ever and punished me for the smallest of things, so after many years of this, I got fed up with my mother’s policies, and I packed my belongings and set out for a new life.

“I traveled north and ended up here at the age of

twelve. I later found out Elderon was not an easy place for a broke twelve year old girl to live, so Siv found me and took me in with his men, but on one condition; he later found out about my magic because once, I practiced it in my bedroom with my door open like a stupid amateur would, ha, never doing that again, but he then had me do his more dangerous dirty work for him. I never had a problem with this until around the time I turned seventeen.

“He rented me my own place-” She gestured to the house around them. “and I was happy. Truly happy. I was happy until Siv began to bother me far more than he usually did. Turned out, many of his men had died when they had gotten caught by the King, so I was his only powerful lackey, now. Plus, it didn’t help that I just turned seventeen, and I wanted to simply live my life in this new house. I wanted to explore the things like exotic foods and clothing and other random things like that and just be... me. Experiencing the world around me had changed me somehow, and for the better. So, once again fed up with policies I had to live by, I gave up on his dirty work and stopped showing up at his hideout for his missions or whatever all together. However, he hunted me down for the money I needed to officiate my leaving,

but my part-time job as a waitress hadn't gathered anywhere near enough of the money just yet, but then you saved me, and here we are." She sighed again. "But that's all in the past now. Well, except for the job. I still have to show up to that *glenting* bar on the weekends if I want any money at all."

"Glenting?" Valian asked.

"Curse word from Valindale."

"Glenting. I like it." Valian smiled.

"Anyway, enough about me, why don't you tell me about your life?"

And so Valian told her.

He told her of his parents' deaths due to the King, of Aldrev, of the training, of Oran, of his old home in Arakon, even of the ring from his father, which wasn't quite working the way he had thought it would, for he had gotten hurt a few times now while wearing it.

And finally he told her who he truly was. He told her that he was an Heir to the Dragonblood line.

"Oh my gods, I- I had no idea." Lithean's breath caught as she tried to digest the words she had just been told. "I'm so sorry for your loss, but, the dragon's blood thing must make up for it, I guess, right?" Lithean tried to joke.

“Yes, it does, in a way, but I had gotten used to simply living with Aldrev. I made a friend, I had fun challenging Aldrev in sword fights and shooting contests, I was happy, too.”

“Well, I certainly hope you were. You deserved a life better than that after... after all you went through at the age of five.” Lithean shifted in her seat and moved closer to Valian ever so slightly.

He placed the glass of golden liquid on the coffee table casually, and looked down and locked eyes with her. This close, he could notice all the intricate details in her bright brown eyes. There were faint traces of gold woven within, which only complimented the freckles below her eyes and across the bridge of her nose even more.

He was so, *so* glenting close to leaning forward and kissing her when a loud chime rang through the room and startled the both of them.

CHAPTER 7

The clock on the wall chimed midnight, and broke Valian and Lithean away from each other.

“I- I should really be going. I’m sure the Captain will be furious with me. I apologize.” Valian stood and made a beeline for the door.

He reached for the door handle when Lithean said softly, quietly, “Valian?” He looked over his shoulder to lock eyes with her again, and to also notice that the red haze around her necklace’s symbol glowed much brighter. “Thank you- for opening up like that. For, telling me about your past, and about your powers. I know not too many people know, and, I hope...” She faltered. “I hope we can be friends? You’re welcome here anytime. I should be home, unless I’m off working,

of course, or shopping, or getting myself into trouble, again.” She smiled in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Valian’s gaze shifted to the floor at his feet as he nodded. “Of course, Lithean. I’m just glad we ran into each other. I’ll see you around.” He grabbed the door handle and slipped through it into the warm summer night air as he smiled. He inhaled a sharp breath before he walked briskly through the cobblestone streets and up through the castle gates. He turned into the right wing from the foyer and walked down the hall until he reached his chambers.

He slipped through the door, into his bedroom, changed into his freshly bought nightclothes, and snuck into bed.



He couldn’t sleep.

All he could think about was nearly kissing Lithean.

He had hoped for a second chance in the shopping district, and he got it. But did he do anything with it?

Of course not.

He regretted it. He really should have kissed her. He just hoped he'd get another chance, someday.

But for now, Valian dragged himself out of bed and pulled all the books out from his satchel to distract himself. He transferred them from his bag to the large, empty bookshelf in his living room.

It was about gods damned time he actually unpacked.

He then grabbed one, sat down at his desk, and began to read.

He still didn't feel the slightest bit tired and couldn't get that girl off his mind.

He closed the book and grabbed his journal to begin drawing.

Hours went by, and it was around four or five in the morning before he finally fell asleep, his journal still open on the desk, a half drawn lake landscape sketched on one of the pages.



Valian awoke with Tirion sitting, arms crossed, on the arm of his couch, and his journal in the Captain's hand.

Of course he'd forgotten to lock the door last night...

Tirion looked rather upset. Valian turned his sleepy head to look at the grandfather clock.

It was one in the afternoon.

Fire...

He hadn't wanted to sleep in so late, today. He'd hoped on waking up early and getting a fresh start on the new day to come. He didn't quite know what he intended to do today, though. All he really wanted to do was explore the city a bit more. But what he did know was that Tirion was going to give him hell about how late he had woken up.

"You're a god artist. Do you know that? But anyway, what do you have to say for yourself, Ashryver?" He uncrossed his arms, placed the journal on the couch behind him, and stood from its arm. "It's only your second day here. You can't just relax. So, what could possibly be the reason for you staying up so late last night?"

All Valian could really bring his sleepy self to say was, "Lithean" drowsily.

Tirion gave him a puzzled look. "Am I supposed to know what that means?" He walked into the kitchen,

grabbed another platter of breakfast already cooked for Valian, and carried it into the living room/foyer where he set it down on the coffee table. “So, why don’t you get your sleepy ass over here and tell me about ‘Lithean?’”

Valian still did not one hundred percent trust Tirion, and was not one hundred percent sure who the Captain trusted either, but he figured if he didn’t tell the truth he’d just get in more trouble later, so he stood from the chair by the desk, walked to the couch, grabbed a strip of bacon from the plate, and explained to Tirion about what had happened last night. Everything ranging from the night time flight to hurriedly leaving Lithean’s house after his panicked mix of emotions from almost kissing her.

Tirion’s face had changed from angry to a calmer, more understanding look. “Well then, your lucky you had nothing too important to do today, or else I wouldn’t be letting you off so easily. But I am warning you, next time you sneak off to your new lover’s house at night, either don’t stay too late, or find a better way to fall asleep and wake up. May I suggest an alarm clock, or have me order you a full time personal maid, perhaps?” He stood and walked towards the door.

“She’s not my lover, Tirion.” Valian said as he cut a piece of the pancakes. “And I don’t need or want a maid.”

“Oh, you say that now, but you just watch.” He turned then paused. “About, Lithean, not the maid, I mean.” Tirion was about to close the door behind him when he poked his head through again and said, “I hope you bring her around your room for a change. I would absolutely *love* to meet her.”

Valian simply smiled and gave him a vulgar hand gesture.



He finished his breakfast, dropped the plate into the washbasin, and changed into a white tunic, black breeches, and his sapphire and silver cloak. He grabbed the bronze dagger and washed the dried blood off it. He tucked the now clean blade in his belt and headed out.

He walked down the long, ornate hallway, hoping to just be by himself for a day and sort through his thoughts as he explored the rest of the city

He heard his name being called from behind him and turned around.

Oran came walking up next to him and asked,
“Where are you off to?”

Valian sighed. “Oh, nowhere in particular. I just
need to go off on my own and clear my head today.”

“Clear your head? What of?”

Valian explained Lithean to Oran the same way
he had explained it all to Tirion, using the dagger as an
example and all.

“Fire, sounds like you had an eventful night
yesterday. If I were you, I’d go back and talk to that girl
of yours, sort out what happened between you two last
night.” Oran had always been the one to give him
advice.

Valian groaned. “Why must you always be
right?”

Oran shrugged. “Years of knowing you has let
me be able to figure out where you go wrong in
situations like these, and later learn to help you through
them.”

Valian sighed. “Oh alright. I’ll talk to her about
it...” He tucked his hands in his pockets. He brushed the
knife with the pad of his thumb. “Oh, hey, you know
what, maybe you’d want to keep this, as a souvenir from
the first day here? I know how eager you were about all

this, so it seems fitting you have it.”

“Ha, I’d be honored.” Oran took the dagger and placed it under his own belt. They had reached his chambers at the end of the hall now. “Well, this is my stop. I wish you the best of luck with Lithean, my friend.”

“Thanks...”

Valian walked into the castle’s foyer and turned right, headed into the courtyard. He had only ever been inside it when he was rushing to the throne room.

It was a beautiful place when one actually got to look at it.

The leaves and branches of the trees and shrubbery seemed to dance in the breeze, and the waters of the multiple fountains glistened in the afternoon sunlight. Valian adored the smells of the courtyard. No matter where you wandered there was always the faint scent of flourishing wood and wildflowers.

He came across the clock tower in the center of the gardens, and sat down on one of the benches at its base.

He hadn’t been sitting for more than a minute before he heard someone say, “What are you doing here?”

Valian looked up to see the princess walking toward him. He jumped up from the bench. “Oh, I’m terribly sorry! I didn’t mean to intrude, Miss Synderith, I was just-”

“Oh stop. First, it’s Lena. I hate those formal titles. Second, you’re not in trouble. Why would you be?”

“I just thought you were mad at me.”

Lena placed her hands on her hips. “Why would I be mad at you? For sitting there? It isn’t like the courtyard is a private area of the castle. You do *live* here now, after all.”

“I apologize. My head just... isn’t in the right place right now.” Valian looked down.

“Don’t apologize. I get it, you’re in a very different surrounding, now. It can be hard adjusting.” She sat down next to him, and her green eyed juvenile hippogriff with the yellow collar that Valian hadn’t noticed was there jumped up to sit on her lap. “Valian, was it?”

He nodded.

“I can give you a tour of Elderon, if you’d like? Help you become more accustomed to everything this place holds? You seem a bit lost.”

Valian smiled at her graciously. “That would be wonderful, Lena. Thank you.”

“No problem.” She looked into his eyes and squinted in an awkward way.

“What?” Valian asked as he squinted his eyes back at her. Sort of.

She laughed at him. “Nothing, your eyes are just neat.”

“Oh, well thank you. Yours are pretty, too.” He noted how her eyes shimmered when she smiled. He had never noticed how intricate her eyes were since he technically wasn’t allowed to make eye contact with her. He had to admit, he was jealous of all the details they held.

They were a darkish brown with bright blue highlights around the irises, with flecks of gold mixed throughout the blue like flaming stars still hanging in the sky during the day.

The silence between them was broken by the baby hippogriff. He began to chirp while sitting in Lena’s lap, and Valian couldn’t help but smile at the creature. “What is it now?” Lena asked as she stroked the hippogriff’s head.

“I don’t think the two of us have been formally

introduced. Who is this?" Valian extended his arm out to pet the animal's small, soft head, and it purred.

"Oh, this is Athril, my baby hippogriff. The egg he was hatched from was a gift from my father on my twelfth birthday, so he was born on my thirteenth birthday as a token of my passing into teenagehood. He's only three."

"Well, he's awfully cute." Valian retracted his hand from Athril's feathered head and remembered the princess had offered him a tour. "Shall we get going?"

"Oh, right, yes we shall." She shifted her attention from Valian to Athril. "Alright bud, it's time you go back to my room." Athril then jumped from Lena's lap, spread his little, feathery wings, and half-glided half-sprinted back through the courtyard and to where Valian suspected were the Princess' chambers.

"Alright, let's hope you can keep up."



Lena had led Valian back through the courtyard and out of the castle headed into the city. They walked right through the shopping district, for Valian didn't want to spend much time there anymore after his first

shopping experience.

She showed him the smaller, less professional Elderon marketplace, which was where stands selling fresh produce and other such food lined thin dirt roads. You couldn't buy much proper food like fruits or vegetables or fresh meat in the shopping district, so Valian supposed this was a convenient little corner of the city.

Lena then led him through the slums of the city, where filthy bars sold beer, and beggars and prostitutes roamed the streets and-

The streets smelled like, well, shit.

Gods, Valian didn't want to spend another second in this vile, wretched place. Thankfully Lena had led him out of there as quickly as possible.

She had shown him through the entire city- which included the racetrack and arena, both of which Valian noted in the back of his mind- until they came across the housing district. They walked down the block in the center of the residential district where the fountain stood, and all Valian could do was stare at Lithean's house.

"You know who lives there, I take it?" Lena asked from beside Valian on the fountain's rim.

“Um, yeah. The girl who lives there, she’s, well... I’m not really sure what she is, just yet.” Valian turned from the gray and pale blue house to Lena.

“Oh you don’t need to tell me. I already know who she is.”

“Oh, you do? How?”

“Lithean Riddian, and she’s a friend of mine.”

“How’d you two meet?” Valian rested his elbows on his knees.

“Why do you care?” She copied him.

“Just wondering, really.”

“Well, when she was twelve she ran into the castle, hoping to find my father, claiming she wanted help to get away from a man named Siv Blasius. Instead she ran into me. She told me what had happened, and I fed her and clothed her and we became friends in the moments when she wasn’t stuck with the crude man. Simple as that, really. Oh, but this morning she did tell me she was free of that man’s grasp. She didn’t tell me how, though.” She turned to look at Valian directly. “So, how did *you* meet her?”

He smiled off into the distance. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Oh, right, because I wouldn’t believe

something a boy who can turn into a dragon tells me.”

Valian sighed. Of course she knew that secret. Why wouldn’t she? She was the daughter to the man who hired him.

Valian began to question if he should even bother keeping it a secret at all. “Alright, I’m the one who helped her get rid of Blasius. He was cornering her last night, right there-” He pointed to the alleyway. “and I helped her free herself from his ownership, or something. It was a bit confusing when she told the story of how she got stuck with him to me. But it’s all in the past now, right?”

“Hmm, she told you more about that man than I thought.” Lena stood from the stone rim and said, “So, why don’t we go say hi?”

He sighed. Now was the time to take Oran’s advice. He had just been praying it wouldn’t happen so soon. “Um, alright.” Valian stood and walked to Lithean’s front door and knocked hesitantly.

She opened the door with a bright, surprised smile on her face. “Oh! Valian, come in. I’d been hoping you’d come by today. So this reminds me, I needed to-” She turned around to walk back into her house, signaling Valian to follow her.

“Lithean, wait,” Valian grabbed her arm.
“Before you say anything, before *I* say anything else, I need to just tell you that I’m sorry. I’m sorry about the way I acted last night, how I rushed away because I was panicked and I didn’t know what to do with myself. It was immature. Having said that, you’re a wonderful girl, and I really like you, but I just don’t know what I want, at least not right now, not with all I have to take care of and keep up with, first. I’m sorry. I hope we can still be friends, though. And maybe things will work out once I figure everything else out about this city, first?”

“Hey, it’s okay, I understand, and I hope we can, too.” She leaned against the doorframe and smiled.

“So, am I just going to keep standing behind you, Valian, or am I going to be told what in the gods’ names you two are talking about?” Lena remarked from behind Valian.

Lithean gave the Princess a smile and shook her head softly as she said, “I’d prefer to keep this between the two of us-” She gestured to herself and Valian. “If that’s okay with you?” She shifted her attention from the Princess to the Dragonblood.

“Fine by me.” Valian tucked his hands into his pockets.

“You two are annoying.” Lena said, jokingly, as the two visitors walked in and closed the door behind them. Valian sat next to Lithean on the couch, and Lena sat in an armchair diagonal from them.

“So, what was it you needed to do once you opened the door?” Valian asked, turning to face Lithean.

“Oh, right, I’d forgotten about that.”

“I think I know what she wants to show you.” Lena said coolly before turning to look at the clock in the corner. She then jumped up and said, “Oh, I just remembered I didn’t tell anyone to feed Athril for me. I need to head back to the castle. Glad to see the three of us are all friends, now, I suppose.” With that she stood from the armchair and left.

“She always forgets something or other.”

Lithean laughed softly to herself. “So, I *do* want to show you something.”

“Well then what is it?”

Lithean stood and slipped down a hallway and into another room as she said, “I’ll be right back.”

As Lithean was in the other room, Valian glanced around the living room. A large, detailed, oak armoire sat in the back right corner, an intricate blue and gold Earthornian rug rested beneath the coffee table, a

grand stone fireplace was built into the center of the right wall, and many small statues and paintings had been placed atop its mantle.

Valian stood from the couch and walked over to the fireplace's mantle. On it sat a small bronze statue of the Elderon hippogriff, a marble candle holder, the red wax candle inside it about half used, a small portrait of Lithean, Lena, and another girl with pale skin, somewhat straight brown hair, and eyes almost identical to Lithean's, painted perhaps about a year or two ago, and a fairly small chunk of unpolished rose quartz.

Valian paused at the cluster of pink crystal for a moment, wondering why Lithean had placed it upon the stone mantle, when she came walking back down the hallway, a bright smile on her face, and a small animal Valian couldn't quite make out trailing her.

Lithean walked behind the couch to face Valian, a dragon the size of a small dog following her. It looked up at her, it's dark blue scales shimmering in the light flooding through the window, it's light blue eyes sparkling. Lithean smiled at the creature, and bent down to pick it up in her arms.

"This is Locryn. He's my um, Northern Pseudodragon? I think that's what he's called." As she

picked him up, Locrynn's oil colored under scales and long, twisting horns atop his head danced in the sunlight through the window. Lithean laughed as the small dragon attempted to paw at Lithean's face in a playful manner, and Valian gazed into the creature's sparkling blue eyes.

Lithean set him down, and the pseudodragon tentatively walked over to Valian's feet, and sniffed them. Locrynn's pupils dilated to thin slits, and he pulled back, his head tucking in low, his legs crouched. He looked up to lock eyes with Valian, realizing that he was part dragon.

Valian knelt down on one knee and reached a palm out to Locrynn. The pseudodragon hesitated at first, but then, slowly, he closed his bright blue eyes and moved his head until his muzzle was in Valian's palm, holding it there for a moment or two.

"I think he likes you. Which is odd, because he dislikes everyone besides me." Lithean looked to Valian and smiled. "Why don't you let him see you as a dragon, maybe he'll become a bit more familiar with you."

"Alright then." Valian stood, walked to the center of the area between the couch and the fireplace, closed his eyes, and shifted to the slightly-larger-than-a-

horse-sized golden dragon.

He opened his spring green eyes, and looked down to Locryn, whose pupils had softened and filled in once again. Valian stood and lowered his long neck until he was practically face to face with the small black and blue reptile.

Locryn's pupils once again dilated, but not in surprise and more in fear as the pseudodragon squeaked and flew back down the hallway and into the room whence he came.

Valian stood straight and sat on his haunches again as he turned to look at Lithean as if to say, *it appears the little guy's a bit afraid of my dragons.*

However, what looked back was not Lithean's bright smile, but more of a look showing pure shock, awe, surprise, and wonder.

Valian tilted his head to the side and squinted his eyes in confusion.

“Oh, I apologize for gawking, it’s just, I haven’t seen you as a dragon yet, and I must admit, it’s definitely a sight to see a seventeen year old boy transform into a dragon in a quick flash of light and gust of wind.”

Her smile returned, and Valian shifted back.

“Well then, it appears I have a lot to show you.”



Valian had spent the rest of the day showing Lithean his dragon forms and simply talking to her some more, as friends. Then once dusk had fallen, Lithean had whipped up a scarlet colored soup that she wouldn’t tell Valian the ingredients of, which he hated, for it was absolutely delicious.

Once the two had finished their dinners, Valian had glanced to the clock, realizing it was half past nine at night.

He said his goodbye and goodnight as he slipped from her house and down the streets and alleyways in his sapphire and silver cloak until he reached his foyer in the castle.

It was around ten o’clock in the evening when Tirion had knocked on his door, claiming he had a message from the King.

“What is it, Tirion?” Valian asked with severe lack of interest as he hung his head off one end of an armchair and his legs off the other.

Tirion had opened the door and sat down on the

couch by the time he had said, “Well, you *are* the King’s Champion, so, how long did you think it would be before he gave you your first assignment?”

“I don’t know, not long. But let me guess, I am to go into the throne room bright and early in the morning tomorrow so he can tell me about one of the many rebels amongst the city’s citizens I have to kill, correct?”

Tirion smirked. “Is that really all you think your job is, because if so, you’re wrong. That’s my job.”

“Well what else is there to it?”

“You don’t simply creep up behind people and slit their throats for the King’s own benefit. You are to track people, note their actions and schedules, then report your findings to the King. You are to capture certain rebel leaders and interrogate them so the King can get the answers he needs. But yes, there will come a time when the King will simply ask you to kill someone for him, but do not expect it to be every time. Not even relatively often. Understood?”

“You know, I find you far less soporific when you talk like a normal person instead of the King’s very formal Captain of the Royal Guard.” Valian moved his legs from the chair’s velvet arm until he was sitting

upright against its cushions.

“I just sat through two hours of one of the King’s royal meetings where he takes updates and reports and such from my guard and his other associates. Almost every single person in those meetings talks like that, and it drives me crazy until I start talking in their tone myself just to try to fit in or something I guess.”

Tirion walked over to the couch and sat down.

Valian had to give him credit, he was really trying to bond with Valian and gain his trust.

“Well don’t do it again. Please.” Valian yawned and stretched his arms over his head. “So are you going to tell me what my assignment is, or am I going to have to wait to hear it from the King himself tomorrow?”

“Even if I wanted to tell you, I couldn’t. The King never specified on what, exactly, it was you were doing.”

“Well then you are of no use to me, so, I say this in the kindest manner possible; Captain Tirion Fordragon of the Aereden Royal Guard, for the love of the gods get the hell out of my chambers so I can actually get a good night’s sleep for once.”

With a laugh Tirion slipped back out through Valian’s door and stalked down the torch-lit hallway.

Valian stood from the armchair, walked into his bedroom, changed into his nightclothes, and fell asleep within a matter of minutes.



It was too early for Valian's taste when Tirion had walked into his bedroom and shaken him awake. His immediate reaction was to rub his tired eyes and throw a string of curses at Tirion.

"What time is it?" Valian asked, half asleep.

"Seven. You have an hour before the King wants to see you." Tirion yanked the pale blue covers off the bed. "Gods above, you reek. When was the last time you bathed?"

Valian leaned forward and swung his legs around to sit on the edge of the bed. "Not since my first meeting with the King, so a few days ago." He stood and released a breath of hot air in Tirion's face.

"Well," He gagged. "For someone who is half dragon, you certainly have the dragon's breath thing covered." Tirion shoved him toward the washroom as Valian looked over his shoulder and laughed.

Valian closed the door behind him and Tirion

heard the water from the tub running not more than a few seconds later. Tirion walked into the entry room and sat down in an armchair when someone knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Tirion asked, readying himself to place a palm over the grip of Tyrhung, one of his two greatswords slung over his back.

"Tirion, let me in. It's Lena."

Tirion loosened his hold on the stag horn grip of his sword, and opened the door for the Princess. "So, why come to visit Valian just forty minutes before his meeting with your father?"

"He asked me to bring him these," She held up a fairly small beige package in one hand and a sheathed sword in the other. "He said he would appreciate it if Valian could wear all this to the meeting."

Tirion took the items from Lena's hands and turned to set them on the coffee table. He spun on his heel and sat in the armchair once again.

"I'm debating whether I should stay here with you two or go back to the throne room with my father. I wonder which is worse."

"Well, if you stay here much longer, I'm afraid you might see Valian wearing nothing but a towel

around his waist once he's done washing up, so it's really up to you." Tirion put his hands behind his head and leaned further back in the chair.

"Yeah, no thanks, so I'm going to take that as an excuse to leave," Lena turned to reach for the door handle as she smiled and said, "I guess I'll see you two in a little over half an hour."

Tirion had merely waved her off as she left Valian's chambers.

Even though they had practically grown up in this castle together, they had never really been friends. He had always thought of her as a somewhat spoiled Princess with too much nonchalance, and he was sure she thought of him as an uptight yet highly trained fighter and nothing more, but he honestly didn't care. He never talked to the Princess unless it had to do with his job or her father, or now Valian, and he was perfectly fine with that.

Valian had walked into the foyer, as Tirion had expected, wearing nothing but a white towel around his waist, his damp hair barely fixed. "Have you seen my red tunic with white embroidery laying around here by any chance? I can't find it anywhere."

"No, but the Princess dropped this off for you to

wear about three minutes ago." Tirion held up the package Lena had given him.

Valian gave him a slightly puzzled look. "What is it?"

"Well, if you would hurry up and put it on, maybe we can find out."

Valian bared his teeth at Tirion, who merely responded with a nonchalant smile. Valian slipped back into his bedroom for a minute before he was out again wearing the contents of the box.

Valian wore a suit that covered his whole body from the neck down and clung to his skin tightly, but was still very flexible yet armored and padded in certain spots. It was made of black fabric and lacquered black leather, and there were many small pieces of armor made of dark anodized steel attached over it. That armor consisted of shoulderplates, cuffs around his lower arms, large pieces over the front of his thighs, knee pads, and knee high black leather boots. The outline of the royal symbol of the hippogriff was sewn into the chest in white thread. A shadowy, black cloak trailed him, its hood pulled over Valian's head and the folds of the dark fabric practically swallowing his feet whole.

"Fire," Tirion said in a joking manner. "Your

uniform looks nicer than mine."



Valian had nearly burst out laughing at the way Tirion gawked at the new uniform he wore, but he probably would have looked the same way if he had gotten a chance to look at himself in a mirror. He felt silly putting on a uniform of death for the King

"The King also wanted you to bring this." Tirion extended his arm out to hand Valian a sheathed sword.

The sheath was made to match Valian's uniform; the scabbard itself made of the same black leather as parts of his suit, and the locket and chape made from the same dark steel as the armor over his shoulders. He attached the sword to the right side of his leather belt. He reached across his waist with his left arm and held the scabbard in place with his right as he pulled the blade from its sheath. As much as Valian disliked the King, he had to admit, he knew how to make a blade, or at least, knew where to get them from.

The sword's hilt was quite beautiful. Its grip was wrapped in black leather, the cross guard and rain guard made from that familiar dark steel, and the pommel was

a polished sapphire designed to look like a Dragon's eye encircled in a ring of dark steel with smaller sapphires embedded in the sides of the ring. The blade was made of pure stainless steel, with the forte being about two inches wide, and the foible no less than about an inch. The length of the blade itself spanned a bit over thirty inches, and in total the weapon was near forty. It weighed about three pounds, and fit his hands nicely.

He hadn't brought any of the weapons Aldrev had given him over the past few years, for he feared it would pose to much of a threat and might have endangered his trust with certain people, but gods above, had he regretted not having a blade at his side. It felt good to have a sword in his hand again.

He re-sheathed his new blade, pushed the hood off his head so it rested against his back, and followed Tirion out the door and down the hallway.

As they walked through the courtyard on their way to the throne room, Valian said, "You know, we should duel one of these days. See how good our skills with swords and daggers really are."

"I would love to kick your ass in a sword fight, so I don't see why not." He gave Valian a wild grin.

Valian's brows raised as he said, "Oh, getting

cocky, are we? Well, we'll just have to see about that."

They passed under the rosebush archway and walked straight ahead into the throne room. Valian had opened the doors to find the King standing at the foot of the dais, and Lena sitting on her small throne above. She had immediately jumped to attention when Valian and Tirion walked in.

Valian and Tirion had stopped about ten feet away from the King and bowed as he said, "Ah, I'm glad to see the new uniform fits," He turned and picked up a small envelope from the marble stairs leading up to the dais. "This is the name of the rebel leader I want you to track for a few days. Once I have enough information, I will give the order for you to kill him. He doesn't go outside much, only when he has to travel from meeting spot to meeting spot, or so I have been told, so I am counting on you to get into those meeting spots without getting noticed, understood?"

Valian nodded and slipped the envelope into his pocket.

"Well then, all that's left to do is really see you in action." He shifted his gaze from his Champion to his Captain of the Royal Guard. "I want you to fight Valian, I want to see which one of you really is the better

swordsman."

He walked up a few of the marble steps and sat down. "Well? What are you two waiting for? On with it."

Valian smiled and raised his brows at Tirion, then pulled out the new sword he had just been given, and Tirion pulled out the duel blades known as Tyrhung and Aetherius from over his shoulders. Valian glanced over his shoulder ever so slightly to see Lena leaning far forward in her throne, her eyes wide, an almost wicked grin spread across her face.

The Princess wanted to see them fight and make fools of themselves, he was certain.

Valian snickered to himself. Too bad the fight wouldn't last very long.

CHAPTER 8

Lena had been waiting all morning to see these two go toe-to-toe with their blades, and now she would finally get to see it.

Tirion spread his blades out at his sides as he glared at Valian and ran for him. He slashed for Valian, but the Dragonblood was too quick. Tirion's steel sliced nothing but air.

"Oh, I hadn't realized we had started yet." Valian gave Tirion a wicked smile as he dove just out of reach of Tirion's blades, fast as lightning. The Captain swung one blade at his throat and the other at his leg, but both missed their mark. It appeared Valian had decided to go on defense as Tirion continued to swing his blades in quick, fluid motions that would've killed a mortal man.

After multiple minutes of Tirion lashing out and Valian dodging his blows with his speed, Tirion began to grow tired, and Valian began to attack. Valian raised his sword high above his head and brought it crashing down towards Tirion's head, but the Captain's blades crossed in an X, blocking Valian's sword. Tirion slid his blades against each other, throwing Valian's out of the hold. The Dragonblood stumbled back, giving Tirion another chance to go on the offense, but Valian was too quick with his Dragonblood speed and stamina. Before Tirion could process where his opponent had gone and what had happened to him, His legs were swept out from under him, sending him falling backward and landing hard on the quartz floor below. Valian placed a boot on Tirion's chest and pointed his sword at the Captain's throat.

Even from atop the dais, Lena could see the looks the two gave each other, as if a bet or wager had just been settled between the two. Tirion tucked his swords into their sheaths over his shoulders as Valian extended his free hand to help the Captain up, and as ashamed as Tirion was, he grabbed Valian's hand as he was pulled to his feet.

Her father let out a haughty laugh. "That was

incredible, Valian. You were able to send one of my finest soldiers to the ground within a matter of minutes. Well done." The King stood from the marble steps, the obsidian pommel of his great sword, Arid, shaped to look like a dragon's head- which Valian found ironic- glimmering in the light as he did so. "Tirion, perhaps you and your men should take lessons from my new Champion." He chuckled to himself again. "Well, now that you have officially used your new sword in a battle, I think it deserves a name." He paused, pretending to contemplate options in his head, even though Lena had known he had named the sword himself the day he had ordered it be created for Valian, but Lena wasn't entirely sure why. "I believe, Dragon's Fang is a fitting name, don't you?"

"A fitting name, indeed." Valian sheathed the sapphire-pommeled blade.

"Your Majesty." Tirion said as he bowed and turned to leave the throne room, Valian close behind.

Lena simply smiled to herself as the Captain hung his head in embarrassment as he exited.



Gods, Valian was proud with his performance. He knew he was going to beat Tirion, he just hadn't expected to knock him off his feet so glenting fast.

Tirion had been keeping his head low and his hands tucked into his pockets for almost the entire walk back to Valian's room until he said, "Tirion, it was just one fight. You have no need to beat yourself up because you lost."

Tirion quickly turned to face Valian. "No, you don't get it. For ten years, I have been building a reputation as one of the finest Captains of the Royal Guard ever known to this kingdom. Since you simply swiped my legs away from under me within a matter of mere seconds, the King knows I am nowhere near one of the finest soldiers known to man any longer."

"You can't blame yourself for this. Keep in mind, I was trained by a skillful retired mercenary with a secret assortment of weapons hidden under his bed, you were left to teach yourself with practically nothing as a child, and I find that a fairly large achievement in itself, don't you?" Tirion still stared forward, not responding. Valian placed a hand on his new friend's shoulder. "Also, you have to remember, your human. I'm... not. There's a reason I move so fast, Tirion. I have an

entirely different type of blood and body type than you, for the gods' sakes." Valian smiled at him.

Tirion hesitated for a moment, and then turned and smiled back. "You know, you're right. I might not be the best swordsman in the world, definitely not compared to beings like you, or Elves, or even Demons of all things, but amongst us mortals, I think I'd still do pretty well." He smiled again, as if simply repeating what Valian had just said in his own words had finally gotten the message across.

They had walked into Valian's chambers, and sat down at the kitchen table. Tirion had ordered breakfast from one of the passing servants in the halls, who claimed a plate of Heirafynnian crepes would be there in a few minutes.

"So, you've never told me how you came to be Captain of the Royal Guard at age eighteen. It seems like quite an accomplishment as well, by the way." Valian had been wondering about this very topic since he first got to know Tirion.

"Well, the story probably isn't as impressive as you think it is, but basically, the men of the Fordragon bloodline have been the captains of the Royal Guard for years now, and because my father died earlier than

expected due to a severe illness, I was asked to step up early. The King had been like a second father to me in my earlier childhood because my father and he were good friends, so he was the one who convinced me my skills were good enough to be a beginner's Captain at age thirteen."

Valian heard someone knock on the door, and he suspected it was the servant back with the food. He stood from the dining table and walked through the kitchen and the main room. He opened the door to find not a servant carrying platters of breakfast crepes, but Lithean.

She wore a simple white tunic and black leggings, her long brown hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, her eyes glistening. He looked her over for a moment, as if he had forgotten how pretty she was.

She did the same to him. "You look rather interesting. What's that deathly-looking outfit for?"

Valian crossed his arms. "What, you don't like it?"

She giggled. "No no, you look good. It's very... form fitting. But, *what* is it?"

"Well, it's my new uniform, for my Champion job."

“Ah. Okay.”

“Anyway, Lithean. What’re you doing here?”

Valian leaned against the doorframe, a bit confused, and still somewhat tired. “How did you even know this was my room?”

“Do I need a reason to stop by?” She crossed her arms as she tilted her head to the side and smiled at him. “Because you did just this without any particular reason yesterday. And I asked Lena which room it was.”

“Ooh, she’s gotcha there.” Tirion said from the kitchen.

Lithean laughed softly. “May I come in? I don’t think I’ve been introduced to your friend, yet.”

“Oh, of course.” Valian led Lithean into the kitchen, where they sat down at the table with Tirion.

“So, you’re Lithean, correct?” Tirion asked, resting his elbows on the table.

“Yes, and you are..?” Lithean rested her elbow on the chair’s arm, and her head in her hand closest to Valian.

“Captain Tirion Fordragon of the Aereden Royal Guard.” He held out his hand across the table in a gesture for a handshake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”



Lithean turned from Tirion sitting across from her to Valian sitting next to her, startled. “You’re friends with the Captain of the soldiers that killed your parents!? How? Why?”

“Well, um, first, he wasn’t the one who led those armies. It was his father who did it, but he’s dead now. Second, he isn’t *completely* devoted to the King, as I’ve been learning. He only does what’s asked of him for a certain amount of pay. His job is pretty similar to mine, actually, when you think about it. We would both rebel against him if we had to.” Valian looked down at his hands clasped together on the table as he twiddled his thumbs.

Tirion nodded slowly. “He’s right, I do not agree with everything the King does, but this has been my life since I was born. I can’t abandon it all, and just let my father down. Even if he did kill Valian’s parents… but under the King’s order, so you really can’t blame him either, right?”

Lithean looked to Valian, then back to Tirion, then to Valian again. She seemed unconvinced as she sighed

loudly. “Alright. If you trust him, then I trust him.”

“Glad that’s settled. I was hoping you two would-” Valian was interrupted by a knock at the door. He stood, walked to the door, and returned with two plates of what appeared to be crepes.

“Oh, uh, right, I wasn’t expecting you to visit, so we only ordered two plates.” Valian bit his lip and glanced to Tirion, who simply shrugged.

“It’s alright. I ate before I came.” She leaned back in her chair.

As the two boys ate and talked about stuff she didn’t understand and/or know about, Lithean stood and walked into the main room. She looked around, slowly taking in the decorations of Valian’s temporary chambers. She noticed the bookshelf on the left side of the room, and browsed through it. She realized that many of the books there were some that she had read before, and many others still caught her eye.

She would have to ask to borrow some of them, sometime.

Lithean felt a presence at her side and turned her head. It was Valian. He brushed his finger over many of the books’ spines as he said, “I take it you like to read, too?”

She pulled out a book with a crimson red cover and gold inlay down the spine. “Mm, yes. I used to read a lot when I was younger back in Valindale, but I got... caught up, with other things.” She put the book back. “It turns out we have similar taste in novels. I’ve read a few of these.” She looked to him and smiled, but then turned to look over the kitchen counter to notice Tirion had left. “Where’d *he* go?” She jerked her head in the dining table’s direction.

“He um, he had some errands to do.” Valian jumped in surprise slightly. “Oh fire, I just remembered. I’m supposed to be doing research on someone right now.”

