

Penny Wilder

ADAM'S FLIGHT

FLINT & FROST

A Love's Landscapes Story

★
DRAGONBORN
SERIES

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

ADAM'S FLIGHT

Flint & Frost, Draqborn Series

By Penny Wilder

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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's Landscapes*.

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.

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ADAM'S FLIGHT

Flint & Frost, Dragborn Series

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Photo Description

A beautiful man with long flame-red hair and burning eyes stares ahead. His gaze is determined, deliberate, and his eyes are glowing as if lit by a fire within. He is magic, powerful. In the background, we see his other form, a red fire dragon illuminated against a sky on fire.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It was the loud sound of ancient bolts sliding free from their even more ancient locks that awakened Adam; then again, it also could have been the unbearable pain slicing through the back of his skull that had caused him to finally push through the fuzzy barrier that was unconsciousness. The dim lighting coming from one lone torch on the wall near his head was the only thing that kept his prison from being plummeted into full darkness, he heard low fierce voices coming from behind the large cracked oak door that opened the way to a freedom he'd probably never see again.

Once again there was the clicking sound of an ancient lock releasing from its mechanism, and then the door opened and with it came a creaking noise that suggested that the hinges had gone on far too long without a proper oiling and the awful sound also succeeded in making his head pound unmercifully. As the sound of the door echoed off into the blackness of his prison a short stout man that could've been a relative to an ogre stepped into the room dragging behind him a raggedy looking stool that surely would've collapsed under the cruel weight of this man.

However, as quickly as the man had entered was how quickly he'd left, as soon as the stool was properly placed. A short time later though, another man entered and once again he doubted the ability of the stool to hold this man's weight. This man was far more attractive with dark hair that might've trailed behind him if it hadn't been for the tiny leather band holding it back into a ponytail, his bright blue eyes almost pierced the darkness and took he took his

seat with a gracefulness that surprised Adam. Still, his masculine beauty couldn't hide the cruelty rolling off him in waves of black.

The man snapped his fingers and then another ogre-like man rushed into the room with another burning torch which he promptly placed in the other holder by the door. The taller man, who probably beat Adam's own height by just a few inches, then spoke in a voice that under normal circumstances would've made Adam's cock stand up and take notice in no time flat, but right now all that voice did was make him cringe.

"That's much better. We couldn't possibly have a proper conversation without more light. I always like being able to see my prey as well as seeing the fear I invoke in them."

That's one thing he wasn't going to see from Adam. His rage temporarily drove away the pain from his headache, and he could almost feel the man's throat in his hands; and he might have if it hadn't been for the damnable chains attached to his wrists. The man only laughed in that mocking way Adam despised hearing from anyone.

"Just tell me where she is, and then I'll be more than happy to let you go. Maybe after you cooperate we can get to know each other better."

Adam wasn't sure what made him sicker; the look he received from the man or the way he smiled when his eyes hovered longer than was necessary on Adam's crotch, but Adam swore to himself that he would bear anything he had to in order to keep Ellianna safe. Anything to make sure she married the man she wanted, even if that man was a dragon.

The man's shocking eyes narrowed at his silence and then he rose from his seat. Adam tried to brace himself for what he was sure was coming, but the shocking pain of the man's booted foot colliding with his bare stomach couldn't have been avoided even if he'd been able to read the man's thoughts. His attempt at breathing through the pain failed and when he could finally lift his head, the man was directly in his sight, anger pouring off him.

"Where is she?"

Adam didn't get a chance to respond because some commotion outside drew both of their attention to the door. Then screams and the sound of what might have been an explosion echoed throughout all of the dungeon. The man left Adam with a parting punch to his jaw that he knew would leave at least an ugly bruise.

After he was gone, Adam fought to hang on to consciousness, and if it hadn't been for the rumbling and subsequent explosions he might have succumbed to the darkness awaiting him. But the sound of crumbling stone and more screaming had him staring at the far left corner of his prison. He could hardly believe his eyes as that entire sector began to shake and crash around him. He waited expectantly to be crushed under at least one hundred tons of stone but nothing happened, and when he looked toward what was left of that part of the dungeon, he noticed some sort of barrier protecting him.

"Adam!"

