



Above

All

Else



Dayton I don't

A 'LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD' STORY

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ABOVE ALL ELSE

By Dayton Idoni

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Ribbons of autumnal sunlight penetrate the canopy of leafless trees. The silvery beams reflect off the rippling river, which winds itself amongst the roots of the ancient forest. Next to the gushing water, a blue dragon rests its claw on a gaping fish. The sapphire-scaled creature stares inquisitively into the woods, listening to the cries of an approaching stranger...

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm a dragon shifter, and I'm the smallest of my kind. I'm small enough to sit on the shoulders of an average sized man. I might be adorable in both my forms because of my size and looks, but I have a deadly secret ability that other dragons don't have (at least to the same extent I do). Tell me Author who/what is my mate/s and how do we meet.

Thank you Author for telling whatever story this inspires.

Sincerely,

A.J.

P.S. Please don't let any MC be a wet rag. And some adorable/cuteness/affection between the MCs is a plus. Otherwise this can be whatever you want

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mythical creatures, magic, enemies to lovers, interspecies, imprisonment, first time, non-explicit

Word Count: 36,323

Special Thanks

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ABOVE ALL ELSE

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Chapter One

“Help me! Someone, please...”

The desperate cry startled the stoat that I was hungrily stalking. The lithe rodent twisted its head hastily and tried to pinpoint the source of the sound. It sniffed at the air, seeking the scent of the human that was pleading for assistance. Cautiously, it cast its gaze upward into the thick web of branches where I was hiding. The rat-like creature spotted me hiding amongst the foliage, and its pupils dilated. Deducing my carnivorous intent, my breakfast fearfully scurried off into a thick patch of undergrowth, despite the fact it was slightly bigger than me.

I sighed irritably, and my stomach rumbled. For the briefest of moments, I wondered what human might taste like.

“Stay back! Leave me alone!”

It sounded as though the shouting was coming from the river. The shallow channel was a short flight to the north, and I could just about hear the human splashing noisily through the water. Giving up on the stoat, I decided to investigate. This was my territory after all.

Retracting my claws from the rigid bark, I dropped down from the tree. I unfurled my leathery wings and flapped them once, pushing myself up above the canopy. As I ascended beyond the forest’s top, the cool morning air stroked its way over my sapphire scales. I shivered, enjoying the sensation and revelling in my feral freedom.

“Someone, please!”

With all the noise the human was making, there was no surprise it was in need of aid. It probably had every predator in the forest hunting it down. Honing in on the din, I located the human’s whereabouts.

Stealthily, I landed on a silver birch, grappling at the wood with my powerful claws. Below me, bordered by a muddy bank and thick overgrowth, was the river. Wading through its rapid current at a depressing speed was a man. He was well built for a human. His shoulders were broad, and his bare arms were well muscled. His short russet hair was unkempt, and blood trickled down his forehead. He was dressed, as human males prefer, in a cream shirt. I noted that the buttons on the dirtied fabric were made from pearls. At the man’s

side, dangling next to his dark woollen slacks was a gem encrusted rapier. Whoever he was, he had a taste for finery.

Panting, he turned and scanned the riverbank behind him. “Stay back, tree troll. I’m armed with a blade. I’m not afraid of you!” The panic in his wobbling voice suggested otherwise.

I focused on the patch of woodland from which the human fled. If he was being pursued by a tree troll, or a treoll as we more ancient races called them, then there would be trouble.

A rustling in the greenery near the bank drew my attention. As the creature emerged from the shadows of the forest, I hissed under my breath and felt my muscles constrict involuntarily. Dragons and treolls did not mix well. Meanwhile the human backed away. His big brown eyes were wide and full of fear. Distracted, he tripped on a large rock and toppled backwards, submerging himself in the murky water.

I leered at the treoll, noting the aggressive contortion of her feminine features. Her mass of straw-like hair was braided into thick knots and it sagged down to her hips. Her celadon skin, which was scantily covered in leather and fur, shimmered with perspiration. Two tusks jutted out of her lower lip, curling upwards. Her golden eyes went wild with bloodlust when she set her sights on the man. Squealing, she pranced through the river toward him. In her hand, she held a shaft of crudely sharpened wood, and she raised it above her head as she neared her target. Behind her, two more treolls emerged from the forest’s thicket. Both were male, and both wore the same worried expression on their faces.

One of them shouted her name, “Mish’Ti,” but the female ignored her companions.

The human had regained his footing and was fumbling with the sword at his belt. As the female’s shadow descended upon him, the man unsheathed his sword. The towering treoll jabbed down with her weapon, aiming for the human’s heart. In a fluid movement that belied his apparent clumsiness, the human twisted out of the spear’s path. In retaliation he swiped his blade up into the air, forcing the slip of metal through the treoll’s eye and into her skull. She convulsed for a second and then her gangly lifeless body dropped into the water.

The man isn’t as helpless as he appears, I gauged. Clever human.

I didn't have time to dwell on the thought. The male treolls bellowed in outrage. The unison of their chilling roar silenced the forest and they sprang into action, separating from each other. The taller of the two, who was a full head and shoulders bigger than the human, paddled to the bank on the opposite side of the river. Meanwhile the shorter treoll slowly matched his partner's advance, meaning to trap the human between them.

Normally I was cautious to avoid the treolls, as was any sensible dragon. When I was a child, I was told frightening stories about them. It was said there were a few that could bend the elements and manipulate fire. Back then, I'd huddled with the other hatchlings and listened while the elders spoke of the treolls, who hunted our kind and burned them out of the sky.

They were unpredictable and dangerous. An enemy who could potentially turn a dragon's greatest weapon against them was not to be underestimated. After all, we dragons might have a high heat tolerance, but we're not fireproof. When a dragon's fire is reflected back at them, eventually they burned like everything else.

But I didn't have to worry about that. My weapons were my fangs and my claws. I'd taught myself other ways to fight. I'd had to. I was not born with the same skills as the rest of my kin.

I couldn't breathe fire...

However, that didn't make me any less deadly.

I watched the two treolls advance towards the human and growled quietly in my throat. I couldn't very well have treolls trampling through my territory and making themselves comfortable. I liked my own space. I enjoyed having the forest to myself, and I didn't want to make anyone else feel welcome. As the two treolls charged for the human, I sprang from the birch and dropped into the fray.

I landed on the taller treoll's head and clawed at his bald scalp. My talons cut through his pale green flesh and blood sprayed from the wound. He yelped with surprise and dropped his weapon. It went floating off down the river, chasing after the body of the fallen female. Flailing his arms about above his head, he tried to dislodge me. Happy to oblige, I let go of his skull and took to the air. He looked up at me and squinted accusingly as crimson blood trickled down into his face.

Meanwhile, the human tussled with his opponent. The two combatants circled each other, looking for an opening in their rival's defence. Striking like

a viper, the treoll stabbed his spear at the human's throat. Again, the human spun away from the attack with a confident skill. He drew his rapier along the length of the treoll's arm. The wounded beast danced backward, narrowly avoiding a sword to the gut. It cradled its arm to its chest and hid the deep cut from view.

"Bal'Caa, *we hest akan do mi,*" the taller treoll stated.

Hesitating, the littlest treoll moaned and his nostrils flared with anger. He jabbed his spear at the human one more time, more in warning than as an actual attack. Then the two treolls fled, retreating into the dense woodland. A little further downstream, the taller one reappeared briefly. He quickly plucked the female's corpse from the water, threw it over his shoulder, and then disappeared from sight.

The human stood still for a moment, listening with his head cocked to one side. Satisfied that the treolls were no longer in earshot, he turned his sights upon me. I had landed on the muddy bank and was washing treoll skin from my claws. Warily he waded through the rippling water, slowing as I reared my head to look at him. At this distance, I could better make out the features of his face. Barely visible creases lined his tanned forehead. His eyes were faintly wrinkled at the corner, and beneath the left one was a small triangular scar. If I had to guess, I'd say he was about thirty years old. His cheeks, jaw, and chin were lightly dusted with a covering of russet stubble. He smiled gratefully at me, and I must admit, I found his face most pleasing.

"Thank you," he said, bowing his head slightly. "I would have died for sure if you hadn't helped me."

I eyed him indifferently, trying to decide if I should reply. I'd trained myself to stay cold, to be detached and uncaring. It was safer for everyone else that way. I told myself to pretend that I couldn't comprehend his words. To fly away and try to pick up that stoat's trail again. It was for the best...

The man sighed and looked about, confused. "How in Hell's Halls am I supposed to get out of here?"

It appeared as though he needed yet more assistance. Should I offer it? Would I regret leaving the human to fend for himself? Would his features come back to haunt me while I tried to sleep during the lonelier nights? There was something inviting about the man, if not enticing. He turned his big brown eyes back on me and smiled. I hadn't exchanged words with another living creature for longer than six seasons. Could I even do it anymore? Was I too feral now?

Conflicted, I held my position. If I wanted to engage him in conversation, I would have to shift into a more human physique. It was impossible for me to manipulate my snout into forming human words.

The man took a measured step in my direction. “Do you understand what I’m saying? Are you a drake or...?”

Decision made, I half shifted, transforming halfway to my human form. At my mental command I felt my muscles contract and expand. I felt the rigid bones in my body melt from their natural position, like molten rock, and solidify into another shape. My sapphire scales sank into my tanned skin, and azure hair sprouted from my skull.

The human’s stare narrowed, and I wondered what I looked like through his eyes.

In this half-shift form I retained my wings and my tail. The teeth in my mouth were still sharp, and my canines protruded from my lips. Scales protected my back, my forearms, and the middle portion of my body. I was less than a quarter of his height. The top of my head barely touched his knees. Aside from that however, my body should have looked distinctly human.

The man exhaled slowly and his smile broadened. “That’s incredible. Here I was thinking you were a nothing more than an oversized drake, but you’re not. You’re a full-blown dragon.”

I snorted. It was the first time anyone had ever referred to me as ‘oversized’. But it wouldn’t be the first time I’d been mistaken for a drake. The flying reptiles and I were of similar proportions. However, the drakes were incapable of intelligent thought and survived solely on instinct. They weren’t that dissimilar from newts and geckos.

“I don’t know if you can understand what I’m saying,” the human continued, “but again, I’m so grateful that you came along. If you hadn’t—”

“You’re not that helpless. You deceive yourself,” I blurted out, cutting his words short. “In fact, I suspect that was your intent. To deceive. Those treolls certainly underestimated you.”

The human fell silent and his mouth gaped.

“You tricked them into thinking you were defenceless.” I shrugged. “They underestimated you. If I hadn’t happened across your fight, you’d have slain all three of them.”

The human returned the rapier to its sheath. “So, you speak my language?”

“I can speak human words, yes.”

“Can all dragons speak our language?”

“Some can. Some can’t.”

“And can all dragons change their appearance like you?”

“Yes. We can all transform from dragon to something that distinctly resembles you humans. Some of us believe that humans are nothing more than dragons who lost the ability to shift.” I rubbed a hand across my torso. “Although I haven’t fully transformed into my human self. This body is a something between the two. Do humans not know of this?”

“I guess some scholars might, but I didn’t know that. I personally know very little about dragons, as it happens,” he explained.

I grunted.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I do know your kind are renowned for being reclusive. In human folklore, it’s good luck to see a dragon. That is how rarely we happen across your kind. To be honest, I feel honoured just to be having a conversation with you. No one is going to believe this really happened.”

“So people do not trust you? Are you always deceitful?”

The man laughed. “It’s human nature to be distrusting. Do dragons not know of this?” he mimicked.

I had heard many stories about the humans, before I left Mount Abovalle. A few of the elder dragons told tales about their dealings with mankind. I remembered Arcadestar, the oldest dragon on Mount Abovalle, reminiscing over a wing he’d damaged in a storm. He crashed not far from a human settlement, and their healers had patched him up and given him medicine. Arcadestar stayed with them for several months and he said that they were the kindest people he’d ever had the pleasure of meeting.

Contrary to that, Lissanisa painted a very different picture of the human race. She had been looking for somewhere to nest with her mate not long after the treolls had forced the dragons out of Emerigh. While she was searching, humans had captured her mate. She went to the human town, seeking to set him free. But when she arrived, she’d found that he’d already been butchered. His organs, his scales, all of him had been placed in jars and crates. Lissanisa levelled the town, killing everyone in it.

The human took another step toward me. “My name is Phain.”

“Avonrepus,” I replied. “But everyone used to call me Avo for short.”

“Used to call you?” he repeated. “Are you alone out here?”

“Why?” I asked, still trying to suss out his intentions.

“Because I’m alone too. Those tree trolls, on the other hand, are not. I’d feel safer if you’d do me the honour of escorting me out of these woods.”

It suddenly struck me as odd that a human was so deep in the forest by himself. “Why are you in these woods? It’s the first time I’ve seen a human here.”

“I got cut off from my troupe,” he sighed. “The axel on my caravan’s wheel was rotten and it snapped off. I decided to stay and fix it, but my troupe had a deadline to be at Giralden City. You see, there is a festival in Giralden. It occurs every year as spring switches into summer. It’s a massive opportunity for us to make some serious gold. I told the troupe to move on without me or else they’d miss the beginning of the festivities.”

“I’ve never understood why your kind is so fascinated with gold.” I arched an eyebrow. “Are you merchants then? You and your troupe?”

He shook his head dramatically. “I’m a member of the Great Travelling Tents of Wonder! We’re a circus of sorts.”

I stared at him nonchalantly. I had heard of circuses before. If I was to correctly understand what I’d been told, the members of a circus were all performers. I wondered if Phain’s act involved some sort of swordsmanship or contortionism. It would certainly account for his skill with the rapier.

When I didn’t respond, he huffed in a deflated fashion. “Look, fact of the matter is, those trolls are dangerous. They attacked me while I was fixing up the caravan. They burned it to the ground. I think I accidentally cut down one of their sacred trees, or something. And now they’ll have it in for you too.”

Frowning, I considered Phain’s words. He had a point.

“When we get to my troupe, I’ll round up some men to come back and make sure those trolls are put to ground. I promise.”

“I don’t want them dead, I just want them gone,” I said. “How far is it to this city of yours?”

“Several days on foot, but if you could fly—”

“Do I look big enough to carry you?”

“Well... no.” Phain looked away. “I just assumed you could make yourself bigger. I figured if you could change forms then you could change size too.”

I tried and failed to smother the annoyance that bubbled up into my brain at his words. “If I could make myself bigger, I would have done so before I tussled with a treoll. But as you can see, even at such an *inadequate* size, I’m still a formidable enemy.”

“Point made. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.” Smiling apologetically, Phain squatted down next to me and extended his hand. “So, do we have a deal?”

I’d witnessed humans shake hands as a gesture of good faith on several occasions. It seemed almost silly to me that such a distrusting species could put so much faith in the lame exchange. I sighed, placing my small palm in his. Phain firmly wrapped his strong fingers around my dainty hand and shook it once. His rough skin sent ripples of pleasure dancing along my arm. I smothered a giddy smirk and tried to maintain my detached visage. His touch felt too good. I had spent too long in the woods alone. Gone too long without the touch of another intelligent being.

“Very well,” I replied. “We have a deal.”

Chapter Two

We set off straight after the treolls' attack. Phain assured me that if we followed the river upstream we'd end up near the human city of Giralden. While we travelled, Phain talked—a lot—about his many adventures and I listened. I didn't mind listening to him speak though. His voice was pleasant enough and he had a talent for telling stories. The tone of his voice would shift up and down and he'd occasionally change his accent while characterising some of the people in his tales.

“...and that's why the Tents were a sell-out in Beauvale,” he finished.

“Did the magician ever discover your secret?”

“No, even though he came to see the show three times. If he'd paid closer attention to us, then he'd have noticed we weren't the same child. I mean, we're identical twins, Riven and I, but we're not *that* identical.” Phain chortled to himself. “I dare say the magician is still up in his Beauvale tower, trying to uncover the secrets of teleportation.”

“In his tower and away from the world is the best place for a magician,” I stated. “They're more trouble than they're worth.”

He stopped and surveyed the area. “You've had dealings with them?”

“Not personally, but there have been a few times when they've come to Mount Abovalle.” I flapped my wings to steady my progress. “Every time they come, they try to cross the Veil that protects the mountain. They always fail of course.”

Phain's eyes narrowed. “The Veil?”

“The woodland around the mountain is enchanted. We call it the Veil. It confuses creatures and keeps them from wandering up to Abovalle. My ancestors cast the magic to keep the treolls at bay. I guess they didn't want to lose Abovalle like they had lost Emerigh.”

I imagined the massive mountain where I was born. Miles upon miles of steep grey rock, with not a soul to be seen, except for the birds and the dragons. It was a decent enough habitat for us, if not a bit cold. The forest around the mountain was teeming with prey and it created a wall between us dragons and the rest of the world.

“Why can’t magicians cross the Veil? Surely at least one has been able to punch a hole through the enchantment?” Phain didn’t seem invested in the conversation.

He stared off into the distance, as though he was looking for something.

I chose not to answer his questions. I wasn’t about to explain how our magic worked to a complete stranger. Every race in the land kept their mystical arts to themselves. A secret shared was a defence destroyed.

Instead I diverted away from the topic. “Have you lost your bearings?”

“No, but we’re losing the daylight.” He pointed toward the dulling sky. “I’m trying to find a suitable place to set up camp. It needs to be well hidden and defensible.”

I flapped my wings and started to rise. “I’ll fly up there for a better vantage point. I might be able to—”

“I wouldn’t do that.” Grabbing at my scaly tail, Phain gently tugged me back down. “The tree trolls might catch sight of you.”

He didn’t release his grip on my tail and it twitched involuntarily. A dragon’s tail has a life of its own, like a cat’s, and it swishes when we are agitated. It also swishes when we’re excited, or frightened... and happy. In fact, a dragon’s tail tends to swish whenever we’re feeling any sort of emotion beyond the threshold of placid.

I pulled at Phain’s fingers and my wings beat unevenly, causing me to falter in the air.

“Hey!” I grumbled loudly.

Smiling playfully, Phain turned his attention on me. “I’ll let go if you promise to land. The less distance there is between you and the ground, the safer I’ll feel.”

My wings regained their rhythm and I flapped them heavily, trying to dislodge my tail from Phain’s grasp. “Oddly enough, I feel the exact opposite sentiment.”

“Which is fine for you, because you can fly out of harm’s reach if you need to. Unfortunately, that’s not an option for me.”

“If harm manages to reach you, I won’t be flying away,” I growled. “I made a deal to deliver you alive to your troupe. However, alive doesn’t necessarily

mean in one piece! If you don't let go of my tail this instant, I'm going to bite off a finger."

Of course my threat was empty. I had no intention of biting Phain's hand. I wasn't even sure why I was being so hostile. It wasn't like I found physical contact with the human distressing. In fact, it was rather exhilarating.

Maybe I have spent too long in the wild, I mused sulkily. Perhaps my territorial and feral instincts have made me overly aggressive.

Something in my demeanour must have betrayed my thoughts, because Phain's smile widened. "Did I mention I play the lute? If you steal a finger then you're also robbing the world of a gifted musician. Maidens across the land will weep to hear that my mournful music will never again grace their ears."

"They'll come to terms with it." I grinned wickedly. "You know, only this morning I was wondering what human might taste like."

"Salty," stated Phain and then he opened his hand.

My wings fluttered, lifting me up and just out of his reach. He looked at me expectantly. The smirk on his face slowly sank away, but his eyes were alight with mischief. I sighed and landed on a large rock next to the gurgling river. I could see the sense in Phain's words. I was a bright blue beacon for the treolls that might be following us. The higher I flew, the more likely it was that I'd be spotted.

"If you promise not to pull on my tail again, then I promise to stay grounded," I grumbled.

"Deal." He held out his hand.

I didn't take it. Instead I turned my back on him and scanned the river. "I'm hungry. We should eat before we lose the light."

"I can net us a few fish in my shirt, if you want to get a fire going." Phain started to unbutton his damp sleeveless top. "It shouldn't be too difficult for a dragon, right? Just make sure it's small and dry. We don't want to send up a smoke signal. If we do that, then we may as well send you skyward with a flaming brand."

I cringed away from his words. "Actually..." I hesitated.

"What? You prefer your fish raw? Well, that's fine, but I'm human. We don't do well with raw meat."

"It's not that," I huffed.

I could feel the blood rush to my cheeks and I fidgeted embarrassedly. Phain came up behind me. His massive form bathed me in shadow, blotting out the amber rays of the setting sun.

“Then what?” he asked.

“I can’t breathe fire. I’m too small.”

“Ah,” he intoned, sitting on the rock beside me.

He nudged my shoulder with his elbow, and looked down into my face. He was still twice my height even when he sat.

“That’s not a problem, we’ll just swap jobs. How are you at catching fish?”

I chose not to answer verbally, and instead I quickly shifted into dragon form. Sliding off the rock into the water, which reflected the golden sunlight, I dived for the riverbed. The river was cold and clean. I could feel the blush of my cheeks fading. I scanned the gently flowing water, seeking out my prey. Hidden in the hollow of a fallen tree, I spied a small school of fish. Kicking with my hind legs, I darted toward them like an arrow. I might not be able to breathe fire but that didn’t make me any less lethal. As the fish vainly tried to shift from my path, I snapped my jaws at a large silvery specimen. I tossed my head from side to side and heard the fish’s spine snap between my jaws. Content with my kill, I floated up to the surface. My head emerged from the water and my eyes locked onto Phain’s while he watched with unguarded curiosity.

“Looks like I’d best get a shift on with that fire,” he observed. “You’ll have us a feast ready in no time.”