Lithean gave him a puzzled look. What was he talking about? What research?

He read her expression perfectly. “For the King. *I am* his Champion. I’m required to do things like this.” He walked towards his bedroom door. “Just be glad I’m not killing this man. I think.”

He slipped through the door, and Lithean merely smiled and shook her head. When he returned he had changed from the black and gray uniform he wore earlier into a red tunic with rolled up sleeves and gray trousers, but the black and gray sword with a sapphire pommel

still attached to his right hip.

He pulled out a white piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and read the name, “Connor Galligan. I suppose I should go to the library and find the records of everyone who lives in and has visited Elderon. This may take a little while, so if you want to return home, that’s fine.”

“Well, you know I despise the King, but if you want help, I could come with you.” She put her hands on her hips.

“I wouldn’t mind the company.” Valian looked to the clock in the corner of the large room. “We have nine hours to get all the information on Galligan, then I need to go out to track him.” He walked over to the front door and said, “We should get going.”

CHAPTER 9

They had spent the first four hours looking through the library's more recent records, but it appeared that this man had disappeared from the records entirely in the more recent years.

It wasn't another two hours later until Lithean had found Galligan's name in the records roughly twenty seven years old.

The file read;

[Galligan, Connor]

Sex: Male

Age: 10

Address: 472 Korinth Avenue

The file claimed he was ten years old, but the

file was written twenty seven years ago, placing the man in his late thirties.

If Galligan had disappeared from recorded history twenty seven years ago, it was quite possible he no longer lived at the recorded address, but it was worth a shot. They had no other leads to go off of.

Valian glanced to the large clock face on the far wall of the library, which read seven o'clock. He glanced out the window to see an orange and pink sky, the sun slowly dropping below the horizon.

"So, all that's left now is to go find this guy and follow him for a few days until I learn his schedule and what he plans to do that bothers the King so much."

Valian mumbled to himself as he looked over the file to make sure its information stayed in his head before he put it back in the library's records.

"You say that like it's gonna be easy." Lithean crossed her arms. "Again, if you want assistance keeping track of this guy, I'll be happy to help."

"Who's job is this, again? I wouldn't want to put you at risk like this, I'm the King's Champion, not you. Besides, I thought you hated him? And I'm sure you're growing tired and hungry by now, right?" He walked up to her and gave her a sincere but exhausted

smile before the two of them began to walk towards the library's front doors.

“Aren’t you?”

Valian enjoyed the thought that Lithean cared about his well-being and what happened to him. He didn’t feel like many people did right now... “I can go a few more hours without food.”

“Just because you *can*, doesn’t mean you *should*.”

They had reached Valian’s chambers, and both stepped inside. Lithean had asked to borrow a book, and Valian had said it was fine as he walked into his bedroom to change into his black and gray uniform, his sword still attached to his hip.

When he returned to the main room he found Lithean standing by the door patiently. She held the book in front of her waist with one hand, and grabbed her wrist above the book with the other. She raised her eyebrows in a non-spoken question to ask if he was ready to leave.

Valian had walked Lithean back home, and on the way she said, “I still think this isn’t the best idea. You should just forget about working for the King. I have enough money for both of us at this point if you

need any, but all I'm saying is maybe it isn't as good of an idea as you think it is to do dirty work for the man who made the order to slaughter your parents and countless others, y'know?"

"It's not like I sold my soul to the ma—" Valian suddenly realized that he *had* sold his soul to the man who slaughtered his parents and countless others, and he really didn't feel like telling Lithean...

Oh fire... He had known what he was doing when he performed the Blood Oath with the King, hadn't he? Maybe Lithean was on to something. Maybe it would be smart to just simply try to unofficially break all ties with the tyrant in charge of Aereden and maybe live with Lithean until he could support himself some other way.

But that brought up another aspect to the argument; this was the only paying job Valian had at the moment, and it wouldn't be too easy to find another one that paid as well. Not at this age, and not in this city.

And so it seemed his decision was already made. "Look, I know the King's done some awful things, but for right now, I can't choose whether I truly support or oppose him enough to plot against him, not yet, anyway. So until I learn more about him, I *have* to work for him.

I would never ask you for your money, not now, because I can work for myself just fine. I'll do enough of his missions until I have a good amount. Once I do, well, we'll just have to see how things will go on from there. Deal?"

Lithean rolled her eyes. It was obvious she wasn't happy with the agreement, but she couldn't say anything to convince Valian otherwise. "Fine. Deal."

When they had reached Lithean's house, they both stepped inside. Lithean walked into her bedroom, and Valian walked farther down the hallway into her backyard.

It was dark out. Perfect.

Valian could now fly overhead under the cover of nightfall. He looked to the backyard door as if he could see straight through to Lithean, hoping that he really was right.

With one last deep breath, he closed his eyes, shifted into the midnight dragon, and took off.

He probably would've listened to Lithean if he had known what he was getting himself into by hunting down Connor Galligan

CHAPTER 10

Valian had been watching Galligan for a little over a week now, and he had managed to memorize his schedule. Every other weekday, his target went to the same bar in the slums, probably to meet with his partners in crime, or whoever. On the other weekdays he stayed in his house all day, which luckily had been the right address, and on the weekends he stayed at home most of the day, but went to the docks of the Revaden River just outside the kingdom around the middle of the night.

It was a warm Friday summer night. Valian had followed Galligan from his house through the dark shadows of smaller streets to the oh-so familiar bar. He had watched the man go inside, waited a minute or two, pulled the hood of his black cloak as far forward over his

face as it would go, and walked inside.

The relatively small room had splintering wooden floors, cracked stone walls adorned with cloth drapes and faded tapestries, and filled with small oak tables and booths, every single one of them surrounded by hordes of people.

People played poker and other such card games, drank shot after shot of beer, whiskey, and scotch, and talked and laughed together.

Every group was laughing and smiling with each other, all except for a quiet booth near the very back of the bar. Four men sat at the booth, all of them wearing gray and red cloaks that looked like smoke filled skies with specks of blood spattered about. On the backs of the cloaks blazed a black circle with two smaller white circles, one on top of the other inside the bigger black circle, sewn into the center of it. One of the hooded men happened to be Connor Galligan.

Valian spied a group of drunken card players near Galligan's table, and swaggered up to them. He threw a small bag of rocks he had gathered in hopes of them passing as coins on the table as he said, "Mind if I join?"

"I don't see nothin' wrong in lettin' the boy

play, do you?" One of them said to the others.

"Nah, o' course not. Let 'im have 'is fun." The small group burst into laughter. "O' course, he's only wastin' his money, As if we'd ever let him win!"

Valian sat in an empty seat almost directly back-to-back with Galligan, for he didn't really care about the card game in front of him. He was more focused on trying to listen to what the men in dark gray cloaks were talking about behind him.

Even though Valian had good hearing, it was hard to hear the quiet, whispering men behind him over the loud, laughing men in front of him. He had managed to grasp a few important things, though.

Galligan whispered, "Tomorrow night; that's when we get the biggest shipment we've ever gotten before. Be ready. Meet me there at—" A burst of laughter drowned out his voice.

Another man said under his breath, "What happens if we get caught? We really shouldn't be—" he was cut off again. "-cause the King will probably have us hanged in the streets for everyone to see once he finds out—"

It wasn't the sound that cut him off, however. It was another one of the hooded men. "Quiet! You can't

go around speaking our plans in public places like-”

The last words he was able to pick up came from Galligan again. “Look, both of you shut up. Just meet me at the Revaden docks tomorrow night, and *stay quiet* about it!”

That’s really all Valian needed to hear. He managed to catch a glance of the three other men as they nodded, stood up, and walked out the door. He turned back to the drunkards at the table before him. “Well boys, it’s been fun, but I’ve got to go. Enjoy the card game.”

“Aw, that’s a shame. I was getting ready to win!” Valian heard one of them shout as Valian stood from the table and left the bar.

The four members of the blood-spattered-smoke-filled-sky-looking figures all walked off in different directions, but even from the back, it was obvious which one was Galligan. He was the only one that looked like he could actually stand his ground in a fight. He had broad shoulders and a muscular build, whereas the other three were skinny and probably would struggle to lift a large broadsword.

Valian followed Galligan through a dark alleyway that transitioned from the slums to the

residential district, when Galligan suddenly spun on his heel and pulled a chakram that had been strapped to his back from beneath his cloak. “Why the hell are you following me, boy?” He tightened his grip on the handle within the circular metal blade, eager to hurl it across the alleyway.

“That depends. What are you planning to have shipped into the city tomorrow night?” Valian drew Dragon’s Fang from its scabbard.

“*That*, is none of your business. Stay out of it.” Galligan spat out the first word like poison in his mouth as his grip grew even tighter.

“I’m going to ask you one last time, Connor Galligan, what are planning to have shipped into the city tomorrow night?” Valian matched his bitter tone.

Galligan didn’t bother to respond as he grunted and hurled the chakram through the shadows of the alleyway fast as an arrow, aimed straight for Valian’s neck. Valian’s sword sprang up and caught the chakram seconds before it made contact with his neck, the metal of his blade jutting between the chakram’s blade and handle as it spun with a *blank* to land against the rain guard of Dragon’s Fang. He flicked the chakram aside, and it clattered against the cobblestones below. Valian

raised his blade and pointed it in Galligan's direction.

Galligan, defeated, wavered for a few moments, and put his hands up. Or so Valian thought.

He had bought into Galligan's trick, a rookie mistake.

Galligan flicked his wrist to reveal a small package of thorn-covered red herbs from his sleeve. "You wanted to know what I plan to have shipped in? Have a taste for yourself." It smacked against the cobblestones at Valian's feet before he even saw Galligan's hand hurl the package toward him. The thorns ripped the package open, and the scent coming off the herbs floated through the alleyway fast.

Valian looked up from the package to Galligan, but the man was already around the corner. The herb's scented poison was visible in the air, now, a faint red mist forming around Valian's legs. He began to run down the alleyway, leaving the torn package and chakram behind, but the mist clung to Valian's clothes.

He barely reached the edge of the alleyway before the mist entered his nose and mouth. He fell to his knees.

He couldn't feel his heart beating in his chest anymore.

DRAGONBLOOD

He was having trouble breathing.
His vision grew dark and groggy as he collapsed
on the stones below.

CHAPTER 11

Oran had woken up bright and early the next morning. He was planning to finally explore the area around the kingdom, the forests and grasslands just beyond the kingdom's walls in particular.

He threw on a pale green tunic, black breeches, and a gray cloak and shifted to his wolf form as he rushed down the hallway. He made an abrupt left turn as he ran through the castle's gates and into the city below. He turned and took a shortcut through the residential district. He hadn't stepped foot in this area of the kingdom, yet, and he had to say that the myriad of colorful houses was impressive.

He turned into an alleyway that connected the residential district to the slums and smelled the strong

scent of blood.

What lay before him was Valian's unmoving body, fallen against the cobblestone floor.

Oh gods above, was he dead?

Oran shifted to his Vulpitt self again and tried to pick his friend up. He walked as quickly as he could down the side of the street with his own arm under Valian's, holding onto his shoulders.

Valian was heavier than Oran initially thought, and he was growing tired as he struggled to haul his friend's still body with him.

“Oh my gods, Valian!” He heard a girl shout from across the street. She wore a loose black tunic and brown trousers, her wavy brown hair draped over her shoulders and down her back. She sprinted from what Oran guessed was her house to his side. Oran stopped moving as he glanced to her, an expression of worry and panic on her face.

However, that quickly changed to anger as the girl lifted her gaze from Valian to Oran. She raised her fist, readying herself to punch him in the jaw if need be as she said, “What the hell is wrong with you? Who are you? What did you do to him?” She opened her fists, and flames danced in her open palms, and Oran was growing

a bit terrified. Still holding Valian, he raised his free arm out to her. He opened his mouth to explain, but then he caught the girl's expression change again to understanding and realization as she took in his Vulpitt teeth. "Wait, you're his Vulpitt friend, Oran... right?"

"Y-yes!" He sputtered frantically. "Now for the love of the gods, he's gonna die if we don't do something. Help me out here!" The girl put Valian's opposite arm over her shoulders as well as they dragged him to the castle gates, through the courtyard, and into the hospital ward.

"What happened to him?" One of the healers asked.

"I- I don't know. I found him in an alleyway, not moving, a few minutes ago. I have no idea how long he was out for." Oran set Valian down on one of the beds in the closest free room down the hospital ward hallway. He looked to the girl again, but she wasn't looking at him, she just kept staring at Valian. But not with worry, more with shock and surprise as realization hit her.



The healers had rushed about around Lithean

treating Valian, but all she could think about was Galligan. Connor Galligan had done this to him. All Lithean could do was think that she should have put up more of a fight to try to stop him. She'd been right after all.

"His pulse is gone and he's not breathing." One of the healers said, shaking Lithean from her thoughts.

Tears burned the back of her throat. "I-is he dead?" Oh gods above, if he was, she couldn't do anything but blame herself.

"No. We detected Bloodbane in his system."

Another healer said.

"Oh, of course!" Oran remarked from beside her. "I knew he wasn't dead, he couldn't have been. He's better than that, always has been. But Bloodbane on the other hand, that makes much more sense."

"How does it make sense?" Lithean said slowly. She wasn't quite sure what Oran was talking about.

"Well, he's been going on the King's missions tracking that guy he won't tell me the name of for about a week, so it must've been the man he was tracking who poisoned him." Oran's shoulders relaxed. That's why it smelled like blood in the alleyway even though Valian wasn't bleeding. Bloodbane gives off a blood-like

scent.” Oran spoke with confidence in his voice, as if the fact Valian was the King’s Champion wasn’t a secret. But then again, she figured everyone in the room knew that. The healers all worked for the King, and had probably been informed about the Dragonblood.

“That’s correct. Now, we’ve applied the antidote into his bloodstream, so he should be okay. I don’t mean to scare you two, but emphasis on the ‘should’. If he’s been out for more than twenty-four hours, he might not come back.” The first healer said again as both women in white left the room.

Lithean loosed a breath she had been holding back since they first came to the hospital ward. Valian would be all right.

“I take it it’s been less than twenty-four hours since he was poisoned?” She had forgotten the Vulpitt was there for a moment.

She nodded, wiping away the faint tears that still remained on her cheeks.

As Oran began to walk towards the door he said, “Thank the gods...” He turned to her. “I never got your name.”

“Oh, it’s Lithean,” She sat down in a chair next to Valian’s bed. “And sorry about, almost punching you,

earlier.”

Oran laughed softly as he exited the room. “Oh yes, Valian’s told me about you. And it’s quite alright. You were upset. I get that.”

Lithean looked at Valian again, his near-lifeless face calm and pale but not entirely leached of color yet. She stood, squeezed his hand in hers, and left the room.



Valian lurched forward suddenly and reached for his sword or Galligan’s chakram or whatever he could grab to defend himself.

He felt nothing but bed sheets. He rubbed his groggy eyes and let them clear slowly. As he took in the unfamiliar room, he realized where he was.

White floors, white walls, tables and shelves covered in containers and jars of liquids and other such things, a bed covered entirely in white sheets.

The hospital ward.

He also realized he had been stripped of his sword and uniform and didn’t know where it was. Clothes lay at the foot of the bed, and so he slipped them on. A loose white tunic, white leggings, white socks, and

dark gray boots.

This place sure did have a consistent color scheme.

Once he had pulled his boots on, he heard two pairs of footsteps enter the room. Valian didn't turn around, for he figured they were simply healers.

"Oh, you're awake!" Valian sat up on the edge of the bed again, surprised to see Lithean bound forward to face him. "Are you hurt? What happened with Galligan? How did he poison you?" She said as she ran her hands over his arms, shoulders, neck, and face, checking for wounds or sore spots.

Valian laughed softly as he took her hands in his. "Lithean, I'm fine, really."

She gave off a sigh of relief. "Well, now that that's taken care of," Lithean punched him in the arm. "Gods above, how *dare* you scare me like that? I thought you were dead and then they told us you'd be fine but you still slept for a day and a half and then I began to doubt you would really come back to me—" She went on, speaking fast.

Tirion leaned against the wall by the door holding Valian's uniform as he smiled. "Lovers worry far too much."

“We’re just friends.” Valian glowered at Tirion, then turned to look at Lithean again. “I’m sorry. I tried to follow Galligan after I found out what his plans were until he threw a chakram at me and then a package of, Bloodbane.” The realism of the situation hit him like another punch in the shoulder, except much harder.

“Wait, you said I was out for a day and a half, Bloodbane takes a day to kill someone. How am I alive?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Tirion asked from behind Lithean now.

“Galligan throwing the Bloodbane at me in the alleyway that night.”

“Oran and I found you the next morning and brought you straight here. They injected the antidote within ten hours of your being poisoned, so that’s how you’re still alive.” Lithean sat on the edge of the bed next to Valian.

Galligan had planned to smuggle the Bloodbane the night after the one Valian followed him. It was already the morning after that. Galligan and his men already had their shipment of Bloodbane in the city, who knew where it was, and what they would do with it?

Valian’s expression became dead serious. “I’m

too late. Galligan brought a shipment of Bloodbane into the city last night. For all I know, he has enough to cover the whole city. We have to find him, we have to stop him.”

“We’re getting to that, but you need to rest. You just woke up from your heart being stopped. It might not be as easy as you think to just get up and walk out of here.” Tirion remarked. But Valian didn’t feel the slightest bit sore or tired, so he didn’t think getting up would be much of a problem, but he still listened to his friend. He’d never encountered Bloodbane before.

“Tirion already told the King what Galligan has, now all we need to do is find out what his plans are, alert the King, and do what he tells us to do.” Lithean smiled.

“What do you mean *we*?” Valian cocked his head sideways at Lithean.

“She means we’re going to help you, because obviously you can’t take care of things on your own. So much for being such a great Champion” Tirion chimed in.

Valian shook his head and smiled. “Hey, remember I took you down in minutes. But alright, what time is it then?”

“Noon.”

“I only need a few hours to rest, then we’ll head out. Sound like a plan?”

“Let me put someone else in charge of the Royal Guard while I’m gone, then I’ll be back here.” Valian nodded and Tirion left the room.

Tirion wasn’t exactly right, Valian didn’t need to rest one bit, but he lay back down on the bed and put his hands behind his head anyway. Just because he didn’t need rest didn’t mean he didn’t want it.

“Do you think I should tell him?” Lithean asked, breaking the brief silence.

“Tell him what?” Valian propped himself up on his elbows.

“About my magic.”

Valian remembered how he had left that detail out of the story where he explained the night he met Lithean to Tirion. “Well that’s your secret to tell, not mine. If you trust him go ahead. But I’m not going to make that decision for you.”

She sat on the edge of the bed staring at the sheets beneath her hand, contemplating.

“He knows I have magic, and I’m not dead, so...” Valian made an attempt at comfort, but he didn’t think it worked much.

“But your magic is different, and the people who would essentially kill you for it know about it anyway, and use it to their advantage, as well. The King had you brought here *because* of your magic. He wouldn’t kill you like he might kill me, at least not yet.” Her grip tightened around the sheets.

“True.” Valian crossed his ankles and pulled his knees up to his chest. He didn’t really know what to tell her. “How about this; you don’t tell him. Let him figure it out on his own later today. We’re probably going to face Galligan and his men again, so you’ll use your magic yo fight, right? He’ll see it, realize you might’ve saved his life by throwing a fireball at an attacker, and he won’t ask for the King to have you killed, because why would he have someone who saved him be sentenced to death? Besides, he and I are friends now, and he knows you mean a lot to me. So there’s that, too.”

She bit her lip, thinking about the ups and downs. “Mm, alright.” She stood and put a hand on his shoulder. “You should get your rest. Especially if you want to be ready for later today.” She walked around the bed and out of the room, and as Valian watched her go, he leaned back against the mattress and pillows, shut his

eyes, and fell asleep slowly.



The door creaked open, and Valian woke to find Lithean and Tirion wearing full black. Lithean wore all black everyday clothes, those of which being a black tunic and corset, black leggings, and black leather boots. Tirion wore a black leather chest plate with strips of leather overlapping each other making it look like thick dragon scales, a black hood peeking out from the back of the collar, black leggings with more bits of leather armor over the knees and lower legs, and his dual blade handles peeking over his shoulders.

Tirion gestured to Valian's uniform in the corner, which was where he had put it during his first visit, and so Valian stood, walked to the corner, and grabbed the uniform. Lithean turned around to look away politely and browsed through the shelves of antidotes, and Tirion made the bed as Valian slipped from his hospital ward clothing and into his black cloth, leather, and dark steel outfit. He picked up Dragon's Fang, attached it to his right hip, and pulled his black cloak over his shoulders, leaving its hood flat against his

back.

“So, what’s the plan?” Lithean asked, still brushing her fingers over jar labels.

Valian rolled his shoulders and neck, allowing the suit to adjust to his body. “The plan, is to sneak into Galligan’s house, find him, question him, then—”

Tirion interrupted Valian. “Kill him. At this point, the King doesn’t care what he’s doing with the poison, he just wants him dead so he can’t execute whatever plan he has.”

Valian didn’t like it, but he nodded slowly as he walked to Lithean’s side, making her jump. “Also, please don’t die. I’d never forgive myself for bringing you along in the first place.”

Tirion snickered. “You’re saying that to the girl who doesn’t carry a weapon with her.”

“How many times do I have to tell you Tirion, I don’t need one.” She turned around to face him, crossing her arms.

“If you say so.” Tirion rolled his eyes as he walked over to join them.

Valian glanced out the window on the far wall. “We should head out. The sun just set.”

He walked to the door of the room and exited,

the others following. Connor Galligan would get what was coming to him.



Valian, Lithean, and Tirion walked down the short hallway, onto the dusty platform that connected the throne room, royal chambers, great hall, royal kitchens, and hospital ward, under the rose archway, and out through the courtyard.

“So, are we just going to walk up to Galligan’s house and knock, or... what?” Lithean asked Tirion, both of them struggling to match Valian’s quick pace as he ran ahead of them.

“Valian’s the one who’s been following the guy for a week. Ask him.” Tirion pulled his hands from his pockets as he yelled, “Gods above, why’s Velgrom given you such winds under your heels to push you along so quickly?”

“It’s not Velgrom’s work, Captain, just determination. And great stamina.” Valian said over his shoulder as his pace quickened even more.

“God power, determination and stamina, or dragon blood?” Lithean asked as she tried harder to

catch up to Valian. “Anyway, where are we going to find this guy?” She asked again, still not entirely sure if Valian even heard her.

“We’re going to the docks. That’s where Galligan and his men meet on weekend nights.” Valian looked up at the starry night skies above and stopped abruptly, making Lithean nearly crash into him. He put one hand on his hip and braced his other thumb and forefinger on his temples as he shook his head and smiled. “Wait a minute, what are we doing? I can do this,” He walked forward a few steps, closed his eyes, and did what made Tirion smirk.

What took Valian’s place was a dragon as long a carriage, and as tall as the average man, and the color of the sky above with large obsidian horns, two large ones on either side of his head with two smaller ones beneath, all four of them twisting up and back, long, thin, white teeth, and mercury reptilian eyes. He crouched down and made a gesture with his head towards his neck and back as a signal telling them to jump on. Tirion walked forward first, hauled himself onto Valian’s scaly back in front of his wing joints, and held out his hand to Lithean. She grabbed his hand and pulled herself up onto Valian’s back in front of Tirion.

“Well this should be fun.” Claimed the Captain as Valian spread his black wings spotted with specks of sterling silver scales and launched himself into the air. He hovered a few feet above the ground for a moment, looking over his shoulder to check on his passengers, and took off. Lithean couldn’t help but scream as her stomach flipped over as Valian rose up above the castle walls and dove down into the city below.

She had never flown before, she had never even been anywhere near this height, and she felt like she was about to vomit, but she had to admit, once she opened her eyes, lifted her head, and looked down, the view was beautiful. The lights of Elderon shimmered in a brand new perspective.

She heard Tirion chuckle behind her, and turned around. No matter how queasy and unsettled she looked, Tirion was quite the opposite. He sat up straight, his hands braced against Valian’s hide lackadaisically, and looked down to the city as well. He looked as if he’d been flying before. Had he?

Well, it didn’t matter, because before Lithean could prepare herself, Valian plunged suddenly, sending Lithean’s stomach up into her throat. He dove straight down to the docks of the Revaden River, his wings

tucked in tight, and when Lithean closed her eyes and thought they would crash into the wet soil below, Valian's star spotted midnight wings flew open, catching them before they hit the floor. He hovered, flapped his wings a few times, and finally set his claws on the dirt below.

Tirion swung his legs around and pushed himself off, then helped Lithean off the dragon that changed to Valian in the familiar flash of light and pulse of magic.

“You two alright?” Valian asked as he ran his fingers through his windblown hair.

“How does your hair manage to end up windblown when your dragons don’t even have hair? But yeah, I’m fine. I’ve actually flown on the back of a hippogriff before, so this wasn’t a surprise to me. It’s a long story, I’ll tell it another time.” Tirion crossed his arms and smiled wide as Valian shrugged in response to his question.

“Not sure if I can say the same for myself.”
Lithean seriously wanted to vomit now.

“You don’t look too good. You’re a bit pale.”
Valian walked over to Lithean and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Oh gods.” Lithean braced a hand over her mouth as she bent over slightly, ready to throw up.

Tirion chuckled to himself, but the sound of his faint laughter was broken by the sound of footsteps. Valian drew his sword, and Tirion drew his two as Lithean recovered and steadied herself before opening her fists into bare palms, readying herself to throw fire if need be.

Two men wearing black trousers, normal brown leather chest plates not to different from Tirion’s, and smoke gray and blood red cloaks turned a corner around a boathouse.

“Hey! You three! What do you think you’re doing here? This part of the dock’s is off limits!” One of the men yelled as he drew two daggers from his hips. The other pulled a chakram similar to Galligan’s from his back.

“Tirion, you take the chakram, Lithean and I’ll take the knives.” Valian whispered over his shoulder to Tirion as they both pulled the hoods of their cloaks over their heads.



Tirion nodded and began to sprint towards the man with the chakram in a zigzag pattern, his feet turning and pushing against the dirt with each sudden change in direction, a wicked smile spreading across his face, readying to strafe away from the coming attacks.

The man reeled his arm back and let the chakram fly, the circular metal blade spinning at a slanted angle through the night sky like a silent, deadly bird. Its flight pattern lead the weapon in a wide curve as it headed straight for Tirion's neck, but the Captain stopped in his tracks and leapt back quickly, letting the chakram whiz by just inches in front of him. The blade kept spinning and made another curve as the slanted angle brought it back to the man who had fired it. He caught it in a thick leather glove effortlessly.

Tirion loosed a breath he had been holding and ran again, straight for the man this time. He made it to about ten yards in front of him before the gray and red cloaked man launched his chakram again. Tirion kept running, and before the spinning ring of sharp steel collided with his neck, he slid low across the dirt floor on his side, one leg stuck out in front of him straight, as the chakram flew above him. Tirion launched himself into a roll and stood again and ran towards the man, his

swords spread at his side.

Before the metal blade had returned to the gloved palm of its user, Tirion had sliced his sword through the man's throat, blood spraying Tirion's arms and chest, and more spilling onto the soil below.



Meanwhile, Valian had sulked into the shadows of the nearby buildings and trees, Lithean not far behind him. The man holding the daggers looked around warily, as he took a few steps forward. Valian gestured for Lithean to stay put here in the shadows, for this wasn't a good time to expose her magic just yet. She huffed and crossed her arms in protest but obeyed the order.

The man sheathed his daggers at his sides and exposed his arms from beneath the folds of his cloak to reveal leather gauntlets with small pockets holding small throwing knives. Valian smiled.

Throwing knives and daggers were the weapons Valian had initially trained with. It was because of his original natural skill in throwing knives and daggers that Aldrev had been so eager to train him into a perfect

fighter in the first place.

Valian was about twenty yards to the right of the man, still hiding in the shadows, waiting for the attacker to turn the other way before Valian sprinted in his direction, footsteps silent, Dragon's Fang held tightly in hand. The man under the hood either panicked or hadn't realized what was happening when Valian leaped at him, driving the pommel of his blade into the man's side, sending him flat on his back against the dirt, the wind knocked out of him.

"Where's Galligan." Valian placed a boot over the thin man's chest.

"I- I have no idea" he gasped. "where he is!"
The man squeaked out.

Valian pushed his boot down harder.

"I swear! I swear, I have no idea where he is!"

Valian pushed still.

"Okay, okay wait! I don't know exactly where he goes, but I know that he and three other men climb aboard a boat to talk, I think, with lots of other members as guards. I'm not really sure. Please don't kill me!"

Valian lifted his boot and let the man take a few breaths. Lithean and Tirion walked over to Valian, and before he could say anything to either Tirion or the man, Tirion

drew his sword and plunged it through the man's heart.

He gasped for breath, one hand over his wound, one behind him on the soil, bracing himself. He gasped once more, and his eyes became glossed over and rolled back in his head as he fell back against the blood soaked soil.

"Tirion! Why did you do that? There was no need to kill him!" Valian knelt down beside the man's corpse and looked up at Tirion, a scowl forming across his face.

"He gave us the information we needed, he works for Galligan. There was no need to keep him alive, either." Tirion kept his voice soft and serious, not showing any emotion, which angered Valian.

"He was not our target! Galligan was! Did you kill the other man, too?"

"Hey! Both of you listen. What's done is done. We can't go back now, and you two are being *very* loud, so *stop yelling at each other.*" Lithean braced a hand on each of their chests, keeping them apart, as she raised her voice as loud as she could through a whisper.

Tirion sheathed his sword then crossed his arms, and Valian still scowled, but he looked back down at the corpse and took the daggers and gauntlets filled with

throwing knives.

“You might want these.” Valian said as he handed Lithean the daggers.

She nodded and took them, keeping them tucked against her sides. Valian strapped the gauntlets around his lower arms, and noticed Tirion had snatched the chakram off the other man and attached it to a hook on his belt.

“The man said Galligan and many other men board a ship at this time, so I suggest we go looking for a boat with a gray and red flag.” Valian shifted into the midnight dragon again, Tirion and the already pale-faced Lithean climbed onto Valian’s back, and Valian spread his wings and took off in flight once more.



Sure enough, not more than thirty yards from the wide bank of the Revaden sat a medium-sized dark polished wooden boat with a gray flag spotted with red, a black circle with two smaller white circles, one above the other, sitting in the middle.

Valian hadn’t meant to make Lithean so uncomfortable during their first flight, so he gently

glided from the shore to the side of the boat for the second one.

He hovered by the side of the boat, keeping his body below the deck level as best he could while letting Tirion and Lithean climb off onto the boat's creaky floorboards by walking from his neck and head to the railing.

Valian shifted into himself and hung from the ship's railing by his hands and feet as he whispered so only Tirion and Lithean could hear, "Remember the plan?"

Both nodded.

"Good. I'll be back up when the mission's done." Valian pushed himself backward from the side of the boat and shifted into the aquatic cobalt dragon mid-backward dive. He tucked his legs close to his sides as he used his tail and wings to propel himself downward.

The plan was simple; Tirion and Lithean would get a few crewmembers' attention and lure them to the edge where they would attempt to push them off. Valian would see them and swim over to them, latch onto their arm or leg or torso with his jaws and drag them down until they drowned. Tirion had somehow convinced Valian he needed to kill them. Thank the gods the

Revaden was deep.

Valian swam in small circles below the boat impatiently, blowing jets of water from his gills for a few minutes until he heard the first splash. It was off the port side of the ship, and what caused that sound was a man flailing about in the water. He attempted to swim closer to the side of the boat so he could pull himself back up, but Valian was much faster than he was.

When the man was no less than two feet from grabbing the boat's edge, Valian bit down on his outstretched arm. The man screamed in pain, but all that came out was a plume of bubbles, for he was already being pulled under.

Once Valian felt he was deep enough that the man couldn't swim back up in time to avoid drowning, he released his jaws and went on his way to return to just under the surface once more. As Valian slithered his muscular tail back and forth behind him to get back up, he couldn't help but look over his shoulder.

The man in the gray and red cloak had stopped flailing now, either because he had already blacked out or because he realized it was useless to try to swim back up anyway. With a faint sigh of grief Valian turned his head back around.

The next crew member had fallen over, so Valian dragged him down as well.

Then the next.

And the next.

And quite a few more after that.

Then there was a long pause and no one was being pushed overboard anymore, and none of them had been Galligan yet, so their job wasn't done. Had they been compromised? Had Galligan found them? Were they okay?

Gods above, Valian needed to learn to stop clouding his head with so many thoughts and questions at once.

He couldn't wait any longer. He swam up to the surface and burst up from the water to hover next to the boat. He scanned the deck, but no one was on it, not even Tirion or Lithean. He flew above deck and shifted back as he landed with a soft *thunk*.

Even if the floorboards were somewhat creaky, Valian could keep his footsteps very near silent, so no one heard him when he slipped through the open door to the captain's cabin. There was no one inside. He noticed a small stairwell in the corner of the cabin behind the captain's desk. As quiet as he could be, Valian half

tiptoed half sprinted down the wooden stairwell.

Below deck were two lines of beds, multiple storage chests, cannons and wooden hatches to fire projectiles from, and at the front end of the boat opposite the staircase were Tirion, Lithean, another hooded figure holding an axe, and Galligan, his hood off, revealing his face.

He had very pale skin and wavy blonde hair that went just below his ears, with eyes so dark they appeared they could stare straight into your soul. In fact, his eyes looked almost exactly like-

The King's. Dark and demonic.

Oh gods, no. Not this again...

But Valian couldn't worry about how both figures terrified him on the inside, for Lithean's hands were tied together behind her with a rope, and Galligan's massive hand was holding her shoulder, not letting her move, the other holding his chakram to her throat.

Tirion's hands were tied behind him too, for he knelt down with his head turned sideways, his cheek pressed against a chopping block. The wood below was so bloodstained it was hard to imagine it was anything but, before. The man holding the axe standing next to Tirion was shifting his hands anxiously on the axe's

handle.

Galligan smiled and nodded to the other member. However, Tirion's expression was anything but scared. He looked straight, his mouth an unwavering line, his eyes fixed hard on the distance, emotionless. The man holding the axe raised it and propped it against his shoulder, waiting for Galligan to give the queue to drop it.

They hadn't noticed Valian yet. Good.

He stalked quietly behind a bed and knelt down, trying to make a good plan on such short notice. But Valian wasn't quick enough when it came to plan making with too many variables. Not to mention how panicked he was, for before Valian could stand and put his makeshift plan into action, he heard Galligan say the two words that reverberated through his ears, sending shockwaves of fear through his mind.

"Drop it."



Before Lithean could register what had happened, between the warm pulse of magic, the blur of yellow scales, the glint off the axe head as it flew from

the executioner's hands to the floor, and Galligan getting knocked back away from her, Lithean and Tirion were no longer in danger, for the moment at least.

The golden dragon with bright green eyes that sliced a sandstone claw through the ropes around her wrists was immediately recognized as Valian, who moved from her to Tirion, slicing away the ropes in one quick, precise movement.

As Tirion stood and rubbed his wrists, Valian shifted back to ask, “Are you two alright?” Even though Tirion had been the one with his head against the chopping block, Valian had said that looking directly at Lithean, almost as if the Captain didn’t exist for the moment.

She simply nodded, still a bit in awe, and Tirion said, “Yeah, I think so. My wrists hurt a bit though.” He smiled. Even when he just managed to avoid death, he could still joke. Gods, Lithean wished she were able to do that.

“I’ll be back in a minute.” Valian shifted back into the golden dragon and lunged for the executioner, who scrambled to reach for his axe.

As if that would do him any good...

Before the executioner could even get anywhere

close to the axe, Valian pinned him down and spiked him through the chest with one set of claws and sent the axe sliding across the floor with the other. It was obvious Valian was getting fed up with Galligan and his men, for without thought, he spit a short but wide plume of yellow fire at the executioner's face. He screamed for a while, but the screams died down when Valian clawed away the man's throat, or at least, the charred remains of it.

As Valian flung the burnt body of the executioner from his claws, he stared at Connor Galligan, fire practically raging behind his green eyes.

Lithean heard Tirion draw a sword from over his shoulder that he had just slung over his back once again, for they had been taken away from him and thrown against the wall just moments earlier, but she shot out an arm in front of him to block him as she said, "Let him." Tirion wanted to protest, but he had nothing to say, so he closed it again and resheathed what Lithean was pretty sure was Aetherius.

This entire time Galligan had remained stoic and wicked, an unmoving force ready to tear his way through the city, but now, with the dragon that stood as the teenage boy he had confronted in that alleyway a few

days ago standing in front of him again, he cowered in fear, backing against the thick wooden wall of the boat, his arm outstretched, holding the chakram in front of him as his last line of defense.