The sound of his name being called attracted his attention to the sky, which he could now see clearly through the large hole. It was his sister. She was on the back of an enormous ocean-blue dragon, but the wonderful sight of his beloved sister safe, and it seemed to him having the time of her life, just couldn't compare to the magnificent sight that was moving towards him.

The incredibly handsome man moving towards him seemed to resemble the dragon in the sky except for his color, and the fact that he was wonderfully human. His deep-red hair seem to shine in the light of the setting sun, but his hair wasn't only red as it seemed to spark and dance between several shades; from rose, to ember, and shades he couldn't even seem to put a name to. He looked like some magnificent god the way he rose up from the clouds of dust. When he at last stood before Adam, he noticed that even his clothing was a deep rich red.

The man reached to his side, pulled his sword free from its sheath and let it rise to just above Adam's head. Adam closed his eyes, even though that was the last thing he wanted to do, because if he had to die at this man's hand then all he wanted to do was remember the way he looked right now. He felt the rush of the wind as the stranger's blade was released to do as it wished. Adam knew that he flinched but then he could still feel his head attached to his shoulders.

He opened his eyes and saw that the stranger was closer to him now. Adam had thought that everything else about this man had been magnificent, but he'd yet to see his eyes that he knew what the best thing about this man was... his gorgeous eyes were an incredible mixture of fiery red and melted gold, with little to no emotion reflected within. Adam was so awestruck that he hadn't even heard the man speak until he spoke again, louder this time.

"We don't have time for this. If you want to keep breathing then you'll stop staring at me and move."

Adam shook his head to rid it of the idiotic thoughts that were drifting through his head but he instantly regretted the action because his head began to throb again. The man turned to him and proceeded to pull him up by one arm but that motion only made his headache worse. He tried to follow but that's when his legs came out from under him. The man was there in his sight again, only this time kneeling in front of him yet somehow holding him up. He was saying something, asking a question maybe, but Adam couldn't understand him. He could barely make out his face anymore but something in the stranger's eyes troubled him. The man almost looked concerned.

The stranger's incredible eyes were the last thing Adam saw before he blacked out.

Please give Adam and his incredible dragon a terrific fantasy story, thank you so much!

Sincerely,

Gabrielle ~ Bhlack Benehvolence ~

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, paranormal, steampunk

Tags: dragon shifters, gay, twins, mates, pansexual, transgender, magic users, prison/captivity

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ADAM'S FLIGHT
Flint & Frost, Dragborn Series
By Penny Wilder

Chapter One

There was blackness. Blackness, pounding pain, and there were whispers. Everything hurt. Adam didn't know where he was, but he could feel grass and cool earth beneath him, and the air was clean. *Not the dungeon then, but where?* He kept his eyes closed, and listened.

"Shouldn't be long now."

"Marin, when he wakes, we have to move. We have only hours till light touches these cliffs."

"Can't fly much further anyway. The Order watch the Split, and the Nets they've woven make it too dangerous to fly. We'll have to sneak around them on foot."

"Watchers?" Elli. His twin. *Thank the Gods.*

"Elli, it'll be fine."

"His head, Marin, I don't know if we should move him."

"Flint will carry him as far as we can go." Adam knew that voice. Marin Frost. The memory of Elli sitting astride the great blue Dragon flickered in his mind. Elli's intended had risked capture and exposed himself as a Dragon in order to rescue Adam. *Gods, what happened when I passed out?* he wondered.

Someone snorted.

"Don't start, Flint," said Frost.

"You asked for my aid, Marin. I'm giving it, and thanks to your stunt back there, every watcher in the Order will be on our tail all the way back to the keep."

"Dammit, Ethon! If we had taken any more time, they would have secured Adam somewhere deep in the pits where we couldn't break in."

Another snort. "Lucky for us that they were fools then."

"Lucky for us there weren't any Gifted guarding him," Frost retorted.

"That would have made things more complicated," the other man agreed. Adam listened, still feigning unconsciousness, and silently agreed with the stranger. The Order had soldiers with special talents and abilities who were essentially "Gifted". They had superior strength or could move things with their

mind or levitate or possessed some other power. There were even a few Casters and Fairies who worked for them. The Order fortified their army with Gifted Forces. Many of the Order's Gifted were taken from their parents as children when their gift first manifested. The Order cultivated their talents and molded their minds, creating an army of soldiers who could do things like lift you off your feet and fling you into a wall without ever touching you.