A few hours later we were both sat in the arms of a weeping willow tree. Our bellies were full of fish and our spirits were somewhat lifted. Night had fallen over the forest, and a swath of stars decorated the cloudless sky. Around the low hanging branches, fireflies zipped in spiralling patterns through the drooping leaves. Their soft, warm glow was a stark contrast to the chilly night time air.

Phain dithered on his wide branch. Wrapping his muscular arms in tight to his torso, he shifted uncomfortably. His shirt and slacks were still damp from the river and he seemed very uncomfortable. He looked up to where I sat a few branches above him, keeping a vigilant eye out for prowlers with my keen vision.

He blinked sleepily. “Do you not feel the cold like we do?”

I shrugged my human-like shoulders. “I don’t think we do. I’m not cold.”

Sighing, Phain looked away. “This sort of cold reminds me of being a child. Back when Riven and I were first tossed out into the streets. It makes me feel so helpless and afraid.”

“You were thrown out of your home?” I asked, prompting him to continue.

“Yes, back when we were only eight.”

“Why?”

“Riven became sick and was on the verge of death. Our mother was a magician and she used her powers to cure him. But the spell she used was forbidden by human laws.”

“Blood magic?”

He snorted in agreement.

Like humans, dragons were also very wary of blood magic, although it wasn’t directly forbidden. Blood spells warped the practitioner’s mind, exposing them to negative and necrotic energies. It was used to alter the order of the natural world and worked to enslave the elements instead of existing in harmony with them.

Phain rolled onto his back, and turned his gaze towards the heavens. “She was found out and executed, our mother. Rightly so, I suppose. All her worldly possessions were seized, including our home, which resulted in Riven and I being cast out. We spent many nights after that sleeping in the streets, with no roof above our heads.” Exhaling sourly, he narrowed his eyes. “Gods, I hate the cold. I hate the stars too. All creatures should sleep with a roof over their head.”

Rubbing his broad back into the tree trunk, Phain tried to get himself comfortable. He shivered again, irritably closing his eyes to the twinkling astral display above us. I watched, and a pang of sympathy vibrated out of my heart. I pitied him and felt the desire to comfort his worries away.

I carefully traversed down onto his branch and nudged his boot. “Take off your shirt and hang it out to dry.”

“What?” Phain gave me a sleepy confused look.

“I can keep you warm,” I offered.

“Oh really?” he asked, smiling cheekily.

“Not like that,” I answered hurriedly. My face flushed. However, if I’d said the thought hadn’t crossed my mind, I’d be lying.

“Then what’s your plan?” he asked, sitting forward and removing his shirt.

“I’ll use my wings. I’m not big enough to make a blanket of myself but I’ll wrap my wings around you, like a shawl.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, seeming a little uncertain.

“I wouldn’t have offered if I weren’t,” I replied, and then quickly shifted into my dragon form, which lengthened my wings, before he had a chance to say no.

I swooped up over his head, and then slid down into the gap between his broad muscular back and the trunk. I wrapped my scaly arms around his neck like a scarf and then unfurled my wings. I coiled the leathery appendages around Phain’s shoulders and they covered his top half like a cocoon. He was tense and untrusting in my grip. I rumbled softly in his ear and leaned toward the trunk. He allowed the motion of my body to pull us back and his weight pressed into me. Huffing, I felt his tensed arms relax in my grip.

“Am I not too heavy?” he asked.

Poking my long neck over his shoulder, I turned to face him. I shook my head. He wasn’t too heavy. In fact the pressure of his mass felt nice. Sensual even. He relaxed further and it gently pressed the air from my chest. I carefully inhaled a laboured breath, testing the durability of my lungs. I was fine. Better even. I was happy.

Phain hummed at the movement. “Are you sure I won’t squash you? Why don’t you get on top?” he quizzed, shifting to sit up.

I held him back forcefully and snorted. I could get on top of him, but then I’d be facing the trunk or I’d have my backside in his face. I wanted to be able to look out. This way around I had more visibility of the forest and he wouldn’t have my tail in his face. I could shift into human form and negotiate a better position, but then he would have seen the glow in my cheeks. Relenting, Phain sighed pleasantly as my warmth seeped into his body.

“Thank you, Avo,” he purred, and within minutes he was fast asleep.

Chapter Three

As we neared the edge of the forest, the trees bled away into wide open farmland. Crops of yellow and green were sprouting from the tended soil. Human men and women toiled in the fields, oblivious to our approach. In the distance I spied the large stone walls of Girdalen city, and under the towering structure were the wooden dwellings that spanned away from the sturdy structure.

“There!” smiled Phain, pointing.

On the outskirts of the city was a collection of tents. The circular shelters were a uniform colour of dark red, but varied in size. Dotted around the flapping fabric marquees were wooden caravans, which had been painted the same crimson colour as the tents.

“The Great Travelling Tents of Wonder!” Phain said, then leapt into motion and sprinted ahead. “Come on, I want to introduce you to everyone.”

I followed behind him, daring to fly a little higher. The treolls wouldn't have pursued us this far into human territory. At least, I was fairly confident they wouldn't... I hadn't seen any evidence of them tracking us, at all. But that was the problem with being tracked; you never knew what was coming up behind you.

As Phain neared the encampment, he waved his hands excitedly above his head. He called joyfully and his cry was met with another.

“Phain's back!” someone called. “Riven, get your arse out here!”

Emerging from a tent, a man of identical stature and build to Phain looked out across the farmlands. From this distance, I couldn't make out the man's face, but I had no doubt that it was Phain's twin.

The man sprinted to the edge of the camp and cupped his hands around Phain's face. “Where the bloody hell have you been? I expected you back two days ago.”

Phain slowed as he neared the camp and threw open his arms. The man copied his movement and they looked like two sides of a mirror. They embraced each other jovially. As I approached, Phain's twin looked up at me and his brow creased with confusion. Now closer, I could see that the man was

almost identical to Phain, from his choice in clothes right down to the cut of his hair. The only difference between them was the scarring under Phain's eye.

"Riven, this is Avo," Phain introduced, gesturing towards me.

Riven looked suspiciously at his brother. "So it was a drake? I didn't think—"

I shifted in the air and Riven bit his sentence short.

"Not a drake," I corrected. "I'm a dragon."

Riven scoffed. "Indeed you are..."

He gave me an assessing look, and I felt suddenly self-conscious. Riven's stare made me feel uncomfortable. Behind the twins, the other members of the troupe eyed me with open curiosity, distracted from whatever tasks they were performing. A young woman with porcelain skin and unnaturally long silvery hair strode forward.

"It's true. A dragon..." she whispered into the air, and Phain nodded excitedly at her side.

Her violet eyes met mine. There was something hungry in her stare. She gave me the same look I was giving the stoat from the previous morning. Her kitten like nose sniffed at the air and she exhaled pleurably.

Phain tapped her on the arm. "Bochette, prepare somewhere for our guest to stay."

"But it took me almost a day to prepare that last... space. It might take me some time to ready an accommodation," she protested. "We can't afford to have the whole camp going up in flames in the meantime, can we?"

"Avo is safe," Phain explained. "He can't breathe fire. He is too small."

I was embarrassed. My little shame had been exposed so openly and to so many. I shifted back into dragon form so that no one would be able to see my glowing face. It wasn't Phain's fault I supposed. He hadn't known it was a sensitive subject. I hadn't made it plain that I was ashamed about my inability to produce fire.

"Ah," the woman, Bochette, said miserably. "In that case I can have something ready for our guest in the next couple of minutes. Bring the dragon to the... erm... storage tent."

She turned and walked through the gathered crowd. Her pale hair wisped along behind her, like tendrils of smoke caught on a breeze. Chatting excitedly,

the crowd also turned and returned to the tasks that had busied them before my arrival.

Something wasn't right with that woman, Bochette. Something wasn't right with any of this.

"So," stated Riven, "a dragon in the forest of Giralden. Why so far from home, little one?"

"Avo can't speak in that form," explained Phain.

"I see." Riven nodded and stroked his lightly stubbled chin thoughtfully. "Are there other dragons in the forest?"

Phain shook his head. "Avo prefers his own company and has lived alone for a while now."

"Odd that a dragon would choose solitariness. I'd heard they were very sociable creatures by nature. Are you sure he is alone?"

"Of course I'm sure. And even if—" Phain huffed and narrowed his eyes. "We covered our trail all the way here. We were being pursued by tree trolls and so we had to make sure that we weren't followed."

"Tree trolls? Was it the female again?" Riven huffed as though inconvenienced. "Is that why Lonn's not here with you?"

How did Riven know about the female treoll if Phain had been attacked after his troupe had left him? How had Riven known that Phain would return with a dragon? Why didn't the rest of the troupe seem concerned that Phain had arrived on foot without his caravan? Who was Lonn?

"Lonn was a fool and a waste of resources. The only thing he was good for was acting as a decoy. I was actually relieved when the troll bitch put her spear through his heart." Phain grinned at his brother, and I caught a glimpse of cruelty in his eyes.

"Do you think she'll have tracked you here?"

"She won't be following us anywhere anymore. I put my little Shiner through her face." Phain patted the rapier at his side. "I wonder what her mate will think of that?"

The pace of my heart increased. Phain hadn't mentioned anything about fallen allies in the forest. Too late, I realised I'd made a mistake of gargantuan proportions.

I didn't wait to ask questions. I spun in the air and made to fly away from the camp but Phain caught a hold of my tail. He pulled on it painfully and I whipped my head around to bite at his fingers. As I darted in with my teeth, he wrapped the thick strong digits of his free hand around my face. He clamped them closed around my snout, pinning my mouth shut.

I'd been fooled.

I struggled, flapping my wings and clawing at random. Riven wrapped his arms around my torso and tried to control my flailing limbs. The twins ran to a tent at the back of the encampment, and burst through its blood-red flaps. Inside, cages were stacked against the oppressive fabric. Through their bars, creatures of all shapes and sizes watched the scuffle. At its centre, Bochette was busying herself with an empty cage. She laughed as she worked her hands across its frame. Riven released his grip on my arms and Phain threw me painfully down onto the ground. He placed his massive boot, which was only a fraction smaller than me, on my chest and pressed down. The tip of his sole dug into my neck and I choked for air under his weight.

He grinned down at my tiny frame, as I wriggled under his foot.

"Am I not too heavy?" he asked, mimicking his words from the night before. He put more weight onto his thick leg and his calf muscle bulged inside his woollen slacks. "I don't want to squash you..."

Next to him, Bochette clapped her hands and the cage door popped open. Blood dribbled down her slender wrist and she licked at the ruby trickle.

"Welcome to your new home," she sang, her pleasant pitch jarring my ears.

Phain twisted his foot and the tread of his boot scraped against my scales. I grunted as he lifted his leg and I sucked in a deep breath. Before I had time to lash out, Riven kicked me. The force of the blow sent me sailing through the air. I landed inside the cage, smashing into the thick bars. Dazed, I tried to stand. Before I had regained my bearings, Bochette snapped a thick metal collar around my neck. Nimbly, she danced back from the cage and slammed the door. It clanked noisily as the lock closed, imprisoning me inside.

I panted inside my prison as agony flared out along my side. I growled menacingly, and curled myself up into a protective ball. The sounds of my torment merited a round of laughter from the humans inside the tent.

"Can you imagine how much he's worth?" Riven asked, delightedly.

Bochette hissed through her teeth. “You’re not going to sell it! The tonics I could concoct with a dragon’s blood are priceless. It’s just a shame he can’t breathe fire. Dragon fire is a powerful component for many enchantments.”

“Speaking of enchantments, I bet you’re kicking yourself now, Bochette,” Riven joked. “You wasted all those ingredients on enchanting that other cage. There was no point in making it fireproof if this runt hasn’t got the gall for it.”

The white haired witch rolled her eyes. “No matter. It’s here now.”

“A welcome little addition to our show,” Phain stated. “Think about how much people will pay to come and see a real life dragon!”

“Of course you’re both right,” Riven chirped.

I transformed my body from dragon to human, hoping that the shift would right the damage which was clawing at my ribs. As I felt the bones in my body turn molten, the pain lessened. As they solidified in their new form, a gnawing ache set in my chest and went nipping along my right arm. The collar around my neck changed its shape along with me, staying tight to my skin. It was attached to a thin, short chain. The metallic links trailed away from my neck and then connected to a clasp on the ceiling of my prison.

“I can’t believe there was actually a dragon in the forest. I thought him nothing more than a story the peasants told rich children in exchange for coin.” Phain stepped up to the cage.

I scowled defiantly up at my captor, as he towered over me. “You sought me out?”

“Correct. You were my objective all along.”

“Then all that about the treolls attacking your caravan was nonsense?”

“The tree trolls have been following our troupe for several months now. I thought we’d lost them a couple of weeks ago and dared a venture into the forest to find you. They found me first...” Phain turned on his heel and sat on top of my cage. “Which reminds me...”

His muscular backside covered the lid, and if I had been in dragon form, I would have been able to bite at his rear through the gaps in the bars. I considered shifting. I wanted to taste his blood. I wanted to hurt him for what he’d done to me. But what if I shifted back and the transformation made that earlier agony flare back into existence? I needed to assess my body and ensure that it was safe to shift, and to do that, I needed time and quiet.

Phain cleared his throat. “That rancid woman of yours, the one that tried to free you. She’s dead. I killed her.”

Smiling, Riven and Bochette followed Phain’s line of sight to the opposite side of the tent. There, in a tall cage, stood a treoll. The large creature’s expression was sour and his eyes were closed. Short ivory tusks protruded from his lower lip like upturned fangs. His shaggy yellow hair covered his pointed ears and grew down to the nape of his neck. His gangly arms were folded across his trim, naked chest. He wore the typical meagre garments of his race. The leather and fur bindings barely covered the more private areas of his body.

“Did you not hear me, you big green globule of shit?” Phain snapped.

The treoll opened his lids.

Eyes, the colour of pure gold, glowered out at the tent’s occupants. “I hear good, human. I ignore lies which pour from your mouth. You try and break Lok’Maht’s spirit. You think I fix more humans if I give up hope.”

Riven chuckled. “You heal more than enough people, troll. Hope as much or as little as you like. We don’t need to break your spirit.”

“Believe or don’t believe.” Phain purred as he rose. “I’m simply telling you out of courtesy. It’s what friends do.”

“I am no friend. I am prisoner. You take Lok’Maht’s freedom. You make me slave,” the treoll snarled in broken human words. “We are enemies. Never speak of friendship again, human. Lok’Maht hates you.”

“You just can’t do right by some people,” Bochette hummed and leaned flirtatiously on Phain’s arm. “Come on, let’s get you fed. I bet you’re starving.”

“Famished!” Phain explained. “I’ve eaten nothing but fish for two days. I seriously considered eating the dragon at one point...”

As the three humans left, their conversation was lost to the orchestra of noise that surrounded the tent. Somewhere, a blacksmith’s hammer clanked clamorously. Children squealed as they played between the tents. A group of men sang riotously, their drunk and incomprehensible voices tearing into the atmosphere.

My heart was racing and my mind swam with half-conceived notions of escape. I pulled at the bars, testing their density. I tugged on the chain around my neck and it shrank against my efforts. Clearly it had been enchanted to limit my movement. I tried to kick the door open, and then tried to pick away at its hinges. All the while I winced at the nagging ache in my arm and chest.

“No good, little lizard,” came a quiet rumble from the other side of the tent. “Cage locked by magic.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, treoll,” I snapped through the pain.

“Fine,” he retorted sulkily, “hurt self more then.”

I continued to seek a weakness in my prison. I pushed at the ceiling. I scratched away at the welding on the corners.

It was useless.

The treoll watched, and seemed unimpressed with the futility of my efforts.

I stopped and scowled at him. “What?” I demanded. “Why are you staring at me? It’s unnerving.”

“Please,” he scoffed sarcastically, “suggest more interesting thing Lok’Maht do in tiny cage. Lok’Maht gladly do it. Perhaps Lok’Maht speak with other prisoners...” He turned to the other creatures in the tent. “Oh, can’t. They all stupid animals, like dragon! Creatures that know not words.”

I ignored him and refocused on the task in hand. When Bochette closed the cage door, it clicked. I heard it lock. If there was a lock, then there was a key. That white-haired witch was the one who opened this cage. I dared bet she was the way to unlocking it.

The treoll cocked his head to one side. “You stupid dragon? Burn bars. Melt metal. If you—”

“Mind your own damned business, treoll!” I snapped. “If I try that, I might burn the whole tent down around us. Do you want to die?”

The treoll sat down and crossed his legs. “No. Lok’Maht want to leave. Lok’Maht want to be away from circus. And now, Lok’Maht want to be away from nasty lizard too.”

I scoffed. “And how exactly do you plan to do that, treoll?”

“I find way. I have hope. My friends give me hope. My sis—”

“Won’t save you,” I cut in, trying to ignore a new wave of pain that throbbed out from my ribs. “Phain didn’t lie. He killed the woman treoll. I saw him do it. She was with two men and they carried her body off into the forest after she’d fallen.”

The treoll dug his massive hands into his cage’s base and he turned on the spot. “No, lizard. I not want hear these words.”

“You need a new plan. If those last two treolls throw themselves at the humans, they’ll die. That woman, Mish’Ti, she couldn’t even best Phain in a one on one fight.”

“...Mish’Ti...” The treoll’s shoulders tensed as he whispered the name. “You say her name... Mish’Ti?”

“That was what the other two called her.”

A moan escaped from the treoll’s cage. He rocked forward slightly, hugging his knees in tight like a child. His breathing started to shudder and his head lolled forward.

“She die for me,” the treoll croaked through a sob. “She dead. It be my fault.”

Chapter Four

Several days passed without a notable event. I was given a litter tray and a food bowl, as though I were some sort of pet. Riven appeared in the mornings to place a rotting fish in my bowl and then he'd leave again. At first I ignored the disgusting rations, but after two days, hunger won out and I ate the stinking meal. A few times a day, Bochette would poke her head through the tent's entrance and smile at me. My tailed swished at the sight of the woman, and every time she appeared, I bared my teeth at her. I hadn't seen or heard from Phain since we'd arrived.

The treoll, Lok'Maht, hadn't spoken much since learning of his mate's death. He'd spent most of the time with his back to me, facing the blood red fabric of the tent's side. I'd tried to engage him in conversation a couple of times. I wanted answers about the camp's routine and... I guess I felt a modicum of pity for him.

"What are they planning to do with us?" I'd asked him on several occasions.

To start with, he hadn't responded. He simply lay in a ball at the bottom of his cage.

"Treoll," I'd barked. "What do they want with us? Answer me!"

"Entertainment, lizard," he eventually replied. "Make them entertained."

"What does that mean?" Again he didn't answer. "Treoll?"

Irritated, he'd looked over his shoulder and given me a hard stare with his golden eyes. "Lok'Maht. My name Lok'Maht, lizard. I am treoll. True. But have name. Respect!"

"And my name is Avonrepus! Not lizard or dragon. When you stop calling me that, I'll stop calling you treoll... treoll."

After about a week, men came into the tent and started to load our cages onto huge wagons. They loaded the other animals on first, and the simple creatures cowered in their cages. Lok'Maht and I went on last, and were placed on separate wagons. The two horses that were reined to the treoll's wagon whinnied nervously when they caught sight of Lok'Maht. He sat in his prison, miserably resigned to whatever fate awaited us. Once his cage had been secured, they wrapped a black drape over it, and the horses calmed down. I was covered next, my cage encased in the same black cloth as Lok'Maht's.

Throughout the entirety of the move, I repeatedly asked the men what was happening. The sullen group ignored me, as though I were one of the mindless creatures with whom I'd shared my tent. However, as the light faded from my cage under the cloth, one of them whispered to me through the fabric.

“Do what they tell you to do, dragon.” His hushed voiced was barely perceived by my keen hearing. “You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

With that the wagon started to move, and an eerie music filled the air. The jingling peal tore out across the camp, and in the privacy of my cage, I shuddered. Shifting into full dragon form, I hoped an opportunity to escape would present itself.

The wagon rocked along, following the repetitive melody of clattering metal. Around me I could hear the rising sound of excited chatter. As time crawled by, the collection of voices grew, like a wave swelling before it washes over the sand. Was I inside the city? As though to answer my question, the wheel of the wagon ran over a hump and my cage bounced on the spot. The drape around my little prison flapped open a fraction and I was given a spy hole through which I could examine my surroundings. As I'd expected, the wagon was slowly traversing through the humans' city. Crowds of smiling people lined the cobbled pavements. Walking alongside my cage was a stocky man in face paint. He juggled skittles that were made of glass. The diamond-like pins reflected the sun's light in a display of dazzling golden flashes. I squinted as a shaft of light assaulted my face.

Suddenly, the music stopped, coming to its climax with the clamorous clang of a symbol. The voices fell away too, dying down into a low rumble. There was a pause; a moment of expectation. Inside my prison I could feel the energy in the air like it was a living creature.

“People of Giralden,” bellowed a distinctly male voice. “We, the Great Travelling Tents of Wonder, thank you for welcoming us back into your grand city!”

The pleasant tone of the man's voice echoed around my ears with familiarity.

Phain.

I snarled quietly as an image of bloodshed flickered quickly through my mind.

“This year we have spared no expense in the pursuit of the weird and the wonderful. We have not thought twice about risking life and limb to acquire the

beastly and the beautiful. And now, we are here to share with you the curiosities of our world.”