Galligan was afraid of him, and Valian knew it, now. Valian snarled, now less than five feet from Galligan, the latter now backed up against the wall with nowhere else to go. Valian opened his jaws to reveal the row of small, razor-sharp pearl-white teeth. He lunged forward and bit down around Galligan's throat, the man's head engulfed in Valian's jaws. With one quick turn of his serpentine neck, Valian snapped Galligan's neck. He spat out the now disembodied head onto the bloodstained floor below, dragon saliva and blood covering it, both dripping from Valian's teeth and coating his maw as well.

He shifted back, blood still around his lips, even as a human, and as he spat in disgust, he wiped it away with the folds of his cloak. He turned back to the body and said under his breath, "Don't ever mess with my friends." He turned to Tirion. "Alright, now that that's taken care of, I guess we should inform the King that Galligan's dead, right?"

"Ha, uh yeah okay, you two can go do that, and

I'll head back home. Good luck." Lithean rubbed her throat and coughed, for it still hurt from where Galligan had grabbed her to look her in the eye before he tied her up and from where the chakram had been held to it.

"You helped us take him down, you get to join us in the throne room, Lithean." Tirion said from behind Valian now.

"He's right. You deserve at least *some* credit."

Valian walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder, then leaned in close to whisper in her ear, "Does he know about your magic yet?"

Lithean caught Tirion raise an eyebrow at the two of them and laughed. "Yes, he does," She said aloud so they could all hear. "As we were knocking crewmembers overboard, I shot quite a few fireballs at some of them, which made them jump into the water to put themselves out." She flashed a smile at him. "He's perfectly fine with it. Although I think the fact that he actually finds me nice and fun to be with helps, too."

"Yeah sure. You've got some spitfire here, but watch out. She can be quite deadly when she wants to be. It's good to have her on our side, though." Tirion elbowed Valian in the side.

"Shut up." Was all Valian said, before he

walked above deck and shifted into the midnight dragon.
Lithean and Tirion climbed on, and Valian took off.

CHAPTER 12

As Valian landed in the middle of the courtyard, he couldn't stop thinking about how fast he had moved as the golden dragon. When he had designed it that night in Aldrev's stone training room, he knew it would be his fastest, but he never thought it would be so fast you could barely see it in its fastest moments.

No one had talked much during the flight. Everyone was tired and just wanted to go home. After their meeting with the King of Aereden, of course.

The three of them walked into the throne room and up to the foot of the dais, sleep tugging at their eyelids, but bowed at the waist anyway.

"Report." The King barked as he twirled his fingers around the obsidian pommel of his blade at his

hip.

Valian stood from his bow as he said, “Connor Galligan is dead, along with most of the men who followed him. Tirion has said he will send men back over to the docks to take away their shipments of Bloodbane and take the remaining followers as prisoners tomorrow morning.”

Valian caught the King’s look of surprise for a brief moment that he assumed no one else had noticed before his face became stoic once again. He wasn’t sure if it was because the King hadn’t thought Valian would be able to take down Galligan or because he hadn’t wanted him to.

“May I see proof, Dragonblood?” The King continued to play with the pommel of Arid, his black eyes not looking in their direction even once, which Valian wasn’t sure he was relieved or distressed about.

Tirion finally decided to step in. “Proof? You never asked for proof before, you’re Highness.”

“Well I’m asking for it now, aren’t I? He must have a weapon of some sort, retrieve it for me. Any weapon off his body will suffice. You have twenty-four hours.”

Growing agitated, the King looked up from his

sword to glare at the Captain, who still had the first attacker's chakram. "Is this enough evidence, your Majesty? I pulled this off Galligan's body, thinking I would keep it and practice with a chakram myself."

Valian's eyebrows raised slightly. They all knew that Chakram was off of one of the followers, not Galligan himself. He was surprised Tirion had really lied.

The King scowled again. "Hmm, yes, that will suffice." He seemed even more like he hadn't actually wanted Valian to succeed. But then his attention was immediately redirected to Lithean.

Oh gods, this can't be good. Was all Valian could think.

"So, who is this?" The King's amusement bothered Valian, but he wasn't entirely sure why. Was he being instinctively protective over her, or would he have been bothered like this if someone else was in Lithean's place?

"Um, Lithean. Lithean Riddian. I helped them. Kill Galligan and his men, I mean." She glanced to Valian, a question in her eyes. *Was that the right thing to say?*

Valian nodded once, slowly in response.

“Well, it is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Riddian. It is good to know these two are getting some extra help every now and then.” The King shot a wicked smile at Lithean, which obviously made her uncomfortable, and Valian even more so.

Valian broke the silence. He bowed as he said, “Good night, your Majesty.”

As the three left the throne room and walked through the courtyard, Lithean couldn’t help herself as she suddenly spoke out. “Gods above, that man is infuriating. Why does he have to stare at everyone and always smile as if he wants to rip out your heart all the time?” She sighed. “Sometimes, I just wanna set him alight and never look back at the consequences to follow.”

“Good to hear I’m not the only one.” Valian and Lithean smiled at each other.

They were in the foyer of the castle now, and Tirion had stayed quiet the entire time, which he usually wasn’t. “You okay? Did lying to the King like that mess you up that bad?” Lithean glanced to Tirion, confusion replacing her smile.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, I’m fine, just tired, is all.” He gave an exaggerated fake yawn. “I should probably,

head off to bed. Good night you two.” He waved Valian off over his shoulder and turned into the left wing of the castle.

Once Tirion was far enough down the hall, Valian turned to Lithean with his hands in his pockets and asked, “So, would you prefer to be walked home or flown?”

She smiled as she crossed her arms and placed a hand under her chin in joking contemplation. “Well, let’s see, if you walk me home, we get to talk. And, it’s dark out, so we might get jumped, and I know this sounds insane, but I like when that happens, cause then I get to use my magic without consequence. But then, if you fly me there, I can get a better view of the city, and I can also be within arm’s length of the clouds, maybe even the gods themselves. That sounds amazing. Also, I can walk with you any time of day, whereas we only get to fly at night. So hmm, I think flying sounds better.”

Valian’s eyebrows rose as he said, “I was only expecting a three or four word answer like, ‘Walking would be nice,’ or, ‘Flying sounds good,’ but that works too.” He smiled at her, and she jokingly scowled but smiled back too.

“Is there anything wrong with speaking my

mind?” She crossed her arms in joking anger, but had difficulty keeping a straight face.

“What? No! I enjoy listening to you, I never said it was a bad thing, I just-” He tried to defend himself until Lithean put a hand over his mouth and started laughing.

“It’s very easy to make you unsettled and nervous.” She removed her hand from his lips and tucked her hands into her pockets as well.

“Oh, um, sorry?”

She laughed again. “Sorry for what? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Gods above, I’m really bad at this.” Valian smiled.

She walked out the front gates before the foyer as she smiled and chuckled more. “Oh yes you’re terrible at it. But you’re cute and very nice, at least, so I’ll let it slide. But anyway, we are flying, yes?”

Valian followed her outside, shifted into the midnight dragon, let Lithean climb onto his shoulders, and took off into the shadows of the night.

Valian hadn’t gotten a chance to fly peacefully over the city without being in a rush to meet a deadline or on a chase after one of his targets yet, and he had to

admit, he was enjoying it, especially with Lithean accompanying him for once.

“Wow,” Once Valian had leveled out and began to coast on the winds, Lithean leaned forward and almost hugged Valian’s neck. “This is... beautiful.” She looked around from the stars and moon above to the house lights and street lamps of the city below. “You’re beautiful.”

She caught herself and stuttered. “I mean, uh, th- that’s not what I meant. I mean- yes it is, but, not like that-”

Valian turned to look over his shoulder and laughed slightly. She was blushing, hard.

Before Valian wanted it to, Lithean’s house appeared below him. He spiraled down slowly and gently to land in her backyard, the grass blowing below from the wind under his wings.

She climbed off of his shoulders as he shifted before saying. “Well, it appears I’m not the best at this, either.” She grabbed her wrist in front of her waist and blushed a bit again.

Valian laughed softly. “It’s okay. We’ll figure out a way to get better at, *this*, somehow. Someday.”

“Good.” There was a short silence after her

answer, as if she knew she needed to turn around to go inside but just didn't want to. "Well, good night, Valian." She finally said.

She turned and walked through the backdoor, and Valian stood there for a minute, looking at the door as if he could see through it to Lithean again, watching her. He was really beginning to enjoy her company, and he hoped he would see much more of it.

CHAPTER 13

Lithean woke up the next morning, groggy from last night's mission, not wanting to roll out of bed.

Then there was a knock at her bedroom door followed by a voice saying, "Lithean, are you awake? We need to go." The voice paused. "Are you even here, or did that little date of yours with the Captain and the Champion not return you home last night?"

Lithean swung her legs off the side of the bed, sitting upright now and laughed to herself softly. "No, I'm here Myrna." She stood up and walked over to her dresser. "Just give me a second." How had *she* known about the mission last night? Lithean hadn't told her, from what she recalled.

Myrna Galadaen, the Princess visiting from the

eastern continent, Earthorn, wasn't the most patient person. Her father, Tryllis Galadaen, had sent his only child to Aereden to hopefully find out what it was the King had been planning two years ago to presumably start a war, but to no avail. Aereden and Earthorn weren't exactly at war, and never had been, *per se*, but they were nowhere near allies, and Tryllis did not want it to stay that way.

Lithean stripped from her nightgown and into a long-sleeved black tunic, a detailed brown and gold corset over it, and gray leggings. She walked into the bathroom connected to her bedroom and brushed her messy hair as best she could before walking out into the hallway.

Myrna stood in the hallway, her arms crossed and her foot tapping against the wooden floor. "We needed to be there ten minutes ago, Lithean."

"Well I apologize, Princess, but I didn't get anywhere near as much sleep as you did last night." Lithean had trouble staying awake as she did her best to follow her friend out the door, so she simply tried to force herself to focus on something simple, like what Myrna was wearing.

A simple light gray gown, and a dark forest

green corset with the navy blue and gold details of Earthorn running around the lacing down the front. Nothing any different than the style she typically wore.

“Myrna, what time is it?” As they stood on the curb waiting for Myrna’s carriage, Lithean couldn’t help but ask.

“About fifteen past eight in the morning, and like I said, we needed to be there fifteen minutes ago.” Lithean sighed and Myrna shifted her attention from her drowsy friend to the street before her. “Gods above, what is taking that carriage driver so long?”

As if the gods themselves had heard Myrna say that, the carriage rounded a corner and stopped before them. “Finally...” Myrna murmured under her breath before entering the carriage, Lithean following.

As they sat in the carriage, Lithean realized she wasn’t entirely sure where they were going, either because she was too tired to remember or hadn’t bothered to listen when she had been told in the first place. “Myrna, what is it that we’re late to, exactly?”

She let out a sigh of annoyance as she said, “The ball celebrating Lena’s birthday is at the end of the week, and I scheduled for us to try on dresses at the most prestige dress shop in the shopping district today at

eight.” Agitation was loud and clear in her voice, but Lithean was too tired to care.

Lithean didn’t wear proper dresses often, and she didn’t go to royal balls often, either. She had no problem with wearing dresses or trying them on, she just didn’t want to do it so glenting early in the morning. The carriage stopped and Myrna pulled her into the dress shop.

It was going to be a very long morning for Lithean.



Valian and Tirion walked into the shopping district, and they were both pleased to find it wasn’t all too busy, at least for the moment.

Valian had woken up that morning to find Tirion in his entry room holding a letter. The letter was from the King claiming the Princess’ birthday ball celebration was in a few days, and that while the Guard stood watch outside the ballroom, Valian and Tirion would be inside, standing at the foot of the dais below the royal family, ready to protect them if anyone decided to launch an attack.

Tirion had been the one to deliver the letter, for he claimed that even though they would be on guard duty, they had to wear something nice, and that they should go shopping sooner than later because more people go shopping for parties like this later in the week.

Valian didn't argue.

As they walked down the street past the multiple stores and kiosks, the lack of people caused Valian to turn to Tirion and give him an incredulous look. Tirion just laughed and shrugged.

As they walked into the first shop, Valian didn't really know what to do. He had never worn an entire formal suit growing up, for Arakon had never exactly been a "formal" town. While places like Elderon had fancy balls with dresses and suits in ballrooms, places like Arakon had small celebrations with casual clothing in the streets and people's front yards under strings of lights and the stars and the moon above. While Tirion might've grown up slow dancing with one girl at a time of high stature and royal status, Valian had grown up dancing to sporadic traveling bands with other somewhat peasant-like kids his age in large groups.

This was going to be quite a different adventure. Being the inexperienced one when it came to buying

formal clothing, Valian followed Tirion, but to no avail.
“I’m not sure why you’re following me. I already have a suit from a few months ago that fits just fine. You’re the one who doesn’t have a suit with you.”

“Oh, okay then.” Valian stepped around Tirion and browsed through a rack of jackets as if he actually knew what he was looking for.

“Something tells me you don’t really know what you’re doing.” Tirion crossed his arms.

“Ah, I’d be lying if I said I did.”

Tirion sighed. “Well, pretty girls probably won’t ask you to dance, so—”

“Hey!” Valian crossed his arms as he grumbled defensively. “I bet you one will.”

Tirion smiled. “Anyway, for this kind of thing, all you really need is a formal tunic or doublet, tie, jacket, and any kind of trousers. Simple, really. Unless you do want more than that.” Tirion led him over to a hanger rack holding an assortment of various formal doublets. “Pick one.”

Gods above, Valian still hated shopping.



As Valian and Tirion walked back down the street, shopping bags in hand, Valian couldn't help but feel a bit stupid as he walked around wearing a midnight black cloak holding a bright pink paper bag.

The days were beginning to get colder now that the transition from summer to fall had fully set in, and Valian wasn't pleased by it.

He looked to the side at his friend to comment about it and continued to walk forward. He bumped into someone. "Oh my gods, I'm so sorry! Here, let me help with—" As he bent down to pick up the dropped contents, he realized who he had bumped into. As he stood and handed his attempt of a folded-up dress to Lithean, he caught her smile, but also caught her accomplice's scowl as Lithean shoved the dress into a bag sloppily.

"I've seen her before, in that portrait on your mantle. Who's this?" Valian asked Lithean.

The girl answered for herself. "Myrna Galadaen. You've probably heard of me before, though. Pleasure to meet you." She held out a hand.

Valian shook it. "Princess of Earthorn sent to Aereden by her father two years ago, right? The pleasure is all mine. Oh, and he's Tirion Fordragon, Captain of the Royal Guard, and I'm Valian Ashryver, slight chance

you've heard of me before, too? I'm Lithean's... uh," He faltered and glanced at Lithean, who just shrugged and smiled sweetly. "friend. I'm her friend."

Tirion raised an eyebrow at the two of them, but they didn't notice.

"Umm, the King's Champion, correct? The one who can turn into dragons?" Myrna crossed her arms.

Valian gave Lithean a questioning look. "I've told her about you." Lithean answered curtly.

"Well, nice meeting you two, but I'm afraid we must go. We have a makeup appointment." As Myrna began walking down the street, Valian and Lithean's eyes met. Valian looked at her, another question in his eyes. Makeup?

She just shook her head, rolled her eyes, and shrugged as she smiled to show she was just as clueless as he was.

Valian laughed and said, "bye," followed by a sheepish smile.

"Bye." She smiled back and turned to walk after Myrna.

As Valian tucked his hands into his pockets, Tirion claimed quite suddenly, "You two confuse me."

"Yes, I noticed your constant eyebrow raising,

Captain Fordragon, and I must admit, it was a bit disconcerting.” Valian took his hand holding the bag and wrapped the handle around his wrist. “We’re going back to the castle now, right?”

“Um, to the castle, yes. To your chambers, no.” Tirion put a hand on Valian’s shoulder. “It’s a meeting about where to position yourself and how to stand and how to act if an attacker intrudes the ball so you don’t attack and kill him right away.”

Valian groaned in disappointment.

“At least you don’t have a makeup appointment.”

“Fair enough.” Both boys laughed.



Valian had never been in the great hall before, and it was much larger than he had expected it to be. It was far bigger than the throne room with the dais, but still fairly smaller than the ballroom. Unlike the throne room with its oval-shaped glass roof, the great hall had a flat, wooden roof with crystal chandeliers hanging from it. The walls were high and made of stripes of quartz and birch wood with simple white, gray, and brown

tapestries and sconces hanging from them, the back wall opposite the door being made entirely of glass to reveal a vast expanse of the Silvence fields and the Icefang Mountains far in the distance.

In the center of the room sat a long, narrow table made of dark spruce wood. Sitting at the table was the King, the Queen, the Princess, and all the members of the Royal Guard. The King sat at the head of the table, his family sitting off to his right, two seats left open on his left for Valian and Tirion, and the Guard filled in the remaining seats.

Tirion had practically begged Valian to sit next to the King instead of him, and Valian had protested but in the end lost the argument, but when they entered and sat down, he realized why.

As Valian sat next to the King and Tirion sat next to Valian, on Tirion's left side sat a girl with straight dirty blonde hair and bright sapphire eyes, who smiled at Tirion when he sat down next to her.

Tirion kicked his leg under the table.

"Well, now that everyone is here, I suggest we start the meeting." The King's voice boomed over the silence of the room. "As you all know, at the end of the

week is my daughter's birthday, and it has not happened yet in the past, but that does not mean an attack will not commence this time. Your instructions are simple; four soldiers at each entrance and exit armed with close range blades, four on the roof holding longbows, six inside patrolling the festivities casually, but still armed with hidden daggers, and Valian and Tirion standing at the foot of the dais, ready to protect the Princess at all costs.

Any questions?"

No one said a word, which Valian was beginning to realize that no one other than the King ever spoke during these meetings, even if they were asked.

"Very well. Now, this is still a ball you are all technically attending, so I expect all of you to be wearing formal clothing and to be standing straight and proper. No slouching. Understood?"

Everyone nodded, and Valian sat in amazement at how little speaking there actually was.

The King noticed his astonishment. "Do you have something to say, Valian?"

"No, you're Highness, just a bit tired is all." He half lied.

"Then I suggest you get some sleep, tonight."

Valian nodded.

“You all know what to do in case someone *does* attack the ballroom, but just to recapitulate; apprehend the target, do not harm them immediately. Only harm them if they attempt to harm you or anyone else. However, do not kill them unless absolutely necessary, I will want them alive. Understood?” The King leaned forward in his decorated chair and rested his elbows on the table.

Everyone nodded, again.

“Good. Train hard during the period of time between now and the ball, fight well if fighting is ever necessary, and look nice. I will see you all at the end of the week. Meeting dismissed.”

Everyone except the Royal family stood and began to file out the door, and try as Valian might to talk to Tirion, he kept ignoring him to talk to the dirty-blonde-haired girl with the sapphire eyes.

He knew he didn’t really belong with the other two at the moment, and he hated it, but he couldn’t really do anything to get away, either.

Now he knew how Tirion felt when Lithean was with them...

“Bye.” Tirion said to the girl as she smiled and they walked into the castle foyer. She turned into the left

wing and the two boys turned into the right.

“Who was that?” Valian asked suspiciously.

“A member of my Guard. Why?” Tirion answered quite casually.

“Well, you just seem very fond of her, is all.”

“Am I not allowed to be fond of someone?”

“Aha! So you *are* interested in her!” Valian’s excitement grew to think Tirion was romantically involved with someone.

“I never said that.” Tirion tried his best to remain cool and calm still, but Valian detected his faint blushing.

“But you’re not denying it!”

“So what if I’m not?”

Valian gasped in excitement. “Oh my gods you need to pursue her!”

“No. I don’t. And I won’t, at least not right now.” Tirion was obviously growing a bit agitated now, but Valian didn’t care.

They had reached his chambers, and while Valian stepped inside, Tirion didn’t follow.

“I have somewhere to go, I can’t stay.” Tirion spun on his heel and walked down the hall as he said over his shoulder, “Sorry, bye.”

Valian closed the door and smiled to himself. He didn't even know the girl's name, but he could already tell she was perfect for Tirion.



The week had passed relatively quickly, for Valian hadn't done much other than track down, question, and capture two different minor targets named Erika Presran and Arryn Araris in under three days, receive his large amount of pay in gold for all three targets, and gone to either Tirion's chambers, the forests with Oran, or Lithean's house on other nights.

He woke up on the day of Lena's ball exhausted from the lack of sleep he'd had in the past week.

It was ten in the morning, and the ball didn't start until six, so Valian had a long day of waiting around ahead of him. He got out of bed, cleaned himself up in the washroom, and threw on a royal blue tunic with black trousers.

As he walked into the kitchen, he noticed there was no premade breakfast sitting on the table for him. He groaned in disappointment, but walked out the door, down the hall, and into the royal kitchens nonetheless.

Valian was still tired, but he decided to be nice and smiled at the servants who hurried past him. He had smiled and winked at two maids who were his age or just younger, but had gotten no response. Another girl a bit farther down the hall, who was accompanied by another servant boy, had almost tripped from staring at him. The boy glared at Valian. The latter did his best to stifle a laugh. As he walked out into the courtyard, he noticed it was being trimmed and decorated with yellow, red, and green.

The kitchens were even busier than the courtyard outside. Chefs and servants and maids hustled about carrying trays of food and drinks, and Valian nearly caused a young man to drop an entire tray of red wine glasses. He apologized, and decided he would go a day without breakfast. And possibly lunch. He would just have to eat a lot at the dance, which hopefully he would even be allowed to do.

He walked back through the courtyard and out into the city and into the residential district towards Lithean's house.

She opened the door before he had a chance to knock, and she seemed surprised and rushed. "Oh, Valian, I wasn't expecting you to show up today. I

would've thought you'd be busy with, something or other.”

“Um, no. I’m not doing much of anything today, really. I’ve been bored out of my mind, to be honest.”

“Well, I wish I could say the same, but Myrna has me running around the city today. I’m sorry. You could join me, but I’m not sure if you really want to do that.” Lithean closed the door behind her and began to rush down the walk with Valian.

“I have nothing better to do, so why not?”

“Suit yourself, but you won’t like any of it.”

“Well, I’ll be with you, so, how bad can it be?”

She smiled at him as they rushed through the streets.



Lithean had been right. Valian didn’t particularly enjoy walking through the city going to dress shops, boutiques, and makeup kiosks. At least Lithean had done her best to keep up small talk with him between Myrna’s appointments.

They had finished at around four, and both Lithean and Valian were carrying bags of makeup and

accessories and other clothing items back to her house. Lithean needed time to get dressed and get ready, and so did Valian, but they still talked for a bit.

“So, what is it you have to do, again?” Lithean asked him as Locryn bounded down the hall and jumped up at her.

Valian sighed. “Tirion and I have to stand at the foot of the dais ‘ready to protect the Princess at all costs.’”

Lithean laughed at the quoting Valian put on the King. “I feel a bit bad for you. How are you to dance with me if I am to accompany you to the ball?”

It took a second to realize what Lithean had said. He had thought about asking her, but he didn’t think he would have been able to. And how had she known he’d been considering it? Had it been that obvious...?

“Screw the King.” The Princess didn’t need protecting during the entire dance and even if she did, Valian could reach her well before anything bad happened thanks to his draconic speed. “So, in that case, Miss Lithean Riddian, would you care to accompany me to the Princess’s Royal Birthday Celebration?” He put one hand behind his back, the other out in front of him, and bent forward slightly, dramatically.

She took Valian's hand in hers and did her best to curtsy without a skirt as she said, "I would be honored."

"You are *very* bold, Miss Riddian."

"I know." She smiled. With that, Valian hugged her and left to go back to the castle to change and let Lithean do the same. He also realized he was starving and that he had just missed his opportunity to eat. Again. Guess he'd have to wait another few hours...

CHAPTER 14

It had taken Lithean over an hour to get ready. Myrna had bought her so many dresses and accessories it was hard to choose one. She knew it had probably taken Valian half as long, and so he would be picking her up soon.

She walked through her bedroom and stood in front of the mirror for a moment or two.

She wore white high heeled shoes, and a slimming pale pink dress that went straight down from her hips to her ankles. The dress had a low neckline, and short, tight sleeves that just covered her shoulders. A white seam of a belt was tightened around her waist, accentuating her hourglass of a frame, and her necklace glowing faint red as always against her chest.

There was a knock at the door, and Lithean jumped. She looked ready, but she didn't feel ready.

Oh gods, she was nervous.

She walked through the foyer to answer her door, and opened it to find Valian standing with his hands in his pockets somewhat nervously.

He wore a simple but nice white doublet with a form-fitting black waistcoat over it, a formal black overcoat, black trousers, and a dark blue tie.

When Lithean opened the door, he first locked eyes with her and smiled warmly, but then looked down over the dress she wore, and raised his eyebrows slightly as he said, “You look nice.”

She smiled at him and laughed a little. “Not so bad yourself.”

“Well thank you.” He laughed, and there was a long pause before he spoke again, as if he had forgotten why he was there in the first place. “Shall we go?”

“I think we shall.” She walked out after saying goodbye to Locryn and closed the door behind her.



“So, again, I’m not too sure how much I’ll be

able to see of you, because of the King and all, but I'll try to sneak away when I can. But first, I need to make clear that I am an *awful* dancer." He blushed slightly.

"It's alright. You don't have to be good at dancing to actually dance. Not with me, anyway." She blushed too.

"Easier said than done." There was another awkward pause between his words, like he was searching for anything to keep the conversation going. "So, is everyone going to this ball? I mean, I would assume so, but, just to clarify."

"Yes; Myrna, Oran, Tirion, you and I were all invited. So were many others, people like the members of the Guard, royal visitors, other long distance family members of the Synderith line, and people that Lena barely even knows, if at all from the rest of the city. Her father plans these things more than she does, really."

"That's a bit odd. I figured there wouldn't be too many people here, that's why I've been so... nervous, I don't want to make a fool out of myself in front of everyone I know. But I guess I don't need to be so nervous anymore."

"You never needed to be nervous whatsoever." She glanced sidelong at him and smiled.

“Well that is near impossible.” He tucked his hands into his pockets again, awkwardly.

They had reached the castle gates now, and many people waited in the foyer and in the courtyard in a long line.

“Do we have to wait in *that*?” Valian asked, keeping close behind Lithean.

“Gods no. All the people Lena invited personally get to go straight in. Just show the guards this.” She handed him a small piece of parchment with ink handwriting on it, Lena’s he guessed.

Many of the people they passed in line grumbled or swore at the two of them as they passed, but Lithean kept walking without giving them any attention, and so Valian followed.

They reached the ballroom doors, and Lithean and Valian showed the guards stationed their parchment pieces. Valian recognized both guards as Raelyn and Ryder Revylius, twins both a year older than Valian, Raelyn smiled at him and brushed her jet-black hair behind her ear and Ryder nodded once, his expressionless face unchanging. Valian nodded once back. He had gotten to know most of the Royal Guard members in the past week, which was proving to be

quite useful, having inside contacts like them.

Valian and Lithean walked into the ballroom, and were suddenly washed in a wave of music from the group of instrumentalists and singers at the foot of the dais. He noticed barely any people had made it into the large expanse of a room so far.

Valian spotted the King and the Queen sitting atop the dais almost immediately, and looked around to see Lena, Myrna, and Oran talking, Tirion standing somewhat near the dais's base, talking to the same dirty-blonde blue-eyed girl who he had a fondness for, and a few other people spread throughout, most of them Guard members.

They walked over to Lena, and Lithean hugged her. "Happy birthday, Lena!"

"Thank you!" Lena turned to look at the group of performers at the foot of the dais for a moment, then looked around to realize the room had filled up much more in a matter of minutes. Lena looked back to Lithean as the song changed, eyebrows raised, and Lithean just smiled wide.

"What's that about?" Valian asked nervously.

"Well, this is a slow song after all, so, maybe you'd like to dance with me?"

Valian froze. “Uh, um, I would love to, but, uh...”

Gods, she was too outgoing for his own good. Valian looked back over his shoulder to the dance floor as couples moved out onto it.

“Here. I’ll show.” Lithean grabbed his hand and dragged him onto the floor. She turned to face him and smiled. “It’s simple, really. I do this-” She put her arms around his neck. “And you put your hands on my hips, and we sway back and forth. That’s all it is, really.” She smiled at him again.

Valian hesitated, trepidation overcoming him, but he then put his hands around Lithean’s hips and relaxed. They began to slow dance, not exactly well, but they still did it and had fun nonetheless. A few more songs passed, and they slow danced to all of them, Lithean leaning in close to look up and smile at his sapphire and turquoise eyes between songs.

After a while, they walked over through the crowd to Tirion and the dirty-blonde-haired blue-eyed girl.

“You two are pretty good.” The dirty-blonde-haired blue-eyed girl spoke up, and she smelled of heavy rose water perfume. “Oh, I’m Syndra Windhelm, by the

way. Member of the Royal Guard, and Tirion's... close friend." Syndra looked to Tirion and smiled. Tirion smiled back.

"I'm going to go get a drink. You want anything?" Lithean asked Valian.

"I'm alright, thank you, though." Valian held her hand still as she walked away and let it slip out of his grasp.

"I think you two are adorable, just saying."

Syndra pulled Valian's attention away from Lithean, and Syndra began to laugh.

"I know! Aren't they?" Tirion joined in. Valian could feel his face grow warm, and both Tirion and Syndra began to laugh.

Lithean walked back through the crowd holding a glass of a dark golden liquid that smelled strongly of alcohol when she came to stand next to Valian.

Syndra brushed her hair back behind her ear to reveal that they were pointed. Valian's brows raised in shock and surprise. "You're an elf? With all due respect, how are you alive, let alone working for the King? Wouldn't he have killed you?"

Syndra chuckled slightly. "Well, first of all, elves don't actually have magic, they were created by

magic, yes, or so rumor says, but they do not possess any magical abilities aside from instinctive advanced weaponry use from a young age. Second, I'm only Half-Elf. I have the appearance, lithe frame, and somewhat-longer limbs, but no skill in knowing how to use any weapon since birth. I had to work hard and train to learn to use a sword and a bow to join the Royal Guard.” The clock tower chimed eight o’clock, and all the Guard members amongst the crowd exited the room to go to their posts. “Well, it was nice meeting you, but we have stations to get to.” Syndra smiled at Valian and Lithean, and walked away to position herself on the roof with a bow and quiver.

Valian and Tirion exchanged glances and walked over to their positions at the foot of the dais, while Lithean left to walk over to Myrna and Lena.

As Valian stood at the bottom right corner of the dais, he grew bored and began to pace in circles. Among his pacing, he noticed a boy around his age standing behind the dais with a black hood over his head and his wrists chained to the wall, and realized Lithean was walking out of the crowd towards the hooded boy.

He gave her a puzzled look as she looked over her shoulder and beckoned him to follow her. Valian

looked up at the King quickly, noting his distraction by the merriment, and leapt off the dais after her.

They reached the boy, and Lithean pulled off his hood curiously. She gasped in shock. “Es?”

The boy’s eyes flew open suddenly as he looked up in panic around the room. But then his gaze settled on Lithean. Valian snarled, but Lithean put her hand against his chest to keep him back. “L-Lithean...? No, no it can’t be you. I told you to leave. I told you to never find me again! Why are you here?”

“I had no idea you were here, it wasn’t my intention to follow you to *my friend’s birthday celebration*. Why in Aereden are you chained up, what the hell happened?”

Panic was growing clear in her voice. Valian stepped up next to her and braced a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay, what’s happening?”

She looked from the boy in front of her to the one next to her she had come to the dance with. “Oh, right. You have no idea who he is.”

The boy glared at Valian, but more in a puzzling way as if he had just realized Valian was there.

“This is Espin Ormance. He’s a summoner, as in like, he summons demons and things, and he also

happens to be my, um... my ex-lover.” Espin smiled at Valian, and Lithean looked back to him. “Oh, and this is Valian Ashryver. He’s my... friend.”

“The friend who you accompanied to the dance?” Espin smiled at her jokingly again.

“Um...” She paused, contemplating. “Yes?” She gave him an unsure smile.

“Well, I have to say I’ve heard of you before, Dragonblood, I know very well what you are capable of and how you are now the King’s Champion, but you do not truly follow him, for he killed your parents, I just didn’t know you were now with my ex-lover.”

Both Lithean and Valian reacted suddenly. “Oh, we’re not-” They said almost synchronized.

“We’re not together.” Lithean finished.

Espin laughed.

Lithean looked back to him, panic replacing the embarrassment again. “You never told me how you ended up chained to the wall of the ballroom.”

“Well sweetheart, I left you for a reason, and that was to protect you, from all of-” He gestured around the room as best he could with his hands chained to the wall. “-this.”

She crossed her arms angrily. “I know very well

why you left me, Espin.”

“Honey look, I apologize, I didn’t want to leave you, but I had no other choice. It was either stay and have you be chained to this wall next to me at this moment, or have you not be chained up and running free with that Dragonblood.” He jerked his head in Valian’s direction.

“My name might as well just be Dragonblood...” Valian muttered to himself.

“Anyway, it took them three years, but they finally caught me a week or so ago, and here I am.” Espin looked up to the dais to scowl at the King. “And I believe he plans to have me killed by the end of this, some kind of sick entertainment, so I have *that* to look forward to.” Espin looked back to Lithean and smiled at her again, grimly.

“No, don’t say that. You are not going to die tonight. I won’t allow it.” Lithean moved to Espin’s side and tugged at one of the chains attached to his left wrist.

“I don’t think that’s gonna do much, Riddian.” Espin pulled the chain away from Lithean’s grip.

“Lithean said you’re a summoner, right? Why haven’t you, y’know, *summoned* anything yet to free you?” Valian stepped up next to Lithean again.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to ruin all this by setting a monster loose, now would I?” Espin said, another grim, joking smile spreading on his lips.

Valian snarled as Lithean said, “You’re kidding, right? If it’s your life or this glenting ballroom, I’d choose your life any day.”

“Ha, that means *so much* to me. But even so, if I *did* summon something, I would be killed on the spot, and not in a few hours. I’d prefer to cherish life in these last few moments I know I have.”

Lithean turned to Valian again. “Your dragons aren’t anywhere near as big as his demons, could you break the chains without causing havoc in here?”

Desperation and fear was clear in her eyes, and Valian wanted to tell her he could, but he knew he couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, Lithean, but not without being seen by some, if not all, of the people here, and when the ones who don’t know it’s me see a seemingly-wild dragon standing in the room, chaos will break out.” Valian caught the disappointment in her gaze, and his gut wrenched hard.

“It’s alright, Dragonblood. I don’t need or want your pity. If I’m to get out of this, I should do it myself. Besides, I think it’s time the King removes these

chains.” Espin looked up to the dais, scowling, and Valian noticed the music had stopped while the King had stood from his throne.

“I think it is time for the closing act of my daughter’s birthday celebration. Everyone head to the arena, we have two special competitors fighting tonight, one of them being the summoner in the corner, Espin Ormance.” The King gestured with his hand at Espin. “And his opponent, shall be none other than my Champion, the Dragonblood, Valian Ashryver.”

Most of the crowd cheered, Espin and Lithean turned to gaze at the Champion, and Valian’s jaw dropped.

CHAPTER 15

And his opponent, shall be none other than my Champion, the Dragonblood, Valian Ashryver.

The King's word ricocheted in Tirion's head over and over as people began to murmur about Valian being a Dragonblood.

The secret was truly out now.

Tirion looked around the ballroom frantically in search of Valian. This couldn't happen. Valian had a good chance of dying against someone who could summon fiery demons from the Underrealm two or three times the size of his dragons.

He spotted the young Dragonblood standing with Lithean and the summoner in the far corner. He darted towards him without much thought.

Lithean spun around to face him first. “He can’t be serious, right? Why would the King pit these two against each other?”

“I dunno, it seems like a pretty fair fight in my eyes. A dragon against a demon. Or multiple demons.” The summoner chained to the wall chuckled to himself. Tirion glared at him out of the corner of his eye and shut him up.

Tirion followed Lithean’s gaze. She was staring at the dais where Lena stood nearly yelling at her father. Lithean was right. What was that man planning? Why these two? Why now on the Princess’ birthday? She obviously didn’t want this.

Two of Tirion’s more muscular Guard members walked over to them, Aryan Beckrow, a strong twenty-five, and Respar Trillith, an experienced thirty-three.

Tirion glared at them. “What are you two doing?” He tried to keep his tone even but he didn’t think he had held it together in his panic.

“Just following direct orders from the King, Captain.” The two Guard members unlocked the summoner’s chains, slipped black gloves with bits of obsidian on the pads of each finger onto the summoner, and forcefully shoved him out of the ballroom with his

hands behind his back.

As Tirion watched the summoner being dragged away, he turned back in time to see Raelyn and Ryder, the twin guards who had been positioned by the door, walking towards Valian with another identical pair of black gloves with bits of obsidian.

Valian hadn't said a word, and when he turned around to face the Guard members, he gave them a puzzled look. Raelyn couldn't look at him, so just stared hard the floor, and while Ryder's face was expressionless, his eyes gave a sad, solemn glare. Ryder handed Valian the gloves.

"I don't think I need these, Ryder." He held them back out to the Guard member, but Ryder shoved Valian's hands back towards him.

"The King's orders say you must." Ryder lowered his hands.