Just then, there was something wet and rough, at his brow. *A cloth?* Adam thought. Delicate fingers brushed his cheek, dabbing around a cut on his forehead. The cloth stung, and Adam flinched as his eyes fluttered open. Above him was a dark, starless sky. His twin, Ellianna, was kneeling to his right, her dark eyes full of concern, and her waist-length, inky-black curls falling forward as she leaned over to clean his cut. Behind her, he could see the tall form of her mate, Ilmarin Frost, pacing back and forth, the flame from a glowing, blue lantern at his feet throwing wild shadows in all directions. On his other side, burning eyes and all, crouched the beautiful red-haired warrior who'd spoken to him through the crumpled wall of the dungeon before he passed out. *Flint?* Adam wondered as he stared.

"Ah, there he is." The warrior stared down at him. Adam stared back. The warrior's eyes... they flickered like fire and glinted like gold before fading to a steady amber hue. Adam had seen a Draq before—well, Marin anyway—but the Draq in front of him was nothing like Marin. His flame-red hair and amber eyes in contrast to his pale skin was almost jarring. He was eyeing Adam carefully, his lips pressed into a hard line. At the sound of the Draq's voice, Frost quickly knelt behind Elli and smiled at Adam.

"You had us worried, Mr. Byre," said Frost.

"Frost. Elli, hullo." Adam smiled weakly at his twin and her mate and flinched when the movement made his head throb. "Where... where am I?"

"We're on the cliffs not far from Eldor Falls." Frost noted the confused look on Adam's face. "We're safe for the moment. You were very far from home, Adam."

"Where—" he took a breath. "When you found me, where was I?"

Marin and the Draq exchanged a look, and Adam had a feeling, he wasn't going to like the answer. "New Quidel," said Marin.

Adam was speechless. New Quidel was an enormous city nearly two hundred leagues southwest of his farm. He looked up at Elli, Marin, and the warrior, his eyes wide. "You came for me," he said. "Thank you."

"You are brother to my mate, Adam," Marin replied. His outstretched hand gripped Adam's shoulder. "As long as I draw breath, I will always come for you."

"How'd you find me?" Adam asked.

Elli held up her left wrist, displaying her woven leather cuff, and Adam squinted in confusion. The cuff was old, with an intricate pattern pressed into the leather at the wrist. Its twin resided on Adam's right wrist. "Grandmere's gift, Adam, her magic. It saved you." She squeezed his hand and pressed their cuffed wrists together, her eyes wide. "I felt them take you." Adam and Elli had always shared a space in the other's head. For as long as Adam could remember, he and Elli had been speaking to each other in psychic whispers and sharing flashes of feeling. His connection with his twin was a constant presence, burning brightly in the back of his mind. When they took him at the farm, he'd been knocked unconscious, and the connection would have been severed abruptly. He looked up at his twin who continued. "Everything went dark, I couldn't feel you anymore, but the cuffs—the cuffs were still tied together in some way, and Flint was able to..." She glanced over at the red-haired Draq with a grateful smile.

"Flint?" Adam prompted, squeezing Elli's hand in return.

The red-haired Draq smirked at Adam and raised two long, willowy fingers in salute to greet him. "Ethon Eldhrimnir Flint, at your service. The cuffs were tied with a simple bonding spell, one that probably enhanced your awareness of each other as children. I could feel the trace of the spell enough to follow it to you."

"You're a Caster?" Adam asked, eyeing Flint. "When the wall fell, back there in the dungeon, did you...?"

"I shielded you, yes."

"Thank you," said Adam. Flint blinked at Adam and shrugged. He seemed uncomfortable and looked away from Adam, out into the night. Adam studied his profile and the tightness in his shoulders before turning his attention back to Marin and Elli.

"When Elli lost her sense of you," said Marin, "she went into hysterics."

"It was so sudden, Adam. I thought you were dead," she confessed. He squeezed her hand and touched his mind to hers, reassuring Elli that he was going to be okay. He took comfort in their connection, which had felt distant

and faint even before his capture, because Elli and Marin had been so far away. The relief he felt from Elli through their bond was palpable. He had missed his twin.

"They hit me on the head, El," said Adam, wincing again as he tried to sit up. Marin reached out a hand to steady him. His head still pounded, and his stomach roiled, but he didn't get sick.