Through the gap in my drapes, I saw the humans gawk at my captor as he bewitched them with his words. His silver tongue worked its magic, entrancing all who heard him. If only the city folk could see him how I saw him. If only they knew the heart of the monster that dwelled beneath Phain’s pleasing mask.

“Though the road we travelled was long and treacherous, it was not unyielding,” Phain continued, striding confidently forward and coming into view through the crack in my fabric. “It is with great pleasure that we present to you, the good people of Giralden, the fruit of our labours.”

The crowd whispered. Small children gripped to their mothers’ skirts.

Phain waved his arm dramatically. “Uncover the green man!”

I could hear the waft of fabric as the cage on the other wagon was uncovered. Gasps rang out from the human spectators, and their eyes bulged at the sight before them. Hushed exclamations of the word ‘troll’ went rippling along the street.

“Indeed, people of Giralden, this is a tree troll.” Phain smiled arrogantly as he turned back to the crowd. “But he is no ordinary forest dwelling monster! This troll is one of the famous elemenders.”

I was shocked. An elemender? I thought them nothing more than a myth. I recalled Arcadestar, the oldest dragon on Abovalle, speaking in great reverence of the elemenders. They were said to be terra-touched, and were looked upon with great admiration by the treolls. Their healing magic, which was drawn from the Earth’s essence, was beyond comprehension. In fact their magic was so powerful, it was said that an elemender could raise the dead.

Lok’Maht’s cage was lowered from the wagon and placed down in the middle of the road. The treoll’s mournful stare grazed over my cage. When his eyes locked with mine, through the slight gap in the fabric, he turned away, annoyed. With his back to me now, Lok’Maht stood facing the horrified mob of humans. In the bright sunlight, I could see scarring along his back. Pale stripes had been etched into his celadon skin. I shuddered. No doubt the marred flesh was the result of a brutish whipping.

“Come,” invited Phain. “Who amongst you wishes to put my words to the test? Who amongst you is in need of healing?”

A hush fell over the human crowd.

“Do not fear,” continued Phain. “The elemender have sworn an oath of pacification. It goes against their religion, no, against their very nature to harm others. You have nothing to fear from the tree troll.”

The humans shuffled uncomfortably and spoke in hushed voices. Some of them shook their heads doubtfully, mistrust clear in their expression. However, emerging from the swell of people, a young girl strode assertively forward. The little urchin was dressed in filthy clothes, which hung from her skeletal frame in tatty rags. Her long hair was so matted and dirtied, its blonde colouring was almost lost beneath the grime. As she walked, she tugged another child alongside her. The smaller child, a male, was in the same sorry state as his guide. His long dirty hair hung down in front of his face, making a veil over his features. He stumbled on the stone paving as the older girl led him toward Phain.

“These two have the courage of wolves!” Phain bellowed provokingly at the crowd.

“And the fingers of a magpie! Scummy little beggars,” retorted a loud male voice from the crowd.

Phain sneered, as he sought out the owner of the voice. I heard a tinkling sound as Bochette rushed into view. She wore a meagre lilac skirt and matching bra, which were embellished with little silver bells. Wrapping her dainty fingers around Phain’s wrist, she tugged gently on his arm.

“The children,” she pressed gently, gesturing with her delicate chin towards the approaching duo.

“Yes,” Phain answered, loud enough for the crowd to hear. “Back to what matters.”

The girl, who I guessed was just shy of her teen years, came to a halt in front of the treoll’s cage. Lok’Maht towered over her but she stared up into his face unflinchingly.

“My brother—” she spoke in a whisper.

Phain came up behind her, echoing her words as a declaration. “Your brother!”

The girl nodded, not once taking her eyes off the treoll. “He got burned. He can’t see now. He needs his eyes fixin’.”

“A blind child in need of help!” Phain swept his arm towards the crowd. “Is there anything more distressing? Doesn’t it make your heart ache?”

Lok'Maht crouched down, stooping low enough so that he was eye level with the girl. "Give me boy's hand."

"You won't hurt him?" the girl asked, her brow creasing with worry.

The treoll shook his head. "I not hurt brother. Lok'Maht not scary."

"You don't look scary," she stated. "You look like me, but stretched out an' green s'all. I meant your magic. Will your magic hurt him?"

"No," Lok'Maht smiled, revealing his elongated canine teeth. "No pain."

She nodded, and walked her brother up to the cage. The treoll stretched out his palm, waiting for the girl to place her brother's hand there. The smaller child shivered and whispered something in his sister's ear.

"It's alright, Jora," she reassured. "This'll mend your eyes."

Hesitantly, the boy allowed his sister to place his tiny hand in the treoll's grip. Lok'Maht gently pulled the child towards the cage and then spun him to face the crowd. Then the treoll placed the palm of his free hand down onto the ground outside his cage. A gust of wind blew down the wide road and the boy's hair was swept back. The sight warranted a few gasps from the crowd as the humans saw the shocking condition of the boy's skin. Thick red sores covered the entirety of the boy's face. The ruined flesh ran across his forehead and covered his eyes. I had no idea how he may have acquired such a grievous injury, but he was certainly lucky to have lived through the experience.

The boy, Jora, inhaled suddenly and arched his head back. His unseeing eyes bulged in their sockets. They were bone white; the colour of his irises had been scalded away. The treoll mimicked Jora's movement as though the two of them were in sync. The skin on Lok'Maht's face started to blister, and steam coiled away from it. The elemender hissed through his teeth, then sucked in a painful breath of air. His golden eyes went white, as his magic drained them of colour. Meanwhile, the blotchy patches of red on Jora's face seemed to dissolve away. The twisted, burnt skin fizzled back into its natural position. From the centre of his eyes, a brilliant blue ebbed outward, adorning the milky orbs with colour. Jora blinked. He squinted and held his hand out in front of his face to shield it from the daylight. Behind him the treoll moaned in pain. Lok'Maht's skin returned to its natural pale green hue and his golden irises seeped back into the white of his eyes. He sighed miserably and then relaxed his tense body.

"It is done," he stated, releasing his hold on the boy.

"Rissa?" Jora stroked his fingers across his sister's face.

The girl smiled in awe. “Whoa... You’re the best magician ever!”

Rissa made a grab for Lok’Maht’s hand, pressing her face into his knuckles and kissed at them feverishly. Phain snatched her away, turning her and Jora back to the crowd.

“You see!” he bellowed. “The boy is healed!”

The crowd shuffled excitedly, and an uproar of voices filled the air.

“Me!”

“My mother has...”

“Please...”

Phain called something over the noise but I couldn’t hear it over the cacophony of human voices. He shouted again, smiling, but in his eyes I could see the building anger. He didn’t like to be ignored. He needed to be the centre of attention.

Bochette clapped her hands together and the sound echoed off the houses at an unnatural level. It was like an explosion had gone off and the humans physically flinched away from the sound. They fell silent, and looked toward Bochette who smiled sweetly by Phain’s side.

“The elemender will be made available at our camp, for the right price, of course.” Phain motioned to a couple of the troupe who were dressed as clowns.

The two men sloppily recovered the treoll’s cage and then loaded him back up onto the wagon.

“Now, who will offer these two a roof and food for the night? Good luck passes like a plague and I think the boy is dripping with it at the moment.” Phain, who was still holding the children, lifted their arms up at his side.

“I will,” said a well-dressed woman, despite her husband’s obvious objection. “It’s appalling to see them in such a state. For shame on those who have condemned them to this place of poverty.”

“Indeed,” Phain agreed, bowing as she took the children from his grasp. He looked over at my cage. “And speaking of good luck, we have another cage to unveil.”

The drapes around my prison where suddenly pulled away and the striking daylight rushed in. Behind me on the wagon stood Riven. In his hand was a wooden cane and he grinned down at me.

“Do exactly as we command or this is going to get ugly,” he said under his breath.

Bochette climbed up onto the wagon and stood beside Riven. She pressed her finger into the lock of the cage. I could smell her blood as she pricked her finger on something inside the lock. The cage clinked and the door opened a fraction.

“A dragon!” exclaimed Phain.

Bochette pulled the door fully open and then took a spritely leap back.

Riven poked at me with the cane. “Get out.”

I growled as I followed his order, stalking angrily out of the cage. The shackle around my neck felt as though it were constricting tighter. The enchanted chain lengthened, giving me enough slack to exit the cage. If I could just cut myself free of it, I’d be able to fly to safety and away from these loons. The key to that was Bochette’s blood...

“That’s no dragon,” yelled a woman from the gathering of humans. “That’s just an overfed drake.”

“As I thought, when first I lay eyes upon the creature, but you’re wrong,” Phain corrected. “This lizard, this magical monster, is in fact a dragon.” He pointed at me with a smug look upon his face. “Shift!”

I did as commanded, forcing my body to transform from dragon to my half-human form. While the shape of my body contorted and expanded, I rolled across the wagon towards Bochette. As my body solidified, I sprang from the rickety boards. Having sensed my intention a fraction of a second earlier, Bochette was already moving. As she dodged back, I managed to grab a hold of her long silver hair. She grunted as I pulled at the silvery strands, trying to yank her head back to within my reach. I needed to pierce her flesh. I needed her blood. Just enough to spit on the damned shackle around my throat. Bochette twisted and pulled, taking care to keep her arms out of my reach. Around me I could hear the frightened screams of the humans. There was the scuffle of boots on the wagon and then a pain went tearing along my back. My muscles tensed against the agony, tightening my grip on Bochette’s silky locks. Behind me Riven raised the cane for a second swipe. I narrowly rolled away, dragging Bochette down to the floor with me. I yanked again but she defiantly held her position.

From beneath the tangle of hair I heard her furious curses. “I will bleed you dry for this... I’ll wear your scales as earrings... The potions I could make with a dragon’s tail are infinite...”

Phain appeared above me, his face dark with anger. His rapier was already drawn and he pointed it at me threateningly. On my other side, Riven brought the cane down again and it ripped through the membrane of my wing.

I cried out in pain, “Why?”

Phain scoffed and shook his head. “Because you were fool enough to follow.”

He lifted the sword and it glistened in the sunlight.

“I hope the potions you make from my body burn your blood,” I spat, as Phain cut through the air with his sword.

I wondered if it would hurt to be on the end of his blade, but it was question to which I would not find the answer. The sharp edge of his rapier cut like razor through Bochette’s hair.

As the petite woman fell indignantly from the wagon, Phain pulled back his leg. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

He kicked at my skull savagely. While I sank into the blackness of unconsciousness, I wondered if I’d ever open my eyes again.

Chapter Five

I didn't wake until after we'd left Giralden. The witch, Bochette, kept me docile and sleeping. I don't know what form of tonic she'd forced me to drink while I was insentient but it kept me in a nightmarish state for days.

I dreamt.

I dreamt of home, and of my family. I dreamt of the night I left Abovalle, vowing never to return. Dragons, much like any intellectual creature, prefer to live in a home of sorts. A den, a burrow, a tree. It doesn't matter. We adapt. But in our dwellings, we always build a bird-like nest from broken branches and the fur of our prey.

My family lived in a cave near to Abovalle's peak. It had been our family home since the time of the war for Mount Emerigh. I recalled it so perfectly, my sleeping mind conjuring up its image without fault.

And then there was the fire.

An inferno of raging flame that spread throughout the cave. While I'd slept, my nest had turned into a pyre. I woke alone in the engulfing heat, which wrapped itself around my body. I was sure I'd die. Trapped. Left behind. Forgotten in the confusion. I'd called for help. No one heard me. No one came to aid me. Insignificant Avo, so easily overlooked. Choking from the effort, I'd crawled away from my nest and tried to find a pocket of clean air. It was pointless. The cave was a swell of thick black smog. A large log from one of the loftier nests fell on me while I crawled along the floor. Fire gripped to the burning bark and it crackled threateningly close to my snout. I'd struggled desperately. I recalled sucking in a lungful of smoke, and more than that...

I sucked in the fire too!

The licking flames leapt into my mouth, and went caressingly down my throat. I was stunned. It shouldn't have been possible. The branch smouldered above me, bare of the flames that had claimed it. I had eaten the fire!

I'd felt the heat in my stomach fill me with energy and my body shifted against my will. It grew, stretching and expanding. I could feel my very cells multiplying, filled with a vigour captured from the fire. I sucked in more, clearing a path through the maze of burning amber waves. As I swallowed down the flames, I could feel myself grow and grow. Nearing the exit, I looked down and took stock of my size. I must have been double the dragon. But then

my stomach churned. The embers in my gut clawed against the barrier of my skin. I creased over in pain. The agony was debilitating. Seeking release, the inferno burst from my skin and my very essence went exploding out into the atmosphere, decimating the cave...

I woke.

The caravan jolted me from sleep, and groggily, I opened my eyes. I lifted my head, in full human form. I rubbed at my face with my fleshy tanned hands and rolled into a sitting position. My shaggy blue hair was wet with sweat and it stuck to the side of my face.

“Good,” grumbled a deep voice, “dragon’s sleeping annoyed Lok’Maht.”

Achingly I lifted my head and stared up into the treoll’s face. “And Lok’Maht annoys the dragon when he keeps referring to himself as Lok’Maht. Can’t you just use ‘me’ like everyone else?”

He shrugged. “I know word, and its meaning. Me is Lok’Maht. Human word. I do not like human words. Too many. It slows speaking.”

“I wish you would slow your speaking. I wish it was so slow that it practically came to a stop. The sound of your voice is making my head throb.”

“Dragon’s voice shout when you sleep. You dream of bad thing. Your sounds making Lok’Maht’s head throb for days now.”

“My name is Avonrepus,” I mumbled as I looked around.

My cage had been packed into the back of a caravan next to Lok’Maht’s. The other creatures from our tent were crammed in with us, listening to our exchange with worried expressions. We had been artfully loaded into the caravan fitting almost perfectly into the compact space.

“It’s a good job I’m not claustrophobic,” I sighed as I tried to stand.

I swayed uneasily, and was forced to sit back down.

“Eat,” said the treoll, pointing to a bucket in the corner of my cage. “You have no food in belly now for five suns.”

“I’ve been asleep for five suns?”

“Yes. You lucky.”

“Forgive me if I don’t share that opinion. I feel like I’ve had my bones replaced with thistles.”

“Because dragon lay still too long. Not good for body. You need be moving some. They thrash you good. White hair witch poison with blood. She... um... No...” He shook his head and sighed. “But then after, Lok’Maht did... um...”

“She what? You What? Finish a sentence!”

“Eat,” he said again, more forcefully. “Then talk.”

I noticed that there were dark rings around his eyes and his skin seemed paler than when last I’d seen him.

“You don’t look so good,” I observed, being deliberately defiant.

“Lok’Maht look better than you. Eat,” he urged again, but a little softer.

I did as instructed and crawled across to the bucket. Inside was water and two sickly looking fish that darted from my shadow as I peeped over the rim. I lapped at the water and then grabbed at one of the fish. It was the first time I’d eaten fresh meat since being captured, and although the meagre morsel was hardly filling, it tasted nice. I finished the second fish and lay down next to the bucket.

“Rest now,” said Lok’Maht. “Head throb leave soon.”

He shivered in his cage and exhaled sharply.

I turned onto my side and met his large golden eyes. “What did they do to you? Did they poison you too?”

“Only Lok’Maht’s spirit is poisoned. They leave body be.”

“How so?”

“They make me heal all who come. I not refuse. It is bad for spirit to fix too many.”

“You just said ‘me.’”

“Lok’Maht know thi—” he sighed irritably. “I know this. I try to annoy Avonrepus less. It helps with healing.”

“Why do they make you heal everyone?”

“Everyone who pays coin. Phain and Riven like coin.”

“Is that why you look so sickly?”

“To heal, I must hurt. I feel pain of patient’s pain. I put pain back into the earth. It makes me tired... and cold. My feet are like Mount Emerigh’s tip.”

“So it’s true. You’re an elemender?”

“Yes. Lok’Ma...” He grunted. “I... was born with Earth’s heartbeat, so I must become elemender.”

“You didn’t choose to become an elemender?”

“No choice. Born with Earth’s rhythm in heart. I pass pain to the Earth now. Then pain and wound is healed. Phain make me heal humans for coin.”

“Is that where we’re headed now? To the next human city?”

“It is all we do. City to city. Heal after heal.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Six cities now. Too many suns to count. I had hope. Lok’Maht think that Mish’Ti...” He shook his head. Spinning on the spot, he turned his back on me, like he had on the first day we’d met. “You sleep. Dragon needs rest.”

I looked at the scarring that ran along Lok’Maht’s back and wondered why he hadn’t healed it away himself. He shivered again, and an almost undetectable moan escaped his lips. Feeling a little guilty for my short temper, I found myself wishing there was something I could do to lift his mood. I lay on my back looking up at the rocking ceiling. Another thought pushed its way into my thoughts. Was I starting to care for this creature? Dragons and treolls were bitter enemies. The treolls had chased my ancestors from their home on Mount Emerigh and bad blood had festered amongst our kind for centuries. Our hatred for the treolls was inherent. So, was it possible that I was starting to care about Lok’Maht?

No.

We were simply two entities ensnared in the same situation. We were allies of necessity. I held no regard for him as a person at all. At least, that is what I told myself...

The image of him smiling at the urchin girl in Giralden jumped suddenly into my mind. As she kissed his hand, Lok’Maht had smiled warmly with appreciation. He seemed genuinely happy to have been able to help the two children.

I shook the image from my skull, unsure of why my brain was forcing me to see it. In the cage next to me, Lok’Maht wrapped his long arms around his chest. His head drooped miserably.

“Lok’Maht,” I whispered. “I’m sorry you lost your... hope.”

“Lok’Maht sorry too,” he replied in a hushed gruff voice. “I wish hope had abandoned Lok’Maht. Maybe hope would be home. Maybe hope, not be in spirit. Mish’Ti should not have followed. She should not have been hope. Not when payment was her life.”

“Your mate was very brave. She—”

“Mate?” Lok’Maht shook his head.

My brow creased. “I assumed Mish’Ti was your mate.”

“Mish’Ti is sister, not mate. And not *was*. Mish’Ti still present. Her spirit goes into the trees. She still *is*. She exists in world still. But she certainly not mate.” Lok’Maht shot me a glance over his shoulder. “And what of Avonrepus? Does little dragon leave mate behind?”

I grimaced at the question. “As you astutely pointed out, I’m a little dragon. Worse than little as it happens. So no, I don’t have a mate. I’m not made of the right stuff for that.”

“Ah,” Lok’Maht dithered in his cell. “My words cause harm. Was not Lok’Maht’s intent... this time.”

He turned back around to face me. His large golden eyes seemed to glow in the dim light of the caravan. His short ivory tusks glistened in the light that peeked in through a small window. I noticed that he kept trying to tuck his feet under his backside to keep him warm.

“Pass me your feet,” I offered.

“Huh?” The elemender arched an eyebrow at me. “Why? You still hungry? Lok’Maht is fond of all toes.”

“Fine,” I grouched. “Forget I asked.”

He eyed me a little apprehensively and then in a swift decisive movement he planted both his feet in the space where our cages met. He rested them on their heels with the toes pointing to the caravan’s roof.

I shifted into my halfling state, wincing at the soreness of my ripped wing. I’d forgotten about that and as I brought it around to examine, I notice that a long scabby stripe had joined the membrane back together. My tail twitched in agitation and that too, was incredibly tender. I pulled it around to assess the damage. What had happened to it during my beating?

I gasped!

Half of it was missing!

“Where’s my tail?” I bellowed.

“The blood witch. She said in exchange for her hair,” replied Lok’Maht sullenly.

I was dumbfounded. So many thoughts ran through my brain at once. It was hard to pinpoint a single one. I convulsed with anger. Her hair would grow back! It wasn’t gone forever! That bitch! That evil soulless madwoman!

An eye for an eye was it? Fine, I could play by those rules too. Besides, I already owed her plenty. Had she not been in on the plot to cage me up like an animal, then she wouldn’t have been in harm’s way.

“An eye for an eye...” I mumbled aloud. “I’ll be sure to claim one at the next opportunity.”

The treoll gave me a pitiful shrug. “Lok’Maht heal all that could be. But trolls have no wings or tail. Lok’Maht cannot heal what trolls do not have. I cannot feel pain in wing or tail.”

I hadn’t even thought about the damage to my body. It was gone. That must have been why, while sleeping, I’d reverted to my full human form. It was to protect my additional limbs.

I willed my anger away and as it boiled down it relinquished its grip on my mind.

I walked towards Lok’Maht, still seething but looking for a distraction. “You healed me, even though you were worn out from all that healing in the human city?”

“I heal you before they load Lok’Maht like cargo. They put cages next to each other on ground. I send pain back into Earth. I not like to see suffering.” Lok’Maht blushed slightly, his celadon cheeks brightening. “I... also think... it might shut up your noises.”

“Sorry it didn’t work,” I sighed as sat down with my back to him. “I guess you can’t heal what isn’t damaged.”

I placed myself as close to the gap between his feet as the bars in my cage would allow. While sitting, my shoulders were level with the top of his toes. I pushed my wings out through the bars of my cage and coiled them around his bare green skin.

“You have damage and pain, plenty. But pain is in heart. Lok’Maht cannot heal pain there. That pain cannot be taken by Earth.”

I narrowed my eyes, unhappy that my nonchalant demeanour had been so easily seen through.

Lok’Maht hummed pleurably. “You so hot. Are all dragons likewise?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“This helps,” he whispered. “This helps much.”

“I think we’re going to need all the help we can get.” I was still reeling from the discovery of my missing tail.

“I think you be right, little dragon,” he agreed.