"I'm sorry about this, Valian." Raelyn tried to make eye contact with Valian, but looked away again once Valian gave her a disappointed glance.

Tirion watched his Guard members with caution, and Lithean wouldn't look away from Valian.

"Can I at least change?" Valian made an attempt to smile as he pulled at his waistcoat.

Ryder rolled his eyes. “You have ten minutes.”

Valian ran back through the ballroom, the twins following.

Tirion and Lithean had tried to follow, but Raelyn had pulled herself together and became stoic again, like Tirion had trained her. “No one is to accompany the Dragonblood except for the two Guard members assigned to watch him. The King’s orders.”

“You two can’t be serious. I’m the *Captain* of the Royal Guard!” Tirion took a step forward to challenge the young Guard member, but she didn’t flinch or step back.

“The King’s orders.” She repeated. Raelyn turned on her heel and followed after her brother and the Dragonblood.

“This can’t be happening. Tell me this isn’t real, Tirion. My ex can’t be about to kill him now. Espin wouldn’t, but with his own life on the line...” Lithean trailed off, panicking. “I don’t know what that son of a bitch would do now.”

“The summoner is your ex?”

“Yes, Espin Ormance and I were together two or three years ago. He left me to protect me because the Royal Guard was after him. I never found him until

now.” Lithean said it in a rush with an even tone as if saying that hadn’t affected her whatsoever. She looked back toward the door in search of Valian, but he had already bolted out.

Tirion sighed. “We don’t want to miss what happens to him, do we? We should leave for the arena. I have a plan.



Valian was led back out through the courtyard and into the right wing of the castle foyer towards his chambers. He looked over his shoulders slightly to see Ryder staring blankly ahead and Raelyn looking down once more. He looked forward again.

Gods above, it felt like he was in a prison being led around by prison guards. That, or he was some prissy, defenseless royal who couldn’t take care of himself, which was stupid, because he was *very* capable of protecting himself.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe he was *too* capable. Did they not trust him enough to believe that he would go to the arena no matter what? Did they think he would run?

No. The twins didn't think he would run. Valian was sure of it. They weren't the ones who didn't trust him, they were just following orders to spare themselves. It was the King who didn't trust him. He hoped.

Valian's door was opened for him now as he walked into his bedroom to change, leaving the twin Guard members in the foyer. As he closed the door behind him, he saw Raelyn try her best to peek in through the crack as it closed, Ryder bumping her arm with his elbow.

Valian laughed, despite the situation. Ryder grew angry. Raelyn's face grew bright red.

Valian stripped of his formal clothing and threw them on the bed as he picked up his uniform. He slipped the piece of skin tight black fabric and leather and dark steel armor and smiled. It felt good to not be trapped in such restricting pieces of stuffy clothing.

Even if he *was* off to fight for his life in this uniform.

He walked over to his armoire and knelt down to remove the loose floorboard underneath it. He wasn't sure what he would or wouldn't need, so he took every one of the few weapons in the stash.

Those of which including Dragon's Fang, which

was attached to his right hip, the leather gauntlets holding three throwing knives each, which were strapped to his lower arms, two jagged-edged curved steel daggers the length of his hand he had nicked off of Erika Presran, the target he had tracked just last week, which were strapped to the sides of his thighs, and four thin blades that could be used as both close or long ranged weapons he had stolen from the Guard's practice room, two slipped into each of his boots.

He walked back into the foyer and walked through the front door without giving the twins so much as a sideways glance. They rushed after him but had trouble keeping up with his quick pace, which was what Valian wanted.



The second the black gloves with obsidian were slipped onto his hands something felt... *wrong*.

Espin was dragged down a back alley from the castle by a chain with his hands stuck behind his back, and everything was far too quiet. Not a single thing made a single sound.

Before he realized it, they were approaching the

crowd of people standing around the arena waiting to be lead in. Espin looked around the crowd, wondering if he could see anyone he might recognize, but everyone was a stranger.

He knew he had been talking to people, friends even, just minutes ago, but he couldn't remember their names. He could barely remember what they even looked like now.

The guards finally pulled him in through a small side gate that led to one of the holding chambers for one of the fighters. The chains were removed from his wrists but the black gloves stayed. The iron gate behind him slammed shut, and now he stood in a small room that smelled of piss with blood dried on the walls, two small iron gates in front and behind him.

He waited a while, and finally a silence ran over the audience and a voice boomed out. "Thank you all for coming. You have made a good decision in doing so. The fight for my daughter's birthday is to be one to remember. Tonight, we have my Champion, the Dragonblood, Valian Ashryver!" The crown cheered.

Was he Valian Ashryver? He didn't remember being able to turn into dragons, so that must've been his opponent, right? But then again he couldn't remember

much of anything, right now.

“He shall be fighting a runaway prisoner my men have been tracking for three years, a demon summoner, Espin Ormance!” The crowd booed.

Maybe he was Espin, then? Yes, fragmented memories were coming back now. He could summon creatures from different dimensions. That sounded fun. Hopefully his demons could defeat this man who could turn into dragons. He didn't want to die, even if he couldn't remember much of his life.

The gate in front of him opened to reveal a large, circular gladiatorial arena, with the same gate opening up on the opposite end of the arena. He stepped out into the arena to see the high walls lined with sconces and the stars and full moon in the night sky sparkling above.

His opponent, Valian Ashryver, stepped out of his cage, looking down with a hood on his head. He pulled the hood back and looked up and out towards the crowd. The crowd cheered. He kept scanning the crowd until he stopped on one person.

A girl his age with long, light brown hair and a look of concern on her face. She bit her lip and raised her eyebrows in a question, and the Dragonblood nodded once.

“This first part of the fight is weapons only. No dragon forms and no demons. Understood?” The man who had been shouting over the crowd sat in a throne with a crown on his head, a sword with a pure obsidian hilt at his side, and dark eyes as black as night.

The Dragonblood nodded at the man, and so Espin did the same. But then he realized he had no weapons, whereas the Dragonblood was stocked up. He looked around, and to his relief, many rotting bodies and skeletons lay around the arena holding weapons and wearing armor.

He ran over to the nearest skeleton and pulled the rusted helmet and chest plate off of it and slipped them on himself, then took the bloodstained short sword out of its grip.

“Fight!” The man on the throne yelled. The summoner got one last glance towards the man with an evil smile and demented eyes looking down on him before he fell to the floor and everything went black.

CHAPTER 16

Valian was nervous.

He knew that he was good, that he really shouldn't be scared if this was purely a weapons fight, but they weren't using weapons the entire time. Only until the King told them to stop and swap to magic.

Luckily, he had the bigger arsenal for now. He looked up into the crowd one last time, looking for familiar faces. He spotted the Princess quickly, then Tirion and Syndra, then Oran not far from them, then Myrna looking bored out of her mind, and he stopped once his gaze landed on Lithean. She looked even more scared than he was, but she had every reason to. She cared about both him *and* the summoner, and didn't want one to kill the other. But he now stood in a gladiatorial

arena; one of them was going to die either way.

“Fight!” The King leaned forward in his throne over his ledge above the high walls of the arena.

Valian heard the summoner yell and he looked forward in time to see the summoner running across the sand and dirt and blood.

Valian fell into the rhythm of a fight and waited til the last second before he dodged Espin’s initial blow. He caught a glimpse of his opponent’s eyes, and they were nothing like the eyes of the summoner he had seen minutes before. Instead of being a cyan shade of blue laced with a ring of red around the iris, they were dark and soulless.

Just like Galligan’s and the King’s.

Something was definitely wrong here. But Valian didn’t have time to think much about it, because Espin, or what *used* to be Espin, swung at him again.

Valian leapt back a few times, dodging Espin’s blade by mere inches each time. He ran back a few paces and pulled out the curved serrated knives attached to his thighs. Espin charged again and swung for Valian’s neck, but Valian ducked under the blade and sliced at Espin’s arms. Blood poured from the deep gashes in both his arms, and Espin dropped the sword in his hands

and reeled back.

Valian tucked the blades away again and drew Dragon's Fang. Espin rolled away and pulled another sword off another corpse. Now it was Valian's turn to go on the offensive. He charged for the summoner and feinted right then sliced at his back, but not deep enough to do any severe damage. Espin spun quickly and slashed back in anger, but Valian was already at Espin's side again. Valian stabbed for his leg, and Espin keeled onto his knee, now immobilized. Valian pointed his blade under Espin's chin and pushed him back onto the floor.

He held his blade there, hoping he wouldn't have to kill Espin.

But no. This wasn't Espin.

For all he knew Espin was already gone.

The King's voice rang through his head again. "Enough. Put your weapons away and go back to your gates. The magic half of this fight will begin now."

Oh gods above. Maybe Valian should've just killed him when he had the chance. Now *he* would probably die instead of Espin.

Valian rolled his shoulders and sheathed Dragon's Fang, then held out a hand to used-to-be-

Espin. Its black, soulless eyes looked up at him, but didn't take Valian's hand, just did its best to stand on its injured leg and limp away to stand in front of the gate again.

Valian walked back to his respected gate and looked up at Lithean again. She was still more nervous than he was. She looked back down at him, grief washing over her, then looked up at Tirion. They exchanged nods.

That couldn't be good. What were they planning?

"Fight!" The King shouted once more, and Valian was forced to look away from her and back towards his opponent. He shifted into the scarlet dragon and spread his wings wide, more to stretch and get used to the shift afterward than to intimidate Espin.

He had to admit, it felt good to be a dragon again, though.

He launched himself up into the sky and hovered, just so he could use his wings a bit. Stretch some more. His dragons hadn't been let free in a little while.

Espin held out his hands as an ethereal purple glow formed in his palms. The orbs of purple light grew,

and he pointed his palms at the floor in front of him. Steady beams of purple and black and blue light shot from his hands and pooled on the floor.

The pool formed into a solid circle, and as Espin stopped the beams from his hands, the pool glowed and formed into a black and red portal with a silver rim around the edge holding the liquid-like portal in place.

Valian flew a bit higher to look down at the portal, but it wasn't the portal itself that petrified him, it was the creature that crawled slowly through it, blood-looking liquid dripping off of its skin as it stumbled to the dusty floor of the arena.



Lithean gasped and placed her hands over her mouth. She had known Espin was a summoner, but she had never seen him summon anything in front of her before. The portal creating itself was interesting, but what crawled from it terrified her, but not so much for herself, more for Valian's safety.

The demon was a little over twice the size of Valian in his biggest form, and looked similar to a human, but then again so different. It had eggshell-white

skin, and large, draconic wings with tears and bite marks in the skin between the spokes of the wings. It wore dull black armor that looked much like burnt, demonic skulls. Two large animalistic black skulls as shoulder guards, a smaller one around its neck and down its chest with straps around its back, and two long skinny ones as wrist guards. It wore knee high black boots with skulls over its feet, and a dark red loincloth draped around its waist down to its knees. Each dark skull in its armor had glowing red eye sockets that moved as if they were still alive and looking around. The demon had a round head with two large, frilled ears, two twisting, black horns sprouting from its forehead, four glowing red eyes, and a gaping mouth with pointed teeth dripping blood, a faint orange glow in the back of its throat.

She saw Espin smile, and the demon leaned forward and spread its claws and wings at its sides as it screeched in intimidation. It looked over its shoulder down at Espin, who then pointed at Valian.

Lithean couldn't hear Espin from where she sat, but she knew what he said. "Kill him."

She looked back to Valian, trembling where she stood now, and saw that he had landed. He wasn't cowering, per se, more stalking back and forth in the

corner, assessing the demon.

The demon hulked forward slowly, its glowing eyes locked on Valian the entire time, until it was close enough to reach out an arm and grab him.

Valian shifted into his smallest yet fastest golden dragon and ran. The demon swiped its claws at where Valian had been a second ago, but then looked at its claws in puzzlement to find nothing there. Valian darted around, practically a metallic blur in the arena, and ran straight for the demon's back and leapt to shift mid-air into the midnight dragon. He outstretched his claws and hit the demon square in the back. The demon stumbled forward and turned around to stare at the black dragon in front of it.

Lithean began to grow relieved. Maybe Valian didn't have much to worry about if this thing was so slow.

Valian shifted into the scarlet dragon again and opened his maw to spray a wide plume of orange fire at the demon. However, it had seemed to cause no harm. Not for the demon, at least.

As Valian slowed his fire, his eyes grew wide with fear. This was a demon straight from the pits of the Underrealm. Why would fire hurt it? Its four eyes and

the eyes of the skulls it wore shot fire from them, and before Valian could register what he had just done, the demon's wings, horns, and claws, burst into flames.

The demon began to move faster now, and became far more dangerous. It spread its flaming wings and shot up into the sky. Valian hesitated, but then did the same, thinking he had no other choice.

Which turned out probably not to be the best idea.

The demon flew around in large circles over the crowd, leaving a trail of embers behind it. It stopped making its rounds and flew straight for Valian. The scarlet dragon shifted into the evergreen dragon with mottled scales, a mane of brown spikes, relatively small, blunt horns jutting from atop its head, a club-like tail, and massive wings. When the demon was within arm's reach of the green dragon, he flapped his massive wings and shot up just above the demon, then came around behind it and started flapping its mottled green and brown wings more rapidly, sending strong gusts of air towards the flaming demon.

It struggled to fly forward, the flames coating its body starting to burn out. Lithean smiled faintly, but then looked at Valian again. His eyes faltered from half

closed to open again, and he sputtered mid-air, falling a few inches, then recovering. His wings still beat wildly, but the rest of his body couldn't keep up with the extent of energy and force and magic being used up.

The demon faltered backward, crashing to the ground below, its fire burning out completely, leaving its body charred and black, unmoving, on the arena floor.

The crowd cheered, but Lithean was still nervous as hell. Valian stayed in the air for a moment, but then one wing faltered while the other kept steady, which sent him tilting to one side and crashing to the floor as well. He didn't stop moving entirely, like the demon had, but he was struggling to get back up. His green and brown scales settled against the dirt, the wing under his side crushed by his hulking body, the other one sticking out in the air, half folded. He opened his eyes and attempted to stand a last time, but he collapsed again with a loud *thump*. He lay on the floor with his eyes closed in a half feeble position and shifted back instinctively, unconscious.

He lay on the dust and dirt, his arms and legs folded against the floor, his weapons and cloak sticking out awkwardly, his eyes closed, his side barely heaving.

She stared at Valian, worried to death, and not

sure what was happening. Valian lay motionless against the floor, a massive dead demon a few feet away from him, and a gaping portal with a summoner standing next to it on the opposite end of the arena.

Before she could remember to do the same, she saw Tirion jump over the side of the arena wall and into the bowl. He landed on Espin and punched him in the jaw, knocking him out cold, then ran around the fading portal and across the arena to Valian's side.

Many people booed him, but the King, however, watching with sincere interest. As the Captain knelt beside the Dragonblood, Lithean stood and made her way through the crowd to the edge of the arena wall, as well. To many people's disinterest, she jumped the edge, too, and ran the short distance to Valian and Tirion.

"What in the gods' names happened to him?"
Lithean asked, her voice cracking in fear.

"I have no idea. I've never dealt with a Dragonblood before, Lithean." He tried to remain calm, but it was obvious he really wasn't.

Lithean began to shake. She didn't know what to do with herself. What happened? What could she do?

Shut up and stop standing there! She told herself.

She rushed back to Valian's side, knelt down, and squeezed his hand in hers, as if this physical connection was his only lifeline.

"I already checked for injuries. He's fine physically, I don't know what's wrong." Tirion put two fingers under Valian's nose, then put his ear to Valian's chest. "He's not breathing, and his heart is barely still beating."

"We have to get him to the hospital ward!"
Lithean choked out, nervously.

"Worth a shot. I doubt they'll know what this magic did to him, though." Tirion picked Valian up gently and threw him over his shoulder with a grunt. He began to run down a hallway through one of the gates, or as best as someone could run with an unconscious person over their shoulders, Lithean close behind, not taking her eyes off of Valian.

As they hurried out the hallway and into the open air outside the arena, Lithean heard footsteps behind her.

Oran, Lena, and Myrna came from a separate hallway behind them.

"What happened to him?" Oran asked, hurriedly.
"No idea." Tirion seemed able to remain calm

during tough situations, and even though he was the Captain of the Royal Guard, Lithean still wondered how he managed to do it. For all he knew, he was carrying the body of his already dead friend.

And her-

No.

She wouldn't think about what she felt for him now. She wouldn't think about where their relationship laid at the moment. It didn't matter. All that mattered was making sure he was alive.

"Where are you taking him?" Lena asked, stepping up to look at Valian in confusion.

"Hospital ward." Tirion said again, his tone even and calm as always.

Lithean was getting nervous again. Her friends were asking all these questions and wasting all this time that she wasn't sure they had. She spoke up. "We really don't have time for this. For all we know these few seconds could determine if Valian lives or dies."

Tirion turned on his heal and made a beeline for the castle. Lithean, Oran, Lena, and Myrna all followed.

People stared at the odd group of teenagers storming through the kingdom, one of them carrying an appearing-lifeless body over his shoulder. Lena glared at

anyone who gave them a puzzled look or sideways glance, Lithean and Oran were worried to hell and back, and Myrna followed along struggling to keep up in the folds of her, puffy lavender dress she wore.

They reached the front gates within a matter of minutes and stormed straight through the foyer and courtyard to the hospital ward at the back of the courtyard.

Tirion stopped at the receptionist desk and told the woman behind it that they needed a room and a doctor immediately.

Valian's heart still beat. But oh so slowly.

The receptionist called upon one of the passing nurses and told them to check on the boy over Tirion's shoulder immediately.

The nurse led Tirion down a hallway, but told everyone else to stay behind. Lithean protested, but eventually lost and began pacing in the waiting room.

Tirion came back a few minutes later, and Lithean was the first to spring up and ask, "What happened? Is he okay?"

Tirion shook his head and crossed his arms, frustrated with the situation. "I'm not sure yet. They're doing a diagnostics test on him right now, and we won't

know the results until tomorrow morning.”

“Can I see him?” She asked, more desperately than she meant to.

“I’m afraid not. They-”

“Great.” Lithean pushed past the Captain like her question hadn’t meant shit.

Lithean felt Tirion’s gaze on her back as she strode down the hall. She was pretty sure his mouth was gaping, unable to respond to her. He should know he couldn’t stop her.

He glanced from her to the three others who had followed. “You should all head back to your rooms. I’ll get the results to you tomorrow.”

The three of them left without putting up too much of a fight for the moment, and left Tirion to race after Lithean.

She heard his footsteps behind her.

“You should get some rest, too, y’know.” Tirion offered.

Lithean shook her head and responded without looking back at him. “Even if I wanted to, how could I? I can’t sleep knowing he might not glenting wake up again. I’ll be thinking of thousands of reasons as to why this is happening, and I’ll find a way to blame myself for

it somehow. There's no point in trying to sleep, Tirion.”

He sighed. “Well, I suppose you're right. But I'm sure the healers don't want you crowding them in the room all night.”

Lithean finally turned to glower at him. “I. Don't. Care. I'm not leaving his side until he wakes up.”

Tirion just lowered and shook his head, then smiled as he chuckled to himself. “You really do care for that boy, don't you.” It was more of a statement than a question.

She faltered for a moment. “Well, I mean...” Her eyes closed, and she sighed audibly. “Yes, Tirion. Yes. I really do glenting like him, and I don't know what I'd do with myself if he were to go so soon.”

Tirion walked over to her and braced his hands on her shoulders in reassurance. “Hey, listen, it's okay. I get it. I have a special someone too, remember? I know what worrying like this feels like.”

She was trying her damnedest not to cry as she looked up at him.

“Look Lithean, I promise you, Valian will wake up. You'll speak with him again. And when that happens, you should get all this off your chest.”

She suddenly wrapped her arms around him.

After his actions today, she knew Tirion was looking after Valian just as much as she was, maybe more. And she was happy Valian had someone like the Captain watching his back.

She loosed her grip on Tirion. “Thank you.” She smiled. “I’ll get back to you tomorrow if there’s any news of Valian.”

“I’ll be here bright and early to receive that news. But really, try to get some rest at his bedside, maybe?”

She turned and walked into Valian’s hospital room. “We’ll see, Captain.” She closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER 17

Lithean had been right. She couldn't sleep.

Tirion had been right, as well. The healers had been very reluctant to let Lithean sit by Valian, but they eventually gave in once they had finished performing their tests and diagnostics and rubbing salve over him.

She pulled a chair up next to his hospital cot, and sat there, gazing at Valian concerningly.

She weaved her fingers with his tenderly as she watched his chest rise and fall in long, slow breaths.

They had gotten him breathing normally again. That was good, at least.

She peered around the dimly lit hospital room. It was the same room Valian had been brought to when he was under the influence of Bloodbane. The same

familiar jars and vials sat on the same shelf against the far wall. Lithean stood and approached the large window parallel to Valian's cot on the opposite wall.

She gazed out across the back landscape of fields shrouded in night behind the castle, silhouettes of mountains looming in the distance. She pressed her forehead to the cold glass, closed her eyes and sighed, fogging up the window in the process.

She should've put up more of a fight for Valian. She should've spoken to Lena, maybe the King himself even, try to deter them from having Espin and Valian fight.

Or maybe Espin should've been the one she had needed to talk to. Convince him of not hurting Valian.

Fire, Lithean really should've just spoken with Valian himself... He would've listened to her if she had said that going against Espin was a terrible idea. But no, she had been too caught up in the moment to say much of anything to Valian in those minutes they had standing in the ballroom after the King made his announcement.

No. What she really should've done was tell Valian how she really felt about him. Tell him what she really wanted between them. That was what loomed over her; the fact she regretted not confessing how she felt for

Valian sooner, rather than later. Maybe then she wouldn't feel so damn weighed down by guilt. She may never get a chance to tell him ever again, for all she knew...

Lithean shut her eyes and bit back the tears as her sadness turned to anger. Anger toward the King for setting this all up. Anger toward Lena for not trying to persuade her father away from this wretched idea more than she already had. Anger toward Espin for genuinely putting up a fight. Anger toward Valian for being so *glenting* stubborn and holding onto his pride and honor.

But no, this wasn't Valian's fault. She couldn't think like that. Not now.

She wandered back to the chair at Valian's side and grasped his seemingly-lifeless, cold hand between hers, firmly.

"Valian..." she whispered as she felt more tears well in the back of her throat. "I need to tell you something..." She wasn't sure if he could hear her or not, but she needed to tell him nevertheless.



Valian leapt up. He looked around at his new,

unfamiliar surroundings. He was flying, or rather, floating, high above the clouds. He wasn't in dragon form however, and he couldn't control his manner of movement, he was just stuck there; hovering.

No ground lay far beneath him, either. Just a far light blue void of endless sky with puffy, white clouds spotted about.

He spun himself around mid-air with some difficulty as a feminine voice echoed softly from all directions. "Valian... I need to tell you something..." It said.

"Hello?" Valian asked as he peered about through the sky for another figure that the voice might've belonged to, but he appeared to be the only one there.

Wherever *there* was...

"I worry about you... a lot. Maybe more than I should, sometimes." The voice echoed again. It was eerily familiar, but Valian couldn't put a face or name to it.

The voice went on further. "I know we only met a few weeks ago, but..." The voice faltered. "But I care *so much* for you. And I despise myself for this; the fact that I've let myself become so... so open, so vulnerable,

in such a short amount of time. And because of... some boy, no less, but where I'm going with this is..." It faltered again. "If you wake up...no, *when*, you wake up, I want to... *be* with you. You mean a lot to me, Valian Ashryver, and I know you told me you weren't ready, you said you needed to learn things about the city first, but I can't just push this back any longer."

Valian floated there, appalled. A girl he knew but at the same time didn't know at all had just revealed her feelings to him.

He felt bad. Whoever talked to him, he couldn't see them, and they couldn't hear him, so it was more of a one-sided conversation.

He did, however, feel a sense of yearning in his chest for whoever this was. He may not have known at that moment who the voice belonged to, but he knew he used to, and that in this past Valian couldn't recall, they had had a strong connection of some sort.

"Ugh, this is so glenting stupid. What am I doing? You can't even hear me." The voice echoed, unhappily.

"No, I can hear you, I promise! But, who are you?" Valian shouted out into nothingness.

No response. *She* still couldn't hear *him*.

There was a soft sensation on his forehead, as if someone had kissed it. “Goodnight Valian. Please wake up soon.”

He didn’t know how to respond, really. All he could do was hope he woke up soon, as well.



A little over a week had gone by, and Lithean had spent every night by Valian’s bedside. Tirion was beginning to grow worried about her. She had been a strong, bold girl. It was almost upsetting to see her in such a state.

As for Valian, he was of course still in the hospital ward. Tirion had been very busy with everything the King had thrown at him with Valian off duty. There hadn’t been any new missions he had had to take care of for the Champion, *per se*, but, for example, he had needed to do all the clean-up after the ball essentially on his own...

It was the eighth evening since Valian and Espin’s fight when Tirion walked into the hospital ward waiting room. He sauntered into Valian’s room and, to no surprise, found Lithean there.

“You alright?” He asked, consolingly.

“I’m fine.” She said brusquely, her eyes still pinned on the unconscious Dragonblood.

Tirion hauled up a chair next to her and straddled it, crossing his arms over the top of the chair’s back. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look fine. Lithean, it’s okay to feel-”

“I said I’m fine, Tirion.” She replied bitterly. She sighed. “Is there anything you needed to tell me or are you just checking on Valian?”

“On you, actually.” He glanced at her. “Everyone’s been worried about Valian, but people are starting to worry about you, too. You’ve barely slept or eaten for over a week. Valian’s being taken good care of. It’s time you start taking care of yourself, too.”

No response.

Tirion sighed. “If you don’t wanna talk to me, that’s perfectly fine. I just thought you should know.”

He stood and walked back toward the door.

“Wait,” Lithean practically whispered abruptly. “I’m- I’m sorry...”

There was a moment of silence. How did Tirion respond?

“Don’t be. Like I was saying; it’s okay to feel scared. We all are.”

Lithean stood, too. “I know that, but this just... this isn’t me. I don’t like being worried.”

“Well then, don’t be. He will wake up. Whether that’s sooner or later I am not sure, but I know he *will* wake up. Just be patient, Lithean.”

“Patience isn’t really my forte.” Tirion could’ve sworn she gave him a faint smile behind her fearful expression.

Tirion smiled. “It’s not mine either, but don’t stress over it.” He looked back at the Champion on the bed. “You think he can hear us?”

She rolled her eyes. “Gods, I hope not. I told him how I feel about him a few nights ago, and I deeply regret it.”

“Why do you regret it? I’m rather certain he feels the same way.”

“I should’ve at least waited for him to wake up, to get a real response from him instead of just, *this*.” She gestured to his comatose form before sitting back down in her chair. “It’s only been a week or so, but I miss him. He’s so unaware and innocent sometimes. I’ve never met anyone like him. Most people in my life have been cold

and self-centered. He's quite the opposite." She laughed softly. "He listens to his heart and often has good intentions, which is good. And he's remarkably sweet. Sometimes too much." That produced a faint laugh from the both of them.

"Gods don't I know it." This was good. Tirion had gotten her talking like herself again.

"Anyway, I should go. Syndra, she wished to see me tonight."

That sentence prompted some eyebrow raising from Lithean. "I told Valian how I felt, so when are you gonna reveal your feelings to that girl?"

It was Tirion's turn to be put on the spot about feelings. "Oh, I'm not sure. Maybe never, not with all that's been going on."

Lithean jokingly punched him in the shoulder. "Hey, if I talk with Valian about what I said once he wakes up, then you have to talk to Miss Windhelm. Deal?"

Tirion shook his head, contemplating, but smiled. "Fine."

Lithean smiled back. "Good," She shoved him through the door. "Now don't keep that half-elf of yours waiting."

Tirion laughed to himself as he rushed back down the hallway after “that half-elf of his.”



Thirteenth night. Tirion had just finished the Guards’ training session for the day. He pulled out his pocket watch. Nine thirty-seven.

As he approached the half-open hospital room door, he knocked faintly, but Lithean’s voice didn’t call back telling him to come in.

He stepped in tentatively, and found Lithean asleep in the chair, awkwardly.

Tirion loosed a breath. At least she was getting some sleep now, even if she would be quite sore the next morning from her position.

Valian still lay there, motionless, his lean chest rising and falling slowly.

There didn’t seem to be much to check up on at the moment, so Tirion spun on his heel to leave when the bed creaked unexpectedly and the sound of heavy breathing filled the room.

“Tirion...?” The voice rasped out through a dry throat.

Tirion spun back around and walked toward the bed again, shocked. “Valian? You’re awake! Good gods! How do you feel?”

Valian, with a bit of strain on his still sore muscles, threw the covers off his body and swung his legs around over the edge of the bed. “I feel great.” He was clearly in discomfort as he said those words with a forced smile. “My throat’s awfully dry though.” He coughed. It sounded painful.

“Hold on.” Tirion walked to the sink underneath the shelving of vials and poured Valian a glass of water from the tap.

“Has she been sleeping long?” He was talking about Lithean.

“I’m not sure. I only just got here a few minutes ago, and she was already asleep when I arrived. I do know, however, she hasn’t slept much in the past two weeks. She’s been worried sick about you, so it’d be best to let her rest.” Tirion said as he handed Valian the glass, who drank from it greedily.

As he lowered the cup from his mouth and wiped his lip with the back of his hand, he asked, surprised, “Has it really been two weeks?”

Tirion half-laughed. “Thirteen days, really.”

“Fire...” Valian gazed at Lithean longingly.
“What’d I miss?”

Tirion considered revealing to Valian what Lithean had said a few nights ago, but he would let her explain it all herself, in time. “Not much, honestly. The King hasn’t told me anything about where your missions stand. All I’ve done without you is clean up the ballroom after Lena’s birthday.” He gazed out the window into the dark. “Either there simply hasn’t been much criminal or rebel activity since the fight, or they got better at staying hidden. Or, the King is up to something else I am unaware of...”

Valian didn’t respond, just stared out into nothing. “Would you have brought me a change of clothes, by any chance?” Valian asked, pulling at the much too large white hospital tunic, changing the subject.

“I’m afraid not. I can go do that now, if you want?” Tirion asked, stepping back.

“No no,” Valian heaved himself off the bed slowly. “I could use the exercise.” He said through gritted teeth.

“In your condition, you shouldn’t even be up and walking right now.”

Valian proved him wrong when he came to stand next to Tirion, seemingly not in too much pain. “I heal fast, I guess.” He crossed his arms and flashed the Captain a grin.

“Oh alright.” He watched Lithean, still slumped uncomfortably in the chair. “What about her?”

The Dragonblood walked over to the chair and picked up the girl in his arms gently, groaning as he did so. “I got ‘er.”

Tirion sneered as the Dragonblood proved his seemingly impossible strength yet again. “How is that even doable?”

Valian smirked back. “Being half-dragon does you wonders.”

Tirion walked Valian back through the courtyard and into the latter’s chambers, where the Dragonblood kicked his bedroom door open and stepped in, Lithean still in his arms. He pushed the door shut with his foot behind him, closing off the Captain’s view.

Tirion smiled to himself. He was glad to have his friend back.

CHAPTER 18

Valian lowered Lithean onto his bed tenderly. He gazed at her, delighted to be able to have a moment where he could just... look at her, take in her beauty once more. Her faint freckles were made prominently visible by the stark shadows of the room, and her long, dense, almond brown hair hung loosely on the pillow around her. He smiled at her softly.

He walked over to his dresser as he disrobed himself of the white hospital attire before pulling a long sleeved dark red tunic, a sleeved, brown leather jerkin, and black leggings from a drawer.

The modest side of him hoped Lithean wouldn't wake at that moment and see him undressed, but the side of him that was awfully interested in her hoped she

would, just to see her reaction. He laughed to himself, embarrassed by his own thoughts as he stepped into the lavatory to bathe.

He took a brief cold shower, letting the frigid water splash against his skin, waking him up and bringing him back to the real world. He dragged a towel over his body and through his matted mahogany brown hair rather quickly before shrugging the tunic and leggings on.

He stepped back into his bedroom, once again fully dressed. Lithean still slept peacefully.

Fire, now that Valian was awake, he could remember who had confessed their feelings to him. Lithean.

She had asked to be with him. He wanted to be with her too, but he had told her he would be too busy with everything, what seemed like forever ago. Would he be too busy now? He'd have to make that decision soon...

When he strode back into the living room, he found a note on the coffee table replacing the Captain's presence.

I went to take your hospital clothes back to the hospital ward. -Tirion

Valian tried to distract himself, pass the time while he waited for Lithean to wake. He was hungry more than anything, so he decided to stretch his still slightly sore legs and walk to the kitchens for food.

As Valian walked down the long right wing hallway, he approached Oran's door. He was fairly sure Tirion was the only person who knew he was awake, so he decided to pay his old friend a quick visit.

A lethargic, sleepy-eyed Wolf Vulpitt answered the door and yawned. His eyes quickly widened in surprise, however, when he realized who it was.

"Valian!" He hugged the Dragonblood for only a split second before he pulled back and began asking questions, his curiosity getting the better of him, as always. "You're awake. What was it like? Could you hear or smell or did it not even register for you? Was it just like being asleep? How does it all work?"

Valian smiled. He had missed Oran, noting he hadn't actually spent much time with the Vulpitt since their time in Elderon. "It was like I was dreaming, except everyone's voices around me echoed throughout the dream. But I didn't really know who was speaking to me until I woke up not long ago. It was rather weird, honestly, and I hope I never become comatose again

anytime soon.”

“I’ll second that.” He yawned again. “Anyway, would you like to come in or..?”

“Oh, no, I don’t mean to intrude. I didn’t mean to wake you, clearly you were already off to bed.”

Valian gestured to Oran’s sleep attire. “I was just on my way to get food. I’m starved. But I just figured I’d let you know I was up.”

“Ah, okay well, thank you. It’s good to know you’re back.” Oran grinned one last time as Valian patted him on the shoulder.

Oran closed the door, and Valian went racing back to the kitchen through the courtyard.

Valian was glad he had brought his jerkin, for once he stepped outside into the courtyard, the icy night autumn air hit him.

He snuck through the kitchen, hoping to be alone, but as he tiptoed forward and peered over his shoulder behind him, he stumbled into someone’s backside.

“Fire...” He muttered.

But then he looked up, and observed that it was the servant girl who had been accompanied by the boy who had stared him down because the servant girl had

almost tripped from staring at Valian in the right wing hallway on Lena's birthday.

It felt like it had only been yesterday he had walked past her, even though thirteen long days had passed for everyone else.

"Um, hi." Valian spoke awkwardly, embarrassed to have been caught.

She gaped at him, unsure what to do. "Oh, hi! W-what are you doing here? The kitchens are off limits past ten. Besides, I thought you were in a coma?"

He winced. Of course she knew. The whole cit did, now... "Um, yes, well, I was, but I'm awake now. Anyway, surely you could cut me some slack? I've been asleep for thirteen days. I'm famished. Maybe you could, I don't know, let me take something, just this once..?" He gave her a warm smile.

She gaped at him again. "I, uh, I... I guess I could sneak you something. *Just this once.*"

He beamed at her. "Thank you so much... uh, I didn't catch your name."

"Oh, um, right. It's, Verity. Lovett." She finally looked at him with warm amber eyes as she brushed her long, chestnut hair out of the way.

"Verity." He repeated. "Pretty name." She *was*

pretty for a servant girl, with high cheekbones accenting her hollow face, and Valian couldn't help but wonder how she had ended up here.

Verity glanced back to her feet abruptly. "Um, you came in here for food. Right. Not to run into me... I'm terribly sorry." She blurted out as she rushed behind a counter and pulled something out of an ice box. In better lighting Valian noted she had olive skin to compliment her rare eye color.

He understood he had been staring when she looked over her shoulder and caught his gaze for a second before blushing and turning away again.

Verity had been kind enough to cook him something relatively quickly and put it in a small bag for him to take back to his room. As she handed it to him, Valian's hand brushed hers, and she blushed hard.

He felt a little bad, though. She obviously found him attractive, if not anything more, and all Valian could reciprocate was admit that she was pretty. Hell, at this very moment he had another girl asleep in his own bed, no less. Verity probably didn't even know about Lithean. Fire, he felt like an idiot.

"I um, I need to lock up, soon, so, if you wouldn't mind..." Verity said timidly.

“Oh, right okay.” He stepped out the kitchen door sheepishly before looking back at the servant girl again. “Thank you for the food, by the way.”

She just nodded in response, too shy to say anything else.

As he turned and began walking back through the courtyard, she called out to him. “Valian?”

He looked back at her as she stood in the moonlight, holding her opposite wrist in her hand in front of her, nervously. “I- I’m glad you’re awake.”

Valian smiled at her. “Yeah, me too.” He gazed into her amber eyes one last time. “It was nice meeting you, Verity.”

She finally smiled softly at him for the first time. “You too.”

With that... interesting, encounter, Valian rushed back to his chambers, hoping Lithean wasn’t already awake.

CHAPTER 19

Lithean lurched forward from her slumber suddenly, startled by a nightmare.