"Can you stand?" Flint asked. Adam nodded gently, and they helped him to his feet. He had to grip Flint's arm to stay upright, but he was standing. Marin turned to face Adam and hunched over, so he and Adam were face to face.

"Adam," said Marin, "we have to move. The Order will find us if we linger."

For a Draq, moving meant flying. Adam had dreamed of flying ever since he was a child. Grandmere had filled their heads with old Draq adventure stories. He looked over at Flint, whose face was perfectly blank as he acknowledged Adam's stare with a quick nod. "Better tie him," Flint said coolly.

Flint stepped away from Adam's side and began removing his clothing. Adam's eyes widened as Flint's thin porcelain frame was revealed. What Adam could see of Flint in the flickering light was more than pleasant. His flame-colored hair was thick and fell in soft waves halfway down his back. His hip bones stuck out above the top of his pants, and his muscles... there wasn't an ounce of body fat on the Draq. His muscles rippled beneath his pale skin, every inch of his thin frame chiseled and defined. Flint looked younger than Adam had thought at first glance, maybe not much older than Adam and Elli's nineteen years, but how that translated in Draq years, Adam had no idea. A Draq lived eons longer than humans, so Flint was probably much older than him and Elli.

While Flint disrobed, he muttered instructions to Elli, who rushed to the pile of packs to pull out some kind of leather harness. He paused to look back at Adam and Marin, his hands hooked into his pants in preparation to pull them down. He looked at Adam, and there was a glint of discomfort in the Draq's gaze. "I won't hurt you," Flint stated. Adam blinked and nodded, his heart beating faster as Flint's eyes stared into his. With that, Ethon Flint turned away, shucked his pants, and shifted.

Adam, his head still pounding, and aided only by the dim lantern behind him, could barely comprehend what he was seeing. Flint dropped to his knees

and fell forward, expanding into the shadows. He grew impossibly large. His neck shot skyward, and his skin glowed a fiery red. Scales covered his body in ripples, like a rush of fire. A spiked tail appeared, and great talons, wickedly curved and black, replaced his hands and feet. As Flint writhed and flexed his body, wings unfolded from his great red back. Within seconds Flint the Draq was gone. Flint the Dragon was bigger than Adam's house. As Adam watched, tiny curls of smoke escaped from Flint's flared nostrils. The only recognizable feature Adam could see, that connected the Draq to the great red Dragon before him, were the Draq's familiar burning eyes which flashed even larger in Flint's Dragon face.

After checking himself over and shaking his head, Flint turned his massive head towards Adam. Flint's eyes were still burning fire, and his nostrils flared. As he sniffed the air in front of him, little puffs of smoke escaped. Adam felt pressure on his lower back and realized that Flint's tail was wrapped around him. "What is he doing?" Adam wondered, slightly alarmed as the tail pulled his body slightly forward, and Flint stuck his snout directly on Adam's chest. A jolt of electricity shot through Adam at the contact. He forgot to breathe, and he trembled, his heart pounding.

"It's alright," said Marin. His arm was still around Adam's shoulder, supporting Adam even as Flint's tail pushed him forward and off-balance. He leaned in and whispered in Adam's ear, "He needs to be able to know your scent in this form. I'll do the same when I change as well."

Adam shook and warmth pooled in his belly, making him feel very strange as Flint nosed his torso. Flint, and the tiny puffs of smoke that wafted from his snout, smelled like burning wood... cloves, and *cinnamon*? Adam nearly laughed out loud. He had never heard of a Dragon smelling sweet before. It seemed at odds with Flint's rather terrifying exterior.

When Flint turned his head away from Adam and pulled his tail off of Adam's back, Elli stepped forward with the harness. It buckled swiftly over Flint's shoulders and around his forelegs. With the harness in place, Elli and Marin helped Adam onto Flint's back. Adam glanced up at Flint only to find the Dragon's burning eyes watching him. Despite the fog from the pain in his head, Adam was in awe. He couldn't believe that he was going to fly on the back of a Dragon. When Marin and Elli were finished, Adam's legs were buckled to the harness with two mismatched leather belts. He leaned forward and reached out with both hands, his fingers tracing over the rough row of spikes running down the back of Flint's neck. He could feel Flint beneath him,

and he wondered, not for the first time since he awoke, if this wasn't all a dream. His head was still throbbing, so he closed his eyes. He was so tired.