I coiled my wings tighter, threateningly, around his feet, ignoring the slight throb from my wound.

He chuckled sleepily. “Lok’Maht sor... I am sorry. I meant, you are right, Avonrepus.”

“Just call me Avo,” I mumbled.

Chapter Six

We spent two more days inside the caravan. In the morning the troupe would stop and Phain's lackeys would come in to sort us out. We were fed and our 'litter trays' were exchanged for clean ones.

With nothing better to do, Lok'Maht and I spent a great deal of time talking, or rather plotting. Lok'Maht told me everything he knew about the Great Travelling Tents of Wonder and their routines. He was sure that Bochette was using troll magic on our cages, which was forbidden in human society. I didn't doubt his assumption, having previously drawn the same conclusion. With a drop of the witch's blood, Lok'Maht said he could spring us free. However, in her wisdom Bochette had always kept herself out of the treoll's reach. It was me she was fascinated with, me and my body parts. Because of this we decided I would be the one to draw her blood (and maybe an eye or two). That seemed to suit Lok'Maht fine, as he was reluctant to engage in physical confrontation. No doubt his averseness to acts of violence was the effect of his elemender training.

Eventually, we reached our destination. A city known as Angellene; one of the biggest human settlements in the kingdom. Around our caravan, the Travelling Tents erected their camp. We watched with meticulous scrutiny, seeking some sort of flaw in their layout. Even the tiniest of details could be the difference between escape and recapture, should an opportunity to get away present itself. After a long day of bustle, we were removed from our caravan and placed in the red tent again. I'd given up on trying to talk to the men who worked for Phain and had simply taken to staring at them accusingly. A hobby that Lok'Maht had clearly taken up too.

The treoll was starting to look much better. His previous sickly pallor had been replaced with the usual greenish hue of his skin. He had stopped shivering and he seemed more coherent. As darkness fell around our tent, he lay on the base of his cage. His hands were tucked comfortably under his head. His knees were bent, to accommodate his width, and he hummed a sombre tune. His deep tone was surprisingly melodic and I listened to the notes with drowsy appreciation.

"What's that song?" I asked, stretching out my half-shift limbs.

He rocked his legs gently to keep the rhythm. "Star song, for lost ones."

“What’s it about?”

“It is travellers’ song. It is song to guide lost one home.”

“Can you tell me the words?”

“I cannot,” sighed Lok’Maht. “It is human song. They sing in village where I learn words of man. I do not know words to song. I did not stay long enough to learn. The humans there give me food and bed. I give them healing. Humans there are good. Not like people here.”

“I doubt that. They probably would have exploited you if you’d stayed long enough. I hate them. I hate all of them.”

“I do not hate humans. I hate Phain and Riven. Not all humans are bad. Not all trolls are good. Every spirit is different.” Lok’Maht rolled over to look at me. His shaggy hair fell across his face and he smiled playfully. “I still not sure about dragons though. I meet one dragon. He seem...”

“Courageously outstanding,” I offered, arching an eyebrow.

Snorting, the treoll copied my expression. “Too big for tiny boots. Lok’Maht think that is human saying.”

I feigned offence and opened my mouth to retort, but an unwelcome visitor entered our tent.

“Dragon skin boots? How fancy!” Phain staggered through the tent’s entrance, clutching a large glass bottle. “What do you think, Riven?”

Behind the ringleader, his identical twin wobbled sloppily into view. Bochette followed him in, looking somewhat irritated with the men’s drunken display. In Riven’s hand was a small lantern, and its flame made disjointed shadows of the three humans’ on the red fabric. The scent of alcohol filled the small space as it drifted away from the twins.

“There’s not enough of him left for boots. Maybe a nice belt?” Riven slurred and grinned cruelly.

Lok’Maht and I fell silent. My gut twisted at the sight of them and every nerve in my body screamed for violence. I suppressed the urge to growl menacingly and shifted into my dragon form.

Phain laughed, but there was no humour in his voice. “Belt it is then. That’s what I’ll do with your corpse if you don’t perform tomorrow.”

At that I did growl. I could taste the bloodlust in my throat as it vibrated with warning. Bochette smirked, hidden behind the brothers. Her snowy hair

had been cut to shoulder length. Noticing my eyes on her, she tucked the wispy strands behind her ear. Adorning her pale lobe was a blue scale earring.

My blue scales!

The volume of my growl intensified and I bared my teeth. I wanted to tear open Bochette's throat. I wanted to sink my claws into her pasty, evil skin.

"Calm, Avo," Lok'Maht whispered.

Riven spun to face the treoll. "Shut your shit-eating mouth!"

Lok'Maht glared defiantly at the human.

"I mean, what's the point in calming him? What's he going to do?" Riven continued, grabbing the glass bottle from Phain's hand. "It's not like he can breathe fire!"

Riven took a big swig of the bottle's contents and then spat it out over the candle's flame. An orange flare sprang forth from Riven's mouth and filled Lok'Maht's cage. The treoll hissed in pain and ducked under the blazing ball. Phain and Bochette also backed away from the heat of the flame and closer to me.

"Enough, Riven," Bochette said, trying to take the bottle from his hands.

He knocked her down to the ground and she fell with her hand in front of my cage. Quickly she snatched it away, not giving me the opportunity to snap at her through the bars. Riven turned his attention back towards me.

"How do you like that, you insignificant, pathetic insect?" Riven held the candle out towards me. "Even I can breathe fire! And if you don't start to behave yourself, I'll incinerate you into dust."

He took another glug of the alcohol and sprayed it over the candle. It ignited into a dazzling display of amber waves, which snaked their way toward my cage.

A fatal error on Riven's part...

I sucked at the fire, swallowing it down into the pit of my stomach. Immediately I felt my body start to alter. My skin, my bones, and all the sinewy parts of my being expanded. The enchanted collar around my neck started to stretch as did the length of the chain it was attached to. I struck out quickly while Bochette and the twins gawked at me with flabbergasted expressions. Fast as a streak of lightning, I lunged my head through the bars of the cage and snapped at Bochette's hand. My teeth found their target and sank into the

witch's skin. I ground my jaws together and felt bone crack as I ripped the two smallest fingers of her left hand away. Her blood swam with magic. It tasted metallic and bitter. Bochette squealed in agony as she scrambled backwards. She yanked her hand up and the pitch of her wail rose as she saw the damage I'd inflicted.

"Kill it," she screeched. "Kill it, kill it!"

I manipulated the fingers in my mouth and spat one through the air into Lok'Maht's cage. The other, I rolled under my tongue for safe keeping. Nimble the treoll caught it and instantly started to fiddle with the lock of his cage. Meanwhile Riven had thrown the bottle of alcohol at me. The glass shattered on the bars of my little prison and sent flammable liquid splattering in all directions.

"No!" Phain commanded, struggling to wrestle the lantern away from his brother.

Bochette continued her rant, like it had become some sort of mantra. "Burn it! Kill it!"

As the twins struggled, Lok'Maht managed to unlock his cage without notice. He gave me a quick sorrowful glance and disappeared out of the tent.

Bochette caught sight of Lok'Maht's exit. "Phain, the elemender!"

Outside I could hear other human voices. Bochette's distressed calls had alerted half the camp and the humans were on their way to assist her. The other creatures in the tent squawked, growled, and barked excitedly, their feral eyes fixated on the scuffling twins. Phain let go of his brother, turning his attention on the treoll's empty cage.

"Shit!" he roared.

The momentary distraction was all Riven needed. He tossed the lantern at the shimmering puddle around my cage. It landed with a loud whoosh, as the candle's flame came into contact with the alcohol. A blast of heat and flame spiralled outwards. It gripped to the tent's side and latched hold of the wooden cages nearest me. The unfortunate creatures trapped inside cried out in fear and pain. Luckily for me, the fire brushed over my resilient scales and my metal cage, finding nothing to root itself onto. However, beyond my cage the blaze had created a wall that separated me from the humans.

I winced at the burning heat and squinted at the brightness of the fire. I needed to get out and away. The fire was quickly edging closer to me. I

breathed in the nearest swell of flame, and again my body expanded, pressing into the bars of the confined cage. I couldn't eat more. I'd risk crushing myself to death inside of Bochette's prison. Near me, Phain ripped off his shirt and flapped at the fire. He yanked one of the burning cages away from the flames trying to spare the life of the creature trapped inside.

"Help me, you contemptible idiot!" he spat at his brother. "Our livelihood is going up in smoke!"

Riven ignored him. He simply stood watching the fire as it danced ever closer to my cage. Bochette was nowhere to be seen. She must have slipped away after Riven had stupidly thrown the lantern. In the corner of my eye, I caught sight of something green. Turning, I noticed it was an arm; it was Lok'Maht's arm!

The treoll had come around the back of the tent and torn through the side. In his hand was Bochette's pale finger and he quickly pressed it into the lock. The cage door clinked and popped open. I spilled out, grateful to be away from its crushing confines.

"No you don't!" Riven kicked a smouldering chunk of wood towards us and it hit Lok'Maht on the shoulder.

The treoll grunted as the scalding plank bounced off his skin. He dropped the finger and cursed in treoll. A stack of crates toppled down next to us. Glittering embers rose up amongst the smoke and fire. Lok'Maht coughed and squinted his eyes. I spat out the second finger, which I'd held under my tongue, and then inhaled the flames from the smoking debris. Lok'Maht forced his lids open, and he spied the saliva covered digit next to him on the ground. He nimbly grabbed it and got to work on the collar around my neck. The chain came loose and I shook my body jubilantly.

I was free.

Riven spat obscenities at us from his side of the tent, separated from us by a thick sheet of fire. His features were contorted with rage. I relished the sight.

"Quick," Lok'Maht urged, pulling at my wing. "Fly away. Save yourself."

Now at eye level with my companion, I looked the treoll in the face. His golden irises shone amber in the blazing light and he smiled serenely. I shook my head. I was not going to leave him.

I turned back to Riven and snarled at the ranting human. He backed cautiously away, halting his tirade. I wanted to end him. I wanted to leap

through the flames and rend his head from his neck. But more than that, I wanted to be free. I wanted to take Lok'Maht and flee from the camp. I opened my mouth and took a deep breath. As I did, I mentally called out to the fire.

Join me. Be part of me.

The licking flames seemed to bow to my command and abandoned their assault on the tent. They swirled into the air and then through my opened jaws. I felt the fire's heat press against my fleshy frame, prickling pleasantly as it pushed my body outwards, forcing it to grow further.

Lok'Maht hurried out of the tent and I followed, barely fitting through the large gap in the cloth. I flicked my head under the treoll's arm and tried to slide him over me. Taking the hint, Lok'Maht mounted me like a horse. I must have been of a similar size to the large steeds that belonged to the Travelling Tents. Lok'Maht wrapped his elongated arms around my neck and pressed himself close into my scaly back. I flapped my wings once, testing their dexterity. The wound to my membrane was healed enough for me to fly. I crouched, making ready to pounce skyward, when suddenly Phain appeared at my side. He leapt at the same moment as me, catching hold of Lok'Maht's leg. The treoll growled as he was pulled over my flank, but he didn't let go of my neck. I beat my wings, lifting the three of us up towards the starlit heavens. Lok'Maht grappled painfully to my collar, and I gripped at him with a clawed hand. Below the treoll, Phain clung for dear life to the elemender's leg. Circling away from the human city, I flew towards the darkest patch of land I could see.

We hadn't been in the air for long when my stomach churned painfully. It felt like the fire was tying my gut in knots as it passed through my belly. I faltered, and we dipped in the air. Both Phain and Lok'Maht called out in fear as I started to descend. I crashed into a field of wheat on one of the farms near Angellene. As I skidded to a stop, I dragged plants and gravel along with me, carving a trench into the ground. I turned onto my back, ensuring that Lok'Maht was not dragged under my body as we went skittering along the soil. The moment we stopped my companion sprang to his feet. I coughed at him painfully, praying that he'd read the expression in my face.

Run!

I must have done something right because he spun on his heels and went sprinting through the fields. Behind him, Phain limped into focus and gave chase.

No. I won't let you have Lok'Maht again!

Pushing through the crippling cramp in my stomach, I dug my massive clawed hand into the ringleader's leg. He howled in pain as he unsheathed his sword and turned it on me. He hacked once at my wrist and I felt the blade cut through to bone. The pain paled in comparison to the ripping sensation in my gut. I literally felt like I was being torn in two from the inside. In the pit of my stomach, something snapped.

I exploded.

My vision vanished and was replaced with a white hot sting. I felt the particles of my body scatter away from my mind, like they were made of fire. As they went racing, blazingly across the ground, I felt the plants wither and burn at my touch. I could feel the damp soil shake and steam. But more than that, I felt Phain engulfed in my flame. As the power of my blast enveloped him, I felt him arch his back in surprise. I felt the fabric of his clothes burn to ash and the skin on his bones blister. The human's hair melted from his skull and his blood boiled in his veins. I felt everything. Phain convulsed for an instant, suspended above the burning ground, and then he fell, nothing more than a charred skeletal frame.

I didn't linger in that state. I quickly imploded, returning back to my natural form. The cells of my body gathered hurriedly around my mind, snapping back into place like a stretched out band returning to its original shape. Slowly, groggily, I lifted my head and caught sight of Phain's smouldering corpse. It was much bigger than me again, what was left of it at least. I was back to my normal size. Turning away, I tried to calm my rapidly beating heart. My head was a jumble of emotions. I had done that; I had taken the human's life. I felt an equal measure of relief, anger, and... guilt.

Footsteps drew my attention. Above me, Lok'Maht hopped from one foot to the other. In the sky over his head, the blue moon framed his frowning face. His golden eyes glistened, as though tears were threatening to spill.

"Ground very hot," he stated, as he kept up the rhythmic dance. "Can Lok'Maht move you?"

I nodded, unable to do much more.

The treoll crouched down and scooped me up from the soil. He cradled me carefully in his arms like a father cradles a new born child. I cast one last look at Phain's remains while Lok'Maht carried me away.

"Dragon, do not give Phain sad look. That human do many terrible thing. Phain's greed cause much death. You save many lives by ending his,"

Lok'Maht soothed, while he moved swiftly through the farmlands. "You avenge Mish'Ti by ending him."

He was right. Phain was a murderer and worse. In some ways, his end was befitting. If he'd just let us go, his carcass wouldn't be a charred-out husk. I purred with cat-like gratitude, glad to be accompanied by the treoll. Nestling my head against his bare chest, I closed my eyes.

It had happened again. I'd eaten fire and lost control of my body. After, I'd erupted like a volcano and had sent my burning cells swelling into the atmosphere. No creature on earth could do what I do.

Succumbing to exhaustion, one question reverberated around my skull as I drifted to sleep.

What am I?

Chapter Seven

As I rose from the depths of slumber, my senses languidly returned to me. I could hear the merry trill of birdsong, the rustle of leaves, and the gentle pitter-patter of rain. I opened my eyes to find myself in a dark little space. Rubbing my half-shift hands along the floor, I felt the bark of the tree in which I'd slept. Tiny pinpricks of light invaded the darkness, seeping through a covering of foliage that blocked the entrance to the little den. I stretched out as best as I could manage and was acutely aware of how little my body hurt. The last time I'd eaten flames and gone off like a firework, I felt sore for days after. I wondered if Lok'Maht had healed me while I'd slept.

I crawled out of the tree's hollow, pushing the leaves and twigs aside. Lok'Maht must have disguised the gap. I quickly scanned my surroundings, noting that I was quite high up in an old oak tree. The sky beyond the canopy was grey with cloud and the mild shower coated the greenery in glistening droplets. The treoll was nowhere to be seen. Should I wait? Was he coming back?

I paused for a moment, surprised by the pang of longing that emanated out of my mind. Back in the solitariness and safety of the forest, I felt alone. Why had I subjected myself to this isolation for the last six seasons? How had I survived so long in such a feral place without the company of others? Was it because I was afraid? Afraid of myself and my bizarre ability? No. I hadn't missed the company of others until after Phain had duped me. So what had changed? Surely my little escapade with the Travelling Tents should have put me off seeking intelligent contact.

The soft thudding of feet caused my ears to prick and I spun my head towards the sound. I spotted Lok'Maht quietly pushing his way through the damp, dense bracken around the tree. I breathed a sigh of relief and my heart tingled pleasantly. I wasn't alone. In his hand, Lok'Maht carried a large leafy bundle. He spotted me sitting on the tip of the branch and he smiled brightly. I mirrored his expression, and then fell away from the tree. I glided down amongst the rain to meet him and landed with a lithe plop on his broad shoulder.

"Hmm. Little one is lazy," he joked. "I carry Avo too much already today."

"As I recall I carried you first, lanky one. You weren't complaining then."

"Trust me, Avo's ride much nicer."

I pushed away from his shoulders and fluttered around his head. “I don’t doubt that. I’m sorry. I can’t control what happens to me after...” I let the words trail off, not ready to speak of it yet.

“You seem better now,” he assessed. “Avo looks happy.”

“I am. Thanks to you.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Thanks be yours. Avo get us out of cage and out of camp.”

“Actually you got me out of my cage.”

“And that shiny... thing.” He pointed to his neck. “Lok’Maht get you out of it too. Was annoying to take off. Avo look better without it though.”

I felt for the collar, surprised that I hadn’t noted it missing until now. I shuddered pleurably. I was truly free again.

Lok’Maht snorted and arched an eyebrow. “So... fine. Then we both thankful. We both get us to safe place. Together.”

“I’ll accept that,” I consented. “So what happens now?”

He walked a bit further, coming to rest under the branches of the oak tree. The ground under its chunky limbs was mostly dry, and he sat with his back to the trunk. I sat on a low-hanging branch so that we were eye level while he unfurled the leafy carrier.

“Now we eat,” he said.

Inside the makeshift sack was a collection of berries, fruits, and nuts.

“That’s quite the find, considering the time of year,” I judged.

He shrugged. “Earth show Lok’Maht where to forage. There always food no matter season.”

He tucked into the meal and I followed suit, gorging myself on the rich-flavoured fruit. A relaxed silence fell between us as we ate. I spied a single droplet of rain that trickled down the length of his torso. It navigated through the bumps of his abdomen muscles and disappeared behind the belt of his loincloth. In the dull morning light, I saw Lok’Maht as I’d never seen him before.

His slender limbs were well defined with muscle, as was his bare chest. His mossy skin was mottled with sporadic spots and stripes of darker green. Blond scruffy stubble grew across his jaw and above his thick wide lips. The tusks

that jutted from his mouth were curved slightly at the tips. The ivory protrusions looked like upward facing fangs and were probably half the length of his thumb.

I blinked and looked away. Was that admiration I was feeling? And for a treoll of all things? When first I'd laid eyes on Phain, all the lusty chemicals in my body stirred. At its core, that was why I'd followed the human. But that attraction was short-lived, and vanished when he revealed his true nature. Was the opposite happening with Lok'Maht? Was I starting to lust for him because he'd won me over with his personality?

We finished our breakfast and my companion folded away the leafy bag, storing it under his leathery belt. "Come," he urged, "we must move. Riven will find Phain's body. Riven will seek revenge. He will hunt us down. Kill us. We cannot stay still."

"Alright," I agreed. "Where will you go?"

"Emerigh. Home." He placed his hand gently on my shoulder. "Lok'Maht want Avo to come with."

"I can't go with you to Emerigh. I'll be lynched the second I enter treoll territory. I'm a dragon."

Lok'Maht shook his head, and then strode out into the rain. "Not just dragon. You eat fire."

I followed him from under the tree, wincing at his words. "You don't know what that means."

"I do." He grinned. "You special, Avo. Treolls will welcome you."

"Special? Because I'm the key to destroying Abovalle?"

"Lok'Maht know little about Abovalle. What you mean, Avo?" He started to speed up, navigating over the uneven terrain with ape-like ease.

I sighed, unwilling to speak of my darkest secret. But Lok'Maht had already witnessed it first-hand. I wouldn't be unveiling anything he didn't already know.

I was the Mountain's Doom. The dragon who was prophesied to bring death and chaos to the mountaintop home of my race.

"Valetistus, the most famous dragon ever, had a vision on his deathbed," I began.

“I know of this name. Valetistus was dragon king when war for Mount Emerigh was fought? That was many, many treoll generations ago?”

“We don’t have a monarchy, but in essence, yes. Valetistus was like a king to the dragons. And yes, it happened a very long time ago.” I nodded as we pressed on through the rainy forest. “Ten, maybe even twenty generations ago. You treolls live to be about a hundred, right?”

“Hundred is usual age for returning to the trees, yes. Go on with dying dragon story.”

“Well, Valetistus was cursed by the treoll during the Mount Emerigh war. They gave him... Seer’s sight,” I explained, a bit unsure of the term. “I believe that’s what you call it.”

“Seer’s sight is not curse, Avo. Seer’s sight is gift of highest honour. Seeing vision of future is good thing. It help to keep tribes safe.”

“Maybe where you’re from, but we dragons are tuned into the elements and the magic of the world differently to you. The visions drove Valetistus crazy.”

“Ah, I see. I did not think of this. Magic different for different creature.” Lok’Maht stroked at the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. “What was crazy dragon’s vision?”

“He said that a fire-eating dragon would be born amongst my kin. He named that dragon the Mountain’s Doom. Valetistus was convinced the Mountain’s Doom would bring death and chaos to Abovalle.”

“Vision is odd thing,” Lok’Maht tried to console. “It not always easy to make sense. Even harder if dragon king is crazy.”

“Crazy or not,” I mumbled, “all of Valetistus’s other visions came true. I was his last one.”