She quickly reached around her for Valian, only to find that he was nowhere to be found. She wasn't in the hospital room anymore, either. She looked around at her new surroundings. Lithean was in some sort of bedroom, a nice one at that. It wasn't a terribly big room, but it was plenty big enough for a large white and blue canopy bed, which she lay atop, a fairly large wooden dresser in one corner, a relatively small desk and bookshelf unit in another, and a grandfather clock in the last.

Was Valian awake? If so, why was she here, and he wasn't?

Lithean pushed off the bed and stretched, deciding to look around for anyone else. She walked around the bed and out the door, into a large room. This room, however, she recognized immediately as Valian's living room. So she was in his chambers, then.

Had she really never seen his bedroom before?

Anyway, seeing as she was in Valian's chambers, she could only assume he was awake. Who else would have brought her here?

Then, as if right on cue, the front door opened, and Valian Ashryver stepped through, beaming at her. Tears of joy welled in her eyes as she smiled back.



Valian had practically sprinted back down the right wing hallway, hoping to arrive back in his bedroom before Lithean woke up. As he burst through the door eagerly, he realized he was too late, for she stood there in his living room to greet him.

She virtually hurled herself into his arms, nearly knocking him over back into the hallway in the process. Lithean pressed her face into Valian's chest, dampening the fabric of his tunic. She wound one arm around him

tightly, the other pressing a hand against his bosom. Valian did the same to her, putting one arm around the small of her back, and the other placing a hand against the back of her head, clutching her to him.

She must've been terrified of losing him, for they stood there, embracing, for quite a while before she pulled back and grinned at him again. "Hey dragon boy. I'm glad you're awake."

Valian couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, I am too."

She hugged him again.

"So, what happened while I was out?" He asked, his head still over her shoulder.

"I don't want to think about anything or anyone else right now. This city is slowly going to shit, and I won't let it ruin what I have left. I've lost so many people in my life already. I won't lose you, too." She breathed into his chest between tears of joy.

"You'll never lose me. I promise you."

Valian considered asking Lithean about what she had told his former comatose self, but he didn't have to, for Lithean pulled back, her teary-eyed smile now replaced by a more solemn gaze.

"So, what do you remember?" She drew her

lower lip between her teeth.

His expression softened. “If you’re referring to what you told me, I remember every word of it.”

“Fire...” She murmured under her breath. She pushed away from him and stood with her back to him, arms crossed, a few paces away.

Valian paused, but then stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms about her midsection. “I want to be with you too, just so you know.”

She didn’t say anything, but he felt her shudder against him as she sighed through her tears, so he added, “It’s a dangerous world we live in, we both know that. But I want to keep you safe. You mean the world to me, Lithean Riddian, and I won’t let you go.”

In an instant, Lithean spun and stood on her toes as she cupped his face in her hands and kissed him.

Valian was taken by surprise. His whole world stopped, and all he felt was her lips against his, sending tingles through his nerves like lightning. Once he grasped what was happening, he enveloped her in his grasp, shut his eyes, and kissed her back.

It was an ecstatic feeling, but it was over all too soon when Lithean pulled back to take in a breath, laughing at his sheepish smile.

“You’re a very good kisser.” Valian gasped out.

“You’re not too bad yourself, Dragonblood.”

She beamed back at him before Valian ran his fingers through her hair and once again locked lips with her.

After a minute or so, she pulled away again and walking over to the couch, motioning for him to follow. They sat close, and Valian could feel Lithean’s heartbeat.

“So, what now?” She whispered, sounding a bit anxious.

He reached for her hand. “I’m... not sure.”

“Is this to become a reoccurring thing, or...?”

She laid her head on his shoulder.

“I’d like it to be, if it’s alright with you, of course.” He smiled down at her.

“It most certainly is.” Lithean responded lightheartedly.

“Perfect.” Valian chuckled, and kissed her quickly again.

The grandfather clock chimed eleven from his bedroom, making them both jump. “What is it with us and glenting clock chimes!” Lithean joked, and they both laughed.

The two seventeen year olds cherished each

other for a few more minutes until a rap on the door echoed through the room.

Valian stood, annoyed to have been disturbed, and unfastened the lock on the door to find Tirion on the other side, appearing harried and upset. “The King requests to meet with you.”

Valian looked over his shoulder to share an apprehensive glance with Lithean, who bit her lip again.

“Now, Valian. He’s angry.” The Captain demanded, restlessly.

“Alright, I’m coming.” He stiffened.

“Me too.” Lithean exclaimed from behind him.

Valian spun, putting his hands on her shoulders as she sauntered up behind him. “No, you’re not. I promised to keep you safe only minutes ago, and that means keeping you away from the King as best I can.”

“Who’ll be there for you, then?”

“I can take of myself, but in the meantime, you are to stay here.”

“I can take care of myself too.” She tried to push past him, but to no avail.

“I never said you couldn’t, but-”

“Valian!” The Captain ordered, growing agitated.

The Dragonblood raked a hand through his hair. “Look, you’re staying here until I return. End of discussion.” He kissed her hastily. “I won’t be long.”

Lithean huffed and pursed her lips, but Tirion essentially dragged Valian down the hallway before she could respond.

“What, no snide comment about how I just *kissed* Lithean in front of you? What’s up?”

The Captain’s expression remained blank and professional. “Now’s not the time for that. You’re in deep shit.”

Valian had never seen Tirion so distressed. He grew a bit fearful as the two strode briskly down the hallway, fetched a very drowsy Oran, and scurried into the throne room, no further words shared between them.

They came to stand at the foot of the dais, and Tirion bowered before saying stiffly, “Your Majesty, your Champion.”

Valian looked up at the King. He noticed that Espin stood unnaturally still next to his throne, the summoner’s eyes still black instead of cyan. He wore a suit similar to Valian’s Champion uniform; a skin tight black fabric bodysuit with a large hood able to be pulled low over one’s face, but black leather armor took the

place of the steel protection. Espin's suit also lacked the long, flowing black cloak, and the royal hippogriff seal was sewn in red twine, instead of white.

Valian had a bad feeling about this...

The King smiled down at him. "Hello, Valian. Glad to see you're awake." He stood, his hulking, powerful body making Valian feel small, but he held his ground. "I see you've noticed Espin, here, wearing another Champion uniform. We worked out the kinks of yours with this new design of his, and I must say, I rather like this one. Leather armor allows for more agility and makes the suit lighter overall, no cloak for Espin to get tangled up in, and the red seal is far less noticeable in the shadows than your white one. Anyway, I'm sure you can assume what this means, but let me explain nonetheless; you two fought publicly. You lost the fight. This proved to me that the summoner here, is stronger than you. Or rather, his demons are, at least."

"All the same, it is clear that he will serve as a better Champion for my desired purposes. So, with that, Valian Ashryver, I hereby release you from Champion duty. I will require your Champion uniform and Dragon's Fang back, and you are no longer granted chambers within my castle. You have no later than

midnight tonight to return the suit and sword, and be packed up and off the castle premises.” He glanced at Oran. “Same goes for the Vilpitt.” The King clasped his hands behind him as he glanced to the clocktower out the large window. “It is already a quarter past eleven, so I suggest you make haste.”

Valian nodded, unable to say anything, and Tirion bowed once more. He escorted Valian and Oran out of the throne room. Valian felt empty. It had all happened so fast, and hit him so hard. He trailed Tirion, dumbfounded, unable to speak.

Where did he go from here? He detested the King, yes, but the man had been his only source of money. Even at that, Valian hadn’t been his Champion for all that long, thus he hadn’t made much pay.

Fire, what did this mean for Oran? He had simply been along for the ride. He had made no money on his own, so he would be unable to sustain himself now. Valian just felt guilty, now. He never should’ve brought his Vulpitt friend with him. He could be back in Arakon, living a simple life right now, if it weren’t for the Dragonblood...

As if Oran were a psychic, he came to stand next to him and hooked an arm around his neck. “It’ll be

okay. We'll work our way through this. We don't need this damn castle, anyway."

"It's not leaving the castle I'm worried about. How are we to make money? How do we live in such a big city now?"

Oran pressed his lips together in a tight line, thinking of a response. "We'll think of something."

Valian gave him a furtive smile. "I sure hope so..."

After a few minutes of silence, Tirion mumbled, "I'm sorry..."

The Dragonblood slanted his mouth. "Don't be. You did nothing wrong."

"I still can't help but feel bad." He tucked his hands in his pockets. "I could've prevented that fight from ever happening. I should've had enough authority over my own damn Guard to do so."

"Tirion, what's done is done. We can't go back and change any of that, so it'd be best if we stop dwelling on the past and think of where to go from here."

"You're right." He sighed as they neared Oran's former chambers. "At any rate, you two need to hurry up and pack."

Oran slipped through the door silently, and Valian continued to walk down the hallway alone as Tirion turned around and walked down the left wing hallway.

A little while after, Valian came across his own former chambers, his new lover still inside. He stood outside his door for a moment, contemplating what to tell Lithean.

After a while, he opened the door soundlessly, and found Lithean pacing back and forth.

His face must've been written with misery, for once she laid eyes on him, her expression softened, and she came forward to hug him. "Are you alright?" Lithean asked tentatively.

"I've been...fired." He said candidly.

She looked up at him, perplexed. "Is that not a good thing?" She said slowly. "That man is a tyrant. It's a good thing you're free from his grasp, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but, now I'm without pay and a place to stay. And I didn't even make much money during my time with the job, anyway." Valian stepped away from her and into his bedroom to begin packing. "I don't have nearly enough money to buy my own place, and finding a decent job is going to be difficult on its

own.”

Lithean followed. “You could come live with me?” She offered, kindheartedly.

“Oran too?” He asked as he pulled all his clothing from his dresser and threw it all on the bed.

She paused, as if she had not thought about him. “Well, he would have to sleep on the couch I suppose, but yes.”

Valian pulled the satchel out from beneath the dresser and began folding the few clothing items he had and placed them inside the bag. “No, I couldn’t burden you with the two of us.”

“It’d be no burden at all. You and I *are* courting now, after all.” She folded her arms about his midsection from behind.

“And Oran?” He smiled over his shoulder at her. “Would he not be... distracting?”

“No matter. We are simply trying to find you two a place to stay. I am offering just that.”

“Oh alright.” finished with putting the clothing in the knapsack, he spun to face her. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Just finish packing. I’ll head back to my house now and prepare it for the two of you.” She pecked him on the lips quickly before slipping

out of the bedroom and through the front door.



Valian had finished packing the little belongings he had relatively quickly and easily, aside from the weapons stache, which he had strapped to his body beneath his clothing. He grabbed the folded Champion suit and Dragon's Fang on his way out the door for the last time.

He loosed a breath before he recomposed himself, walking down the hallway with dignity. He knocked on Oran's door and the Vulpitt strode out hurriedly with a bag in his arms.

"Ready?" Valian asked."

"Ready." Oran confirmed.

The two friends found Tirion, who took Valian's suit and sword from him. "Oran can stay with me, if you'd like? So he doesn't get in the way of you and Lithean."

"Is that allowed?" Oran asked.

Tirion crossed his arms. "As long as the King doesn't find out, then yes. But don't worry, he doesn't just go around and search chambers for refugees, so

you'll be fine.”

“Then I'd be more than happy to stay with you.” The Vulpitt turned to Valian. “No offense, but, I'd rather not stay under the same roof as you and your new lover. This'll make things less awkward.”

Valian shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He turned back to Tirion. “It's been a pleasure, Captain.” He saluted jokingly.

Tirion rolled his eyes and gave a half-smile as they parted ways, for now. Valian strode out the castle gates and through the residential district up to Lithean's front door. She opened it with a bright smile. “Make yourself at home.” She gestured into the living room. “Where's Oran?”

Valian stepped in and set his bag on the armchair. “He decided to stay with the Captain. Said it would've been awkward if he had stayed here.”

She laughed. “So it's just us?”

“Seems like it. Thanks again, for all this, by the way.” Valian smiled at her.

“No problem. But anyway, it's late, you should get to bed.” She closed the door behind her and walked over next to him.

“Oh alright. Goodnight, Lithean.” He kissed her

before she sauntered down the hallway and into her bedroom.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, after all.

CHAPTER 20

Valian woke up late the next morning, having slept as much as he possibly could last night to fix his damaged sleep schedule.

It was just before noon when Valian rolled off Lithean's settee, observing that he had fallen asleep in the clothing he had worn the day prior through groggy eyes.

He stretched and let out a long yawn before taking off his jerkin and pulling the sleeves of his red tunic up past his elbows, noting how warm the house was with the fireplace lit.

He wandered into the kitchen, and found Lithean standing with her back to him by the counter, cooking something.

She was still wearing a white nightgown, which ended just halfway down her thighs. Valian blushed at the sight of her bare legs before she turned and gave him a wide grin. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Valian repeated, doing his best to hide his reddened face.

She sauntered over and kissed him briskly.
“Breakfast is almost ready.”

“It smells great.” He replied as she turned and strode back to the countertop.

He looked her over again, this time caught in the act when she looked over her shoulder and giggled at his crimsoned cheeks. “I can change into something more modest, if you don’t like this?” She teased.

“What you’re wearing now is fine.” He stepped up behind her and clasped his arms around her midriff.
“I see why Oran didn’t want to stay here.” Valian joked.

She laughed as she pushed him away. “Go change. I’m going to burn something if you keep distracting me.”

He stepped out of the kitchen. “My deepest apologies.” Sarcasm dripped from his words as he smiled. He drew a white tunic and black trousers from his still unpacked bag, waltzed into the bathroom, and

changed.

When he returned, Lithean was laying food out on her small kitchen table.

They had eaten breakfast rather quickly before Lithean headed off to work.

At least one of them still had a job...

Valian laid down on the couch, his hands behind his head as he stared upward, lost in thought.

He had lost to a strange black-eyed Espin. How? Valian had an arsenal of six dragons within his body, and the summoner had only used one demon against him. Not to sound arrogant, but Valian should've beaten Espin's demon easily. How in Aereden had he lost?

He did his best to recall back to the fight, trying to retain every detail from that evening two weeks ago.

He remembered feeling... sabotaged, somehow. As if part of his spirit had been stripped from him in the middle of the fight. That feeling had been the reason he had been so exhausted by the end of the fight. Why he had been in a coma for two weeks.

Perhaps something, or someone, had robbed Valian of a large chunk of his magic? He was not aware of anyone who had the ability to steal another's mana. Was that even possible? Valian thought back to an old

campfire tale he had heard about beings able to do virtually anything, all because of a special, and extremely rare kind of otherworldly magic called raw magic.

It was a stretch, but it made sense. He couldn't think of any other explanation for his sudden energy loss. But who had taken it?

Valian hit a dead end, so decided to think about another unusual topic; Espin's black eyes. Why were they black? He was pretty sure eye-dying wasn't a thing.

Maybe when Espin summoned, his eyes turned black? No, that couldn't be it. His eyes had been black when Valian had been released in the throne room last night, and Espin hadn't summoned anything then.

No matter the reason Valian thought of, it always traced back to the King somehow. The King must've had something to do with Valian's loss, he could feel it deep within his gut, but what could he have done?

The King had black eyes. Espin now had black eyes.

The King was a corrupt tyrant who wished to snuff out magic. Espin was, or had been, a seemingly easy-going guy who possessed magic himself. Now,

however, Espin seemed to be under some kind of influence, his personality now not too far from the King's.

Could it be...? Was the King somehow controlling Espin? Was he the one who sucked the magic out of Valian, as well?

Perhaps the King had magic, and was able to control others and take their magic?

It matched the raw magic philosophy. Sort of.

With a crazy theory like this, Valian was essentially grasping at straws, but it was the only explanation he had at the moment.

With those seemingly-insane ideas, Valian settled on sneaking back into the castle, searching for...something, he wasn't exactly sure what.

But one thing was for sure; something had definitely been off about that fight, and Valian was going to find out what it was.

He grabbed his black cloak and draped it over his shoulders before stepping out the front door into the cool, late morning air. He strolled up the cobblestone city streets casually, until he snuck past a pair of guards he did not recognize and dashed into the castle.

He stood with his back pressed against a corner

of the foyer, pondering where the best place to start searching would be.

The throne room seemed like a good spot to start, but at the same time, it seemed a little too obvious. Besides, the King was probably seated on his royal throne in there, anyway.

If Valian were an evil overlord of a king who possessed raw magic, where would he locate his secret lair?

The dungeons seemed a bit too cliche, but then again, he had never set foot in the dungeons, so maybe he'd give it a shot.

The former combat protege channeled what he had learned from Aldrev's training as he pulled the cloak's hood over his head and stalked all the way down the left wing hallway, made a right turn, and came within view of the large iron doors to the dungeon.

He noted a guard positioned on the side of the double door, and cursed under his breath for forgetting to bring a weapon as he crouched behind a pillar, becoming nothing more than a shadow.

Okay, so he couldn't fight his way out of this one. That was fine. He peered around the pillar again and detected that, luckily for him, the guard was Syndra.

He loosed a breath. Alright, he could work with that. She would be easier to persuade than any other Guard member.

He looked around him for anything worth throwing. He found a reasonably large piece of the pillar that had chipped away, picked it up, and tossed it clattering back down the hallway the way he had came in.

Syndra's pointed ears perked up as she heard the shard of pillar rattle against the stone floor. "Who's there?" She asked, cautiously.

Valian didn't respond. He needed her to go walking down the hallway after the noise.

Valian held his breath in the few moments it took for Syndra to react. She took slow, wary steps down the hallway, her hand on the hilt of her sword, ready to draw it if necessary.

Once Syndra had moved far enough down the hallway in search of the cause of the noise, Valian ran on silent footsteps toward the dungeon door.

It was heavy, but fortunately it was unlocked, so with a bit of effort, Valian was able to pull the door open, slip inside, and close it behind him soundlessly. Just in time, too, for once the door was sealed, he heard

Syndra's footsteps echo her return to her post.

Valian released a long breath he hadn't known he'd been holding before he skulked down the long, ominous, dimly-lit hallway.

The granite hallway seemed to stretch on forever through the darkness, a sparse amount of sconces hanging from the walls above every other cell or so.

It was hard to make out any detailings of the cell occupants, but it was clear many of the cells were filled.

Silhouettes of prisoners loomed in the back corners of the stone recesses. As Valian walked past them, many glared or glowered at him, jealous of his ability to walk more than ten feet in one direction. Some shouted at him, and one or two of them had even come charging up to the bars and rattled them, making Valian flinch.

Valian approached the end of the hallway now, where he discovered an empty, open cell twice as large as the others. He stepped inside hesitantly, the atmosphere damp within. He ran his hands along the cold stone walls, feeling for some kind of crevasse or button.

He had circled around the edge of the cell and found nothing, so he lowered his hand to the floor, in

search of a similar thing.

Still nothing.

Valian was growing agitated.

He raked a hand through his hair, restless to find something before he was caught, and placed the other against the wall to steady himself.

Then he felt it. The small stone brick beneath his palm pressed into the wall like a large button, and seconds later, many other stone bricks on the opposite wall folded away, collapsing on top of each other in an organized, almost magical way, to reveal yet another hallway.

Unlike the dungeon hallway, this secret passage was barely wide enough for maybe two people shoulder-to-shoulder. Water dripped through the ceiling, and patches of moss grew within the cracks between the stones.

Valian was making progress. He had found something. He just wasn't sure what that *something* was.

He tiptoed quietly down the slick corridor, careful not to slip on a spot of moss here and there.

The torches lining this passageway's walls were even sparser than in the previous hallway, making it difficult to see. It wasn't bright enough to see clearly,

but it wasn't dark enough for his eyes to fully adjust, either.

He considered shifting so a pair of draconic eyes could see better in the hazy light, but reconsidered when he remembered how narrow the walls were. Valian could stand in the middle, and still not be able to outstretch his arms fully. The corridor was just as tall as it was wide, too.

No dragon forms to bail him out this time...

No matter, Valian was still a trained combatant, even without weapons.

Once it seemed like he had been creeping down the hallway forever and he contemplated turning back, he reached yet another door.

"These glenting doors..." He muttered.

This threshold seemed to be a mix of the previous two doors; it was as large as the first iron door to the dungeon, and appeared to be just as open, but it was made up of the same camouflaged stones as the previous doorway.

As Valian stepped forward to try and open the third door, some kind of magic field stopped him from reaching it. As he touched the initially invisible barrier, which now emitted a soft purple glow beneath his

fingertips, an immense jolt of pain surged through his arm and into his body. “Fire!” He cursed, as he pulled his arm back rapidly.

Glenting hell, how was he getting through this one?

“Stop right there!” A voice shouted from behind him. Valian froze. “What do you think you’re doing here? This is a restricted area!”

Valian turned slowly, his muscles coiled tight, ready to spring into action. But then, he observed that the girl shouting at him, was the Princess.

“Lena?” Valian asked with relief.

“Not the Lena you know.” She flashed him a vicious smile, and Valian caught the glint of her now black eyes.

“W-who are you?” Valian asked apprehensively.

Not-Lena stepped toward him nonchalantly, inspecting her nails as she said with a snarl, “Oh please, Valian, don’t play games. You know *exactly* what’s going on, don’t you?”

Valian couldn’t respond. The King. He’d been right all along.

“My father’s been watching you. He’s been *in your head*, reading your thoughts. He knows you’ve

caught on. He knows you felt his pull during the fight.” She sighed dramatically. “But now that you know his secret, I’m afraid he’s sent me to kill you. It’s a shame, really. You seem like a good kid.” She growled. King-influenced-Lena held her hands out in front of her, and a blast of the same purple magic that made up the barrier lashed out at him, knocking him back into said barrier. The same pain shot through his nerve endings. He bit his lip to hold back a scream.

The King was smart to take Lena’s body. He knew Valian wouldn’t hurt her. *Couldn’t* hurt her.

And so Valian would have to fight defensively if he wanted to get out of this dead end.

But what could he possibly do? Agh, he needed to think!

King-influenced-Lena lashed a tendril of violet at him once again, but Valian dived and rolled out of the way. However, upon doing this maneuver, he now crouched much closer to his assailant.

She smiled devilishly down at him again, as she sent yet another strand of energy hurtling toward him. Valian threw his arms up, crossing them in an X above his head. The coil of amethyst wrapped around his forearm, and Valian was suddenly yanked off the ground

and tossed effortlessly back against the barrier once more. He groaned through clenched teeth as the familiar fire burned through his blood.

“You’re not getting away from me that easily.” She spat out, her black eyes fixed on him with a predatory stare.

Tendril after tendril after tendril slammed into Valian. Into his ribs, his stomach, his head. They all pounded with excruciating pain.

But then Valian thought of something. It was risky, but it was the only idea he had at the moment.

Still the whips of purple launched at him, but this time, Valian let them come, and didn’t dive out of the way until the last second. The Princess’s tendril slammed just past Valian’s head, and with great discomfort in his palms, he grabbed the tendril and pulled on it with all the strength he had left, sending Lena soaring into the barrier behind Valian. The Princess screamed in agony.

She staggered to a stand. “Agh, you sonova-” Now was his chance. Valian raced toward the disoriented Princess, and with great guilt and displeasure, punched her square in the jaw.

It’s the King, it’s the King. He kept telling

himself.

She collapsed to the stones below, out cold.

Valian stepped over her, slowly, careful not to disturb her. He contemplated carrying her back, but it'd probably look suspicious as hell if the ex-Champion walked around with the Princess unconscious in his arms.

Besides, she could wake up at any moment, and still be under her father's power. And so, settling on leaving Lena there, Valian darted back down the corridor, his legs absolutely burning, and dashed out the second door. He once again found the button and sealed the door behind him, his arm aching.

He came crashing into the iron door and pushed it open with gritted teeth, eager to get back out.

“Valian? What were you doing in there?” Syndra asked. “And what in Aereden happened to you?”

Fire, Valian had forgotten all about her...

“You’re not even supposed to be here. You’re lucky I’m letting you explain yourself instead of just turning you in right now.”

He turned to face her and did his best to wipe all the pain from his expression. “Uh, yes, thank you for that. Anyway um, I was in the dungeon, you see, because...”

She stared blankly at him, unconvinced. He smiled and gave her a nervous, awkward laugh, then winced at the sudden sting in his ribcage. “I was in the dungeon because... the Princess, Lena, she... wished to meet me there, yes!” He placed one hand on his hip and used the other to point a finger at her casually. “I am not sure why the dungeon was the desired location, but I did not pick it. She did.”

Syndra crossed her arms disbelievingly. “And what of the Princess?” She said dryly.

“Ahh, right. Well, you see, Lena, she wished to stay behind. I’m... not sure why. I’m only the messenger. You’ll have to ask Lena these questions yourself.”

She knitted her eyebrows at him. “And your condition?”

“I, uh... I tripped...?” He slanted his eyebrows in a plea.

She frowned at him, but didn’t speak for a moment.

Valian, raised his eyebrows, gesturing down the hallway with his thumb. “Soooo, can I go?”

Syndra sighed. “I suppose. You’re lucky Tirion likes you, and I like him. You won’t convince *anyone*

with a lie like that next time.”

“Thanks.” He said as he did his best to push the pain away and bolt back down the left wing.

He hauled himself back into Lithean’s house and crashed down on the sofa, every muscle in his body throbbing.

He heard the sound of talons clicking on tile as Locrynn trotted up next to the sofa. The pseudodragon cocked his head and chirped at Valian.

He stretched out a sore arm and ruffled the little reptile’s head. “I’m fine, don’t worry.”

Locrynn purred beneath his touch, then bounded onto Valian’s chest and curled up there. Valian passed out with the little dragon asleep on his chest, the creature’s warmth and the pain-induced lightheadedness pulling him under.

CHAPTER 21

Lithean returned home that evening and found Valian and Locrynn asleep on the settee. She smiled at her two boys, sleeping peacefully. But then she noticed that Valian was covered in bruises. His face was scratched multiple times, and his arms were bruised purple in more than one spot.

What had he done while she'd been out?

She lit the fire, and sat down beside his head, shaking him awake.

He groaned as he propped himself up on his elbows, making Locrynn slide off, chirping unhappily. “What time is it?” He asked, rubbing his eyes.

“It’s only nine. I just got home. Why are you so bruised?”

He sighed and laid his head on her lap as he explained everything that had happened to him today, from his initial thinking to dragging himself back here. He tied in Espin and his black eyes, as well.

“Are you sure it was Lena?” Lithean asked after a while, confused.

“Positive. Well, kind of. It was Lena’s body, but it was the King who controlled everything she did.” He looked up at her with his sapphire eyes, the turquoise rings around his irises glowing faintly in the firelight.

She caressed his scraped cheek gently. “And you’re sure you’re alright?”

“I’m sure. It’s just a scratch.” He sat up, clutching his side tenderly.

“More like a few scratches.” She muttered. “Anyway, you said the way to tell if someone’s being controlled is if their eyes are black, right?”

He nodded.

“So, who’s been under his control so far?”

“I’m not sure. Just Lena and Espin, as far as I know. I’ll ask Tirion and Oran to keep a lookout for black eyes throughout the castle.”

Lithean’s distress must’ve been written across her face, because Valian wrapped his arms around her.

“It’ll be okay, Lith. Lena and Espin are in no danger”

She laid her head on his chest. “I know it will be. That’s not the problem.”

His brows furrowed as he looked down at her, not understanding.

“I’m just thinking, what’s behind that door that’s so important it’s worth exposing his magic for?”

Valian gazed off into the fireplace, the dancing flames mirrored in his pupils. “I’m not sure.” He sat up abruptly, making Lithean jump. “Sorry.” He apologized as he stood and grabbed his cloak. “We should go talk to Lena, if she’s herself right now.”

Valian strode towards the door as he pulled the dark cloak over his shoulders. “C’mon.” He reached for the doorknob.

“Valian, wait.” She still sat on the couch. “Could we, I don’t know, seek her out tomorrow?” She closed her eyes and sighed. “I know you always wanna do the right thing, and go out saving everyone, but, if I’m to be honest, I’m not sure how much time we have left of our normal lives, if you can even call them that. But with whatever the King’s planning and all, things could take a turn for the worse at any given moment. Let’s take advantage of what we have now, okay?”

His grip loosened on the handle, and he smiled at her. “Very well. I’ll go change for bed.”

Lithean gave him a soft smile as she strode into her bedroom to do the same. She stripped of her corset, tunic, and breeches, and tugged on the same white nightgown from earlier that morning.

She exited, surprised to be finished before Valian, and sat back down on the settee. Once he stepped out of the bathroom, she grinned at him and bit her lip. “Come ‘ere.” She stretched her arms out toward him dramatically, and he only grinned as he came back to sit next to her.

They held each other there by the fire, cherishing each other’s warmth as the fire melted everything but this moment away. Lithean was... safe, sitting there enveloped in his arms. As time passed, Valian had repositioned himself to a lying down position, half-proppped up with a pillow behind his back, Lithean lying on top of him, her head upon his chest, his arms around her back.

All she felt was his slow, steady heartbeat. Content with life, happy with her new suitor, despite everything happening in this glenting city, she closed her eyes, and drifted off, smiling.



Valian woke up the next morning on the sofa and found Lithean still asleep, lying against him. Ever so slowly, he lifted her off him, slid out from underneath her, and set her back down delicately, careful not to wake her.

He rolled his neck and shoulders as he stood there in the living room, unsure what to do.

Still with no place to unpack the contents of his bag, he pulled a red and white tunic and black trousers from the satchel, and walked lethargically into the bathroom to change.

He stared at his reflection in the small vanity mirror. Bags were visible under his eyes, and his hair looked more unkempt than usual. The past few days had been, difficult, to say the least.

He did his best to pull a comb through his hair and push it back before he rubbed his eyes and yawned as he changed clothing. Valian stepped back into the living room, where his lover still slept peacefully.

He stared at her fondly. How in Aereden had he managed to make her his? He didn't deserve her, he

knew, but he didn't let that stop him. She had said herself they may not have much time left to just enjoy each other, and so, even if that meant moving their relationship along faster than it would move under other circumstances, Valian would love her as best he could.

He kissed her forehead before striding out the door, set on meeting up with Tirion and Oran now, then coming back for Lithean later to find Lena, so he could let her sleep.

Valian strolled up Aereden's streets, smiling to himself, his hands tucked in his pockets. As he approached the castle gates, however, the same guards that had been stationed there yesterday barred him from entering. "Halt. You are no longer allowed within these walls."

Shoulda tried telling me that yesterday. He joked in his head as he glanced up at them. The smile vanished from his face when he saw two pairs of void-like black eyes looking down at him menacingly.

Valian racked his brain for something to say, but came up with nothing at the moment. It was still dreadfully too early. He was about to simply turn around and attempt to just sneak in again later when Tirion's voice echoed, "It's alright. Let him through."

The Guard members stepped aside, and the Dragonblood saluted at them facetiously as he strode past.

Tirion turned on his heel to walk with the former Champion down the left wing hallway.

The Captain raised an eyebrow at Valian's unusually cheerful mood. "What's got you so happy?"

Valian just kept smiling at him. "Oh nothing," He shrugged jokingly. "It's just that living with Lithean is so great."

Tirion furrowed his brows again and gave him a lopsided grin. "What, are you two doing more than kissing in that household?"

Valian pointed at the Captain. "Aha! There's that snide comment." He attempted to recompose himself. "Anyway, no, we have not done... *that*, if it's what you're asking."

"Then I fail to see why you are so giddy. Is kissing someone daily really all that exciting for you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry mister 'I have kissed so many girls before that now it hardly registers.' My bad, Captain, I was unaware I was speaking with a downright dog." Valian laughed.

"No, that's not it, Valian. Let's just say..."

Lithean and I made a deal while you were in a coma. Now that you're awake, I've followed through on that deal, and lo and behold, Syndra and I... made out last night. A lot, actually."

The Captain's pale cheeks flushed with scarlet as Valian sniggered and patted his back. "Good on you, Captain!"

"I must say, I do believe I am just better at controlling myself around pretty girls." Tirion glibbed as he popped his tunic collar.

"Perhaps, Tirion. But with that said, out of the two of us, who got the girl first?"

Tirion just smiled and shook his head as he faintly muttered, "You did."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Valian cupped a hand to his ear mockingly.

"The almighty and powerful Valian Ashryver did." They both chortled. "But only a few days earlier." Tirion defended.

"Fair enough, Fordragon." Valian shrugged.

Valian cleared his throat as they reached Tirion's chambers far down the left wing. Tirion opened the large door and stepped through it, Valian close behind.

As The Dragonblood looked up and around at the Captain's chambers, his draw practically dropped.

Tirion's quarters were much larger than Valian's had been. His living room alone was as big as every one of Valian's old rooms combined. Tirion's living room layout was more or less the same, it was just a lot bigger, and every piece of furniture within was much grander and more expensive-looking. A familiar coffee table sat in the center of the room, with a grand settee behind it, and two large armchairs on either side. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, centered above the table. It was a simple chandelier, but still a chandelier nonetheless.

Bookshelves, dressers, desks, and other tables lined the walls, elegant tapestries and other such decorations hung above them.

Instead of a bedroom door off the back wall opposite the front door, like Valian's old chambers, a large window made up most of the wall, and a glass door leading onto a terrace took its place in Tirion's apartment. The ceiling in the living room was high, making the large window of a wall seem even grander.

Off the left wall was a fairly large mezzanine which held Tirion's bedroom atop it, and a fairly-large, grand bathroom beneath it.

When Valian turned right, Tirion's kitchen was in the same location as Valian's had been, TIrion's was just, better.

"Fire." Valian said as he gazed about, placing his hands on his hips.

"Almost makes you wish you had decided to come stay here instead, too, doesn't it?" Oran asked as he stepped through the archway of an entrance to the kitchen.

Valian clicked his tongue. "Ha, yeah. Almost." He turned back to Tirion, eyebrows raised.

"Being Captain of the Royal Guard *does* have its perks." He sat down on the large settee. "Anyway, you said you had news for us, yes?"

"Ah, yes, right." And so Valian explained to Oran and Tirion the same thing he had explained to Lithean last night.

"So, just be sure to keep an eye open for anyone with entirely black eyes. It's a dead giveaway once you know what you're looking for." Valian warned.

"Didn't the guards at the front gate have black eyes...?" Tirion asked, disgruntled.

"I'm afraid they too are being commanded by the King at this moment." Valian looked down at his

feet.

“You think people are aware of when they’re being controlled, or is it more like, the King takes hold of you, you go unconscious, he lets go, and you wake up?” Oran chimed in.

“I’m not sure. Lithean and I were gonna go ask Lena if she recalls anything from yesterday.”

“It’d be so strange if you were still conscious of everything you did while someone else controlled... everything you did, wouldn’t it? It’d be like you were just, trapped. Seeing yourself doing things, but just knowing it wasn’t you. Gods above, I hope you *do* just black out. My first idea sounds awful.” Oran mentioned, shuddering faintly.

Silence hung in the room. Seeing as no one had anything else to contribute about such a somber topic, Valian stood and said. “Well, I should really head back to see if Lithean’s awake by now. Anyway, that was all. I just needed to make you two were aware of what’s going on.”

“Thanks.” Tirion said, arms crossed.

“Congratulations on you and Syndra, once again.” Valian exclaimed as he stepped out the door.



When Valian returned home, Lithean had just barely woken up. She sat up on the couch, her almond hair a beautiful mess. “Hey dragon boy. Where’d you run off to?” She whispered in a drowsy voice as he stepped through the entrance.

“I figured I’d let you get your rest and go warn Oran and Tirion to keep a look out for the black eyes on my own.” He said as he pulled his red tunic sleeves up.

Lithean stood and extended her arms at Valian, who walked over with a smile, wove his arms behind her, and kissed her tenderly.

“Good morning.” She said.

“I think I could get used to greeting you like this every morning.” He moved a hand up to behind her head.

“Me too.” She kissed him again. “Anyway,” She pulled back. “We still have a princess to talk to, don’t we?”

Valian slanted his lips at her in a lopsided smile.
“Agh, why’d you have to remind me.”

She shrugged. “What’s gotta be done has gotta

be done.”

“Mmm alright. Go get ready.”

She walked away from him, into her bedroom, Valian watching her leave. He whistled to himself before Lithean strolled back out wearing a relatively thin-skirted, simple, knee-length white dress and a black corset.

He raised his eyebrows at her, nonverbally asking if she was ready.

She nodded as she took his hand in hers. Valian opened the front door for her and they stepped out, walking back to the castle gates once more.

A few people watched the new couple as they strode down the roadway hand-in-hand, and Valian couldn’t help but smile. They approached the gates, and to Valian’s displeasure, the same guards remained positioned there.

“The Princess wishes to see me. I’m a friend of hers.” Lithean said coolly. “Lithean Riddian.”

One guard raised an eyebrow at the other, who nodded curtly back. “You may go.” The first guard replied brusquely.

Lithean and Valian promenaded through the foyer and courtyard, until they reached the cluster of

large buildings at the back of the premises.