He was drifting in a haze again when he heard the rush of Marin's shift. Adam felt a huff of cool breath at his neck and shivered at the icy chill. He opened his eyes and saw the head of the large ocean-blue Dragon that was Frost a few feet away. Elli was holding the lantern aloft and was once again seated on Frost's back of as she had been during Adam's rescue.

"Ready?" asked Elli. Adam nodded. With that, she snuffed the lantern and plunged them into darkness.

Adam gripped the harness he was buckled into tightly with one hand, and pressed the other hand to the rough scales on Flint's neck. He felt the ground tremble as Flint took off across the field in a great jolt, his limbs pounding into the earth, his wings making great whooshing sounds as they lifted off the ground. They passed the edge of the cliff they had been resting on moments ago, and were suddenly thousands of feet in the air. Adam could see tiny pinpricks of light and wisps of smoke from the chimneys of the farms that were spread across the valley beneath them. Above them he saw only darkness. Adam couldn't see any stars. He looked back over his shoulder, and very far in the distance, he could see a glowing, orange haze on the horizon. The glow, he knew, was from polluted clouds in the distance, reflecting the artificial lights that lit up the city of New Quidel. The city sat under a constant haze of foul air that covered all but the tallest buildings in the city. He shuddered, and turned away.

Adam could feel the wind rushing past them. They rose higher and higher. As they spiraled upwards, he felt the air grow colder. Wisps of moisture stung his cheeks as Flint flew through thick clouds. Quite suddenly, they were above the clouds, and Adam could see the stars twinkling above them. He gasped. He'd never seen the heavens so clearly before. Everything felt closer than it did on his farm, like he could reach out his hand and touch the stars.

Adam could see Elli and Frost not too far in front of them. Frost was flying low to the clouds so that his wings just brushed the cloud layer. Elli, his usually shy twin, was leaning forward, one hand on her harness and one hand skimming through the clouds beneath them. She was smiling and talking animatedly to Frost as they flew. Her cheeks glowed in the light of the stars and the moon, and her raven tresses streamed behind her in the rushing wind. She looked like she belonged there with Frost, Adam realized. He was glad to see

Elli so happy, but he felt more alone watching the two of them than he ever had when he was really and truly alone on his farm.

He was jolted from his melancholy when Flint arched high into the air and dove straight down to skim the cloud layer behind Frost. The unexpected tilt caught Adam off guard, and his stomach jolted with the sharp dive. He pitched his body forward, leaning close to Flint's neck, and shifted his weight, learning how to adjust his body to match Flint's movements as he flew. It was sort of like riding a really fast horse through the air. If the horse could fly. No, riding a Dragon defied description, Adam realized. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced.

Flint and Frost circled each other, weaving lazy patterns as they flew north away from New Quidel. Far and fast they flew, so fast that the next time Adam thought to look behind them, there was no distant glow on the horizon from the faraway city, only darkness and the stars of the night sky. As they flew on, the world drifted in and out of focus for Adam. He slumped against Flint's neck, exhausted. He was grateful for the belts on his legs that were keeping him safely tied to Flint. His arms slipped to the sides of Flint's neck, and his head came forward to rest on Flint's warm, red scales. His last thought before he drifted off was that they must be heading due east, because there, on the horizon, were the first signs of morning light. A tinge of gray to the darkness that grew slightly brighter as they flew across the sky.

Chapter Two

Far away, in the city of New Quidel, a handsome man with long, dark hair, bright blue eyes, and a cruel mouth was kneeling on the floor in the center of a room. The room was lit by braziers that lined the cavernous hall, instead of the artificial lights that brightened most of the city. He was not alone.

"You disappoint me, Baker," said the man's hooded companion. "You had Byre in your custody for less than a day..."

"My lord," the Baker began.

"...less than a day, and the twin we were searching for rides in on a *Dragon* to take him away right from under your nose!"

"We were taken unawares, my lord!" replied the Baker.

The hooded man chuckled at that. "The entire city was taken unawares, Baker, but tell me, how long have you known the Draq were not extinct?"

"My lord?"

"How long?"

"Since Westenfall, my lord."