Lok’Maht came to an abrupt stop. “The pain!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, circling round to face him.

His golden eyes held me in their sombre gaze as I hovered above the ground. “The pain,” he repeated. “The hurt in Avo’s heart. It from crazy king. You alone and not at Abovalle because you fear vision. You leave to not be Doom.”

I nodded and lifted my face towards the pouring sky. Tears threatened, and I willed the sting of them away from my eyes. I wouldn’t cry. I’d not cried once since finding out about my ill-fated birth. I didn’t want to be defeated by it;

didn't want to be powerless to it. In my mind, the ability had taken on its own persona. It had become a living thing. Something I had to tame and keep caged within me.

Lok'Maht's eyes brightened and his sad expression lifted into a serene smile. "I was wrong last day. Little dragon not have tiny boots. Little dragon have big boots. Other human saying. Avo have big boots to fill, but Avo fill them full with courage."

His words of esteem cut through the wall of bravado I'd built around myself. My lip trembled and I lifted myself higher into the air where he couldn't see me. I exhaled deeply, pushing the swell of emotion that threatened to run rampant over my mind back down into the blackest depths of my stomach. I would not cry.

"Avo was brave at human camp. Avo... You brave to leave other dragons," he called up to me.

"Lok'Maht, please..."

"Pain in dragon's heart should be pride. Avo should feel pride."

I lowered my gaze and fixed him with a forced stony stare. "I am proud," I whispered, unsure if he could hear me. "I did the right thing. I'll always do what I feel is the right thing. I told you, I'm not broken. You can't heal what isn't broken. I'm fine."

He gave me a long perplexed look, his eyes narrowing into thin slits.

He cocked his head to one side and then scraped his wet hair back from his face. "Come with Lok'Maht. Emerigh is not bad place. Treolls will be friends of Avo."

"They won't, Lok'Maht. Like I said, I always do what feels right, and going to Emerigh feels wrong. It's dangerous for me."

"You feel wrong, Avo?" He stalked off into the wood, setting a determined pace. "Who else Avo know that can eat fire?"

Again I found myself following him through the dense thicket of trees. "No one. It's unheard of."

"Wrong again." He waved his arm dismissively toward me like he was swatting away an insect. "First true treoll king was fire eater."

"The who?" The pitch of my voice rose excitedly.

Never before had I heard of someone who could eat fire like I could. Not that I'd actively gone in search of such a person. I'd simply skulked away from Abovalle, planning to spend the rest of my life hidden away with my dark secret.

“First treoll king. Nameless king. He make treoll tribes stop fighting. He make us one big tree. He is peace bringer.”

“So you think I'm a peace bringer?”

“Treoll use Seer's sight too, Avo. Seers say that peace bringer return. Seer Lou'Ren, she say peace bringer comes to unite tribes. I take you to Emerigh's Seers. They teach Avo about first treoll king. Maybe they teach Avo about fire eating.”

“You mean someone might be able to help me? Someone can show me how to get rid of this?”

“Get rid of? No. Maybe they teach you control. Avo not poof,” he made an explosive gesture with his hands, “anymore.”

My pulse quickened at the thought. If I could learn to control my ability, then perhaps I could return to Abovalle. Perhaps I'd finally find my place in this world, instead of feeling like it was against me. But then again, what if I was beyond help? What if I followed Lok'Maht to Emerigh and the treolls decided to lock me in another cage... or worse. Had I not learned from my mistake to not blindly follow others?

“Avo?” Lok'Maht wiped the rain from his face. “This be good for you. Avo deserve good things.”

I sighed, feeling torn. I wanted to go with him; to continue sharing his company. I also wanted to see if his kind could help me. But considering what I'd already been through... I just couldn't decide.

“Lok'Maht, I'm not sure. I can't go gallivanting off on the whim of a stranger—”

“It take many suns to travel to Emerigh,” he interjected. “We not be like strangers when we arrive. We not stranger now.”

“How long?” I asked. “How long will it take us to reach your home?”

“One third of season. Maybe twenty-five or thirty suns. Much distance. Must travel like shadows through wild land. Lok'Maht not want Riven to follow us.”

“Very well,” I said, having reached a decision. “I will accompany you until I’m certain we’re out of Riven’s grasp and that we’re both safe. If you can convince me during that time, I’ll go to Emerigh with you.”

He pursed his lips sagely, pressing them into his tusks. “Lok’Maht agrees. Lok’Maht ca... I can do that.”

I gave my companion a smile. “So which way do we go?”

He pointed in the direction that he was already walking. A victorious smirk spread across his face and he hummed amusedly. Again I found myself admiring the pleasing dimensions of my companion’s features. And again I felt my chest bubble with a jittery pleasantness. Lok’Maht was no longer an ally of necessity. He was simply an ally. And I hoped deep down inside that Lok’Maht remained so.

We journeyed for several days, avoiding the human settlements. Lok’Maht liked to talk, but he also asked a lot of questions. I was happy to answer most of them and the treoll would listen with genuine interest while I spoke of my trials and tribulations to outcastism.

Late one afternoon, I was talking about one of my encounters with a magician while hunting in the Veil, when suddenly an intense wave of nausea swept over me. I dropped from the air and landed on my face. Instantly blood pooled in my mouth, where my fangs had cut into my lip. Worse than that though was the gnawing sensation that chewed at my hand.

“Avo,” panicked Lok’Maht, kneeling at my side. “What wrong?”

I grit my teeth and lifted my arm, expecting to see a wasp or some other insect hanging out of my finger by its stinger. Instead, I noted that the skin on my two smallest fingers was fizzling away.

My flesh was evaporating!

“Lok’Maht!” I gasped. “What... How?”

“Is magic,” he replied, snatching me from the ground. He held my wrist and closed his eyes. “Is witch Bochette. She use Avo’s blood and Avo’s scale to steal even more of dragon’s body.”

“What?” I snapped, alarmed.

The skin of my two smallest fingers was gone and the bare muscles were bubbling away from the bone. I started to shake, terrified.

“Witch mends her body. She takes from yours,” Lok’Maht growled. “Is vengeful and evil magic. Lok’Maht sever it.”

The pain was nearing an unbearable amount. It felt like the air was eating away at my hand, slowly hacking away at my fingers.

Hastily, Lok’Maht placed the palm of his other hand on the ground. He took a deep breath and his angry face melted into a serene visage. As he closed his eyes, I felt vibrations of power thrum away from his body. The rhythmic pulse washed over me, no, poured into me, like a soothing wave. The pain in my hand disappeared and I was filled with elation. My mind hummed pleasantly and I felt another presence gently nudging at the barrier of my consciousness.

Lok’Maht?

I was filled with the sense of him. I could feel his need to protect me, his drive to aid me. His spirit was full of love and gentleness. I could hear his heartbeat, overlapped by something stronger, something louder... The noise boomed like a cannon, keeping time with the elemender’s pulse.

Slowly, full of concern, Lok’Maht’s spirit withdrew from my body. I slowly opened my eyes, sad to feel him slip away from my mind.

“What was that?” I asked, blinking in the daylight.

“That was Earth’s heart. I sent pain to Earth.” Lok’Maht sighed, looking a little drained. “I also send Bochette’s magic to Earth. Bochette will not link with Avo again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Lok’Maht block evil magic from finding Avo. Bochette can cast all blood spells and all will fail. You invisible to witch now.”

Relieved, I smiled at him. “Thank you, my friend.”

He returned my expression. “Oh, so Avo and Lok’Maht friends now? Then little dragon must trust judgment of friend, yes?”

I lifted my hand while he spoke, noting that my fingers had returned to their rightful position. “I trust you, Lok’Maht.”

“Then Avo will come to Emerigh? I promise Avo be safe.” He arched his blond brows in a comical fashion.

I considered for a moment, the touch of his protective mind lingering in my thoughts. There was no denying it. His intentions were genuine and his belief

that I would be unharmed in Emerigh was solid. Our minds had been linked and I'd been privy to the innermost workings of his spirit. I'd felt his loving essence, his gallant nature. He wanted me to be happy. He wanted me to seek out the help I needed in order to tame my fire-eating abilities...

“Yes, Lok'Maht,” I breathed. “I will go to Emerigh with you.”

Chapter Eight

We travelled for almost thirty suns before we reached the outskirts of Mount Emerigh. Much like Abovalle, the mountain was framed with thick woodland, which seemed almost impenetrable. I studied the thick wall of forest, feeling both exhilarated and saddened to be nearing the end of our trip.

During the journey, Lok'Maht proved himself to be a master at navigating across alien landscapes. He knew where human settlements were and how to avoid them. He knew when we were nearing the territory of wolves or other lethal animals and led us around them. He knew where to find fresh water and places to scavenge ample food. When I'd asked him how he'd acquired such skill, he replied only with, "I am elemender. Earth guides Lok'Maht."

He spoke much about his elemender training, and I learned a great deal about his upbringing.

"Lok'Maht only son," he'd explained one night, "and Mish'Ti is only sister. Mother is very happy to have elemender son. Is great honour. Father sad that he not teach Lok'Maht to hunt and be warrior. But Father also very happy Lok'Maht is born elemender."

"So you were born an elemender? It isn't something you can aspire to be?" I'd asked, genuinely intrigued.

"Elemender gift come with treoll at birth. Earth is living thing. Earth have heartbeat. Elemender's heart beat in rhythm with Earth's. Two are connected. Magic is passed from one to other."

"So that's how you heal? By drawing magic from the Earth?"

"No," he hummed, trying to find the words he needed to express how he mended people. "When dead, we go back into Earth. All spirits go into earth."

"Like a burial?"

"Yes... No... We bury tree's seed and dead in soil together. Dead treoll's spirit goes into tree. Tree grows. But if no tree seed is buried with body, then spirit return to Earth."

"So human and dragon spirits go into the ground after we're dead because we're not planted with a tree on top of us?"

"Yes. Spirit goes back to Earth. And when dead, spirit take pain of life back into Earth with it. Then pain is healed. I put pain back into Earth early."

“How?”

“Lok’Maht put pained part of spirit into Earth. Rest of spirit is left in body. Some say, elemender make person part dead when healed. Some say we necromancers.”

“Is that true? Can you bring the dead back to life?”

“I heard story. Many ancient elemender come together. They bring dead back. Take spirit from Earth. Put back into body.”

“Can you do that?”

“No. That gift lost. Ancients very secretive. They not show children and Earth not tell Lok’Maht. Not that Lok’Maht want this secret. Is good spirit go into Earth. Lok’Maht not want stop that.”

I spoke a fair bit about my life on Abovalle. I told Lok’Maht about the first time I’d eaten fire and how I’d caused the massive cave-in at my family’s home. The treoll listened intently as I described how I’d crawled aching down the mountain’s side that very night, having instantly realised that I was the Mountain’s Doom.

He’d asked questions about how I’d spent my time in the forest, to which I simply answered, “Alone.”

“Like wild things,” Lok’Maht mused. “But even wild things seek mate. Alone is lonely.”

I didn’t argue with him on that. It wasn’t until Phain had tracked me down that I’d realised just how badly I craved company.

“So, Avo not mated?” Lok’Maht continued.

His stare lingered on me, and I was certain that I caught a lustful gleam in his eye.

I blushed. “I’ve already told you. I’m too small for that.”

“So Avo never—”

“Lok’Maht, please. Can we speak of something else?”

The treoll nodded, but I could see the cogs in his mind turning. He wanted to ask me more. More than I was willing to share.

We set up camp for the last time, purposely teetering on Emerigh’s rim. Lok’Maht announced that we’d arrive at the treolls’ city early the following

day. I knew we were getting close. The massive mountain range had appeared as a thin line on the horizon several days earlier, and had been growing steadily ever since.

My companion had built us a fire and was gazing gloomily into its depths. “Tomorrow, journey with Avo finish.”

I lay on the opposite side, half-shifted, staying well away from the tiny flames. “I thought you’d be happy about that.”

“Lok’Maht is happy to be home,” he sighed. “But sad too.”

I rolled over, pulling my gaze away from the twinkling ocean of stars that blanketed the sky. “Why are you sad?”

His eyes strayed away from the fire and roamed over to my meet mine. “Lok’Maht already said. Avo is special. All treoll will want time with Avo.”

The thought of being passed from treoll to treoll made me a little anxious, but I quelled my concern and pressed Lok’Maht further. “I recall you saying it would be good for me to come here. You said I’d bring much joy to your people.”

“Lok’Maht speak truth on this.” He snorted sulkily and his stare narrowed. “Much joy...”

“Then—”

Lok’Maht stood abruptly and leapt over the flames. He landed with his feet on either side of me, covering me in his shadow. I lay still, unsure what had prompted his sudden movement. Were we in danger?

“Avo is special,” he repeated while he towered over me. “Avo is special to Lok’Maht.”

My pulse quickened as he lowered himself down into a kneeling position over my petite frame. In the flickering light of the fire, the contours of his body were outlined by dense shade. He brought his long arm down and gently stroked the side of my face with his littlest finger. I nuzzled into his palm, my nose filling with his sandalwood scent.

I’d suspected he’d caught my many appraising glances. He’d found me admiring his physique several times while we’d traversed through the human territories. I was sure I’d caught him in the act too. His big golden eyes had lingered on me longer than normal curiosity could account for. But I wasn’t sure if it was just wishful thinking on my part. I didn’t know for definite. I needed some form of solid evidence to confirm my suspicions. I needed a sign.

Again, Lok'Maht had given me what I wanted; what I needed. His actions were more than just a sign; they were a pulsating light in a sea of shadows. He desired me! Our feelings were mutual.

If only I could give him what he wanted in return. But I was so damned small!

I pushed away from his palm. "Lok'Maht, we've been through this. I'm not big enough—"

"Stop, Avo. I already know you are little dragon. But that not always true. Lok'Maht saw once. I saw you be big dragon. I see you now, as big dragon. Blue. Beautiful."

As his words sank in, a desperate spiral of hope went shooting out of my heart and along my limbs. "That's right. I can grow. If the treolls can teach me to contain fire, then I can be bigger."

"Avo see now what Lok'Maht see? Possibility."

I trembled. "Yes."

"Avo make Lok'Maht's heart lose Earth's rhythm sometime. It beat so fast." He placed his elongated fingers over his chest. "Avo is beautiful. Big. Small. Dragon. Man. Lok'Maht only see beauty."

My eyes filled with tears and I pressed my head into his palm so that he couldn't see them. I kissed at the rough skin, and he tasted sweet like honey and rhubarb. Carefully he descended to the ground, lying on his elbow. He pulled me back, pressing my wings against his chest. The whiskers on his face tugged gently at the thick strands of my hair, as he rested his chin on my crown.

"Lok'Maht sad because soon must share little dragon. Lok'Maht want... I want Avo all to self."

I sighed and pulled his hand in tight, surrounding myself with him. "You said you couldn't heal the pain in my heart, Lok'Maht, but you were wrong."

"Avo?"

"It hurt because I was alone. Even before I knew I could eat fire, when I lived with the other dragons on Abovalle, I felt alone. I was too small to mate with; easily and consistently overlooked. That's what caused my pain. That's why I really left Abovalle."

"It matter not. Lok'Maht still think Avo is brave and strong." He chuckled and I felt the vibrations in his throat. "I not want get on little dragon's bad side."

“I don’t think you could if you tried. Not now.” I exhaled deeply, relaxing into his warmth. “You gave me hope and now my heart is on the mend. Because of that, I want you to have it. I want to give myself, wholeheartedly, to you.”

“You honour Lok’Maht, Avo. You honour... me.”

We fell into a drifting silence. Not really sleeping but not quite awake either. It was like we had become one with the stars above us. Hovering over the world and all of its complications. Detached and yet still connected.

In my mind, I secretly thanked Phain for bringing us together and I wondered if his spirit had found its way back into the Earth yet.

Chapter Nine

“*Kaha, lofnogut dem, Lok’Maht?*” The treoll patrolman pointed his spear at me.

Behind him were several other treolls. All of them were tall, and all of them wore skimpy fur uniforms. War paint adorned their faces, tracing almost identical patterns with a blood red colour. They’d fallen from the tree tops of the dense forest which surrounded us, landing expertly in the dirt.

Although he held the tip of his spear in my direction, the lead patrol treoll didn’t act in an aggressive manner. He looked more concerned to see me than he did annoyed. I guess being small helped sometimes. I wondered if he’d be this relaxed if I were a horse-sized dragon like the rest of my kin.

Lok’Maht answered him in treoll while I defiantly hovered at his side. My companion had tried to put himself between me and the patrolman, but I had moved back into position beside his left arm. I certainly wasn’t going to hide behind my ally, and I didn’t want the treolls to think me weak.

The patrolman shook his head and gave Lok’Maht a sympathetic stare. “*Bal’Caa del oon hirom. Shinfu go dachin het riam dem, Bal’Caa.*”

Lok’Maht’s brow furrowed and he turned his attention to me. “Guard say you help human, Phain, attack treoll named Bal’Caa. Bal’Caa return home with Mish’Ti’s body. Bal’Caa say he fight human and dragon when Mish’Ti die.” His face became twisted, contorting into an odd mix of anger and confusion. “Avo said, Mish’Ti dead because of one and one fight with Phain. What is truth?”

The beating of my wings faltered as an immense incorporeal weight pressed down on me. “Both.”

The creases in his forehead deepened, causing the top of his nose to wrinkle. He waited expectantly, no longer confused. Just angry.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and took a deep breath. “I found Phain in the forest. He was being chased by three treolls. The first, Mish’Ti, attacked him by herself. Phain...” I tried to think of a sensitive way to describe what had happened. “Your sister died before I flew in to assist Phain. After that, I did help him fight off the other two treolls. In my ignorance, I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“You did not fight sister?” His words were a growl.

I shook my head, and my heart raced so quickly I could hear its pulse like thunder in my ears. “I did not. I did not help Phain to kill any of your people. But I did attack them. I... I’m...”

I couldn’t convey in words how absolutely awful I felt. I should have thought to speak of this before now. Perhaps I could have cushioned the blow in some way. Lok’Maht spun so that he was no longer facing me.

“*Bulgar dem fosh mik na high dachin Avo. Riam go Lou’Ren. Prom lettansi dem Ert.*” Lok’Maht spoke hurriedly and the patrol treoll nodded. Glancing over his shoulder, Lok’Maht spoke to me, deliberately avoiding eye contact. “Avo, follow this man. He is Mah’Gar. He take you to Lou’Ren. She help. She is Seer.”

He stalked off and I flew after him. “Lok’Maht—” I bit my sentence short.

He stopped, his head hung low, and his fists were clenched. I couldn’t blame him for wanting to leave. I’d done a terrible thing. It wouldn’t be right to ask him to stay with me. Although every fibre of my being rallied against my decision, I held my tongue.

When I said nothing, he whispered to fill the void. “I go see Mish’Ti’s tree. I need thinking time. You see Lou’Ren. You be safe with Mah’Gar.”

“I’m sorry... Lok’Maht. I wish...” I wished so many things, but my mind wouldn’t clasp hold of a singular thought and the words trailed off.

He started to walk again, and I watched as he disappeared through the dense thicket. I felt torn in half. Part of me thought I deserved to be left, to suffer for my stupidity. The other part of me wanted to chase him down and explain myself more fully.

“*Dachin,*” said the patrolman. “Avo.”

With difficulty I tore my eyes away from the shadowy patch of forest through which Lok’Maht had just disappeared. The treoll, Mah’Gar, motioned with his hand that I should follow. His stoic expression did nothing to instil me with confidence that I would arrive at the Seer’s dwelling unharassed.

Mah’Gar guided us through a maze of wide tree trunks. The branches above my head were so thickly intertwined that I sincerely doubted I’d be able to navigate through them should I try to fly away. These trees were ancient and yet still full of vitality. Slowing, Mah’Gar neared what appeared to be a wall of

bark. The trees had grown so close together that their trunks had merged into a single entity.

My treoll guide slipped through a slight gap in the wooden barrier and gestured with a nod of his head. "*Wendel oon Emerigh, dachin Avo.*"

I hovered easily through the gap, and emerged in a clearing. A small gasp of wonder escaped my lips as I gazed at what lay beyond the open space.

A lush living city.

The treolls had made their home in symbiotic dependence with the forest around Mount Emerigh. Tree trunks had grown to form massive hollows at their bases, most of which were occupied by busy treolls. Spiralling branches twisted around the trunks, creating convenient walkways. From the sturdy, lower-hanging branches, twigs had grown in overlapping formations to produce swinging nests, which I assumed were used for sleeping. Bulbous flowers, the same size as me, grew in multiple shades of purple on the branches of the trees. Their petals exuded a soft glow, which brightened up the murky recesses of Emerigh. I looked up, noting that the branches of the trees were similar to the ones outside of the wooden wall. The canopy was woven together, allowing little but the odd pinprick of sunlight to pass through.

Mah'Gar waited patiently for me to drink in the sight. He snorted in an amused way as a faint smile spread across my lips. I wondered where Lok'Maht was in this labyrinth of a city. How long it would take for him to find it in his heart to trust that I hadn't aided Phain in killing his sister. What if he never forgave me? My smile faded, and Mah'Gar pointed to the city with his spear.

"*Dachin,*" he said and started to walk casually across the clearing. "*Del.*"

Flapping my wings I stalked behind him, close as a shadow.

"Thank you, Mah'Gar," I said, hoping he knew from my tone that I was expressing my gratitude for his guidance.