Lithean led him around the kitchens and into a seemingly-smaller castle within the castle. They stepped through the wooden door, and walked down a hall that ended in a upward spiral staircase. Lithean glided up the steps, Valian bounding up behind her. After they were roughly three stories or so off the ground, they came across a door. Lithean knocked, and within seconds Lena opened it with a smile on her face and hugged Lithean.

“What brings you here?” She asked. She looked down and noticed Lithean and Valian were still holding hands. Her eyes widened and mouth gaped in a smile. “It’s about damn time you two.” She declared jubilantly.

She stepped away from the doorframe, welcoming them in. As Valian stepped through and closed the door behind him, he was, for the second time today, taken aback by someone’s bedroom, of all things.

Lena’s bedroom was a large, circular room atop a tower, with the entryway in the very center of said tower, coming up into the room itself in a cylinder.

Hers too, like many other rooms in the castle, had a large canopy bed on one side, a bathroom on the other, and even a study room and/or personal library on another, replacing her kitchen, seeing as she didn’t need

one, being the Princess and all. Other such desks, seating arrangements, and decorations were placed about the circular space.

The room itself was quite simple. It was the view that really did it, however. Large, circular, porthole-like windows were scattered on the walls quite frequently, offering a grand view of the kingdom from all sides of the bedroom.

“Valian here, wishes to speak with you about yesterday.” Lithean said, shaking him back to the present.

Lena frowned at Valian. “Yesterday? What happened yesterday?” She seemed genuinely confused, and Valian noticed that her eyes were in fact not black, but rather her traditional darkish brown with blue and gold highlights.

“Um, can we sit?” He asked.

“Oh of course.” She led them over to one of her multiple settees.

The three of them sat down in a row, Valian between the two girls as he asked, “So... you wouldn’t happen to remember, I don’t know, following me through a secret passageway in the dungeon and beating the shit out of me with magic yesterday afternoon, would

you?”

She blinked at him. “You’re joking right?”

“Wish I was. But I guess that’s a good sign that you don’t remember.” And so Valian explained for a third time.

“H-how is that possible? I was up here all day, with Athril.” She pointed to the sleeping juvenile hippogriff on her bed. “I mean, I did take a nap for a few hours around that time, but... That makes no sense. My father is a wicked man, but he does not possess magic. Nor do I.” She held up her palms innocently. “In fact, he despises it. You both know that.”

Valian shrugged at her. “I don’t really know what else to tell you. Everything I already said is pure truth. All I can say is, I believe all that magic-loathing is just a front. A front that will allow him to take others’ magic, with some grand scheme I haven’t figured out yet.”

She just stared at him, fear growing ever-present in her wide eyes.

“I can show you the passageway. You can see for yourself, if you’d like?” Valian offered.

“Yes please. Lead the way.” The Princess composed herself again as she stood, gathering the folds

of her yellow gown.

The three walked back down the tower, through the courtyard and left wing, and once again Valian stood on the outer side of the iron dungeon doors.

A new Guard member that was not Syndra stood watch, who opened the dungeon door without a word once he caught sight of Lena.

She smiled graciously at him, making him blush. He was young.

Valian looked him up and down, sizing up the boy. The Dragonblood reckoned he could fight his way past him if need be.

He focused back on the task at hand, shaking his head as he walked back down the dingy dungeon passage. He came across the big empty cell once again, found the button after a few moments, and led the two girls through the even smaller corridor for a few more minutes.

As they approached the final door, Valian crossed his arms “Here you are. This is where the fight took place yesterday.”

Lena reached for the door handle suddenly, and Valian’s eyes flew open as he remembered the feelings of agony.

“Wait, don’t!” He held out his hand to stop her, but then froze, baffled, when Lena’s fingers sparked bright purple as she came in contact with the barrier. “Whoa!” She exclaimed, surprised, pulling her hand back fast, but she didn’t appear to be in pain, just shock.

She gazed down at her fingertips, which now glowed the same eery purple as the tendrils from yesterday. She slowly reached back for the barrier, and her hand passed through the air as if there were nothing there. She continued pushing, and walked through the barrier with ease. “So much for the barrier...”

“What the...” Valian reached forward hesitantly, and his fingers touched the familiar barrier as present as a stone wall, the purple glow rippling out from the point of contact. Blistering pricks shot up his arm beneath his tunic sleeve. “Fire!” He shouted, angry. “*Glenting* barrier...” He wanted to kick it in frustration, but decided that wasn’t the best idea.

Lena stared down at her still-glowing hands again.

“Are you positive you don’t have raw magic...?” Lithean asked.

Lena gaped at the two of them. “I- I thought I didn’t, but look at what’s happening to me now... I’ve

never shown any signs of this before. I thought you show signs at an early age? Lithean, you told me fire flared in your palms when you got angry until you learned to control it.” She spoke fast.

Lithean shrugged. “Raw magic is different than elemental magic.”

Valian stroked his chin, thinking, as he stared at then Lena’s hands, then to the barrier, then back to her hands. “I think... somehow, coming in contact with you father’s barrier magic must’ve quite literally sparked your own magic, deep inside you.”

“Why wouldn’t my father have told me I had magic...?” She muttered, staring down at her open palms once again.

“Maybe to protect you? Or maybe he feared you would overthrow him if you found out you had the power to do so.” Lithean suggested, placing her hands on her hips.

“That, or he just doesn’t know.” Valian added. “Which could be used to our advantage, because if that’s the case, then he might not even know we’re down here.”

Lena glanced back to the door.

“You think you could go see what’s behind there

for us...?" Valian asked, slowly.

"Right, that'd probably be a good idea." Lena stepped toward the door cautiously.



As Lena walked for the stone door, she allayed her fears and replaced it with simple wonder and amazement.

Lena had magic.

Lena had magic!

She grasped the stone door handle, and pushed the heavy door in. Its hinges squeaked and the bottom scraped against the floor from the lack of use.

The door had opened before Lena to reveal, well, nothing really. She stood in the entrance to a large expanse of a room, completely shrouded in darkness.

"Hey guys, I can't see a damn thing in here." She turned back to face them behind the barrier.

Lithean's gaze dropped to Lena's hands, which still emitted a very vague magenta light across her sides. "Hey, presumably, our magic is more or less the same, control-wise, so once we get out of here, I can try to help you master it. But lesson one starts now. You've still got

glowing hands. Learning to make a small, controlled fireball in my hand as a light source was one of the first tricks I managed. So right now, try to brighten those lights.”

Lena loosed a breath. “Okay.” She shut her eyes and thought about a lavender light glowing from her palm, bright as the strongest of torches that would allow her to see around the room that stretched before her.

A fair amount of time must’ve passed before anything happened, because Lithean added, “Listen Lena. It’s not so much imagining the light forming, it’s more so just simply willing it to happen. Concentration is still important, of course, but don’t overthink this. You’ve got this.”

Lena pushed every other thought from her mind, everything but a glow shooting from her hands.

A few more moments passed, and she heard Valian chuckle. “Open your eyes, Princess.”

She did so, and gazed down at her hands, which were now glowing a bright purple, casting red-violet light around the room. She smiled. “I did it.” She breathed.

“Atta girl.” Lithean said, grinning. “Now go check out this room, would you?” She joked.

Lena held her hand out in front of her, illuminating the room entirely.

It was a fairly large room as big as Valian's old living room, or so. It was quite empty, though, aside from a rather old and dingy-looking circular carpet in the middle of the room, and rotting, stained wooden table about as big and as high as a bed resting atop the carpet.

"What do you suppose that's for?" Valian asked, peering in through the door, getting as close to the barrier as he could without being zapped, Lithean squishing in beside him.

"It's stained with... something dark," She squinted at it. "but I'm not sure what. My lights kinda just make everything appear different shades of purple."

She glanced up again, and looked around some more. There was a closed door on each wall, all of them identical.

Lena looked over her shoulder at the door behind her and gulped. "So, which door?" She asked her friends waiting outside.

"Left one." Lithean said.

Lena stumbled for the door on the left irresolutely. She reached for the handle with a radiant hand, but she couldn't open the door no matter how hard

she tried. “Locked.” She said directly.

“Try the right door, then.” Lithean suggested again.

Lena walked around the wooden table back across the room to the right door.

“Also locked.”

“Try the last door, just to see.”

Lena rolled her eyes, growing tired of being stuck in the gloomy chamber. As she approached the final door at the back of the room, the stench of dried blood flooded her nostrils. She blanched, but continued on nonetheless.

She reached for the final door handle, but hesitated before grasping it, noticing it had been... bent, to say the least. Almost as if someone had attempted to open it, but just hadn’t been aware of their own brute strength.

She shuddered, trying not to think about what kind of thing could’ve done that.

She pushed those kind of notions from her mind as she shoved the door back with a bit of effort. Lena stepped into the room, and the vile stench amplified tenfold. She shone her lights around the much larger room, and the notions returned immediately as she

wretched onto the stones below.

What lay on the ground in the space before here were three... absolutely wretched atrocities. They looked similar to Espin's demon, yet, somehow much, much worse. They were smaller, about the size of a very large man, but still just as horrendous.

The deformity that lay farthest to her left was a hulking mass of charred, blackened flesh, vaguely in the incredibly disproportionate shape of a humanoid figure. It had a more or less "normal" pair of burned legs beneath an emaciated midsection, and a bulging, fleshy upper half of a body. Three misshapen heads with two closed, beady eyes and a large, toothy mouth each, were jammed awkwardly next to each other, protruding from the folds of the chest, or neck, or shoulder area. It all blended together in one massive swell, really. The organism's left arm looked fairly regular compared to the creature's right arm, which, much like the upper torso, bulged abnormally and stretched much farther down than it should have, ending in three colossal claws about the size of someone's forearm. They probably would've brushed the ground if the brute had been standing up.

The abnormal thing lying to the right looked

more or less proportional compared to the previous thing, but it still looked not at all human. Armored plates practically blended with the creature's coal-black skin, making it hard to tell when plate ended and skin began, and large spikes jutted out all across the monster's body. The monstrosity had swollen, almost grasshopper-like legs. If the grasshopper's legs had been stretched farther back than they should go, burned black, and developed thorns all across the skin. The being had fairly normal-sized arms that both ended in five, long, spindly fingers that did their best to curl unnaturally into "fists." The freak's head had one large eye that hung between a brow of spikes and an unbelievably protruded underbite of a jaw.

The mutation that lay directly in front of Lena between the other two was the worst of all. It's torso was an abnormally large swell of a hunchback, yet ribs, if you could even call them that due to their location on the thing's back, were still very visible against the bulge's skin. A ridiculously unproportional lower half of a body hung beneath the swollen mass, and probably would've dangled beneath it if the creature were to get up and start shambling around with its arms. Speaking of arms, the entity had massive tree trunk-sized upper limbs. Rigid

spikes projected out from the thing's forearms, and large, fleshy hands, that really looked more like feet, which is why Lena believed the thing would probably stalk on its hands, capped off the extremity. Grotesque, long tubes of skin connected the beast's elbows to the mass of an upper body it possessed. The titan's head bordered on a round shape, if it weren't for three long, prong-like tentacles sprouting from the top of it's skull, each one ending with a swollen shut eyeball. Worst of all, this existence did not have a mouth on its head, but rather, another long, girthy tentacle extending from below its chin like an elephant's trunk for an orifice that appeared to stretch even lower than the small, dangling legs.

Lena felt dizzy from the nauseating odor, and wanted to vomit again, but she willed herself to stand strong and continue exploring the expanse.

She stepped around the masses lying in the middle of the floor incredibly carefully, and looked around the walls at the other ever so slightly smaller aberrations that were chained to the walls.

Some demons were swollen and fatty like two of the three demons on the floor, with large, hulking, fleshy limbs hanging at their sides. Some were incredibly tall

and lean, with far more than the appropriate number of spindly limbs tangling around their emaciated bodies in messes of arms and claws. And others were just completely beyond description, appearing entirely bent and broken and unable to function in such a muddle of limbs, horns, heads, even some wings.

In a corner, multiple chopped and severed creature parts were thrown carelessly in a pile, dripping and oozing blood ,that now dried to look like tar, onto one another.

One of the creature head's eyes were still open, its dull, pupil-less yellow eye rolling in the socket, a fly crawling atop the eyeball, visibly consuming it with a long proboscis.

At that final sight, Lena puked again. She felt lightheaded, and wanted to faint, but then steeled herself, promising she wouldn't fall, once she looked to the floor coated in dried blood and the gods knew what else seeped out of these monstrosities. She definitely did not want to fall here.

Horrified of the either unconscious or dead bodies around her, Lena raced back out the chamber, through the door, and into her friends.

“What happened in there? You've gone pale.”

Lithean said as Lena fell against her.

“I threw up twice.” Lena said bluntly.

“What the hell was in that last room? We couldn’t see from here.” Valian asked, curious.

She didn’t want to explain to them. The creatures were going to haunt her thoughts for some time. But she knew she had to tell them something. They hadn’t seen any of it.

“That room... it was just full of these... awful, horrendous, *disgusting* demons. They just, they don’t look right in the slightest. And they’re chained up or cut apart as if someone is experimenting on them. I don’t want to see those creatures ever again!”

And then it hit her. Her eyes grew wide with fear. “I think Espin is summoning an army, and my father is turning them into his soldiers back in that... that laboratory. Oh no...” She gasped. “He’s going to unleash those horrors on the world.”

CHAPTER 22

Valian could hardly believe what he was hearing. He needed to see these demons for himself, but he knew he just couldn't get through the damn barrier.

"That's... that's awful." Lithean said hollowly.

Valian put his arm over her shoulders and placed his other hand on Lena's upper arm, steadyng them both.

"Hey, it's okay. You don't have to set foot in there again, I promise." He looked to Lena and did his best to smile at her comfortingly.

"Can we just, get out of here. Please?" Lena asked, pale.

"Sure thing." Lithean answered as they began trekking back down the dismal corridor, and eventually

exited out the dungeon doors.

The guard raised an eyebrow at them as they walked out. “Everything alright, Princess?”

She gave him a dazed smile and waved him off with her hand. “I’m fine.”

They carried themselves back up to Lena’s bedroom, where she lay down atop her bed and stared blankly at the canopy above. Her face was leached of all color, and her expression appeared vacant.

Lithean sat down next to her. “You think you could explain to us what we might be facing...?”

Valian leaned against the opposite wall, arms crossed. Whatever she had seen had clearly frightened her, and she was reluctant to give explanations of the horrid creatures in the lab, but after a few moments of gentle coaxing from Lithean, she illustrated grotesquely realistic pictures in their minds.

Lithean went slack-jawed, and all Valian could do was whisper, “damn...” under his breath. He shook his head. “Why the hell does he need all those wretched things?” Valian asked hollowly

The clocktower from the courtyard chimed five o’clock.

“I can attempt to question my father?” Lena

offered.

Lithean shook her head. “No, we can’t reveal to him that we’re aware of this. We have to keep this between us, maybe alert Oran and Tirion as well.”

Lithean whispered something in Lena’s ear so Valian couldn’t hear, and the Princess nodded. Lithean stood and strode over to Valian before whispering in his ear now, “We should let her rest. I can only imagine what tiptoeing around those things was like for her.”

He gave her a curt nod, and they silently slipped out of the bedroom.

As they walked back out through the courtyard, Lithean clung to his arm, scared. “This is terrifying. What happens if he really does release those devils?”

Valian couldn’t respond, just shook his head, unsure, and took her hand in his. “Whatever happens, I’ll be here for you. We’ll do our damndest to fight back.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.” She gripped his hand tighter. “You’re oh so protective of me, and I love that, hun, but I fear you may get yourself killed because of it.”

He pressed his lips together in a tight line. Valian knew she was right. He would do virtually anything to keep her safe, maybe even give his own life

in the process.

They walked back to the small blue house quietly, and sat close on the settee in the living room, the faint howl of the wind outside the only sound.

Valian was exhausted. With everything between the fight from yesterday and the new sting from the barrier an hour or so ago, his body ached.

The Dragonblood nodded off peacefully.



Lithean clung to Valian tightly. She was usually confident and bold and outgoing, but not now.

Now, all she wanted to do was hide in this room with Valian, shielded from the King and his demonic horde.

Her thoughts were corrupted with the pictures Lena's words had painted in her mind. Large, bloody, vulgar-looking things that would reach for her out of the shadows with long, scraggy claws.

She found it hard to believe such things existed in another demon world, but then again, the boy she leaned against now could turn into dragons, and hell, she could control fire, too, so was an army of monsters that

far off?

Fire... this world was going to shit with this man as their King. The father of one of her closest friends was a monster. Her ex-suitor was enslaved by that man of pure evil.

She had almost forgotten entirely about Espin. As selfish as he was, even he didn't deserve being mind-controlled.

Lithean wanted to seek him out, see if she could help him. Free him of such a grasp. It would be difficult, and she would probably get herself into trouble, but she had to try. She just wanted to know he was okay.

“Valian?” She whispered, glancing up at him with kind eyes.

He had fallen asleep next to her. That was good. Meant he wouldn't try and stop her. She eased herself off the sofa and slipped out the door. Dusk was falling over the city as she strided back to the castle.

The same Guard members let her in nonchalantly, and she strode past them, making her way through the castle left wing.

She was looking for Tirion, however, she had no idea where his chambers really were, and if he would even be there if she found it.

Lithean luckily stumbled across Syndra in the hallway. Lithean didn't know the guard well enough to trust her with what Lithean, Valian, and Lena had learned earlier, but she could ask her to show Lithean to the Captain's room.

The Guard member did so, and Lithean knocked on the door vigorously. Tirion opened it after a few moments, surprised to see Lithean there.

"How'd you find...?" He asked her slowly, as if he had just woken up, but as he saw Syndra walking back down the hallway, he answered his own question.

"Can I come in?" She asked.

"Uh, sure." The Captain stepped aside and let her in. "What brings you here? You've never sought me out like this before."

"It's urgent."

"Oookay... what's up?" He raised a brow.

Lithean did her best to explain the secret room and the demons that lay within, and how it all tied back to Espin. "So, I was wondering if you knew where Espin was? I want to try to talk to him, before this all goes down."

The Captain crossed his arms. "And why would I let you do that? Valian would kill me if I let you go

rushing into danger.”

She snarled at him. “He doesn’t have to know.”

“Keeping secrets from your lover is not a good thing to do, Miss Riddian.” He joked.

She gave him a stern look, and he stifled his smile. “I’m serious, Tirion. I know he would never let me do this if he knew, but I have to at least try. Espin may not be the best of guys out there, but no one in Aereden deserves to be manipulated like that. Surely *that* much you can understand.”

He paused for a while, contemplating. “And what would happen if something were to happen to you?”

“Nothing will happen to me.”

“You don’t know that, Lithean. You have to think things like this through.” His tone grew serious as well.

She knew he was right, but she couldn’t admit that. Not yet.

“Perhaps I could go with you?” He added.

“I’m not so sure that would work. You’re the Captain of the Royal Guard. I’m the former Champion’s lover. People might begin to think you’re on our side.”

Tirion opened his mouth as if to protest, but he

had nothing to counter with, and just stood there, thinking.

“Ugh, we don’t have time for this, Tirion. Those demons could be released tonight, for all we know.” She crossed her arms, growing annoyed. “I have to try.”

The Captain sighed and tucked his hands in the pockets of his trousers. “Alright fine, but don’t blame me when he turns on you.”

“Thank you.” She said bitterly as the Captain led her back out into the hallway. They walked back through the right wing of the castle, and Lithean frowned as they stopped before Valian’s old chambers.

He looked down at her, noticing her glowering stare. “Does it really surprise you? This is technically the Champion’s chambers, after all.”

“No. This just used to be a nice place. Not anymore...” Lithean muttered as she banged on the door. “She turned to Tirion quickly. “Remember, he doesn’t know you and I are even somewhat close. You are just the Guard member I asked to show me here. We need him to believe you are still one hundred percent allied with the King.”

He nodded once before Espin opened the door, leaned against the doorframe.

His eyes were still black as night as he smiled devilishly at Tirion. “Ah, good evening Captain Fordragon. What a pleasure it is to find you here.” His black stare shifted to Lithean’s and his eyebrows raised as his smile grew wider still. “And with my ex-lover, no less.”

“She found me in the hallway and asked me where your rooms were, and so I showed her.” Tirion responded coolly.

“Did she now...” Espin’s colorless pupils remained unreadable.

“Yes. I did. I need to speak with you.” Lithean attempted to read his eyes, but couldn’t tell if she was talking to the real Espin or not, despite the eye color. She turned to Tirion. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Not a problem, Miss Riddian.” He turned and wandered back down the hallway.

Espin turned back to the fire magic wielder outside his door. “Care to come in, or...?” He asked her, still smiling.

Lithean simply nodded before stepping into Valian’s old room hesitantly. She shuddered as she gazed about. Espin had changed so much of the living room.

All of Valian's books were gone from the shelves and desks, instead replaced by eery, demonic-looking relics. He had also removed all the tapestries and paintings that had hung from the walls, leaving the room to appear emptier than it really was.

"So, Riddian, what's made you come looking for *me*, of all people? Did that Dragonblood of yours leave you, and now you've just come crawling back to me?"

He reached for her shoulder, but Lithean slapped it aside.

"That's not it at all."

"Then what is it, darlin'?" A shiver went through her body at the way he had said that title. She really didn't like this Espin one bit... worst part about all of it, she wasn't even sure she saw much of a difference between this version and regular Espin.

She got straight to the point. "Why have you been summoning demons for the King?" She crossed her arms.

He knit his brow and gave her an odd smile. "You're funny. But I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. I'm his Champion, that's all. But if you're just trying to find a way to make me seem cruel so I'll get released, too, it won't work. You can tell your lizard that he's not getting his job back."

“Cut the crap, Espin. Why have you been summoning demons for the King?” She repeated.

He frowned at her in a joking, playful way. “Come on Lithean, that’s such a *serious* topic.” He stepped toward her. she stepped away from him. “I’ll tell you what,” He took another step forward. She took another step back. “Instead of talking about that,” Another step. “Let’s have some fun.” Lithean was backed against the wall. Espin put out an arm and braced his hand just by her head, leaning over her. “Whaddya say, honey? Why don’t you and I head into that bedroom back there and-”

Her blood boiled, and before she even registered what she was doing, she gave him a hard right hook to the jaw, stopping him from finishing that sentence. “You’re *disgusting*.” She spat.

His head snapped to his right from the blow, but aside from that, he had barely moved. “Wow,” He raised his eyebrows as he grabbed his jaw with his hand. “I mean, your form was awful, I saw the punch coming from a mile away, but, wow. I didn’t know you were so full of *fire*. Oh wait, that’s right...” He smiled deviously at her hands, which had began smoking.

She clenched her fists hard enough to dig into

her palms with her fingernails, fighting hard to keep fire from blazing in them.

Lithean really did want to show him just how full of fire she was, but of course that was exactly what Espin wanted, and so, with everything in her power, she stopped her flames before the whole damn room burned up.

“Enough of your bullshit, Espin. I’m gonna ask you once more, slowly this time, so maybe then you’ll understand me; why have you been summoning demons for the King?” Daggers shot from her stare as she looked straight into his eyes.

“Aww, you’re cute. You really think I’ll tell you, don’t you?”

She felt heat pulse from her fingertips as it grew harder and harder to hold back.

He shrugged dramatically. “I’m sorry Lithean, I really am. But you know I can’t just give you that information. You’re *naive* if you really thought you’d get something outta me.”

Espin took a step back and ran a hand through his hair. “I sincerely apologize for this, sweetheart, but, it appears you really are catching on.” Suddenly he turned on her and punched her square in the head, much

harder than she had punched him earlier.

Her vision swam as she collapsed to the floor.

“I can’t let you leave with all that information you know, but it’s a shame. You really are rather attractive.” Was the last thing she saw and heard before his boot came crashing down against her temple, and she blacked out.

CHAPTER 23

It was eleven o'clock that night, and Valian had awoken from his nap roughly two hours ago. Lithean had not been home when he arose, and at first he did not think anything of it, but as time passed, and it grew later in the night, he grew fearful of her whereabouts.

"C'mon Lith, where are you?" He murmured as he paced the living room, Locrynn perched on the coffee table, his head cocked to the side as he watched the Dragonblood curiously.

It wasn't like her to be out *this* late without leaving him a note, at least.

More time passed. Quarter to midnight.

Okay, that was it, Valian went out searching for her. He stormed up through the city streets, dodging

between the drunkards that roamed the city at this time, all the way to the castle and snuck around the guards, hidden in shadow.

He didn't know where to look. He considered going and seeing Lena, but she was probably asleep.

Myrna was a good bet, too, but Valian had no idea where her chambers were, assuming she even stayed in the castle at all.

He decided Tirion's rooms wouldn't be a bad place to start. Valian went marching down the left wing hall, darting past the wooden doors on his way to Tirion.



“YOU LET HER DO *WHAT*?!” Valian seethed with frustration and fear.

The Captain paced back and forth in his living room. “I know, I’m sorry. But she’s very persuasive, surely you’re aware of that.”

The Dragonblood’s body burned with anger. “Hey, here’s an idea; instead of defending yourself, WHY DON’T WE GO AND GLENTING FIND HER!” He growled deep in his throat. “If she’s not already *gleniting dead*...”

Valian stormed toward the front door and out into the hallway. “Are you coming?”

Tirion raced out into the corridor after him. “Right behind you.”

Valian raced back down the hallway, terrified of what might happen to her. But as he made it roughly halfway back down the hallway, he remembered he didn’t know where he was headed. He turned around to see Tirion struggling to keep up with his Dragonblood-enhanced speed.

“Espin’s chambers are your old ones.” He shouted. “Go on ahead, I’ll catch up.”

Valian spun on his heel and darted back down the hallway, rushing all the way to his old chambers.

He pounded his fist against the wood of the door. “Open the glenting door!”

No response.

He growled after a while. “Okay, fine. I’ll let myself in...” he murmured. He took a step back and kicked at the lock, and the door flew open. He charged into the room, and he could feel his eyes shifting to reptilian, ready to attack whatever lay beyond.

He blinked them back to human as he looked around the room frantically. Where the hell was she?

Valian saw nothing.

He burst into the bedroom. Nothing.

Then the bathroom. Nothing again.

Finally the kitchen. Nothing still. “Argh, what the hell?” He seethed.

Tirion finally came running through the door after him, appearing a bit winded.

Valian walked back to him. “They’re not glenting here, Tirion!”

“Perhaps she’s being held prisoner? We can check the dungeons.”

Then it hit Valian like a ton of bricks. She was in the laboratory. “Oh fire... No, I know where she is. C’mom!” Valian rushed back down the hallway, the carpet beneath his feet, and the tapestries and sconces all the wall all blurring together as he sprinted down to the dungeon doors, Tirion tailing him far behind.

The guard at the door stopped him from entering, and Valian snarled at him. He was about to get into a fight with the Guard member, if Tirion hadn’t appeared before fists went flying and called the guard off. “Let us in.”

The guard huffed, and repositioned his sword out of the way.

Valian and Tirion hauled down the dim dungeon corridor.

“I thought you said she wasn’t in the dungeons?” Tirion called.

“She’s not.” He said bluntly over his shoulder.

Valian reached the empty chamber before he had even realized, and pushed the button in the large cell, the bricks peeling back seconds later.

Tirion’s eyes went wide at the moving stones, but they had no time to gawk at the magic.

The Dragonblood grabbed the Captain’s arm and pulled him down the long, narrow passage until they came across the closed laboratory door with the forcefield over it.

“What’s wrong?” Tirion asked. “Why’d we stop?”

“Barrier, remember?” He glanced back to the door, hellbent on finding Lithean. “Fire, this is gonna hurt...” he muttered as he took a few paces back, and ran at the barrier, slamming into it hard with his side. It rippled purple as his shoulder rippled with pain, but nothing happened.

He body slammed the field again. Same result.

“Argh!” He yelled, frustrated. Valian began

pounded on the barrier, punching it as hard as he could. The same rippling effect appeared, but nothing else eventuated. Valian's knuckles bled. "Glenting hell!"

He raised a fist to slam on the field of magic once more, but Tirion grabbed his wrist mid-air. "All you're doing is hurting yourself. That thing isn't budging. Besides, We're not even sure she's in there."

Valian snarled at the Captain. "Oh yeah? THEN WHERE THE HELL IS SHE? She's not back home, that's for sure!" He raked a hand through his hair, frustrated.

"Hey, calm down. We'll find her. I promise."

Tirion stared back at the forcefield.

Valian stomped back down the hallway, irritated, as he muttered over his shoulder, "Don't make glenting promises you can't keep, Captain..."

What did he do now? What *could* he do?

Valian was positive Lithean was trapped in that damn laboratory. It was the only place that made sense to keep someone who had figured out the King's devious plan without raising suspicion from anyone else.

But how the hell did Valian get through?

As far as he knew, there was no other way in.

Fire... Valian felt defeated. He didn't know

what to do.

The only seemingly possible ideas were, one, somehow forcing his way through the barrier, but he'd probably die of pain after pushing through it for so long. Two, simply confronting the King on his own, but he'd probably lose in a fight against someone with that much control over raw magic. He wasn't ready yet. Or three, Lena could either try and use her magic to remove the barrier herself, or simply walk in and face what lay behind the door on her own, but Lena probably wasn't capable of doing either of those things right now.

He had no other ideas. How in Aereden was he getting Lithean back...?

He stood against the wall, tilting his head back against the stone behind him, and slid down to the floor. He felt tears well in his eyes.

Valian had promised to keep Lithean safe. He had just broken the one promise he had made her. Now, he may never see her again. She might die, and Valian would have no one by his side when all hell broke loose and those demons were released.

Tears dripped down his cheeks now.

Fire, he hated crying... But he just felt so damn *useless!*

Tirion came and sat next to Valian in the stone passage. “We *will* work something out, Valian. Don’t lose hope. You of all people *can’t* lose hope.”

Valian wiped his eyes. “Yeah?” he sniffled. “Why’s that?”

“Because if you lose hope, then the chance we have at rescuing Lithean becomes nonexistent. You must have faith that we’ll work something out. I know I’m not the most comforting of people, but... you just gotta trust me on this one. Lithean’s a strong girl. The King won’t break her anytime soon. And we’ll have her out of there before he even gets the chance to.”

Valian didn’t respond. He knew if he did he’d just end up snapping at the Captain again, and then feel even worse.

“I have a meeting with the King tomorrow morning. I’ll find a subtle way to bring all this up slowly if he doesn’t himself. He trusts me, after all.”

The Dragonblood wiped his eyes with his tunic sleeve. “Fine...”

“In the meantime, just- try and rest. I know it’s hard, but, just try. And if you can’t sleep, well, who knows, maybe you’ll think up some genius plan if I can’t get the King to tell me anything.” Tirion patted him on

the back before standing up.

He held a hand out, and Valian reluctantly grabbed it. He was pulled up, and with one last hateful glance at the barrier-sealed door from Valian, both boys went walking back out the dungeons and to their respective bedrooms.

Valian walked back to Lithean's house, upset. He lay on the settee, and after a while, drifted off to the faint promise that he would hold Lithean again.



Her head pounded, and she felt her heart throbbing dramatically throughout her body.

As Lithean grew more aware of her surroundings, she realized she was chained to a wall by her wrists, hanging painfully.

She looked around the large, dark room to see the bodies of monsters hanging on the walls beside and opposite her, all faintly lit by a single torch above the door frame.

Wait, these were the demons Lena had described. Lithean was in the laboratory.

Oh fire... It all came rushing back now. She had

confronted Espin, but to no avail. He had presumably brought her here.

She heard voices from the other side of the door, from what must've been the entry room behind the barrier.

She couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but she recognized one of the two voices as Espin's. Lithean shuddered just thinking about him again.

Moments later, the door flew open, and he came striding in triumphantly. "Ah, you're awake. I missed you." He gave her a wicked smile. "I'm terribly sorry about that bruise across your cheek. I hope you can forgive me?"

She glared at him. "Why am I here?"

He gave her a mischievous look as he raised his eyebrows mockingly. "Ah, so you know where you are?"

"Yes."

"Then why ask me why I summoned the demons for the King? You already know the answer. They'll be released soon, all over Aereden, then, finally, he'll have total control over all those wretched people who refuse his rule." He puffed out his chest and placed his hands

on his hips. “And it’s all thanks to me.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She sighed. “I know he’s doing something to you. I know how his magic allows him to influence people and bring out their darker selves. But Es, listen to me, I know you’re still in there. You can fight it. You don’t have to do this for him. Please. I know you despise him just as much as I do.”

It was too dark to see if his eyes changed from black to cyan, but the muscles in his face softened. “L-Lithean? Is that really you?” He looked around the room, frantically. “Where are we?” He stepped close to her. “Why are you chained up like that?”

She smiled at him as he reached up to caress her cheek, but she immediately regretted it.

Espin’s caring smile shifted back to the wicked one as he punched her again. “Stupid girl... You really thought you could turn me, just like that? You’re even more foolish than I initially thought.”

She felt blood trickle down her lip.

“Anyway, I was only supposed to relay a message. The King wants to let you know he’ll be down here in person soon enough to speak with you, so don’t get too comfortable.” He turned and walked back out of the demon-filled room.

Lithean cursed herself for being such an idiot.
Why had she believed his front?

No matter. She had bigger problems to worry about than Espin being manipulated by the King. Like losing her own life down here.

Why was the King coming to see her? Hell, why was she even still alive? Perhaps she was only to be used as leverage against Valian?

Gods above, she hoped not...

She worried about him now. He was probably terrified for her, knowing she was in here if he had went and talked to Tirion.

He'd probably try to just break through the barrier with brute strength to get to her, if he hadn't already.

But Lithean knew he couldn't save her. Not yet, and not by himself, at least. Not as long as she was still trapped in this room.

She looked up at the shackles around her wrists and considered breaking loose as she glanced back to the torch, trying to will the flames to move and melt the metal around her wrists delicately so as not to burn her skin.

However, no matter how hard she tried, she

couldn't use her magic.

Lithean must've been drugged. Espin had probably told the King she had magic. She cursed herself again for telling Espin her secret so many years ago. She had been naive for trusting him then.

So, no magic. She yanked hard against the cuff and chains around her arm until it dug into her wrist harshly. "Fire..."

She glanced around the room once more now that her eyes had fully adjusted, realizing just what the demons really looked like.

She saw why Lena had reacted in such a way. Lithean wanted to vomit too. They all looked absolutely vile.

She shut her eyes and sighed, racking her brain for a solution. She had no magic. She was nowhere near strong enough to break metal. What else could she do?

But then, as if on cue, a guard opened the door and stepped into the room. He walked towards her and held up a goblet of water to her lips. "Drink." He commanded, brusquely.

Lithean eyed the cup warily, but she was thirsty and her mouth dry, so she sipped the water greedily.

Then the King walked in regally, with his chest

puffed up and his hands clasped behind him. He turned to Lithean slowly. “Hello darling. It is nice to see you’re awake.”

She scowled at him. “Why am I being held here?”

He smiled. “It’s not for the reason you think, Miss Riddian. You are not here because of the Dragonblood. No, you’re here because of what *you* have to offer, which I have learned about from my Champion. That magic of yours is crucial for my plan to succeed.”

She furrowed her brow at him. “What could you possibly need my magic for when you have magic of your own?”

The King clicked his tongue. “You see, Miss Riddian, raw magic can do a lot, yes, but it *does* still have boundaries. Raw magic can do essentially everything *but* elemental magic. After all, if I could control the elements, there would be no need for you elementals. All forms of magic have a sort of balance with one another.” He glanced to his demons lying on the floor. “I wish to throw off that balance by infusing Espin’s creations with your fire before I release them. Just imagine; an army of demons would be horrific, but an army of Flame Runner demons would be

catastrophic!"

Lithean shuddered at the title. Flame Runner.

Flame Runners were beings who had completely mastered the art of fire magic. She was nowhere near close to becoming a Flame Runner herself, but she knew what they were capable of. The thought of Flame Runner demons sent a chill down her spine, ironically.

"How are you to infuse my magic into those... things?" She asked, fearful.

"You channel your mana through your hands to create fire." He stated. "Well, I am afraid I am going to need to... take your hand, for the infusion. It is a gruesome process, yes, and I apologize, but it must be done. Soon you'll understand."

Lithean's eyes went wide. He was going to cut off her hand. "You can't do this!"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "What is stopping me?"

She sputtered for an answer, but found nothing that would ever convince him. "You're a *monster*." She spat out, instead.

The King laughed. "Oh, Miss Riddian, I am *so* much more." He smiled fiendishly upon her before turning back to the Guard member that had accompanied

him. “Arull?”

The guard’s eyes shone at attention, for that was the only exposed part of him to offer emotion. He wore the same outfit as all the other Guard members, except his cloak was black instead of crimson, and he wore a dull black metal helmet that covered his entire head aside from two rectangular openings for his eyes.

“Take her. That sedative will take its hold soon.”

Sedative? Fire, it had been in the water! She knew she shouldn’t have drank from that glenting goblet.