We entered the outskirts of the city. As we passed the treolls in the wide open streets, their faces turned to me. Some seemed excited to see a dragon entering their domain. Others stared at me with concerned expressions. Once or twice, a treoll veered completely out of our path, keeping well away from me. Thankfully, none appeared hostile and none moved to cause me harm. Squealing with delight, a little treoll ran into her tree hollow home and remerged seconds later with her mother. In the mother's arms was an emerald-

skinned infant and all three gazed at me with wonder. The little child waved, and I waved back with a slight smile. Giggling, she covered her pudgy face with her arms and jumped on the spot.

Emerigh was not what I had expected. I thought its denizens would be openly inimical and that the streets would be filled with brawling warriors. I thought the homes of the treolls would look like ramshackle mud huts, decorated with the bones of their ancestors. Of course Lok'Maht had described the city to me, but even then I couldn't shake the ignorant images I'd conjured up in my mind.

I had been wrong about the treolls. The dragons were wrong.

Mah'Gar and I turned a corner, entering a huge circular yard. Few treolls occupied the space, and those that did seemed to be bent in prayer. At the yard's middle, a fire burned white hot. Around the fire at irregular intervals were large rectangular slabs. The grey stones were weathered and lush clumps of green moss grew over their surface. Some were stood up like watchful sentinels, while others lay flat, half submerged in the fertile soil.

On the opposite side of the yard was a tree unlike any I had seen so far. Its trunk was hollowed at the bottom like all the others, but its bark grew in swirling patterns of warm autumnal colours. Its branches grew in a similar fashion, twisting and coiling as they reached toward the sky. But the most peculiar aspect of the tree was the colour of the foliage that grew upon it. Clinging to its curling crown was a mass of leaves that were the colour of a midsummer sky. Sapphire, cyan, aquamarine; every leaf was blue.

"What is that?" I asked, awestruck.

It was beautiful. The treetop wobbled gently in the slight breeze that brushed through the yard. Reflecting the firelight, the leaves bathed the entire space in a glittering azure light.

"Lou'Ren," said Mah'Gar, pointing to the fire in the middle of the courtyard.

Sat cross-legged near to the pure white flames was an elderly treoll female. At the mention of her name, she stood and walked across to greet us. Her platinum hair was loose and long. Pink flowers and ornamental beads were woven into the white strands. The wrinkles on her face framed her violet eyes, which sparkled in youthful contrast to her skin. Unlike the other treoll, she wore a cloth robe instead of leather and fur. The red net-like fabric was

embroidered with a golden trim. She wore the loose-fitting garment over one shoulder and cinched it at her waist with a thin golden chain.

“*Wendel, Mah’Gar.*” Her voice was high in pitch and sweet to listen to. “*Gom ba nanic mast nim dachin dem fost tal?*”

The two of them held a brief conversation in treoll, and I heard my name mentioned a couple of times. The female, Lou’Ren, kept looking at me as though she were measuring the length of my body. At one point, her white eyebrows shot up into her hairline and her mouth gaped open. She shook her head and an excited grin spread across her lips. Abruptly she clapped her hands and skipped around in a circle.

“*Dachin, pyre ert dem!*” she exclaimed, drawing the attention of the other treolls in the yard.

I hovered by Mah’Gar’s head, trying to keep a mask of indifference on my face. For all I knew, the elderly treoll was skipping about because dragon stew was on the menu that evening. When she came to a stop, she held out her bony hand in offering.

Mah’Gar grunted his approval and nodded toward the crone. “Lou’Ren.”

“Lou’Ren,” I repeated, bowing slightly.

She cocked her head to one side and blinked. “Avo.”

Taking a deep breath, I placed my hand in hers.

“*Del,*” she said, tugging gently, “*del, del.*”

I allowed her to escort me across the yard and into the tree with the sky blue crown. Before we disappeared inside the cavernous hollow, I noted that a big patch of the bark had been torn away from the tree’s trunk. A crude image had been swiped across the smooth heartwood in glowing red dye. It was a finger-painting of a dragon, flying next to a star. Smearred below the star were the words, ‘Above All Else’.

The hollow, inside the tree’s trunk, was well lit. The purple flowers grew in thick clumps along the ceiling, casting amethyst light over everything inside. Humming, my host led me across to a table. On it, berries in bowls and bottles of fluid were stacked neatly together.

She released her grip of my hand and busied herself with mixing the contents of the bottles into a glass jar. Then she crushed some juice from the berries and added it to the concoction. She sang while she worked, her sweet

tones mumbled under her breath. Lifting the jar, she swirled the mixture around and studied it with narrowed eyes. Seeming content, Lou'Ren placed it back onto the table and then unfastened one of the ornaments from her hair. She pricked her thumb on one of the needle-like grips and dripped a single drop of blood into the jar. The contents that had become a soupy brown muddle turned clear the moment the droplet came into contact with it.

She put the beads back into her hair and picked up the jar again, holding it out to me. "Avo, *glug*."

She mimed a drinking motion with the jar. I shook my head. I'd just watched her drip blood into it. Did she seriously expect me to drink it? She rolled her violet eyes and pointed with her free hand into her opened mouth. She then pulled at invisible strands, as though she were yanking something from the back of her throat. Confused, I shook my head again. She was clearly not of sound mind. She repeated her movements and then flicked to her long pointed ears, while pretending to talk.

Realisation sank in. The potion she'd created would allow us to communicate. At least, I think that was what she was trying to convey. Still I hesitated. I did not want to drink what was inside that jar. Was it dangerous? Was this another trap? Lok'Maht had said I could trust this woman. And she'd made no secrets about what she'd put inside the mixture.

Shrugging, Lou'Ren placed the jar back on the table and tapped a slender finger against her wizened chin. She looked thoughtful and gave a deep sigh. I sighed myself, having changed my mind about the tonic. I trusted Lok'Maht and he trusted this witch. I landed on the table next to the jar and lapped at the contents inside. Lou'Ren grinned and her pearly teeth shimmered in the purple plant light.

I waited for something to happen; some internal sign that the mixture was taking effect.

"You look worried," stated Lou'Ren. "Are you alright?"

I scoffed with disbelief. "I understand you!" I said in treoll, bringing my hands up to my throat. "I'm speaking your language!"

Lou'Ren clapped her hands again and bounced jubilantly from one leg to the other. "And that could confirm it! Lok'Maht might be right! In fact, there is no other explanation."

"How did you do that to me? Are you a blood witch? Did you enchant your blood to make me speak treoll?"

“Blood witch? Yes. Are you able speak treoll because of it? No.” She shrugged energetically. “I can’t put a language into your brain. I’m not even sure magic can do that...” She looked dreamily off for a second and then refocused. “Anyway, I simply uncovered what was already there, tucked away in the crevices of your mind.”

“What?” I asked, still amazed by the potency of the potion. “How was the treoll language already inside my brain?”

“All in good time, Avo. All in good time!” She beamed. “So, you’re a fire eater?”

“Yes,” I answered and smothered a blush. “I’ve done it twice now.”

“And on both occasions you went—kablam!” She threw her arms up into the air, arching them out above her head.

“More or less,” I agreed. “I don’t know how or why. Lok’Maht seems to think you can help me figure that out.”

“I will certainly try,” she dipped her chin, “but we know very little about fire eaters. There’s only ever been one treoll born with the ability.”

“The first troll king?”

“Precisely.” Still smiling she spun on her heels. “Did you know that this is his tree?”

“His tree?” I asked. “You mean he was buried here?”

“Yes. He was the first of our kind to put his spirit into the trees. He showed us how to do it.”

“Lok’Maht told me about that. He said you believe our spirit returns to the Earth when we die.”

“That’s true. Did he tell about what happens to a spirit when it rejoins with the Earth’s spirit?”

“Not really. He found it difficult to explain,” I replied. “We’ve been communicating using the human language.”

“Ah, Lok’Maht has a good understanding of the human language, and he speaks it better than most, but...” She groaned considerably. “We don’t interact much with humans. It’s hard to learn the language of a people when, as a rule, we go out of our way to avoid them. But that’s a different matter entirely.”

She tapped the side of her head. “What were we discussing—ah! Spirits, right?”

I nodded slowly, deciding that my earlier assumption was pretty close to the mark. Lou’Ren was as too scatty an old treoll to be of sound mind.

“Yes, spirits,” I prompted.

“My spirit, your spirit, all spirits; they’re all splintered fragments of the Earth’s spirit.”

“We’re all part of the Earth’s spirit?”

“Yes. All of us. Every living creature. We’re all connected, and we’re all part of this World’s living energy.”

“We don’t feel very connected at times,” I observed. “What does this have to do with treolls putting their spirit into trees?”

“Well, as I already said, when a spirit returns to the Earth, it becomes one with the Earth’s spirit. When that happens, it’s like a match being thrown into a bonfire. Huge parts of that spirit’s essence are seared away, or rather, it is absorbed by the Earth. The spirit’s memories, its pain, its joy, all of it, gone!”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “Why?”

“To ready that spirit for reincarnation.” She made a looping sweep in the air with her finger. “Birth, death, rebirth, redeath. It’s an ongoing cycle. It’s that cycle which makes the Earth spin.”

“But why burn away a spirit’s memory?”

“Because a wolf does not need to know how to sew.”

“You’re speaking in riddles. I have no idea what it is you’re trying to say.”

“When a spirit is reborn, it can be as any sort of creature or living thing,” she explained. “For example, a human tailor in the prime of his life dies suddenly. Now, imagine he’s reborn straight after as a wolf, with all his human memories. How is he supposed to function as a pack animal while his mind is so convoluted with information about dressmaking?”

“I see your point,” I said. “For a spirit to take on its new role as a new animal, it must do so with a clear mind.”

“You’ve got it!”

“So why do the treolls put their spirits into trees?”

“Because we like being treoll. We like being who we are.”

I thought about her words a moment, and Lou’Ren waited for me to piece together what she was saying. “You prevent your spirit from returning to the Earth by putting your spirit into a tree. That way, you stay who you are for longer.”

“Close,” she smiled. “What actually happens is that we ensure we’re reincarnated as treolls again.”

“How?”

“A spirit tree will eventually produce fruit. It only happens once and often takes many, many years to do so. When that happens, the tree’s fruit is harvested and it is eaten by us. One of the fruits contains the spirit of the treoll who was inside the tree. Once eaten, the spirit of the treoll will find its way into the womb of a mother, one way or another.”

“So you’ve been reincarnating yourselves for thousands of seasons?”

“Yes, although it isn’t an exact magic. We’re still reborn with vast chunks of our previous life lost, but we retain enough to know who we were.”

I mused over Lou’Ren’s words, trying to let it all sink in. “So the spirit of your first king is still someone, somewhere in your tribe?”

“That’s a long story. Perhaps—”

Another voice, distinctly male, angrily cut into Lou’Ren’s words. “It is you! You’re the dragon who aided that pig human. Mish’Ti remains unavenged because of you!”

Lou’Ren and I sought the speaker. Standing at the tree’s entrance were the two treolls who had been with Mish’Ti when she’d died. The shortest pointed at me, his frame vibrating with rage. The tallest, who had a faintly scarred head, was trying to restrain his companion.

“Bal’Caa, leave it. That dragon didn’t kill Mish’Ti. Mah’Gar bought it here for a reason.” He looked over his shoulder at us and met the elderly woman’s eye. He blanched at her expression. “Bal’Caa, seriously! Lou’Ren looks—”

Bal’Caa wasn’t listening. He broke free of his companion’s grip and ran at us, spear raised. I shifted, transforming into my pure dragon form. I didn’t want to fight him. I felt guilty enough about the last time we’d tussled, but I would still defend myself. As he neared, I bared my teeth and flapped my wings. I would descend upon him like a vulture. Lou’Ren however, had had a similar

thought. Before I could react she'd leapt from the floor, a mass of red flowing fabric and white hair. She looped gracefully through the air, like a butterfly chasing its tail. She came down on top of Bal'Caa, sitting on his shoulders. In a flash of movement that belied her age, she wrapped her spindly fingers around Bal'Caa's face. A red light blossomed out of Lou'Ren's palms, causing the treoll in her grasp to yelp. Bal'Caa fell to the sandy floor, taking Lou'Ren down with him. The old treoll was poised with dignity on top of the younger male, and she smiled cheekily at me. Beneath her, Bal'Caa lay still, his face in the grit.

"Lou'Ren, what have you done to me?" he demanded, his voice muffled.

The scarred treoll came bounding over and tried to help Lou'Ren to her feet. "Forgive him, Lou'Ren. He is delirious with grief."

"I know of Bal'Caa's problems, Xin'Jan," she said, knocking his hand away and rolling onto her feet by herself. "I'm just not sure when his problems became my problems."

Bal'Caa growled from the ground. "That dragon was there the day Mish'Ti died. He was working with the human!"

Xin'Jan gave his friend a curious look. "Why isn't he moving, Lou'Ren?"

"I've numbed his body!" she snapped. "He's lucky that's all I did. Damnable fool! Picking a fight within the tree of the first king!"

The volume of Bal'Caa's voice rose. "Why is no one listening to me? That dragon played a part in Mish'Ti's death!"

I swapped back into my half-shift form. "I did not kill Mish'Ti," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "Nor did I play any part in her death."

"You were there—"

"I was. By chance." I interrupted. "I thought that human was helpless and outnumbered, so I helped him fend off your attack. But that was after he'd slain Mish'Ti. That human tricked me too."

"Your error cost me my vengeance. That pig yet breaths because of you."

"He's dead!" I corrected, keeping the tone of my voice level.

"What?" Xin'Jan and Bal'Caa both asked together.

"He's dead," I repeated. "I killed him."

"How?" Bal'Caa wondered.

“I burned him.”

At my side Lou'Ren threw up her arms. “Kablam!”

Xin'Jan snorted pleasurably. “So, Mish'Ti's killer has gone to ground?”

“What proof do you have?” said Bal'Caa, sounding calmer.

Huffing, I landed on the floor beside him. “Lok'Maht was there. He witnessed everything.”

“Lok'Maht was there? He escaped the humans?”

“We broke free of the human camp together. Lok'Maht has gone to see Mish'Ti's tree.”

“So, you freed Lok'Maht and avenged Mish'Ti's death, did you little dragon?” Xin'Jan said, bowing his head. “If what you say is true, then you have my eternal gratitude.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “Even though I did that to your head?”

The tall treoll chuckled. “I wish you'd done this sooner! I've had no end of attention from the girls at the Wet Root. It makes me look like a fierce, seasoned warrior!”

I looked to Lou'Ren. “The Wet Root?”

“A watering hole for drunkards and idiots,” sniffed the old treoll.

“Lou'Ren, are you sure this dragon speaks the truth?” Bal'Caa asked, his temper simmering

“Only fools are sure of anything,” she answered. “But Lok'Maht wanted Avo to come here, and I trust the judgement of the elemenders.”

“Why?”

“To teach him all we know of fire eating.”

“When do we start doing that?” I asked.

Lou'Ren tapped her tusk. “I'm not one to put off till tomorrow, what can be done today. What say we get started right away? Unless you need to rest, of course.”

“Now is good,” I said taking to the air again. “I don't want to outwear my welcome.”

From the floor Bal'Caa coughed up an offering. “I want to help.”

“You’ve done enough,” Lou’Ren snapped.

“Please,” he pressed. “Consider it my thanks for avenging Mish’Ti. And if you’re lying, consider it my way of keeping an eye on you.”

“Bal’Caa...” Xin’Jan gave the Seer a fearful look.

“If you can’t be sure, Lou’Ren, be safe.”

Lou’Ren squatted by Bal’Caa’s side. “On the merit that you’re using your head for a change, I’ll allow it.”

“Great,” I mumbled, somewhat sarcastically.

Lou’Ren rose. “Follow me.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” asked Bal’Caa.

Lou’Ren laughed musically. “No, I’m not.”

As we exited the tree, Bal’Caa’s whinging tone chased after us. “Lou’Ren! Come on... LoouuuUUUUUU’RRRRRRRENNNNNN!”

Chapter Ten

“Move,” I warned as my eyes flew open and a writhing discomfort went galloping along the entirety of my nerves. “Quick.”

In my peripheral vision, I saw a streak of red, white, and green dart past me. Lou’Ren shifted at a speed that seemed impossible for her age. She sprinted across the burnt patch of land, then through the tall grass which covered most of the large meadow. I held on to the intensifying pain for as long as I could. When Lou’Ren neared the dense wall of the forest at the meadow’s edge, I released it. My body splintered, exploding into thousands of tiny flaming fractions. The pain was gone, replaced with the familiar ecstasy of unbridled freedom. For a moment I was a living fire, no longer bound to the physical constraints of my body.

“Avo.” Swimming in the euphoria of my heat, I barely caught Lou’Ren’s cautionary words. “Stop. You’ll have the whole forest aflame!”

I sighed sulkily and forced my mind into focus. Using what I had learned from Lou’Ren’s previous lessons, I pushed away at the warmth. I envisioned the snowy peak of my home, and felt its icy touch seep into my veins. Rapidly my body retracted. My bones, my skin, my scales. All them righted themselves, coming together like the pieces of a puzzle.

“Sorry, Lou’Ren.” I shrugged and my half tail twitched with embarrassment.

The treoll witch appeared from behind a singed trunk. Her face was a mask of irritation. At her side, Bal’Caa flapped at the smoking tips of her charred snowy hair.

“Don’t apologise, Avo,” he said excitedly. “That was awesome! You’ve been holding that fire inside since midday. It’s almost—”

Lou’Ren flicked at Bal’Caa’s ears. “I’ll decide what is and is not awesome!”

The young male dodged back, grunting.

“What is it that keeps distracting you?” grumbled Lou’Ren, turning her frustration on me. “It’s been nine suns now. Nine. Just when I think you’ve mastered holding on to a decent-sized fire, you slip. I feel it. I can sense your mind wandering to some place upsetting and then, kablam.”

Gazing up at the darkening sky, I frowned defensively. “And how long should it take to master eating and containing fire? What did your vision say?”

“Well...” she replied, her tone softening. “I don’t know. It wasn’t very clear at all. I told you that.” She crouched on the outer perimeter of my blast radius and poked at the smouldering patch of earth. “I just know it would happen quicker if you’d concentrate. I’m starting to feel offended by the sight of this meadow. Especially those weird red flowers. I did nothing but dream about pretty red flowers all night. They were raining from the sky and then they danced when they landed! It was annoying!”

She was right of course. I did keep slipping. My untamed mind would blunder back to thinking about Lok’Maht every time my concentration waned. The moment his image jumped into my head... kablam. I hadn’t seen or heard from him since we’d entered Emerigh. I was starting to think he’d decided not to see me again. Bal’Caa had said that the elemender hadn’t moved from Mish’Ti’s sapling tree. Ignoring all attempts to engage him in conversation, Lok’Maht simply sat and meditated at his sister’s grave.

I wanted to go to him. I wanted to convince Bal’Caa to take me to Mish’Ti’s resting place, but again, indecision stayed my tongue. I didn’t want to intrude on Lok’Maht’s space, especially not at his sister’s tree. I was too connected to her death.

“I think we should stop for today,” Bal’Caa said. “If that doesn’t offend you...”

Lou’Ren snorted her agreement. “We’re going to have to find somewhere bigger for tomorrow. Look at the size of the sphere you made today.”

I made my way across to them, walking over the steaming earth. I looked down, noting how much wider the scorched circle was than yesterday. Lou’Ren was right, if I were to practice eating a bigger flame in the meadow, the breadth of my explosion would probably reach the treeline now. We needed a bigger space.

Distracted, I hadn’t noticed that a third treoll had emerged from the forest to join the others.

As our gaze connected, I felt a jolt of powerful excitement go rippling down my spine.

Lok’Maht.

The corners of his mouth pricked into a small apologetic smile, but his big golden eyes carried the weight of guilt in their stare. Over his shoulder was a

large leather satchel, and he gripped at its strap like it would go floating off without an anchor.

“Good,” stated Lou’Ren. “Finally come to sort out this silliness. Took you long enough.”

Lok’Maht blushed and bowed his head. “Forgive me, wise one.”

“Maybe tomorrow we’ll make some actual progress!” Lou’Ren tapped her dainty tusk and walked away. “Come along, Bal’Caa. Know when you’re not wanted.”

The old treoll vanished behind the trees and Bal’Caa followed. “We’ve made lots of progress already,” he said, nodding to Lok’Maht as he passed. “He’s a good one, your dragon. He’s really grown on me... literally.”

We listened in silence, Lok’Maht and I, until we could no longer hear the footfalls of the departing treolls.

He spoke first, addressing me in the human language. “Avo is good?”

“I’m good, Lok’Maht. How are you?” I replied, also in human.

“Better. Lok’Maht have much thinking in head. Have many questions to ask about self.” The deep pitch of his rumbling voice was music to my ears.

I switched to my companion’s native language. “We can talk in treoll now, Lok’Maht. I speak it fluently. Apparently.”

He blinked and his mouth gaped somewhat. “Apparently,” he repeated. “You picked that up fast. Was it magic?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Lou’Ren seems to think it was already inside my brain. I suspect it has something to do with your people’s bizarre reincarnation magic.”

“That makes sense,” he mused.

“Does it?”

He nodded and looked down at his feet. We fell silent. Crickets distantly sang to each other in the long grass, their raspy tones filling the void that had grown between us.

I hovered up into the air so that we were eye level. “Lok’Maht... I am truly sorry—”

He held his hand up, motioning for me to stop. “I’m the one who should apologise. I deserted you when we arrived. I shouldn’t have done that. You were so worried about coming...”

“I understand why you did. I think I might have done the same in your position.” I moved closer. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“Likewise.” He looked up and his golden irises wobbled behind the tears that threatened. “...I’ve missed you.”