Suddenly Lithean felt very drowsy as Arull unlocked the cuffs around her wrists. The burly guard threw her over his shoulder as her eyelids drooped, try as she might to fight off the drug-induced sleep.

“Prepare her for the operation.” Was all Lithean heard before she went unconscious once more.

CHAPTER 24

Tirion awoke early the next morning feeling miserably guilty as he recalled everything that had happened yesterday.

He had no idea how to help Lithean. He had no idea why she was even being held captive.

All he could do was hope the King would bring him into the loop of his plan in this meeting of his, today.

Tirion stood from the bed and walked to the railing of the mezzanine. He glanced out the large window of a wall, noting the sun was just beginning to rise. He knew he wouldn't be able to go back to bed, so he pulled a long-sleeved red tunic and black leggings from his dresser, and tugged them on, before slipping his

Captain uniform on over them.

He walked down the stairs from the mezzanine and into the bathroom below, where he washed his face and combed his hair quickly.

He then hurried into the kitchen, grabbed a slice of bread, and walked out the door down the hallway, eating his bread slice, careful not to wake the sleeping Oran on his sofa..

The Captain stopped before Syndra's door and knocked. Seeing how distraught Valian had been yesterday after discovering Lithean had been taken had made Tirion realize Syndra could be gone at any moment, so he wanted to spend as much time with her as he could.

She opened it, still wearing a knee-length black nightgown with sleeves up to her elbows. "Tirion?" She said through a yawn. "What are you doing here so early?"

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. Her eyes widened in surprise, but then she kissed him back. "I'm sorry, I couldn't sleep. May I come in?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Sure." They stepped into her living room and sat down on her couch. Syndra folded her legs to the side on the cushions in

front of her as she turned to face him. “What’s wrong?”

Tirion put an arm over her shoulders.

“Something just made me realize that I should spend more time with you.”

“That’s awfully sweet, but why this early?” She joked.

“I have a meeting at eight, but I still wanted to be with you this morning.”

She smiled at him, her pointed half-elf ears perking up. “Oh alright.”

The Captain sat there, holding her close until the time of the meeting came upon him.



The only attendees of the meeting were the King, Espin, Tirion, and a fellow Guard member, Arull Fallirm.

It was rather awkward having only three other people at the meeting, one of them influenced, but Tirion pushed that thought aside as the King slowly informed him of a plan involving the King having magic, a secret room, a magical barrier that had been adjusted to allow him access, Lithean, her now severed hand, her magic

within that hand, and an army of Espin's demons.

The Captain had known about the first few aspects of that plan, but was aghast after hearing of the remaining factors, but didn't let the emotion show. Holy fire. The King had *cut off Lithean's hand* last night, and was to use it to infuse an army of demons with a higher level of her magic, no less. Valian was going to kill him...

"I know I can rely on you, Captain, so that is why you are one of the few to learn of this plan. The other Guard members will find out once the army is released, but until then, this knowledge is to stay between the four of us, and no others. Is that understood, Captain Fordragon?"

Tirion swallowed. "Yes, your Majesty."

The King clasped his hands. "Very good. Now," He glanced to Arull. "I would have my executioner stand on guard beside her, but I am assigning him... a different job. So I am going to have you watch the prisoner yourself. Is that a problem?"

Hell yes that was a problem, but Tirion couldn't say that. "Not at all, your Majesty. I will head down there as soon as possible."

"Good. Now I know you were friends with the

Dragonblood, and this prisoner is his lover, so I must ask, were you friends with her as well? If so, will this cause problems?"

Yes he was friends with her, and of course this would cause problems! "I have never spoken to her about anything but directions to the Champion's chambers, your Majesty."

The King smiled. "Excellent. Meeting dismissed."

Tirion and the two other members aside from the King stood and left the great hall.

Fire... well, Tirion had found his way into the laboratory, that was for sure. But now that he was to be positioned beside her, how was he to free her without raising suspicion?

He was the Captain for a reason. The King would find it hard to believe someone else could break in and free her with him on guard duty, unless he could be the one who would free her.

The closer Tirion got to the dungeons, the more realistic of a plan exposing his rebel status and freeing Lithean himself became.

He ran his fingers through his short, curly blonde hair and sighed.

He could think of no other plan. He couldn't get Valian through the barrier and make it so Valian would free her himself.

Espin and Arull were deathly loyal to the King, so they would not free her, either.

Tirion approached the barrier, remembering what it had done to Valian that night. He stepped through it tentatively, but found himself unscathed as he opened the door behind it and stepped into the entry room with the table.

Lithean was strapped to it, unconscious, her left arm held out to her side, strapped to another, smaller table.

Lo and behold, that arm was... missing the hand, the stump ending halfway down her forearm, cauterized to prevent her from bleeding out.

Tirion's jaw fell as he beheld the sight of her missing hand. He felt terrible, and feared for her reaction when she woke up.

Nonetheless, the Captain positioned himself next to the table and "stood watch" as he racked his brain further for any other plan that didn't involve giving up his advantageous relationship with the King.



Lithean woke up strapped to a table in a dim room, groggy.

“Oh good, you’re awake.”

She scowled, expecting it to be yet another wicked man there to poison or punch her, but then she realized it was Tirion who stood leaning against the wall.

He pushed off said wall and began walking toward her, head down, hands in his pockets. “How are you feeling...?” He asked tentatively, loosening the straps.

She sat up. “Fine, I suppose, why-” As she reached up to run her hands through her long hair and over her face, she faltered. Her left hand was... gone. “W-where- what happened to my hand?” She asked, hollowly.

Lithean prodded the cauterized stump of a forearm with her right hand. Holy crap. *Her left hand was gone.*

“Fire...” She remembered what the King had told her about his plan involving her magic, and she clenched her remaining hand into a tight fist. “I’M

GOING TO KILL THAT MAN!"

As she stood from the table abruptly, Tirion rushed over to hold her back, bracing his hands on her shoulders. "Whoa, hold up. We're in it deep right now. You can't just go storming off."

"BUT HE CUT OFF MY GLENTING *HAND*, TIRION!"

The Captain rubbed his neck. "Yes, I know, and I'm terribly sorry, but we have bigger problems right now. So please, Lithean, calm down."

She shut her eyes and took in a deep breath. He was right. So she no longer had a left hand. That really sucked, yes, but she was right-handed, at least.

Besides, she needed to worry more about the reason her hand had been taken than the fact her hand had been taken itself.

The King was now able to turn those demons into Flame Runners, if he hadn't already.

Lithean realized she was in the entry room of the laboratory, now no longer in the demon room. She spun and strode toward the back door, but it was locked. She banged her fist against it with frustration before turning back to Tirion. "What happened while I was out?"

"I'm not really sure. All that I'm aware of is that

I am now your permanent guard down here.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Well, no. Now I cannot break you out of here without the King realizing it was me and learning I am on your side.”

“Oh...” That most definitely was *not* good.

“Well, so what if the King learns you’re a rebel? He’ll release his damn demons soon enough, and by then it won’t matter.”

He began pacing. “Yes, I’ve been thinking the same thing, and try as I might to think of any other plan, yours seems to be the only solid one.”

She splayed her hands, or, hand, wide. “Then it’s settled. Let’s break outta here.”

“Not so fast. I need the King to tell me more information.”

She placed her one hand on her hip and frowned at him. “Like what?”

“Like when he’ll release the demons, for starters.” He sighed. “And I wish to learn what else he wants with you. He clearly needs you for something more than your hand, or else you’d be dead right now.” He said the words bitterly, and Lithean shivered. Why *wasn’t* she dead right now?

“I see.” Was all she could say. She heaved herself back onto the table, sitting there. She held her left forearm in her opposite hand. “I’m not getting my hand back, am I.” She stated more than asked.

The Captain simply nodded as he sat next to her.

“Fire...” She muttered. The realization was hitting her. Things were going to be much harder now that she was one-handed.

Lithean shook her head and distracted herself.
“So what do we do now?”

“I’m... not sure. I wish to speak with Valian.”

“Oh *fire*, Valian! How is he?”

Tirion stood again. “He’s fine, just incredibly worried. I haven’t informed him of my position or your... state, yet, so that’s high on my list.”

“Can I see him?”

“Afraid not. That barrier’s still a problem. He still can’t get in.

Her eyebrows raised. “But you and I can get out?”

“Well, yes. How do you think we’re in here now?”

Lithean frowned at him again. “I hadn’t given that much thought. Anyway,” She glanced to the front

door longingly. “Do you think you could bring him here? Just outside the door? And then I could see him.”

“I don’t-” He looked at her expression, and his gaze softened. Tirion sighed. “Oh alright. Don’t even think about sneaking off while I’m gone, Miss Riddian.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Captain.”

With that, Tirion strode out the front door, leaving her alone in the dark room.

Lithean sat back down atop the table. She began thinking about her missing hand again, and cursed herself, cursed the King, cursed all those glenting demons and her glenting ex-lover for it.

She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms about her shins, sinking her face between her knees, waiting to see Valian again.



Valian had woken up very late the next morning, for he had gotten little sleep. Nightmares of Lithean kept flooding his unconscious mind, waking him abruptly.

A short while after Valian had risen, a knock came from the front door. He jumped up. Could it be Lithean?

He opened the door eagerly, but his face fell when the Captain stood on the other side.

“Good morning.” He said curtly.

“What happened at your meeting? How’s Lithean?” He asked almost desperately.

“She’s... fine. I have a way for you to see her. C’mon, I’ll fill you in on the way.”

The Dragonblood ran back in, tugged his boots on, and waltzed out the door after Tirion, for he was already dressed from the clothes he had worn yesterday and fallen asleep in.

“So, Lithean is still being held in the laboratory as prisoner, but I have been assigned as her guard from now on, which is convenient, except for if we are to break her out, then it will obviously be me, exposing my rebel status. Also, the King’s demon plan? Turns out he had Lithean captured so he could use her to harness her magic and turn his demons into Flame Runners.” Tirion said tersely.

“*Had* Lithean captured...?” Valian asked.

The Captain bit his lower lip. “Yes I’m... I’m sorry to inform you that Lithean’s left hand was... removed. That’s how he harnessed her magic. The King’s Flame Runner infusion plan is already

happening, if it hasn't happened already."

Valian went slack-jawed. He couldn't respond.

After a while, all he said was, "What?" hollowly.

"I'm sorry, Valian." He braced a hand on the Dragonblood's shoulder.

"How did she react to it?"

"Better than most people would've, I suppose. She was more worried about you, really."

"Then perhaps we shouldn't keep her waiting. And you're sure this is okay for me to go walking back through the castle with you?"

"Mmm, no, not really. We just gotta steer clear of other people."

Valian nodded as they walked back up into the castle, and down the left wing. A servant girl was walking toward them, headed the opposite way down the hall.

Valian didn't think anything of her, until she got closer and her amber eyes came into view. They went wide at the sight of the Dragonblood, and he couldn't help but smile.

They stopped in front of each other. "Valian. Hi!" She said awkwardly, glancing up at him for a

second.

“Hey you.” Valian placed his hands on his hips.

She looked up at him again. “I thought you were released? Why are you back here?” She caught herself. “Not that that’s a bad thing, I’m really glad to see you. I mean, it’s not like we ever actually talked aside from that one time in the kitchens, but I’d see you every now and then in the hallway, and-”

Valian chuckled at her nervousness. “I’m glad to see you, too.” He smiled at her warmly.

“So what are you doing back here?” She repeated shyly.

“Ahh, long story short, my, um, lover, is being held captive because-”

“What do you think you’re doing, Dragonblood?” Tirion hissed in his ear through a whisper as he had pulled him back a step. “We can’t tell anyone about this.”

Valian turned to whisper back. “Why not? She doesn’t deserve to be stuck here when hell breaks loose. Surely I can warn her? Please?”

Tirion pursed his lips. “...fine.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Valian spun back around to face the shy servant girl, who stared down at her feet,

holding her wrist with her opposite hand in front of her.

“You have a lover?” She asked, barely more audible than a whisper.

Valian rubbed the back of his neck. “Uhh, yes, I’m sorry, Verity. You’re a lovely girl.”

“It’s okay.”

There was a silence between them.

“So, she’s being held captive?” Verity piped up again.

“Oh, um, right.” Valian explained the entire situation to her, and her amber eyes went wide.

“By the gods...” She murmured.

“You should get out of here as soon as possible before those things are freed.” Valian placed a hand on her shoulder tentatively, and she froze. “I don’t want you getting caught up in this mess.”

“I’ll... I’ll try.” Suddenly the timid, delicate servant girl before him wrapped her arms around him. Valian was surprised. She hadn’t struck him as the hugging type, but he hugged her back.

“Just promise me you’ll get out of here soon, Miss Lovett.” Valian said as he and the Captain began walking back down the hallway.

Verity nodded, her cheeks flushed from hugging

him. Valian smiled to himself, happy to see her again.

“Valian?” She called back.

He spun to face her and raised his eyebrows.

“What is your lover’s name?”

“Lithean.” He smiled again.

She gave a very faint smile back. “Pretty name.”

“Indeed.”

He turned back to the Captain and they began walking again.

“Who’s this Verity Lovett?” The Captain asked, raising an eyebrow at the Dragonblood.

“That servant girl who deserves more than this.” He gestured to the castle around them.

“She’s a servant girl? She’s remarkably pretty.”

Valian sighed. “I know.”

The two walked to the dungeons in silence. Valian approached the hidden barrier-guarded laboratory once again with extreme trepidation. Tirion stepped through the barrier like there was nothing there and opened the door.

There, in the dark room, Lithean looked up at attention. Her grimace quickly turned to a wide grin at the sight of her Dragonblood. She sprung from atop the table, out through the barrier, and into Valian’s arms in

the corridor.

“Hey, dragon boy. Are you okay?” She asked, worried.

Valian almost laughed. “I should be asking you the same question. Tirion told me everything that happened.” He ran his hands along her, checking for wounds or bruises.

She kissed him without warning, but then her smile faded. “I’m... I’m fine.”

Valian frowned at her. “That wasn’t very convincing.” He looked down to where her left hand used to be for the first time. His breath caught. Tirion had warned him beforehand- no pun intended- but he clearly hadn’t been ready. She looked down, away from him. “Hey,” He tilted his head down to look into her bright brown eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I... My hand got *cut off*, Valian. I’m not okay.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tight. “It’s alright, Lith.” He ran his fingers through her long, almond hair. “It’s alright.”

The Captain cleared his throat loudly.

“Yes, Captain?” Valian asked sarcastically.

“We need to discuss the plan.”

“He’s right.” Lithean said, recomposing herself.

Valian took Lithean's hand in his. "Very well, what've you got, Tirion?"

"Now that I'm on secret-prisoner-watch, I am to report to the King every morning. So, I was just thinking that once I have the information I need, I'll break her out."

"And how long will that take?" Valin asked inquisitively.

"I have no idea. As long as it needs to, really. I cannot force the King to tell me these things. I must work my way into learning them." There was a pause. "Look, I know this is not an ideal situation, but it's what we're stuck with, so we've just gotta work with it. I'm sorry."

"None of this is your fault, Tirion." Lithean reached for him, only to pause and reel back, remembering she lacked a left hand.

"Yes, it is. I could've put up more of an argument that day I let you go see Espin. If I had never allowed you that visit, we wouldn't be in this damn mess!" Tirion punched the wall.

"Valian placed the hand that wasn't holding Lithean's on the Captain's shoulder. "Look Tirion, we can't rewrite history. We've gotta live with the choices

we make. So we're gonna deal with these circumstances and work our way through all this. We'll stop the King, alright?"

"Fire, okay. I'll allow you two another minute or so, but then you've gotta go back in, Lithean. And Valian, I'll bring you down here for a few minutes every day after my meetings until we sort this out."

"Thank you, Captain." The Dragonblood said before he hugged Lithean one last time. She was secured in the laboratory once more, with Tirion on guard now, and Valian left the castle, new zeal in his heart.

He would get Lithean out.

He would save Verity and everyone else like her trapped in this city.

And he would stop the King from fully conquering what was left of Aerden.

CHAPTER 25

The next morning. The next meeting.

Tirion had learned that Espin was using his summoner portals to transport the demons from the laboratory to the great hall, so he would have to accompany the Captain down there later this morning.

The King was to be left alone, undisturbed, in the great hall to infuse the demons with the fire himself using his raw magic.

The infusion process took four hours to imbue life and magic into one demon, and Espin had summoned a total of thirty demons as of now.

One hundred and twenty hours. Five days to complete all the infusions.

Tirion had five more days, including today.

He still hadn't learned how, exactly, the King performed the infusion, but he had learned a lot today nonetheless.

The Captain trod back down the left wing and into the dungeons, the new Champion close behind.

"So, Captain Fordragon, are you and Miss Windhelm courting?" Espin gave him a sly smile as he began to keep pace with him once they stepped through the iron doors.

"Why do you ask?" Tirion replied professionally.

"We *are* associates, now, after all. I see things. Like how you two... *interact*, during training sessions."

Tirion didn't respond. He knew the son of a bitch was just testing him.

"Very well, if you two are not courting, I'll have to bring her back to my chambers later tonight, while you're down there, keeping *watch*."

Tirion clenched his jaw. He knew damn well Espin was tantalizing him. He would not give in.

"She's quite alluring for a half-elf, you know. I'd love to see just what she looks like beneath all that armor, wouldn't you, Captain?"

Tirion spun and punched him in the jaw,

silencing him. “You do love getting punched, don’t you, Summoner.”

Espin wiped his lip with the back of his hand. “What can I say? I’m very straightforward when it comes to what I want.”

“You lay a hand on her, and you may not have that hand the next day.” Tirion scowled at him.

“Oh, you mean like Lithean? Speaking of, it’s a shame her hand had to be amputated, but it was necessary for-”

Tirion punched him again, in the gut this time. “Shut. Up.”

The Summoner coughed. “Ooh, defending your *friend’s* lover, too? Such chivalry, Captain. I must say, I’m impressed.”

Tirion began walking again, refusing to heed Espin’s words as they approached the laboratory.

They entered the entry room, where Lithean stood impatiently. Her bright gaze immediately turned to a scowl as Espin stepped in after the Captain.

“Good morning, Lithean. How are you today?” Espin asked ,all-too cheerily.

“Go to hell.” She crossed her arms and turned her back to him.

“Sweetheart, I’ve already been there.” He smiled maliciously as he eyed her backside up and down, stepping toward her.

“Watch it, Champion.” Tirion ordered, taking a step toward him.

Espin held up his hands sarcastically and stepped backward slowly before unlocking the door to the demon room. “My apologies, Captain. Lithean.” He nodded to her and vanished behind the door.

After a moment, Lithean uttered, “Gods *above*, I despise him. I can’t believe we ever courted.”

Tirion explained what he had learned at today’s meeting, and why Espin was there in the first place.

“Five days? That’s it?” She asked, alarmed.

“Fraid so.” Tirion crossed his arms.

“Does Valian know?”

“I haven’t gotten a chance to tell him. Not with *him* around.” He thumbed toward the back door.

Lithean frowned. “What else is there to learn? Why not break out now?” She lowered her voice.

“I would like to learn why the King still keeps you here, if possible. Aren’t you curious?” He matched her whisper of a tone.

“Not so curious, just gracious to be alive, even if

I'm... y'know." She held up her stump.

"I promise we'll find... a hook, or something, once you're out of here."

She laughed softly at his crude joke. "Why thank you, Captain."



Tirion had not come to see Valian that morning, so he only assumed he had been busy with a meeting. He promised himself he would not worry about Lithean. He knew she was in good hands, and if anything went wrong, Tirion would tell him immediately.

Valian decided to try and find the others he hadn't seen in a few days.

He strode into the castle unnoticed, even though he was still technically forbidden from roaming the premises.

Oran was probably awake by now, so he was probably not within the Captain's chambers.

Lena might be in her room, but Valian would have a hard time getting by the guards clustered around the area near the back of the courtyard.

Myrna, hell, Valian had no idea where she

stayed, and wasn't even sure if she was aware of what was going on.

Without direction, Valian meandered through the courtyard. To his astonishment, he stumbled across all three of the people he had considered visiting moments ago sat together by the clocktower base.

"Valian!" Lena exclaimed, as she jumped up and hugged him.

He smiled. "Hi."

She placed a hand on her hip, pouted at him, and pressed her other finger to his chest accusingly. "Where have you and Lithean been these past few days?"

Fire, that's right! Oran and Lena knew about half of what was going on, and Myrna knew nothing at all, unless Lena had told her.

Valian sighed and raked a hand through his windblown-looking hair. He knew Tirion had told him not to tell anyone else about Lithean being held captive, but surely he could inform Oran, Lena, and Myrna, right? They were all rebels, too, after all.

And so the Dragonblood stood before them, seated on the bench by the clocktower, explaining in great detail everything that had happened since the very first night they discovered the demons with Lena.

All three didn't say anything once he had finished. Similar to everyone else's reactions, they were speechless.

"Perhaps we should go somewhere else? We may be too visible out here." Oran suggested.

Lena led them to her bedroom, waving off the guards easily. They all stepped through the door atop the spiral staircase and sat down at her largest, half-circle-shaped seating area around a small hearth built into the wall.

"I was thinking about Lithean's hand on the way up here," Oran said, breaking the silence. "And how I might be able to build something for her. A prosthetic, of some kind. Making it in the form of a real human hand is not hard, but I have no idea how she would control it. It was just a thought."

"I might be able to help with that." Lena interjected. "I've been... practicing, with my magic, I mean. I found a very sparse amount of books on raw magic in the very back of the library that my father was probably keeping in case he ever got rusty, but using what I've learned, I might be able to find a way to link the prosthetic with her mind, so it would act just as a normal hand."

Valian beamed. “That’s... amazing. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. This is just an idea.” The Princess turned to Oran. “What would you make the hand out of?”

“Well, wood would be the easiest, seeing as how I could simply carve it with a knife. I don’t have access to metal, I’m afraid.”

“Wouldn’t that cause problems, seeing as Lithean has, y’know, the *ability to control fire*? ”

“I... You’re right, I hadn’t thought about that.”
Oran shrank back and pondered further.

“I don’t think that’d be a problem at all, Myrna.”
Lena said again. “I could link the joints in the prosthetic to her mind, yes, but I don’t believe her mana would be able to flow through the wooden hand as it did in her real one.”

“She’s right. The hand would only be meant as, well, a *hand*, and nothing more, so it’d work fine.”

Valian faced his old Vulpitt friend. “How soon can you start working on it? We *do* only have five days.”

“Oh, I could start today, I just need to go gather the wood for it, and then, find a place to work on it. I doubt Tirion would be pleased if I littered his living

room with sawdust.”

“Fair point.” Valian gripped his chin in thought. “Seeing as Lithean’s not around right now, you could come work back at the house, out in the yard, I suppose?”

Oran nodded once.

“Now that that’s settled,” Myrna interrupted. “What’s our plan if we break Lithean out and the demons run loose?”

“*When* we break Lithean out.” Valian corrected. “And *when* the demons run loose, too?” The Earthornian Princess shot back.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

She scowled at him.

“Anyway, um, if I’m honest I haven’t really... given it much thought. I’ve just been so focused on Lithean herself and getting her out, that... everything after kinda just, slipped my mind.” He admitted sheepishly.

“*Slipped your mind?*” Myrna mocked. “You’re joking right? How are you to fight off the demon threat without a plan?”

“I am a Dragonblood, Princess, or have you forgotten? I can fight them off.”

“Oh yes that’s right, like how you ‘*fought off*’ that demon in the arena? Please, Valian.”

“Hey—”

“Stop it!” Lena intervened. “Arguing like this won’t solve anything, so quit your squabbling and, oh, I don’t know, maybe *help think of a plan* instead of accusing the other for not having one?” She crossed her arms dramatically.

Valian and Myrna both hung their heads. They knew she was right. Everyone was just so on edge about Lithean being in *prison*, and missing a hand, no less.

“So,” Lena said. “What do you all think of this?”



“That’s the most absurd plan I’ve ever heard, Lena.” Myrna derided. “There is no way Valian and I would be able to rally an army from Earhorn of a reasonable size in time to save this country. It’d take far too long.”

“It… could work, Princess.” Valian said quietly. Everyone’s gaze fixed on him. “It doesn’t necessarily need to be a large army, just one consisting of people able, and willing, to take down demons.”

“You say that like it’s so easy to take one of those damn things down...” Myrna said, annoyed.

“I am by no means saying it’s easy, believe me,” He glared at Myrna. “But I am positive there are other magic wielders out there in Earthorn who’d be inclined to help us stop this King of ours. Hell, we already have a few fighters in the rebellion now who could hold off the devils until we return. We do not need many more to fully take them down.” He looked around at all their faces, studying their expressions. “Besides,” He shrugged, looking back to just Myrna. “*You’re* their Princess. They’ll listen to you.”

“He has a point.” Oran spoke up.

Myrna glared at him now, too, before looking to Lena, who had suggested the idea. “Why must the two of us go together, though?”

“He just explained it, Myrna. You’re their Princess. They’ll welcome you back. He’s a Dragonblood. They’ll listen to his strange new cause.” She gazed out her window toward the Easternmost continent of Earthorn. “Not only that, but Valian’s flight in his dragon form is probably the fastest mode of transportation we have, so if we want to build this army fast, you’re riding him.”

Myrna scoffed. “Excuse me? I will do nothing of the sort! He’s courting my best friend, after all.”

“You know what I mean!” She said angrily, but the hint of a smile turned the corners of her lips upward. They were only joking, at least a little. “I don’t see why it’s such a problem, Myrna. Valian isn’t *that* bad.”

“Hey!” He interjected.

Lena ignored him, glimpsing back to the Earthornian Princess. “Anway, there’s no discussion, Myrna. Having the two of you go together makes the most logical sense.”

Myrna braced her hands on her hips. “Perhaps Lithean could come too, then? She’ll be free by the time this plan goes down. And Valian certainly wouldn’t mind it.”

“As true as that may be,” Lena noticed his reddening cheeks. “He’d fly a lot faster with only one passenger instead of two.”

“She’s right...” Valian mumbled. He had become optimistic for a second at the suggestion that Lithean tag along, but Lena was making a lot of sense right now.

“There, end of discussion. You and Valian are to fly to Earthorn to rally an army to fight these wretched

demons once Lithean is free and our small rebellion we have now is established. Understood?” Lena raised her eyebrows at the other princess, awaiting a confirmation.

Myrna sighed. “Understood.” She turned back to Valian, raising a brow and pursing her lips at him. “Looks like you and I will be seeing a lot of each other soon. Joy...”

CHAPTER 26

The days had blown by terribly fast. The fifth morning was upon them. The King's horde would be up and running by tonight.

Valian had woken up late. He leapt off the settee, threw on a tunic and breeches, and ran outside into the backyard.

Oran sat, cross-legged, amidst the grass, the bronze dagger from when Valian met Lithean in his hand. He was holding a small, cylindrical-shaped piece of wood, one of the ends rounded to look like a fingertip.

A small brown bag was nested beside him, containing many other wooden prosthetic hand segments.

"How's it going?" Valian asked, crouching

down before him.

“Almost done with this last finger. Then I’ll just have to put all the pieces together with these.” He gestured to another, smaller bag full of an assortment of hinge, saddle, and gliding joint fragments. Surprisingly, they were made of metal.

Oran read his expression. “Lena managed to scrape up some steel for me. The joints should move smoother, now.”

Valian smiled and patted his friend on the shoulder. “Gods you’re smart. Thanks again, for this.”

“No problem. I’m just happy to help Lithean.”
Oran flashed him a grin.

Valian nodded once and stood, striding back into the house. Locrynn yipped at him and began bounding in circles around his feet.

The Dragonblood crouched down and stroked the pseudodragon’s sleek head. It purred beneath his touch. “Don’t worry. I’m bringing Lithean home.”

He stood, grabbed his cloak, and glided toward the castle.

He met Tirion outside the gates. “Ready?” The Captain asked, his hands clasped behind him.

Valian loosed a breath. “As ready as I’ll ever

be.”

Tirion held his chin high as he declared, “Today marks the official beginning of our rebellion. No turning back after today.”

“I’ve been a rebel since he released me, Tirion.” Valian corrected.

“I know, but I am referring more so to myself and both princesses.” They had reached Myrna’s chambers down the right wing.

Their small group had decided to meet there instead of Lena’s bedroom so as to raise less suspicion, for this was the first “meeting” everyone but Lithean and Oran would be attending.

Valian knocked, and was let in by the Earthornian Princess almost immediately. She welcomed the two boys into her chambers to meet with the others.

The Dragonblood gazed around her chambers at the very end of the right wing for the first time.

Her chambers opened up to a wide hallway running parallel to the right wing hallway itself. At the left end of Myrna’s hallway was her bedroom and bathroom unit, and at the right was her kitchen.

Opposite the front door within the wall of the hallway was a large archway that opened up into a grand

living room. A fireplace was built against the right wall, tall bookshelves beside it.

The far wall of the living room was for the most part a large window, a terrace hanging beyond it, not unlike the Captain's living room.

Against the left wall of the living room was a desk and an elegant chair

Within the room itself was a large, low table, a sofa, and two armchairs around it, all sitting atop a grand rug, a somewhat-simple chandelier hanging above it.

As Tirion and Valian stepped in and sat in the armchairs with the rest of the group, the latter realized most, if not all, of the furniture and decor was Earthornian, the familiar intricacy of the blue and gold designs or the forest green fabric making up most things.

“So,” Myrna said, clasping her hands before her. “Today’s the day. Is everything set?”

“Oran’s almost done constructing the hand. Lena, are you sure your enchantment will work?” Valian said, turning to the other princess.

“Positive. I tested it on a book. The linking itself took a little time, but once I finished, I could turn the pages of the novel as if they were a part of me, which now that I think about it, was quite odd, but it worked

nonetheless.” Lena said triumphantly.

“Could we run through the plan again?” Tirion asked, crossing his arms as he sat on the arm of the sofa.

“Once the sun sets, you and Lithean are to run out of the laboratory, through the dungeons, fight past the guards, and get to Lithean’s house. There, you’ll find Oran with the finished prosthetic hand, and Lena ready to enchant it. In the meantime,” He turned to Myrna. “you should start packing. I’m gonna go and attempt to see anything in the great hall. Does anyone have anything else to add?”

They all shook their heads.

“Very well. I’ll head out now, then.” Valian stood, and surprisingly, the person who strode up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder was Myrna.

“Don’t get killed, let alone caught.” She said flatly. “Not that I care about you or anything, but for Lithean’s sake.”

Valian smiled. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” He saluted with his index and middle finger at the Captain before exiting Myrna’s rooms, pulling the hood of his black cloak over his head, and sneaking his way over to the great hall.

Valian hid behind some shrubbery a few yards

away in the courtyard, assessing the situation. The door was of course guarded, and the great hall, to his surprise, actually had no smaller windows aside from the large one at the back wall, which was outside the city wall.

So, if he wanted to look inside, he would have to get around to that window. There were two ways to do that. The first way was he could shift and fly right over the wall bordering the city and to outside the window, but the sentries stationed in the guard tower at the corner of the city premises would surely fill him with arrows. The other way was he could walk all the way to the front gates of the city, and fly low to the ground parallel to the wall around the city until he reached the window.

The first way was much quicker, but riskier. The second way would take longer, but put him at no risk whatsoever.

Valian did not have much time, and so he decided to take a gamble with the first route.

He hugged the outer wall of the great hall until he reached the border of the surrounding enclosure, and shifted into the golden dragon, doing his best to keep the flash of light hidden. He crouched at the base of the watchtower for a while, assessing the sentries with crossbows perched within the top of it.

Every few minutes, the sentinels would let their guards down to discuss amongst themselves. That was when Valian clambered over the wall in a flicker of gold before they noticed.

Valian was now hovering just below the edge of the watchtower, on the outer side of the bordering wall. He glided over to just behind the edge of the great hall window, shifted back to his human self so as not to be so visible, and peered into the space.

This was the first time he had seen the demons, and his eyes went wide as he watched the hulking, charred creatures roam within the great hall.

He knew there were only thirty of them, but he still shuddered at the thought that he and all the people he cared about would have to clash with those brutes all too soon.

Valian studied the horde closer, and soon enough found the King himself. He stood outside a circle of melting candles, a pentagram etched in chalk within the circle.

Valian had to squint to see closer, but he could make out that what sat in the center of the pentagram was a hand... Lithean's hand no doubt, a purple aura glowing around it.

One of the few ianimate demon bodies left, which also glowed a faint violet, lay outside the circle on the side opposite the King.

Valian wished to inspect the infusion process further, but was forced to leave when one of the shambling demons spotted him and began walking towards him by the window, snarling.

The Dragonblood ducked away from the glass before Espin noticed and turned his own attention on the spot where Valian had been moments ago.

The Summoner shrugged and turned back around to watch the infusion again.

Valian considered staying longer, but he had seen enough. He now knew it was a ritual of some kind that involved candles and a pentagram. He shifted back to the golden dragon and darted back over the wall to beside the great hall once more.

He shifted back, and walked right out the castle. He made his way back to Lithean's house, where he found Lena seated on the settee, playing with Locrynn.

She looked up at him as he stepped through the door and smiled. "You okay?"

Valian glanced to the clock. It was one o'clock. They had a little over four hours. "Yeah, why?"

She stood and smoothed out the folds of her dress. “I don’t know, you just seem... uneasy.”

He creased his brow at her. “I’m fine.”

“Valian, it’s okay to be scared. History will be made tonight.” She stepped closer to him and reached for his hands.

He stepped back, away from her. She frowned at him. “How’s Oran prosthetic coming along?” Valian asked, changing the subject.

She gestured toward the kitchen. “Go see for yourself.”

Valian walked into the kitchen and found Oran seated at the dining table, his wooden pieces and metal hinges laid out before him. He held a large wooden piece that resembled the palm area of the hand, with the thumb and half the index finger attached. “Looks good.” Valian said, sitting next to him.

“You think? The bolts could be a little looser and the leather straps may be uncomfortable.” He continued to criticize his work, but Valian had no idea what he was talking about, really.

“I’m sure it’ll work fine, Oran. Don’t worry.” He smiled at the Vulpitt as he stood and walked back out to the settee and plopped down next to the Princess.

After a moment of awkward silence, she asked,
“Wanna talk...?”

“What about, Princess?”

“I don’t know, anything really. How were things
between you and Lithean before she... y’know.”

Valian crossed his arms. “Fine.”

“Just fine?” She pressed further. “Have you two
not done anything romantic?”

“We kiss.”

“That’s it?” She frowned at the Dragonblood
again.

“Yes. What else would you like me to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know, it’s just that, you two *do* live
in the same house, after all. Or, *did*. But anyway, I’m
surprised you have not slept with her.” Lena giggled at
Valian’s shocked and embarrassed expression.

“I’m not ready for that.” He defended as his face
heated.

Lena rolled her eyes. “If you say so.”

He smirked at her. “Y’know, I’ve been dreading
tonight, but you are making me just wish it were upon us
already.”

She punched him in the shoulder lightly. “You
are very rude. I’m just making conversation.”

“My apologies.” Valian tilted his head over the back of the sofa, staring at the ceiling. He did not know what else to say, and Lena said nothing further, either, so they just sat there, letting the hours pass them by until the plan was underway.



Tirion stood in the laboratory with Lithean, both were silent. He had filled her in on the plan days ago. They had discussed what to do in every possible scenario. They were ready.

But Tirion didn't feel ready.

He checked his pocket watch. Half past five. It was time to go.

“It’s time. You ready?” The Captain turned to Lithean.

Her eyes widened. “Already?”

Tirion nodded once.

“Fire, okay.” Lithean raked her one hand through her long, now matted hair, did her best to smooth out the shirt she’d been wearing for five days in a row, and steadied herself. “Let’s go.”

Tirion opened the front door, stepped through

the barrier, and went dashing down the secret corridor, Lithean close behind. He turned out of the empty cell and barreled toward the iron doors. He slammed into them and threw them open, making the guard stationed there jump.

It was Raelyn Revylius. The female twin who had unhappily taken Valian during the night of the arena fight. “Tirion?”

Lithean came rushing out the door and slammed into Tirion’s back, who had stopped unexpectedly.

“Ow...”

“And Lithean? What are you doing with her, Captain?” Raelyn asked, confused.

“The King wished to see her.” Tirion responded politely.

“That’s not possible. He told all of us to never let her leave, no matter what. What’s going on Tirion?” Raelyn brushed her jet black hair behind her ear.

“Fire... Raelyn, I don’t want to hurt you, we’re friends. Please just let us go.” Tirion said anxiously.

Lithean rolled her eyes. “Look, Raelyn, was it? We don’t have time for this. The King and his new summoner are building an army of demons with fire magic. They’re releasing them across Aerden *tonight*.

Stop us, and there may not be enough of a rebellion to fight them off.”

“And why should I believe you? You’re a prisoner, after all.” Raelyn crossed her arms.

“Well then believe me. We’ve been friends for years, and I can assure you, she’s telling the truth.” Tirion interjected.

“So you’re with this, rebellion?” The guard asked, a bit shocked.