“Likewise,” I echoed and my lips perked up into a grin. “What’s in the bag?”

He dropped the satchel to the ground. “Camping supplies. I was hoping we could camp out here tonight. I wanted to pick up from where we left off, before we came to Emerigh. If you’re willing, I’d like to pretend that this is the last night of our journey. I’d like to go back to that night.”

“I’m willing. I’m very willing.”

He strode onto the charred bit of land. The jubilant smile upon his lips quickly turned into a painful grimace. Suddenly hissing, he hopped backward the moment his bare feet came into contact with the burnt ground.

“That doesn’t get any easier on the feet, does it?” he pouted and arched an eyebrow.

I laughed, a hearty genuine laugh. The sound was so alien to me. I hadn’t laughed like that in so long, I couldn’t remember if I ever had. Gliding across the small space between us, I threw my arms open. I wrapped them around his skull and pressed my forehead into his. He puckered his thick green lips and kissed my belly. His familiar sandalwood scent filled my nose. A sense of belonging ebbed out of my heart and went careering through my spirit.

“Come on,” he breathed, “let’s set up camp and you can show me what you’ve learned.”

Reluctantly I released my hold. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?”

“For coming back.”

I hovered away from his face. Lok’Maht stared at me with those gorgeous honey-coloured eyes, and frowned forlornly.

Reaching out, he stroked the side of my face with his long fingers. “I could never leave you behind. I’ll always come back. You’ve stolen my heart, little dragon. I need it. I need you.”

I felt my face twist; half smiling, half pouting. Tears brimmed in my eyes, and for the first time since my childhood, I allowed them to fall. How odd, to

find myself shedding tears while smiling like a fool. I felt full. Complete. I'd found the only thing I'd ever wanted, and with it, everything I'd ever need. A place to belong. Someone to belong to. A home.

He plucked me from the air and kissed me again. His big lips pressed into my face, covering my features from chin to brow. I dangled in his grip, trusting him to hold me up. When he pulled me back, I saw that he too was crying. His tears reflected the last silvery rays of daylight, making it appear as though he were weeping smelted iron. The tears trickled down his mossy skin and glistened like diamonds as they fell to the ground. Lok'Maht truly was a creature of the Earth. His heart beat in rhythm with it and so did mine, because my heart beat for him.

"Look at us," he rumbled, and wiped at his face, "like a pair of sad willows." He gently let me go. "We'd best get this camp made, or else we'll be fumbling about in the dark."

A short while later we were sat on opposite sides of an amber fire near the outer ring of burnt patch in the meadow. Above the jittery flame, seasoned fish and meats were cooking steadily on a spit. They smelled divine. Over our heads a huge crescent moon and its many twinkling companions had claimed the sky.

"So tell me," Lok'Maht said. "What have you been doing with Lou'Ren?"

"We've been coming out here," I said pointing to the grassless spot of land. "She thought it'd be best if we came out of Emerigh. She didn't want me to burn down the city while we felt our way through mastering my abilities."

"Felt your way through?"

"That's right. Her understanding of my power was on par with mine, which as you know, is nil."

"I see. I thought she'd be able to offer you some insight." He turned the spit, inspecting the meat as we spoke.

"She asked me for a drop of my blood, which I refused to give her on the first day. She said she needed it, in order to invoke a vision that could help her teach me how to control my gift."

"You can trust her, Avo. She's practically a deity to the treolls around these parts. She's one of the wisest and most honourable people I've ever met in my life."

"I know," I agreed. "That's why after sleeping on it I decided to give her a drop on the second day."

“So she had a taste of your blood?”

“Just a drop.”

“And did her Seer power kick in? Did your blood invoke a vision?”

“She said a few hazy images came to mind, but nothing helpful. She said my blood was too old, which I found confusing.”

“So that’s why you’ve been feeling your way through your powers.”

“Correct. It’s been fairly easy though, so far. Well, that was until the last couple of days.”

“Why is that?”

“Because of the size of the fire,” I explained. “We’ve been building up slowly. To start with, I swallowed a small fire. It wasn’t even a fire really. It was more like the flame on the tip of a match. I grew from kitten size to cat size. I managed to keep that flame inside for the rest of the day. I only let my hold slip deliberately so that we could go back into Emerigh. I think I could have held that flame inside for much longer.”

“That sounds promising.” He smiled and his tusks gleamed in the firelight. “So when you let go, did you burn up?”

“I did. It’s the only way I can release the fire. I tried to breathe it out but I couldn’t. Lou’Ren seems to think that I won’t ever be able to breathe fire. And yes, it is promising,” I grinned.

“So what happened next?”

“The next day I swallowed a bigger flame. I got up to fox size, but then we pushed our luck. I ate more fire, which made me grow sheep sized, an adult sheep that is. However, I couldn’t keep it contained for long and I... kablammed.”

“Kablammed?”

“It’s what Lou’Ren calls it when I lose control. To be honest, I think she deliberately pushed me into exploding. I reckon she just wanted to see me kablam. I think she wanted to know what warning signs to look for.”

“And where are you now? Are you still at sheep sized?”

“Not quite,” I smirked and rose to my feet. “Lou’Ren made me meditate and imagine that my spirit was a kiln. She said it would help me tame the fire I ate, so I did as she instructed. I mentally wrapped myself around the flames, trying

to envision my spirit becoming solid, like metal. It took a few tries, but I mastered it. The trick was in closing my imaginary kiln's door."

"And that led to?"

"Let me show you."

I drew close to the campfire, feeling its heat rise up into my face. Puckering my lips, I sucked at the flames and devoured a large chunk of its blazing bulk. Instantly my body reacted. Searing heat surged through me, filling every hollow cavity, pushing against my frame. I stretched outward and upward, growing with the fire's vital energy. Lok'Maht's eyes were transfixed. He stared at me lustfully.

"This is as big as I dare to grow," I said, pleased with the new depth of my voice.

It was nearly as deep as his, and we were almost the same height.

"That's big enough," he spoke mutedly. "By the Earth, you are a magnificent specimen."

"Big enough?" I repeated, making it a question.

I forced my body to shift, changing into my full human form. My naked form. Lok'Maht's eyes swam over my tanned skin approvingly and he bit his bottom lip. He stood slowly and walked around the fire. Its flickering light danced across his near naked body, and I was filled with a lustful need to touch him. However, inexperience stayed my hand and allowed him to make the first move. Stopping in front of me, he pressed his palms against my shoulders and slowly let them slide along my skin. My navy nipples hardened as his elongated fingers grazed past them and I inhaled sharply. Lok'Maht chortled mischievously at the sound and his probing hands worked their way further down to my hips.

Unable to control myself any longer, I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him in tight, forcing his pelvis into mine. The treoll's solidity felt good grinding against me, and his touch sent trills of exultation spiralling along my back. His long arm snaked around my head and he gently pressed my face into his. We opened our lips in unison and his exploring tongue entered my mouth. He tasted of wild berries and he groaned while we kissed. The vibrations in his throat travelled through our opened mouths and filled me with his excitement. I swooned as his free hand stroked at the small of my back, circling the indents of the place where my tail grew from.

He pulled his head away and then bowed to kiss at my throat.

His caressing mouth made its way up to my ear, and panting gently he whispered, “Is this too much, my little dragon?”

“No, Lok’Maht,” I breathed, enjoying the sound of his name in my lusty tones.

“If I push too far—”

“Lok’Maht, push for everything. I want you to have it all.”

Grinning, he pulled away from me and turned his back. He fumbled with the clasp of his loincloth and it clicked as it came loose. The leathery fabric fell away from his celadon skin and he stood naked in the firelight. I dropped to my knees and pressed my tongue greedily into the base of his spine. I licked at the protrusion of every vertebra as I rose back onto my feet, travelling the length of his scarred, slender back. When I arrived at the nape of his neck, I bit softly at his moist flesh. He growled teasingly and his hands reached around to pull me in close. We lost our footing and toppled to the ground, me atop him. Lok’Maht pushed us into a kneeling embrace and held the position invitingly.

“Slowly, my dragon,” he rumbled temptingly. “I will guide you through...”

With that we were moving as one entity. Joined in both body and heart.

We made love twice, rolling and writhing by the fireside. The first time was a little clumsy and came to its climax too quickly. But the second... The second time seemed to span the entirety of the night. We swayed in harmonious synchronicity, enwrapped in each other.

When it was over, we lay side by side, silently content. We drifted, like a piece of flotsam on a sea of green grass. As the sun began to peek over the horizon and the dark sky started to melt into lighter blues, I rolled away from Lok’Maht. Yawning sleepily, I made my way to the centre of the scarred earth, and expelled the fire trapped within me. I didn’t want to risk falling asleep with it still inside. I might turn to fire while I slept.

When I returned, Lok’Maht coiled his hand around my tiny frame and I fell into a deep and joyous sleep.

That became my day- and night-time ritual for the next several suns. I’d practise with Lou’Ren while the sky was blue and camp under the moon with Lok’Maht. Once I went back into Emerigh, just for a change of scenery. Word had spread about the fire-eating dragon who had chosen an elemender for his

lover, and a crowd of well-wishers had gathered around me. Lou'Ren guided me through them, introducing me to many, and they bowed politely and exchanged brief words of good tiding. She led me back to her tree: the tree of the first treoll king.

When we entered the courtyard, Lok'Maht appeared at my side, and I landed on his shoulder.

"Lazy little dragon," he joked in human, and I flapped my wing good-humouredly at the back of his head.

"It is good to see the two of you together," Lou'Ren observed. "It fills me with hope that the Grand Seer's prophecy may come true."

"What's that?" I asked.

Lok'Maht pointed to Lou'Ren's home, specifically at the crude hand painting on the tree trunk. "That was painted there by the Grand Seer. It was the product of her final vision. She painted it in her own blood, before dying of blood loss."

"Grim," I stated, frowning.

Lou'Ren tapped at her tusk in an amused fashion. "I guess it was, sort of."

"Why did she do that?" I asked, examining the picture in more detail.

In the painting, a dragon was gliding above a massive mountain. Around the mountain's base, large trees had been scribbled sloppily onto the wood. Beside the dragon was a huge star, and under the star were the words, 'Above all Else.'

"Because of the importance of her final vision," Lok'Maht explained. "You see, the dragon king, Valetistus, came down from the mountain when he heard that the tree of the first treoll king had produced fruit."

"He did?"

"Yes. He was once close allies of the Grand Seer, but when he arrived at the first king's tree, he became feral. He attacked the Grand Seer and tore into the tree."

"That is why the bark is scarred," Lou'Ren added.

"That's right," Lok'Maht continued. "During his assault, Valetistus managed to eat the fruit of the tree. Once he'd stolen it, he fled. That is why the treolls drove the dragons away from Emerigh. We couldn't have the dragons stealing the spirits of our ancestors'."

“Then why don’t the dragons know of this?” I asked.

Lok’Maht shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“As far as we’re concerned, the treolls grew greedy and went to war with us over dominion of Mount Emerigh.”

Lou’Ren nodded. “I’ve heard this said. But as you can see, Avo, we’ve never moved up the mountain.” She pointed to the steep elevation of stone, which was barely visible through the thick canopy. “There is a huge shelf near the mountain’s peak. It’s riddled with hot springs and the forest thrives up there despite the snow. It is an ideal place for us to live, but we’ve never moved there. The Grand Seer forbade it. She said the treolls would only be allowed to grace the mountain’s greenery again when the first king had returned to us.”

Lok’Maht nudged me with the side of his head. “Which brings us back to the tree.” He walked us closer to the trunk and the large hand painting above its entrance. “Valetistus was injured during his scuffle. The Grand Seer managed to jab him with her spear. After he’d retreated, she licked the point of her weapon and a vision struck her immediately. She climbed up the tree’s trunk and opened her wrists with the point of her tusk. The vision was all consuming and she chanted, near incomprehensible, while she painted in the blood she drew from her arms.”

I gazed at the picture with newfound appreciation. “What does it mean?”

Lou’Ren climbed onto the trunk. “Before she died, the Grand Seer said that the painting represented the rebirth of our first king, the fire eater. She said he would be born from a star and that his rule would usher in an era of unity, much like he had in his past life.”

“Is that dragon Valetistus?”

“No one knows for sure,” Lou’ Ren mused. “It’s a mystery. So is the writing. No one knows what the words she painted say. Many think they’re written in the words of the first king. Words long lost to the treolls, even in the days of the Grand Seer.”

“Lost?” I asked, unsure.

“Yes,” she replied. “We’ve always spoken the same language, but the symbols we’ve used to write with have changed drastically over the years.”

I gave her a confused look. “But the words say ‘Above All Else.’”

Together, Lok’Maht and Lou’Ren cast their eyes my way with incredulous looks upon their faces.

“What?” I asked, feeling a little anxious.

Lok’Maht lifted me from his shoulder. “Can you really read that?”

“Yes,” I answered, wrestling out of his hand and flying up toward the painting. “It says, ‘Above All Else.’”

“Above All Else is what the ancients named the largest mountain in our land,” he said thoughtfully.

“Abovalle?” I blinked.

“Above all else,” Lou’Ren repeated. She raised her eyebrows at Lok’Maht and gave him a knowing smile. “Our lost king will come from Abovalle.”

That night, I didn’t sleep well. Lok’Maht and I lay side by side, equal in size, and his long arm was draped over my waist. I watched the stars crawl over the darkened sky, thinking about the conversation I’d had with the treolls outside the blue tree. Was Lou’Ren insinuating that I was the first king? Did my spirit originally occupy the body of a treoll? Had my spirit been passed through dragon after dragon until it’d found its way into my mother’s womb?

What was I? Dragon or treoll?

Trying to shake off my feeling of confusion, I snuck out of Lok’Maht’s embrace and headed for the meadow’s scar. Reaching the middle of the charred spot, I transformed into my half-shift state and prepared myself mentally.

Before I had to chance to release the encased flames, a streak of white leapt from the silhouette of the forest at the meadow’s edge.

“Avo,” shouted a distinctly female voice. “Avo!”

“Lou’Ren?” I called back, unsure why she sounded so panicked.

I ran to meet her, her face pale and wrought with worry. As I neared, I noticed that she swayed drunkenly. She toppled forward, blindly reaching out. I caught her in my arms and lowered us to the ground.

“Lou’Ren, it’s me. What’s the matter?”

“A vision!” she panted. “The red flowers.”

Lok’Maht appeared at my side and pressed his hand to Lou’Ren’s forehead. “What’s this about flowers? Seer, speak sense to us.”

“She’s dreaming about the red flowers that grow in this meadow. She was talking about it a few days ago. In the dream, she said it was raining flowers that danced,” I explained hastily.

“They’re not flowers!” Her croaky voice faltered. “It’s blood! It’s raining blood.”

“How?” Lok’Maht’s brows creased with confusion.

“Avonrepus! This vision belongs to you. It is your blood that’s forcing me to see it!”

A chill ran down my spine. “To see what, Lou’Ren? What happens in your vision?”

Quick as a snake, she drove her palm up into my face. The instant we came into contact, my senses clouded over. A mist of dazzling light invaded my eyes, stripping the world away. I could smell snow. I could feel its frosted touch. Hazily, I heard a woman singing, chanting in eerie tones. As the mist cleared, I found myself floating above a forest clearing. Instantly I knew I was in the Veil. I looked over my shoulder, and sure enough there was Abovalle. My mountaintop birthplace. The home of the dragons.

I hovered in the air like a ghost and beneath me, a woman with stark white hair held her bleeding wrists over a huge steaming cauldron. Every muscle in my body jolted with prickling recognition.

Bochette.

She swayed as though she were entranced. Her song was disjointed, it seemed to overlap itself, as though there were several of her singing at one time. Littered around the cauldron were several naked human corpses. They’d been sloppily arranged into a circle around Bochette, with their glassy eyes facing the dawning sky. The dead bodies were colourless, like snow, except for the deep red laceration across their necks. They’d been bled to death, no doubt into the cauldron over which Bochette worked. The rotund container wobbled above a fire and its dark metallic underside shone like molten rock. Spiralling tendrils of red fog curled away from its boiling contents, carried by the slight breeze.

Behind Bochette stood Riven, impatiently tapping his finger on the elbow of his folded arm. He looked sickly. His skin was pale. His eyes were red rimmed and swollen. He’d lost a significant amount of weight since last I’d seen him.

“How much longer?” he snapped, cutting into Bochette’s chant.

“Finished,” she exhaled and staggered backward. “All we need to do is add this.” She unfastened her earring, the one made from my tail. “Any bit of a dragon will do. It’s what’ll make the rain burn.”

“And it will cover the whole mountain?” Riven asked, scowling at the witch.

“The bulk of it. All of this side and mo—”

Riven darted forward, grabbing Bochette by her bleeding wrist. “The bulk of it isn’t good enough! I want it all to burn. I want every dragon incinerated and gone from this world!”

“I don’t have enough blood for that,” replied Bochette, angrily trying to twist out of Riven’s grip. “I’ve given all I can! Anymore and—”

She didn’t get chance to finish her sentence. Riven produced a dagger from his sleeve and drove it into Bochette’s slim neck. The witch choked, her eyes wide with accusation and betrayal. She clawed at Riven’s face, raking her nails across his eye but the taller man pushed her away easily. He held her struggling over the cauldron, and pulled the dagger free. A font of crimson spluttered out of her neck and poured into the bubbling mixture below. Bochette gurgled, and her eyes rolled into the back of her skull. She ceased to struggle and her lifeless body dangled from Riven’s clenched fist.

I shuddered, surprised that I found no satisfaction in the witch’s demise. Before, I had wished Bochette nothing but pain and suffering. I felt that she deserved the most gruelling of ends. But after witnessing her death... All I felt was an odd sort of pity. My eyes trailed away to the other dead humans strewn across the ground, and the pity was short lived.

Content that his companion had been bled of every drop, Riven tossed Bochette’s corpse aside. He stared intently into the soupy contents of the massive iron vat.

“Phain...” he sneered, “for you, brother.” Then dropped my azure scale into the gory mixture.

The cauldron’s tar-like innards hissed as it ate away at my scale. Thick smog, the colour of burnt flesh, rose like a giant worm from the concoction. It skulked ominously into the air as one vile column. As it reached the coldest layer of the morning sky, it condensed into a thick cloud. The wind carried it sluggishly away, creeping toward the mountain.

Abovalle was in trouble. Massive trouble!

And I had been the catalyst.

Phain died at my hand. Because of that, Bochette and Riven were exacting their revenge on my kin. My choices had led to this. I had become the Mountain’s Doom.

Lou'Ren pulled her hand away and my sense returned. I blinked and stood up, forgetting about my new height, and collided with Lok'Maht.

"When will that come to pass?" I demanded, rubbing at the back of my head.

"Right now," she answered urgently. "That was happening as you saw it!"

"Avo, what's going on?" Lok'Maht pulled Lou'Ren to her feet while eyeing me with a frightened expression.

"Riven is using magic to attack the dragons."

"That cloud will rain blood down on Abovalle. The rain will burst into fire the instant it touches something. The mountain top will be an inferno before the day's end."

"I can't let that happen!"

Lou'Ren shook her head, sensing my intention. "Avo, you can't. You're not ready! You might never be ready!"

"You're leaving?" Lok'Maht pulled on my wing, demanding my attention.

"I have to," I answered, pushing back the guilt that went skittering across my mind.

"Avo, please..." he started, his voice pleading.

"We've talked about this already, Lok'Maht. You know how I feel about my fate. I won't leave my kin to suffer for my mistakes."

"They were not your mistakes! You simply reacted to the poor choices other people had made. Other people with ill intent. Please Avo, don't shoulder this burden! It isn't yours to carry."

I leaned toward my elemender lover and kissed him on his chin. "Forgive me."

Pulling away from the treoll I shifted into my dragon form. My burden or not, I wasn't going to sit idle while my kin were burned from the Earth. Not when I had the power to aid them. I arched my wings, readying to take off, but Lok'Maht wrapped his arms around a leathery limb. I nudged him away with my head, pushing him back forcefully. He staggered and released his hold, but he wasn't finished with his attempt to hinder me. With his powerful legs he leapt from the ground and landed on my back. I shook my shoulders and felt his heels dig stubbornly into my side.

“I said I’d never leave you behind,” he shouted and his words were wrought with worry. “Please, Avo. Please show me the same courtesy.”

It was too dangerous to take him. I didn’t want him caught on Abovalle between the angry dragons and the flaming skies. I wanted him in Emerigh, safe.

“Lok’Maht can heal,” said Lou’Ren from the floor.

“I can!” he agreed. “I can heal those who need it. If it’s as bad as it sounds, many dragons will need my help this day. Don’t waste time quarrelling with me.”

I growled, wanting to argue with his logic, but the Seer and the elemender were right. With my mind made up, I sprang into the air and flapped my wings. Lok’Maht wrapped his arms around the base of my neck, hugging tight. I would bring Lok’Maht along and drop him off on the outskirts of the Veil. He wouldn’t be able to get up onto Abovalle, but I’d be able to direct those in need of healing to him. He’d be angry with me, but he’d be safe... or safer, at least.

Chapter Eleven

We flew for the best part of the day, stopping once by the side of a small river. I had to rest and refocus my mind. The fire coursing through my body was growing agitated and I could feel my hold over it slipping. I needed its energy to fuel me, to make me strong and swift. Mentally I encompassed the fire like Lou'Ren had taught me, taming its burning desire to eat away at my flesh. After a brief meditation we were airborne again, gliding through soft white clouds.

As the sun began to dip into the skyline, we neared our destination. A shadowy cloud appeared on the horizon, like an oily smudge on the sky's topaz canvas. It seemed to grow in mass while we rapidly approached. The thick, black monstrosity was not the same colour as it had been in my vision. It was not the same cloud that Bochette had conjured up with her vile spells. No, that magic had run its course and faded away. The dense barrier of smog before us hadn't been born of magic; it was birthed from fire.

Smoke.

An impossibly large wall of strangling, choking smoke.

Lok'Maht gasped as his treoll eyes focused on what mine had already seen. "That's not possible."

The whole mountain was awash with blazing flames. We were too late. Abovalle was buried under an avalanche of twisting, writhing fire.

"There nothing we can do," Lok'Maht breathed, his haunted words invoking a defiant urge within me.

I would help. Dragons might not be fireproof but we can tolerate temperatures far exceeding those of any other living creature. Maybe some of them had found a place to hide away from the consuming blaze. Maybe some were trapped...

I dipped into the Veil, and hovered above a large lake that the dragons simply called Middle Lake. I had intended to shake Lok'Maht off into the safety of its water, but movement drew my attention. I saw several dragons paddling above its depth. Relieved, I swooped down and sought a familiar face.

"Avonrepus!" called a dragon's voice. "You've gotten so big! Is that really you?"

I turned, seeking the speaker and found Arcadestar arching his long coal-coloured neck out of the lake.

“Ancient one!” I hurried over to him. “Are you alright?”

“My wings are in a sorry state,” he explained, lifting them out of the water. “And yet still, I’m one of the lucky ones...”

His wings were painfully frayed at the edges and holes had burned their way through the membrane. I could see that his scales were also marred with scorch marks and a deep laceration travelled the length of his face.

He shook his head mournfully. “I tried to go back. I wanted to help the others. The sky rained fire. Fire!” Tears filled his pearl-like eyes. “It wasn’t natural! The fire gripped at the rocks. Fire doesn’t root itself in stone... It just... It burned everything.” He looked up at the blazing mountain. “After it had finished raining I went back up. I went to look for survivors, but... I...”

I noticed that the other dragons had edged curiously closer. They stared at Lok’Maht with confused expressions.

“Arca, this treoll is my friend and ally.” I motioned to my passenger. “He is a healer and he’s come to offer help.”

“A treoll?” Arcadestar eyed Lok’Maht suspiciously.

“He is an elemender. I don’t think he can heal your wings but he can mend your body. He can save lives.”

The old dragon nodded sagely. “Follow me. I will take you to those most in need.”

“What’s he saying?” asked Lok’Maht, whispering in my ear.

I plunged us both into the water and transformed into my half-shift form. We emerged, treading water face to face. Around us, the lake reflected the mountain’s fire and it looked like we were swimming in a sea of ruby and amber blossoms.

“The black dragon is my elder and I trust him. You’ll be safe with him.” I wrapped one of my arms around his neck. “He’s going to lead you to those in most need of your talents.”

“And you,” he asked, his deep voice trembling. “You’re going up there, aren’t you?”

“You’d do the same for your people.”

“Avo, it’s a pyre. All you’ll find up there is death. Please, please stay and help me.”

I didn’t have time to argue my point. Every moment was vital. I kissed him on the lips and forced my brain to memorise his touch. He kissed me savagely back, pressing his tusked mouth against mine.

If I was flying to my death on Abovalle, I wanted our kiss to be the last thing to float through my mind before I died.

Lok’Maht tried to wrap his arms around me, as though he meant to anchor me in place. With an aching heart, I reluctantly pushed away and swam out of his reach. I shifted back into my dragon form and sprang from the water.

“Avo!” Lok’Maht called after me. “Avo, please! Don’t do this!”

Protecting my resolve, I dare not turn to look at him.

“Please Avo, come back!” The pitch of his voice grew panicked. “I came back for you! Please...”

Lok’Maht’s pleading cries became distant as I climbed into the sky. I felt hollow, despite the fire raging within my body. It was like someone had reached in through my ribcage and torn out an imperative piece of me. The words of my treoll lover resonated in my head.

You’ve stolen my heart, little dragon. I need it. I need you.

I fully understood what he meant. He’d stolen my heart too, and to be separated from him was to be without a pulse. I gave myself a shake and tried to shrug off the feelings of guilt and remorse. I had to focus on the task in hand.

I flew above the mountain, through the strangling black barrier of smoke that bloomed over Abovalle like a giant spectral flower. The heat was incredible and almost overwhelmed me. I gritted my teeth against it and swooped down towards the ground. I landed in a stony court that hadn’t been claimed by the blaze. Around me, I could make out the odd ruined corpse of my kin. Some were in full dragon form, others were distinctly humanoid. I could have cried, had I enough time to mourn for them. Beyond them was the mouth of a cave, one of the many that covered Abovalle’s length.

Like Arcadestar had described, the fire crawled unnaturally along the cave’s stony surface. Creeping hungrily, the magical flames lapped at the craggy rock, leaving a blackened scar over everything they touched. The entrance was a blazing ring and I thought it highly unlikely that I’d find survivors inside. Yet

still, I had to be sure. I had to investigate every home, every possible hiding place. I pushed my mouth towards the fire and drew in a long breath. The flames spiralled away from the cave wall and went spinning through my opened jaw. I continued to suck at the fire, pulling the length of the flame from the cave and leaving white smoke in its wake. I grew, expanding outwards to a size I'd never been before.

From out of the cave's smoking mouth flew a male dragon followed closely by a hatchling girl. Surprised, my mind throbbed pleasantly as they flew up into the sky.

The adult male, who was half my size, spun while they retreated. "Thank you stranger! My life for yours! Thank you!"

They disappeared from view, lost in the smoky atmosphere. Spurred on by the luck of my first attempt, I continued through the flames. I cut a path through the fire, eating as I went and arrived at a large cave that was in much the same state as the last. I inhaled arrogantly, hoping to be the hero for more of my kind.

It was a mistake. It was too much.

The instant the fire passed through my throat it clawed into the confines of my skin. It wanted out, to be free of its cage and I was not equipped with enough skill to stop it. I hunched forward, crippled by the pain it caused.

Gasping, I exploded.

The intensity of the blast was like nothing I had experienced before. My mind scattered outward, along with the heat and I felt... I felt...

I felt everything.

My burning body fused with the fire on the mountain's top. We became one, driven by the need to consume. I could feel the trees around the mountain's rim hiss and crackle at my touch. I could feel the charred bones of my kinsman turn to dust as I brushed over them with my flames. I clawed at the very stone of the mountain, digging my nails into its resilient hide. I was no longer Avonrepus; I was the inferno.

I suddenly became aware of other things. There were little, inviting pockets of air within the caves that I wanted to explore. There were places I hadn't ventured yet, places I wanted to taste. I wanted to eat away at the world, consume it in my heat, until there was nothing left.

Blindly, I sent a tendril of flame snaking out into an unexplored crevice. My searing limb bit into something. It kicked at me, flinching away from my touch.

What was it? I wanted to taste it. I edged closer. Again I brushed over something. It moved. A tail? Yes, a scaly tail. It would fuel me. It would sustain me for longer. Tails belong to dragons. Dragons tasted nice too.

Suddenly, I could feel them. All of them. Sense their body heat. Dragons. All over the mountain. Hiding from me. Denying me. I wanted them. They tasted like... like...

Phain...

Human...

Cages...

Treoll...

The image of Lok'Maht flashed brightly into my mind, jarring me from my single-minded thoughts. I had become one with the fire and, in doing so, had taken on its simplistic primal need to survive. It had lulled me out of my senses and filled me with an unadulterated bliss. I had never known happiness like it... except...

I tried to pinpoint the memory. I'd been happier than this. Somewhere. Red flowers. In his arms. Lok'Maht...

I was losing my mind, being won over by the fire. Something ran into me, trying to escape my reach. A dragon, judging by its shape, risking a desperate retreat. It fell in my grasp a moment later, dead. I could feel myself crawling over its body, digging into its scales and burning away its shape. I shuddered and pulled away from its corpse. The fire responded to my thought, lifting itself above my unfortunate brethren.

I could control it. I could pull it back!

I sent my mind out along the flames, finding its outer most perimeter. I encompassed the breadth of it and yanked mentally. The fire withdrew, hastily travelling up the mountain's side. It slithered along the stone ground, coiling itself into the limbs of my incorporeal body. As it recoiled, I felt my physical senses returning. I could smell again. I could see. Ignoring the symphonic agony that sang in every nerve of my body, I arched my neck to look around. My body had regained its solidity and it was massive.

I was a giant of gargantuan proportions.

The fire wrestling within my frame was most displeased and intent on breaking loose. If I exploded here... If I kablammed at this size, I'd destroy half

of the mountain. I would become the Mountain's Doom. I closed my eyes, and with every measure of my spirit, I dug into my heart. With sheer force of will, I commanded my limbs to respond. I flew upward, pushing as high as I could. The air thinned and a savage chill attacked my scales. I cried out, my roar cutting over the landscape. I punched through the Earth's last layers of air and dared to open my eyes.

I saw the sun; a molten globe of light floating in an infinite sea of stars. To see the sun and stars share the sky... I gasped at its beauty. Who'd have thought it was even possible?

I closed my eyes and imagined the feel of tusks pressed against my lips. I imagined the scent of sandalwood and heard the echo of humming in my ears.

I heard his voice, "*Star song for lost ones.*"

I filled myself with images of him.

Lok'Maht.

And then, I let it all go...

The sound that succeeded the fire's release seemed loud enough to split the very fabric of reality. The deafening crack shook the skies, like thunder a thousand times more ferocious than that of any natural storm. My brain rattled in my skull, shaking what little wit remained within it from its perch. The force of the blast catapulted me through the air, back down towards the mountain. I sailed through the darkening sky, pursued by a tail of glittering, blue flame. From the ground I must have looked like a tiny comet made of twinkling sapphire stone.

Above me, the swirling sphere of pure white fire rumbled angrily. Strands of scarlet flame snaked out of its bulk, like the tentacles of a monstrous squid. A burning limb stretched toward me, as though it meant to give chase. It was too slow. I was plummeting too quickly.

I tried to turn away from the fire, but my body was limp and unresponsive. I tried to spread my wings out, but they fluttered lazily by my side. I was falling to my death. Lok'Maht had been right. Again, a vision of him wandered lovingly into my thoughts. I held on to it, determined to let it accompany me to the grave. Piercing the layer of black smog that had gathered over Abovalle and the Veil, I braced myself for impact. I closed my eyes.

I'm only a breath away from the ground. I hope Lok'Maht buries me with a tree seed...

Below me, something hissed noisily. A great gargling, gushing hiss. And then I slammed into something hard, yet fluid. If I hadn't been so numb, I think I would have felt every bone in my body shatter. My eyes flew open and I saw that I was immersed in a pillar of water! The crystalline liquid was stretched to an impossible height above the ground. I twisted in its length, spun about by the whirling cylinder. Underneath its wobbling mass, I could see Middle Lake and the dragons that were anxiously retreating from its depths. The geyser that had caught me had sprung from the centre of the lake. Rings of ruby waved around the fount's root, reflecting the flaming ball in the sky. From where I was, it looked like the beating of a giant heart. As my own heart's rhythm faltered and I began to die, I gloried in the beauty of it. Closing my eyes, for what I suspected to be the last time, I felt a scaled hand wrap itself around my body. It gently plucked me from the geyser's grasp while I sank into the blackness of death...

I felt cold. I felt wet. I felt a hand on my chest. I felt...

I FELT!

Sitting up, I drank in the scene before me. I had been laid on Middle Lake's bank. Lok'Maht was kneeling in the mud at my side. He was sweating heavily and his skin had a greyish pallor. At his back was a crowd of dragons who looked over us with intense expressions. Further behind them was the geyser, which coated the surrounding forest in a blanket of twinkling mist.

"What happened?" I asked, with a trembling voice.

In response to my question the dragons began to cheer. They roared and they sang. They shot jets of jubilant fire out into the damp air.

Lok'Maht scooped me up from the gritty ground. "Don't ever do that to me again," he ordered. "I... I..." His voice broke and his lip quivered. "I thought you'd died. I thought you'd already returned to the Earth's spirit."

I shook my head. "I won't die. I can't die."

"You can't?" he asked, pulling away to give me a puzzled look.

"I stole your heart, remember? When mine failed, yours continued to beat for me. I'm alive because of you." I smiled, struggling to speak through the swell of emotion that poured out of my soul. "I live for you."

"Avonrepus," he purred as he began to shower me with kisses.

Chapter Twelve

Sometime later.

I awoke without opening my eyes and yawned. Stretching my half-shift arms, I hummed uncomfortably. The small fire in my belly gurgled merrily, reminding me of its presence.

At my side, Lok'Maht stirred and rolled into me. "Well, today finally arrived," he grumbled. "We can leave after all of the official nonsense, right? I've barely slept a wink for the last couple of nights."

"If you want to," I sighed.

"Do you want to?" he asked, pushing himself up onto his knees.

My lids cracked open a fraction and I gave him a wondering look. The morning sun beamed in through the thin fabric of our tent. It washed over his glorious green skin, highlighting every bump and dimple. His blond hair had been cut presentably short and his beard was neatly trimmed close to his skin. He'd gained weight since the last time we'd shared a tent together, filling out in all the pleasant places.

Languidly I shook my head. "I want to go home as soon as possible. I don't agree with the humans' method of execution. Don't get me wrong, I feel that Riven deserves to die, but not like this. That, and I'm just not keen on this place."

Lok'Maht sat up and dangled his legs over the side of our travel cot. "I can't believe Abovalle has changed this much in just eight seasons," he said, tracing patterns in the golden sand beneath his toes. "It literally has become a desert." Lok'Maht wasn't exaggerating.

"Well, that's what happens when a big clumsy dragon decides to create a Blood Star over a mountain," I grimaced.

That was what the humans had called it.

My big *kablam*. The Blood Star.

It shone continuously like a second sun high above Abovalle, marring the landscape for miles around with its perpetual light. As the seasons crawled by, the area surrounding the mountain had become a wasteland. An uninhabitable reminder of the dangers of blood magic.

“This isn’t your doing, Avo.” Lok’Maht brushed the side of my face with his hand.

“I know,” I replied, pausing to kiss his fingers. “And that is why we’re here.”

“Indeed.” He shrugged. “Come on, let’s get some breakfast. I get the feeling the human officials want to be away from here as soon as possible. I dare say they’ll start proceedings as soon as they can.”

Not long after, we were stood at the front of a large gathering of beings. An even mix of dragons, treolls, and humans. They’d gathered to witness Riven’s punishment. The ex-circus performer had been a fugitive for almost seven seasons. He’d been caught, drunk, trying to sell my last stolen scale in a tavern. The humans had captured him and put him on trial for using blood magic. After that, they trialled him for the murders of countless dragons and humans alike. The human law keepers had decided that the severity of the punishment should fit the crime. They’d sentenced Riven to death and had decreed that he should be left to bake in the desert, under the Blood Star’s unclosing eye.

While we listened to the human officials pass sentence, Riven sat in his cage, which was chained to two tall iron poles. His expression was one of boredom, and once or twice, he rolled his eyes as his gory crimes were listed aloud. I almost pitied him, in that he was broken beyond remorse. I could only wish him a speedy send-off to rejoin the Earth’s spirit. A completely clean slate would be his only salvation. When the human officials had finished with their speeches, Riven’s cage was elevated and left suspended high above the ground. Having seen enough, Lok’Maht and I said our goodbyes and made our exit.

We strolled along what used to be the Veil, kicking at the warm sand with our bare feet. We came to an oasis, one of the few fading patches of greenery that remained of Abovalle.

I recognised the shape of the land. “This is Middle Lake, isn’t it? Or at least what’s left of it.”

“I think so,” Lok’Maht answered, taking my hand. He led me down to the water’s edge. “It’ll be somewhere around here where you fell. You were like a little blue comet.”

I snorted softly. “I don’t remember much about it. After flying up with all that fire in me, the only thing I remember was thinking of you. I think that’s how I found my way back here. I came back to you.”

Intruding upon our conversation, the geyser erupted from the centre of the shallow water. It was a pitiful replica of the font that pushed its way into existence on the day I'd fallen from the sky.

"I overheard the humans talking about the geyser yesterday," Lok'Maht said, coming up behind me and wrapping his lanky arms around my waist. "I meant to tell you last night, but it slipped my mind. They call it the Tree Troll's Tears. I wonder how they managed to dream up that name."

"I wonder..." I grinned while we swayed together in the geyser's mist.

"I think they should have named it the Earth's Tears."

"Why would you think that?"

Lok'Maht inhaled and pressed his arms tighter around me. "Because my heart beats in rhythm with the Earth's. We're connected, the Earth and I. I think, like me, the Earth loves you too, and that's why it pushed the geyser through its shell. It meant to save you."

A pleasant buzz skittered around in my tummy. Lok'Maht knew exactly what to say in order to lift my spirits. I turned in his arms and kissed him firmly on his tusked mouth.

"I've seen enough sand," Lok'Maht stated, drawing away from me. "If you're ready, I'm missing the privacy of our mountaintop treehouse. I can't wait to get you back into our bed."

"Very ready," I grinned. "To be honest, I've been getting a little anxious. I don't like to leave the dragons unsupervised for too long."

"Don't worry," he chuckled, "Arca and Lou'Ren get along like forests and fires, if you'll pardon the pun. There isn't a problem the two of them couldn't handle. Not that I suspect there will be any problems."

After the Blood Star had claimed Abovalle and the Veil, the dragons had returned to Emerigh. The treolls had allowed the dragons to claim the vacant mountain above their jungle-like city. At first, the move had been met with some resistance by a few of the treolls and dragons alike. But their disgruntled concerns were soon quashed, and so far, the dragons and the treolls had lived in an easy peace.

Somehow, I'd landed the role of liaison between our two races. I was fine with that, of course. There was little dispute between the new neighbours, and so far all matters of discord had been resolved quickly and respectfully. I

wasn't sure if I'd acquired the job because my lover was a treoll, or if it was because I was highly respected by the dragons and the treolls in equal measure. In fact, the treolls have taken to calling me the dragon king, though no such monarch has ever existed in dragon society. I didn't mind though, and the dragons had decided that I should occupy the highest tree on Emerigh's peak. I guess in some sense that signified me as being a person of prestige in Emerigh. Yes, it was certainly time to return home.

I shifted into my dragon form and lowered my neck for Lok'Maht to climb on. The elemender mounted me expertly, positioning himself with practiced ease as I leapt from the ground. We swept swiftly through the sapphire sky, dipping in and out of the clouds. I couldn't wait to be surrounded by the comforts of home. To be able to sleep in my own bed, alongside my treoll.

"Avo is in hurry," Lok'Maht observed, speaking in the human language. "I wondering what reason Avo have for that?"

I chuckled and answered in dragon, which my treoll companion was starting to understand fluently. "Behave Lok'Maht, you know I love it when you speak human to me. It takes me back..."

"Then Avo need hurry and take us back. Lok'Maht have need of Avo." He stroked his hand along the base of my neck.

I purred and shuddered a little. He sniggered playfully, and bit softly at the scales on my shoulder. I propelled us forward quicker, and growled alluringly at the treoll on my back. Soon I'd have him all to myself, in the place I'd made my home. Soon we'd be entangled amongst the furs and fabrics of our bed; two hearts beating with one rhythm. In the tallest tree at the highest point of the Mount Emerigh. To the place where I felt...

Above all else.

The End

Author Bio

I'm an eager writer who lives in the county of Nottinghamshire (... yes my house is near Sherwood Forest). I live with my partner, our teenage son, and three very needy cats. I'm the oldest of four rather eccentric siblings, who seem somewhat normal in comparison to our zany parents. I also have a small gaggle of comical nieces and nephews, who descend upon my home at regular welcomed intervals. I dearly love all of the above named persons, and simply couldn't function without them constantly adding colour to my life.

I was recently a featured author in The Book Seller Magazine. Yay! The lady who wrote the editorial (Caroline Sanderson, author of Adele's biography) made it her mission to find promising indie authors, who write books of publishable quality, and push them into the spotlight. I was surprised and incredibly grateful when she tweeted me at the start of the year to let me know I'd appear in the magazine! That, so far, is my biggest claim to fame!

From a very young age, I've read fantasy and horror stories, marvelling at the words artfully adorning the pages. My first love affair was with a book written by L. J. Smith. Her Night World series blew my turbulent teenage mind away and I couldn't read enough of her work. Following on from that, I've fallen in love with many other authors including, Anne Rice, James Clemens, and Trudi Canavan. I find their writing to be both inspiring and enthralling.

I'm also a massive geek and will happily spend hours playing on RPG console games. Some of the most content moments in my life have involved me being tucked away with a bar of Dairy Milk Chocolate in one hand and my PlayStation pad in the other. I've lost hours without end to the likes of Final Fantasy, Suikoden, Zelda, The Secret of Mana, and Breath of Fire. These story-driven RPGs have had a profound effect over my creative psyche and probably influence my writing more than I dare to let on...

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading what I've written. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to think I've sprinkled a little bit of enjoyment into the lives of other people.

Contact & Media Info

Get in touch with me via email, if you feel the need...

Or hit me up on Twitter and Facebook, where I'm always happy to answer questions. I sometimes post brief insights into my life on there too. Nothing

very exciting, just my drunken escapades and photos of my cats. (No. That's not sad. Cats are a very healthy thing for a thirty-three-year-old queen to be tweeting about! Honest...)

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