The Captain sighed. “Yes, and you should be, too. Unless you want the King forcing you to fight alongside those demons. And if you don’t, he’ll have you killed.”

“I- I can’t, Tirion.” Raelyn glanced down the hallway. “He’ll kill me if I side with you.”

“We’ll make sure he doesn’t. I promise.” Tirion outstretched a hand to her.

She paused for a moment, but after a while, took it hesitantly and nodded.

“Good. Now, you think you could spread this message throughout the entire Royal Guard? Rally as many of them as you can for the rebellion.” Tirion spoke as he began running backward down the hall.

Raelyn nodded once more, and Tirion smiled at

her as he turned to follow Lithean out the left wing.

They shot out the front gates and, as expected, the two Guard members stationed there hurried down the city streets after them. Tirion and Lithean stopped and turned to fight them once they reached the bottom of the path back to the city.

“Stop right there! She’s a prisoner!” One of them shouted.

Tirion couldn’t recall their names, but he knew they were deathly devout to the King, and wouldn’t believe a word they said about the demons.

“Terribly sorry about this, boys.” The Captain said as he clenched his hands into fists and took up a fighting stance. Lithean caught on, and flared fire in her right palm.

The guards’ eyes widened, but they didn’t stop. One went for the Captain, the other for the prisoner.

Tirion and one of the guards began throwing punches and taking or blocking blows from the other in a flurry of flying fists.

Tirion got hit hard in the jaw. “What are you *doing*, Captain?”

“You’d never hear me out, anyway...” He mumbled as he grabbed the guard’s head, pulled him

down hard, and rammed his knee up into the guard's face., knocking him out.

He turned to see Lithean strike the man's slightly burned face one last time before he fell, as well.

They nodded to each other, confirming the other was okay, and made their way back to Lithean's house.

Tirion opened the door and walked in, Lithean behind him, and found Lena and Valian sitting on the sofa impatiently. They both jumped at the sound of the door bursting open, but Valian then gave the biggest smile of relief once he laid eyes on Lithean.

He jumped up and threw his arms around her.
“You made it.”

“Of course I glenting did. Did you ever doubt me?” She said, her face still buried in his chest.

“Not for one second.” He kissed her long and hard until Oran and Myrna walked into the room from the kitchen.

Oran cleared his throat loudly.

“Oh, right, Oran made something for you.”
Valian stepped back.

Oran held the finished wooden hand out to her, and her eyes went glossy with tears as she clasped her hands over her mouth. “I- I don’t know what to say.

“Thank you!” Lithean took the hand, and with a bit of help and instruction from the Vulpitt, attached it over her stump to her left forearm using the thick leather straps.

She stared down at it, and frowned. “Not that I’m ungrateful, but, how am I to control it...?” Lithean asked Oran, confused.

“That’s my job.” Lena stepped forward, holding a thick, leather bound book. “I’ve been practicing, like you said. And through some old books on raw magic, I think I found a way to allow you to control the hand as if it were real.”

Lena set the book down on the coffee table, open to a certain page, pressed one finger to Lithean’s temple, and her other forefinger to the wooden hand. She began reading some sort of chant or spell from the book aloud, and repeated the same spell three times, slowly.

Halfway through the second recitation, her eyes and forefingers began to glow a faint lavender.

Then, Lena finished the third narration, and the hand emitted an incredibly bright and very sudden burst of light.

Everyone had turned away so as not to go blind, but once they turned back after the glow had faded, they all stared in awe as Lithean clenched and unclenched the

prosthetic hand in a fist.

“Oh my gods, it worked! Thank you so much Lena!” Lithean turned and hugged the Princess tightly before she turned to face Valian again.

He took both her hands in his and squeezed them tightly.

Her eyes widened. “I- I felt that. It’s as if my hand was never gone!” Lithean’s smile broadened even further.

“Well, it’s not a perfect replacement, I’m afraid. You can’t control your magic through the prosthetic...” Lena said, almost embarrassed.

“That’s not a problem at all. I’m just grateful to have a hand again.” She turned back to Valian and cupped his face with her new prosthetic.

Tirion stepped forward. “I hate to break apart this moment, but we do have an impending demon horde to discuss.”

Lithean cleared her throat and sat down on the settee next to Valian. “Right. Speaking of,” She turned back to the Dragonblood once again. “I’d like a word with you.”

He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Alone.” She stood and strode into her bedroom,

Valian close behind.

Tirion turned to speak with the other three as the two lovers discussed the gods knew what.



Lithean had closed her bedroom door behind them, making Valian nervous. What was she upset about?

His nerves were quickly melted away when she wrapped her new hand behind his neck and kissed him voraciously. Fire and passion burned through his whole body as he ran his hands down her back. He pulled away to take in a breath and asked. “Is this really what we needed to be alone for?” He joked.

She laughed softly. “No, I’ve just missed you.”

He smiled down at her. “Well, you’re back now.”

Lithean’s expression hardened as she straightened her tunic. “Yes but, you’re just gonna leave again tomorrow. Tirion told me you and Myrna plan to fly to Earthorn to recruit an army.”

“Believe me, I wish I could bring you along, but, they need you here.” Valian caressed her cheek.

Lithean sighed. “I know there’s no talking you out of it, and frankly the plan makes sense, so I really shouldn’t be arguing, but I can’t help but think that... every time I get you back from losing you previously, I just seem to lose you again. This time you’ll be gone for *months*, if not longer.” She faltered. “I don’t want you to go, Valian.”

His gaze softened. He didn’t know what to say. “Come ‘ere.” He pulled her in close again, and he could feel her heartbeat. “I promise I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“You can’t promise something like that. This is a dangerous, magic-filled, new land, Valian. We don’t have any idea what you’ll face there, and if you’ll even come back in one piece. Hell, I’m not even sure *I’ll* still be here when you return.” She breathed. “I don’t want to really lose you this time.”

Valian peered down at her, taking her hands in his. “You won’t, Lith. We’ll see each other again after tomorrow.” He kissed her tenderly again. “*I promise* you that.”

She slanted her lips at him. “You better not break that promise, Valian Ashryver.”

He chuckled and kissed her again. “I won’t.”

The clock chimed six. “We should head back out. People will get suspicious soon.” He took her wooden hand in his, but retracted it quickly when a splinter pricked his finger.

She gave him a puzzled look.

“You should wear a glove over that. It is still wood, after all.” He suggested.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I hadn’t thought about that.” She pulled a white silk glove from her dresser and slipped it over her prosthetic hand, then they walked back out into the living room to rejoin the rest of their small party.

Tirion nudged him with his elbow. “Everything alright...?”

Valian loosed a breath. “Yeah, everything’s fine, just nervous about tomorrow.”

The Captain nodded slowly in understanding.
“It’ll be fine.”

“I know.”

Tirion cleared his throat. “We’ve got a big night tonight and an even bigger day tomorrow. Everyone ready?”

Most of them nodded. Valian hugged Lithean from behind. All they could do now was wait.



The rebellion sat around Lithean's house, antsy, waiting for something to happen. They had alternated shifts outside the front door, keeping an eye on the castle, watching for any sign of demonic activity.

It was past midnight, now, and still nothing.

Perhaps the King was running... behind schedule or something?

Valian looked around the living room at his friends. Everyone but Tirion standing watch outside and Valian and Lithean inside was asleep.

The beautiful girl sitting next to him looked up at him. "Perhaps we should head off to bed, too?"

"We?" Valian asked, curious.

"Well, seeing as you'll be gone tomorrow, I've been thinking, maybe we should take advantage of the little time we have left?" She said amorously.

"Oh." He blinked at her. "*Oh.* I see." Valian smiled at her.

"C'mon dragon boy." She called as she strided into her bedroom.

Valian followed, and, finally heeding Lena's

words, slept beside her peacefully that night, letting the King, Espin, their demons, all of it fade away, leaving nothing but her warmth against him in that moment.

CHAPTER 27

It was early, five o'clock or so, the next morning, when Tirion woke everyone up. "I see them. The demons. Some just shot up into the air above the castle. They're coming." He called throughout the house.

Valian shook Lithean awake before pulling on some trousers.

"What time is it?" She asked, still half-asleep.

"It doesn't matter, Lith. The demons are here. We've gotta go." He said as he tugged his tunic on over his head.

She sat up abruptly, his words donning on her. "Oh fire." She, too, slid out of bed and changed before they stepped out and met everyone in the living room, awake and alert.

Tirion began barking commands, the Captain side of him coming forward. “Valian, you and I are heading up to the castle to try and stop some demons at the source if we can, and find as many Guard members as we can find to try and convince them to join us. Lithean and Lena, you two position outside the castle just before the city, stop any demons or guards that get past us. Oran and Myrna, come with Valian and I to the castle and try to save chefs and servants and anyone else you can find. Grab what you need and move out. If things start going south, converge back here. Once we lose our positions entirely, everyone fall back here no matter what. That’s when we send Valian and Myrna out.”

Everyone nodded, and Valian rushed out the door and up the cobblestone streets with the rest of his small rebellion. The city had just started falling into chaos now that the early-risers had laid eyes on the demons and were waking up others around them.

Valian’s gaze lingered on Lithean as she and Lena parted ways with the rest of the group before she disappeared from view behind a crowd of people.

Gods he hoped nothing happened to her...

Valian shook his head as he focused on the task

at hand.

“You go on ahead, fight those devils. I’m gonna find my Guard and get them to fight with us. I’ll catch up with you!” Tirion yelled as he darted down the left wing.

Valian nodded before he burst into the courtyard. It was there that he saw the masses of charred, unnatural flesh lumbering out of the great hall doors.

Good gods, how was Valian to fight an army of demons on his own? He really hoped Tirion hurried...

Valian leapt and shifted to the scarlet dragon mid-jump, tucked his wings in close and barrel-rolling to shake himself awake before gliding through the courtyard, his gaze fixed on the largest demon leading the horde on the ground. With outstretched claws, Valian rammed straight into the demon and sent it stumbling back, doing its best to regain its footing.

Valian turned his draconic head on another demon running past him and shifted again to his evergreen dragon, then lashed his muscular, club-like tail at it as the first demon was distracted. Another demon was hit with a thin stream of almost lava-like, liquid flame from Valian’s maw, sending that one staggering back, as well.

As the Dragonblood did his best to take on three demons at once, switching between all his dragon forms, he realized there was no way he could hold off the entire army. He could hold back these three on his own, but that was about it. The other demons ran past him, tearing through the courtyard, making their way toward the castle gates and down into the city below.

Fire, where was Tirion?

While Valian had been looking over his shoulder, distracted, the first, largest demon sent large fireballs slamming into his side. He roared in pain, faltering at the barrage of flame, but then launched himself up into the air, and came slamming down atop the demon. He spread his jaw wide and clamped down on the demon's throat, taking it out quickly just as the other two demons closed him in on both sides.

Valian snarled at them as they sent fists and fireballs flying. He took hard hits, but had managed to burn away one of the demons with his own flames.

One demon left. They eyed each other down. The demon screamed at him, its mouth gaping to reveal rows of small but sharp teeth. It sprinted for him, its exceedingly long, bulky arms reaching for the dragon before it.

Valian leapt into the air and shifted into the midnight dragon, but the demon's long appendage grabbed him by the tail and yanked him back down, sending him crashing to the ground hard with its brute strength.

The Dragonblood staggered to pick himself back up. The demon formed a sword made of flame in its grasp, and swung the burning blade at the reptile. Valian dove out of the way, landing right beside the demon. He lunged for the devil's legs with his long claws and tripped it, sending it falling face first to the earth below. Valian pierced the thing through the back with his whip-like tail.

He glanced up around him. All the demons had ran past him during his tussle with only three of them. Some of them had already made it through the gates, hell, some had wings and had already flown over.

It was only then that Tirion, Syndra, the Revylius twins, and a few other Guard members had burst from the left wing, slashing their blades and firing arrows at whatever creature ran before them.

Valian was about to rush and go help them at the gates when a blood-curdling scream echoed off to his left. He snapped his reptilian head toward the kitchens,

where a servant girl was cowering, being cornered by a seven-foot tall demon with many twisting horns and long fingers that reached for her threateningly.

Glenting hell, the girl was Verity!

Valian launched himself at the demon's side, sending it flying away from her. It landed hard against a stone wall and crumpled to the floor awkwardly. He turned his head to gaze at her with slitted eyes, and she still screamed.

Fire, she didn't recognize him, did she? Valian shifted to himself and reached for her. "Hey, hey it's okay! Verity, it's me. Look at me. It's okay." he said, wrapping her in his arms.

She stared up at him with hollow amber eyes.
"Valian?"

"Yeah, it's me."

She hugged him hard back.

"I thought I told you to leave?" He asked as he grabbed her by the wrist and ran with her toward the front gates.

"I know, and I did, but once I saw them coming, I just... I had to come back, to try and warn some of my friends who are still stuck here as servants. I ran into your friends, the foreign princess and the Vulpitt, and

then I realized you were here, so I came looking for you. I should've known it was you, but in the midst of it, you just looked like another demon. I'm terribly sorry." She said timidly.

"Hey, it's alright, just get out of here, okay? Oran and Myrna will help your friends." Valian said as they approached the mass of devils stopped at the castle gates by the few Guard members.

"What about you?" Verity asked, terrified.

"I can take care of myself, now go!" Valian practically threw her from him as another very large demon turned back from the horde and faced him.

It was more or less a very large, muscular human, but its arms appeared to have been replaced by tattered wyvern wings much too large for its body, a large, long lizard tail with an axe head of a tail tip stretched from behind it, and two twisting, ram-like horns jutted from the sides of its lizard-like skull.

An incredibly high-pitched screech escaped its throat, nearly deafening Valian before he shifted to the evergreen dragon.

The demon hurled itself at Valian, kicking him hard in the ribcage with large, bird-like taloned feet.

Valian was knocked back, and managed to catch

a glimpse of Verity off to his side, who still stood behind a tree, watching, making sure he didn't die. He snarled at her to run before rallying his muscles to push harder. More lava shot from his throat, but this demon was far more agile than the previous four. It sidestepped away from the liquid fire and shot up into the sky. Valian launched himself up after it.

The demon opened its lizard mouth much farther than it should've gone and sprayed an incredibly wide-ranged funnel of fire at Valian.

He couldn't avoid it, but did his best to block most of the impact with his broad, armored wings.

It burned like hell, but Valian fought on. He had to. For Lithean. For Verity. For everyone.

He flew straight for the demon's large wing, and reached a long talon for one of the small holes in its wing membrane to tear it wider and throw the creature off balance, but the demon was fast, and darted away from and around Valian. It kicked him hard again, in the back this time. Valian definitely heard something snap as his spine bent a little too far back. He howled in agony, but pushed further still. He managed to land one final burning blow against the demon before it kicked him from above, sending him crashing back down to the

dirt with a large thud.

Valian's reserves were depleted. He was forced to shift back to human, his mana levels were so low.

He lay there, crushed in the courtyard dirt, the winged demon hovering high above him, its gaze pinned on him.

Valian managed to push himself up onto his elbows through immense pain, and miraculously forced himself to stand. "Face me!" He shouted at the demon above him.

As if it understood him, it came gliding down and landed a few yards away from Valian, growling.

"Is that all you got, demon? C'mon!" Valian forced out. He felt broken, but he wouldn't stop fighting.

Before Valian even realized what happened, the demon had swiped its tail across his chest, leaving a long diagonal gash across his torso from the axe head. He stumbled back, almost losing his footing with the pain.

The creature kicked him with one leg, sending him flying backward to the ground once more. Valian rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, coughing and spitting blood to the dirt below, staining it crimson.

"Fire..." This thing was going to kill him.

Valian couldn't shift yet, his mana levels still needed to replenish. He couldn't fight it in human form.

Valian crouched, and pushed up off his knees with a groan. The gash in his chest was bleeding, his mouth was bleeding, his side was bleeding. He was hurt bad.

The demon lumbered forward, wings outstretched behind it menacingly, tail raised high above its head like a scorpion's. It screeched again.

As Valian struggled to stand alone, the devil's tail tip came hurtling for Valian's chest once more.

But then suddenly, before Valian could register what had happened, Verity had shoved Valian away, and the demon's tail went slamming into her sternum, the intended target lying in the dust off to the side. Verity collapsed to the ground, blood pooling on the soil around her.

“NO!” Valian cried as he crawled his way to Verity's side. He pushed himself to his knees next to her, holding her head in his hands above his lap. He glared at the demon, fire raging in the Dragonblood's eyes. The demon practically smirked as it assessed that it was done with the two of them, and shot up into the air again and flew over the castle wall into the city below.

Valian turned back to the servant girl in his arms. “C’mon, stay with me Verity! You’ll be okay.” He assessed her wound. It was bad. A large hole had essentially been ripped out of her chest by the heel of the axe head. Ribs were exposed, and incredibly broken. Each breath was clearly painful.

She wrapped her fingers around his that traced her wound tenderly, weakly. “Don’t... lie to me. It’s okay... knew this would happen.” Her head lolled to the side, dazed.

“No, no Verity please!” Valian clutched her head to his chest.

“These people... need you more than they need me. You’re their hero.” She rasped out painfully between ragged breaths, her eyes half-closed. “I had to... save you.”

Valian didn’t know how to respond. He just clutched her to him in her last breaths. “I’m sorry things had to be the way they were. You deserve so much better.”

“Don’t be. I get to... see parents now.” The pretty servant girl stared up at the sky blankly, a very faint smile parting her lips.

A drop rolled from his cheek and splashed into

her blood pool. “I didn’t know. But that’s- that’s good.” Valian smiled through his tears.

Verity turned her gaze to his slowly and smiled at him, her amber eyes dazed and glossy. “I wish we could’ve been more... I’m just glad... was lucky enough to meet you in the first place.” The servant girl reached up and caressed his cheek very weakly. Valian placed his hand over hers. “Tell Red I care so much about him. More than he... could imagine. And... he means the world to me.” She closed her eyes and smiled to herself.

“I will. I promise.”

“And treat Lithean well... Now go, demons need... fighting...”

With those words, the smile faded from her face, and her eyes went glassy, rolling back lifelessly in their sockets. Her muscles relaxed, and her whole body went limp in his arms.

“No...” Valian whispered through his sobs as he pulled her close to him. He knelt there, holding her lifeless body there for a few moments before he reminded himself he still had a job to do.

He stared down at Verity. Her death would not be in vain. Valian closed her eyelids with his fingers gently. He let out a long, shaky breath as he stood, his

strength renewed by adrenaline and emotion.

He stared furiously out through the castle gates to the city below. He didn't know who Red was, but he would relay that message. "They're dead. All of them! I'm gonna kill every last demon." Valian sprinted out the castle gates and shifted to the scarlet dragon before gliding down over the city. He gave an incredibly loud guttural roar that echoed across the city, directing every living thing's- man and demon alike- attention up at him.

He spotted people with his enhanced draconic vision easily. Tirion and Syndra stood back to back, one holding two greatswords, the other a longbow, a circle of four demons around them.

Lithean and Lena stood before a large, fallen demon, their hands glowing orange with flame and purple with pure mana as more demons closed in.

Oran and Myrna were making their way back to Lithean's house, a small group of people who looked like servants trailing them.

He spotted other Royal Guard members in their iron chest plates and red cloaks, clustered in two small groups.

Demons of various sizes shambled through the city streets. Bodies were littered here and there, and

Valian shuddered, thinking back to Verity. Buildings and kiosks were in flames. The devils tore through everything they came across, and Valian wondered what the King's plan really was. Or maybe he no longer had control over them...

Valian circled back to find Tirion and Syndra, who seemed to be fighting off more demons than any of the other groups.

The scarlet dragon body slammed into a more or less humanoid demon with five arms, two from each shoulder and one from its back, and three eyes. The creature staggered back, but before it could regain its footing, Valian charred it to ash with a flute of fire.

"Leaving the rest of us to clean up your mess again, ay?" Tirion joked, spiking a scrawny little demon with a mouth that opened into four toothy segments and bony wings through the chest.

Valian's thoughts were still enraged by Verity's death, but he wouldn't tell Tirion the somber news just yet. 'Demons needed fighting,' after all.

Valian was still in dragon form, so could not joke back, but he snorted and smiled over his broad scaly shoulder at the Captain as an armored brute of a creature charged for them.

“Incoming.” Syndra warned as she pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it against the bowstring.

The demon was a hulking, muscular thing, with skin pulled tightly over its coiled muscles, veins exposed through the pale burned pelt. It’s head hung low in a hunchback sort of way, a large crest or horn jutting from above its brow bone, and two large, curved horns protruding from the fronts of its plated shoulders.

The creature charged at them like a rhino, the two horns from its shoulders pointed forward as it ran.

As it rammed toward Valian, Syndra filled it full of arrows, but they appeared to do nothing. Just before the demon slammed into Valian, he sidestepped out of its charging path, clamped his jaws down on one of the horns and yanked it back. As one half of the creature was pulled away but the other kept moving forward with its momentum, the creature lost its balance and toppled over.

Tirion leapt atop it and slashed its throat with one of his swords. He looked around. No more demons were around them. They were either dead, or had fled somewhere else. “Where to now?” He sheathed his great swords over his shoulders.

Valian shifted back and said, rushed, “Climb on.” He shifted back to the scarlet dragon, and Tirion and Syndra clambered onto where his neck met his shoulders. The Dragonblood soared up into the sky and looked around again.

Lithean, Lena, Oran, and Myrna were all nowhere to be found.

As Valian inspected the city further, he spotted the demons that remained retreating back to the castle.

“Do we follow them?” Syndra asked from over his shoulder.

Tirion shook his head. “No, we should regroup and heal while we can. Head back to Lithean’s house. I informed the Guard members to meet us there, as well.”

The Dragonblood nodded his crimson head and rocketed back to their rebellion’s base of operations. The Captain and his lover slid off, and Valian shifted back painfully before they entered the house.

Lithean strided for Valian and hugged him once he closed the door behind them. “Are you okay? You’re caked in blood.” She then gasped at the sight of the gash across his chest, his tunic torn. She touched the wound lightly, making him wince with pain. “Sorry.” She said. The adrenaline was long gone, realization setting in.

Valian looked down at himself. His tunic was colored a very dark red across the chest and lower sleeves. The front of his thighs and knees, too, from when he had knelt beside Verity... "I'm fine. Most of this isn't my blood." He half-lied. He was injured, but he would heal faster than normal. "Besides, there are others with far worse injuries than mine that need to be tended to first."

Lithean turned around to see what he was talking about. She pressed a hand to her mouth as she took in the sight of one of the Guard members missing an entire right arm, passed out- or so he hoped- from pain on the kitchen table. Another guard's face, left shoulder, and chest area was badly burned, as well.

"I'm gonna go help treat them. You stay here, I'm fixing you up before you take off." She said over the murmurs of the crowd as she slipped away. The living room seemed much smaller with so many people clustered within it.

Lithean was gone from his view once she stepped into the kitchen, tending to the guards with a few of the servants' help.

Two of the three servant girls assisted Lithean. There were five servants throughout the house in total,

the other two were boys.

“We- we lost two of the older boys on the way over here...” Oran whispered, ashamed, as he came to stand next to Valian. “They held off the demons to protect the rest of them.” He gestured to the other servants.

He was reminded once more of Verity, and bit back his guilt.

“We can’t think about the ones we lost. Not at this moment. Our first priority is to save the ones we can now.” Tirion said from Valian’s other side.

Oran nodded.

Tirion strode away to hold Syndra as they both checked up on each other, evaluating the severity of the other’s wounds, as well.

Oran moved away to sit with Lena and Myrna on the settee. Oran looked repentant, Lena’s jaw set, Myrna horrified, staring at a small gouge in her right forearm as Lena wrapped gauze around it.

Valian caught another glimpse of Lithean in the kitchen. Thankfully she seemed unharmed. He almost smiled, relieved she was not injured, before he spotted Raelyn sitting in the corner, sobbing.

He walked over and sat down next to her

hesitantly. He noticed Ryder was not one of the rebels standing within the living room...

“Go away.” She murmured.

Valian pressed his lips together in a tight line. He did not go away. “I’m sorry. About... Ryder.”

Raelyn sighed. “He didn’t deserve to die. Not like this.” She shuddered.

“I know. None of them did.”

“It’s all my fault. I dragged him into all this. He wanted to stay behind, wanted to see for himself what the King was up to, but I forced him to come fight with me. They surrounded him. He was dead before I even took down one of them.” She stared off into the fireplace. “He’d still be alive if I had let him stay behind with the King, at least.”

“Alive, but enslaved, and forced to fight against his will under the King’s influence. He walks among some of the best warriors in the Overrealm, now. He is at peace.” Valian put an arm around her trembling shoulders.

It was... strange, seeing her cry. He had always seen her as a strong and confident Guard member of only eighteen years, good friends with Tirion, as well. But then again, every time he had seen her, she had been

with Ryder...

She had whispered thank you before Valian stood again, roaming around the living room awkwardly. He walked back over to Tirion, still holding Syndra.

“Who’s injured, and how many did we lose?” Valian asked, bitterly.

Tirion set his jaw. “That guard there, Kovalt Galloway, is badly burned, but he’ll survive. Syndra and I are scratched here and there, but we’ll be fine. Myrna got clawed across the forearm, but that’ll heal fast, as well. And then there’s your injuries, but you seem to be holding up just as well?

“The one with the missing arm doesn’t seem like he’ll make it, if I’m honest. We lost another one of the guards that decided to join us on the way here. Ryder also died defending his sister, but you already knew that. And Oran told you they lost two of the servants.” Tirion turned his gaze from Valian to the people around the room.

“Verity’s dead, too...” Valian barely whispered.

Tirion’s eyes widened. “I-I’m so sorry.”

“Because of me, Tirion. Verity saved my life. And now she’s glenting dead because of it!” Valian hung his head in shame.

“What?” Echoed another voice from the far wall. “Verity’s... *dead*? ”

Valian’s throat tensed. It was the boy who had been protective of her in the hallway on Lena’s birthday, the one who had glowered at him because she had almost tripped. “Yes. I’m sorry.” Valian approached the servant boy hesitantly. “You knew her, yes?”

The boy scoffed. He looked about Valian’s—more accurately Verity’s—age. “*Knew* her? I was *in love with her!*” The boy turned his back to Valian. “But she found you far more interesting than me once you showed up. I never even got the chance to tell her...” He faltered, his fists clenching.

Valian’s lips parted. “I—I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Your apologies won’t bring her back.” He turned back to Valian. “How did she die?” He demanded.

“Verity... saved my life. She pushed me out of the way of a demon’s attack. She said...” He wiped his eye. “She said this rebellion needed me more than it did her. That I would be your hero...”

The boy practically laughed. “Look at how well that’s turned out... You’re supposed to be this grand

Dragonblood here to free us all from our tyrannical King, but so far, you've done nothing but leave pain and death in the lives of the people caught in your wake! Some *hero* you are..."

The room was silent. Everyone's attention was focused on Valian and the servant boy, now.

"You're... you're right. I'm sorry. I've been a pretty shit rebellion leader, it's true." Valian turned to the whole room, spotting Lithean leaning against the kitchen door frame. "But I will not fail you. I will free you, all of you, from the King, if it's the last thing I do. You have my word. I will not let any of you down." Valian turned back to the boy. "Is your name Red, by any chance?"

The servant boy glared at him. "My nickname. Verity called me that, 'cause of my hair." Red gestured to his, well, messy *red* hair. "Why?"

Valian smiled faintly. "She wanted me to tell you, before she passed, that you meant more to her than you could ever imagine. That you meant the world to her, Red."

His lips parted and quivered, his eyes glossing over with tears. He didn't know what to say.

Valian braced a hand on Red's shoulder. "She

didn't die in vain. I promise you that."

The servant boy pushed away from Valian and joined the other servants once more, who welcomed him with open arms and soothing words, reminiscing in memories of Verity.

Lithean strolled back over to Valian's side and clung to his arm. "We couldn't save the man with the missing arm... he passed away on the table just moments ago."

"I'm sorry." Valian said. He seemed to be saying that a lot, right now...

"There was nothing we could do for him. He had already lost so much blood. But he heard your little speech. He said he was proud of you, and that he trusted you would lead us to victory."

Valian gave the faintest of a smile.

"So, who was Verity...?" Lithean asked carefully.

He loosed a breath. "Verity was, uh... she was a servant girl, who, apparently wished to court me, but, y'know." He gestured at the two of them. "Anyway, we would pass in the hallways, and we only spoke, what, two, maybe three times before she died in my arms? I just, I feel so guilty. She deserved so much more, but

now she's dead because of me."

Lithean stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. "She *believed* in you, Valian. I do, too. You can honor her, and everyone else we lost today, by winning this fight. We'll all be here, supporting you, as well. Just go out there and find that army, and those demons won't stand a *chance* against us." She smiled up at him.

"May I have your attention, everyone." Tirion spoke up professionally throughout the room. Everyone turned to him. "I believe we should announce our rebellion to the city, so they have something to believe in. And we should hold a funeral for the dead in the streets outside. So, all those who are able, could you please come with me to gather as many of them as you can in the town square? Others gather wood, too."

Most of the people nodded, and soon enough, almost everyone was outside, carrying the bodies of the fallen and laying them beside one another amongst dry logs in the town square. Valian had made his way back up to the castle and found Verity's body. Her beautiful frame looked so broken, her hair clotted with congealed blood. He bit back the tears as he picked her up in his arms and walked her to the funeral pyre, as well.

There was a crowd of common folk gathered

around the pyre, now, and Valian figured now was as good a time as any to speak to them all.

Valian went to stand at the front of the pyre before the people, Lithean next to him as reassurance. “Excuse me, people of Aerden? May I have your attention, please?” He cleared his throat. “As many of you probably know, our King has turned on us this day. He has used his new Summoner Champion’s abilities of demonic summoning to form a formidable army, which he has only partially unleashed on us today. He will unleash more demons across the country soon enough, wreaking havoc on everything they stumble upon. My friends and I, this rebellion, promise to fight back against the King and his demon horde. I vow to give this fight everything I have, and I will not stop until the King is taken down.

“With that said, I have failed you, today. We did not know what we were facing, and these creatures got the better of us. I promise, however, we will not let you down any longer. We have learned more about these demons and how to counter them, and we will take them down. So please, people of Aerden, don’t give up. Believe in the rebellion. Spread the word. Spread the name ‘Valian Ashryver, the Dragonblood.’ I will do my

damnedest to keep every last one of you safe.

“And now, if you do not mind, I would like to honor the fallen with a traditional funeral pyre ceremony.” he turned to Tirion and Syndra. “Captain? If you would, please.”

Tirion stepped forward, taking Valian’s place before the funeral pyre. He cleared his throat, and everyone went silent.

He spoke slowly, professionally. “May Fenric welcome you, and guide you to his grand throne. May they accept you, and the others that have passed this day, with open arms. May you take your proper places in the great hall of the Overrealm. For great heroes have fallen, given up their lives so that the rest of us may live. Warriors. Allies. Family members. Friends.” Tirion wiped a tear from his cheek. “Your deaths will not be in vain.”

He turned and nodded to Syndra, who lit an arrow using Lithean’s magic and fired it into the stack of logs on top of bodies that represented their funeral pyre. The pyre caught fire instantly, and began burning away.

Rebellion members and common folk alike stood together, honoring the fallen in silence as their spirits rose high with the smoke up into the Overrealm.

CHAPTER 28

Hours had passed, and it was now evening when the pyre had died down, and people returned to their homes.

The rebellion sat within Lithean's living room in silence, the atmosphere around them solemn and grave. No one spoke, the only sound the crackling of the fireplace and the ripping of gauze as Lithean bandaged Valian's chest.

He knew he had to leave soon, but he just wasn't ready. He sat there holding Lithean on the armchair quietly after she had finished dressing his wound.

It was then, however, that a voice echoed through everyone's heads. Through everyone's own *thoughts*.

Hello people of Aereden, Rebellion. This is your King speaking within all of your thoughts through raw magical means. I have been exposed and betrayed by my former Champion, Royal Guard Captain, and even my own daughter, already, after all, so there is no point keeping this a secret.

Everyone stared at each other, shocked and scared, but they listened, or thought, further.

You may all believe that I called my demon army back in a retreat, but oh, you have no idea how wrong you are. Some of you may even believe I only possess, what, twenty, maybe thirty demons within my army? You are all so naive. I have been building an army for weeks. I am in possession of hundreds of demons. Today was only a test. A trial run for my demons so I could see how they worked, so to speak. I am very pleased with the results. I will be releasing my full army across the entire country very soon, and I will burn this kingdom to the ground, then rebuild it all from the ashes! So please, Rebellion, try and stop me! Nothing you do will make any difference. Good evening.

No one could see him in their head, only hear his haunting voice, but Valian knew he was smiling

devilishly down on them, his black eyes digging into their minds.

“That was, awful...” Lithean murmured.

The rebels that did not nod in agreement trembled, or pressed their fingers to their temples, trying to rid their brains of the sinister man.

It took a few minutes for a few to recover, but once everyone did, Tirion nudged Valian, saying, “I’m afraid it’s time. You and Myrna should head out.”

Valian nodded and stood.”Myrna?”

She looked up at him, dark brown eyes wide.
“Already...?”

Valian nodded somberly.

“Let me get my things. “The Earhornian Princess stood from the settee and walked into the kitchen to grab a large knapsack, which she then slung over her shoulder. Valian proceeded himself and walked into Lithean’s bedroom to grab his satchel.

When he reemerged, many people had stood, ready to wish him farewell.

“Um, could I get a moment alone with Lithean?” He asked sheepishly over the crowd. No one protested, and so Lithean followed him out the front door. They stood there alone, Valian’s arm around her shoulders,

watching the moon high above.

“What’re you thinking about, dragon boy?”
Lithean asked, looking up at him inquisitively.

“I’m just... scared.” He breathed.

“Don’t be. You’ve got this. Like I said, I believe in you.” She grabbed his hand that rested over her shoulder.

“No, that’s not it. I’m scared for you. What if I never see you again?” He looked down at her, and he met her bright brown eyes, noticing flecks of gold shimmering in the moonlight.

“Don’t speak like that. We’ll see each other again, don’t worry.” She weaved her arms around him, and he looked down and kissed her gently.

“Just- promise me you’ll take care of yourself?”
Valian asked, concerned.

She smiled. “Same goes for you, Ashryver.” She kissed him again, quickly. “Myrna, too. I fear for her, sometimes.” Lithean joked.

“Lithean, seriously.” Valian smiled.
“I’m being *very* serious right now,
Dragonblood.” She grinned wide. “You sure you’re not forgetting anything?”

Valian nodded.

“Okay.” She loosed a long breath. “Then let’s do this.” Lithean stepped back in through the door. “We’re ready.” She said to the rebels in the room. Everyone stood and gathered outside the house.

Valian was nervous as he went down the line shaking everyone’s hands, hugging and getting patted on the shoulder by his closer friends.

Tirion handed Valian two hand-drawn maps, one of Aereden, the other Earthorn. “You might need these.”

And then there was Lithean again, at the very end of the line. He hugged and kissed her again before turning to Myrna. He handed his satchel and the maps to her, for he couldn’t carry them over his shoulder while in dragon form.

Myrna raised her eyebrows and placed her hands on her hips as she faced him. “Shall we go?”

Valian nodded, and was about to shift, but then caught the gaze of his lover one last time. “Uh, actually, just one second.”

Valian slipped back to Lithean and took her hands in his. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before murmuring, slowly, carefully, “I love you, Lithean Riddian. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Lithean smiled warmly at him, her freckled nose

wrinkling, and threw her arms about him. “I love you too, Valian Ashryver. And I won’t.” She whispered over his shoulder into his neck before she pecked him on the lips for the last time. “Now go! You’ve got an army to build, dragon boy.”

He lingered, but finally slipped back to Myrna’s side and shifted to his broad-winged evergreen dragon built for long-distance flight in a flash of light and wind and magic. He crouched down and allowed Myrna to climb on, and he leapt up to hover in the air.

He looked back down at all his friends that he’d grown to care so much for as many of them waved or whistled or saluted him goodbye and good luck as he turned and flew towards the Easternmost continent of Earthorn.

As Valian glided toward the seaside city of Portbrooke, their last stop before making the long journey out over the Venasian Sea, he reminded himself that he had an army to build, a kingdom to protect, and a girl to return home to.

He promised himself, promised everyone in that rebellion, everyone in that city, that he would do all three of those things as the now-burned, Golden City of Aereden faded behind him, a new horizon stretching out

before him as the full moon shone bright in the night sky.

The Princess atop his shoulders leaned forward into the wind and said in his ear confidently, “Let’s go save Aereden.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oh wow, okay, where do I begin? Well, *Dragonblood's* taken me so long it's hard to believe I still stuck with it. Over two years. It's been *over two years* since I started writing way back in 8th grade only to finally finish now in 10th grade.

Of course, I do have to give a lot of that credit to the fact that this book became my 10th Grade Personal Project after I stopped writing around the end of 8th grade or so, so if I'm honest, it kind of became required if I wanted to pass 10th grade...

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