"Ah yes, Westenfall. Your failure," the hooded man chuckled. "That was your first attempt to bring in the girl twin."

It was the first time he had been thwarted by that cursed Draq as well. "Yes, my lord." Elli Byre was unusual, but Elli held no interest for him. Her brother, on the other hand, was intriguing. He clenched his fist, still feeling the blow he'd delivered to that wide-eyed face just hours before.

"The Draqborn who was here in the form of the Ice Dragon, he's the one that you encountered in Westenfall?"

"Yes." The twin had been secured, ready for transport to the Order's Gifted Conditioning Program, when that cursed Draq had managed to break into Westenfall and abscond with her in the night.

"You were aware of the connection between the Ice Dragon and the Byre twin?" The Baker nodded, and the hooded man's face twisted in a sneer. "How is it then, that your guards were unprepared for such an attack?"

"The men that brought Byre here claimed they were not followed. His twin should not even have known that he had gone missing. Finding him should have been impossible."

“And yet, they had no trouble doing just that. Which means, we either have a traitor in our midst, or you greatly underestimated your quarry.”

“Yes, my lord.” The Baker kept his eyes on the ancient tiles that covered the floor of the hall.

“Since you alerted us to their continued existence, we’ve been gathering intelligence on the Draq.”

“Naturally, my lord.”

“Their numbers are unknown, but it is rumored they have a stronghold in Loras. So far our Gifted have been unable to pinpoint the location. You must intercept the Byre twins before they reach it. Bring them back here. Alive,” the man added.

“We leave within the hour, my lord,” the Baker assured him.

“Good. Do not fail me.” The hooded man turned to leave the room.

“Lord Chandeler?” The Baker chose his words with great care. “My lord, these Byre twins have clearly allied themselves with the Draq. That association alone, along with the damage wrought this very day on the city of New Quidel, makes them enemies of Domin. They are also far beyond the age when other Gifted are conditioned by our Order.” He shifted, his questions of, *Why? Why bring them back here? Why not just kill them?* left unasked. He kept his eyes on the ground as Chandeler’s stare bored into his skull.

Finally Chandeler sighed and said, “All I can tell you is that we have been looking for the Byre twins for a very long time.” As Chandeler spoke, the Baker noticed that he touched his hand to a pendant he always wore.

The Baker pondered his words. Chandeler often spoke in half-truths. “How long?”

Chandeler scoffed, “That is irrelevant. You have your orders, Baker. Go now, and bring them back to me.”

The Baker stood and bowed. “Consider it done, my lord.” He turned to leave.

“And Baker? Don’t underestimate them.” The Baker looked back and nodded as the heavy door closed behind him.

Dawn was drawing near when they landed. Adam was still slumped over Flint’s neck, barely aware of what was happening. He heard Elli and Marin

speaking, their words rising slowly to the surface of his awareness, and then there was silence. Suddenly, Adam felt Flint shrink under him, shifting while Adam was still tied to his back. Adam slid to the ground beside Flint, his legs still tied to the harness which Flint easily shrugged off his much smaller Draq frame. As Flint stood, he picked Adam up and threw him over his shoulder. Adam's nose bumped Flint's lower back, and he blushed as he looked down at Flint's lily-white frame. The Draq's skin was unmarred except for a round brand of a Dragon in flight at the center of his back. It looked familiar, but Adam wasn't sure where he'd seen it.



Flint carried Adam to the center of a small grove of trees where he gently lowered him to the ground. Flint squatted in front of him, unbuckling the belts to remove the harness from Adam's legs. Adam didn't know where to look as the skinny Draq made fast work of the harness. There was no safe place for Adam's eyes. The Draq's entire body was hairless with the exception of his head and a shocking thatch of flame-red curls at his crotch. Adam's eyes drifted still lower, and he sucked in a quick breath before averting his eyes.

"Like what you see, do you?" Adam looked up quickly to find Flint watching him with a smug look on his face. Adam blushed to the roots of his hair, as Flint's eyes held his.

"Sorry," he murmured.

"It's alright." Flint reached forward to touch his fingers gently to the bruises on Adam's face. Adam winced. "How do you feel?"

"Like I walked for days, then was dragged through mud, and then beat up." Adam almost smiled at the concern on Flint's face. "I hurt all over," he admitted, "but I don't think anything is broken." He looked around. "Where are Elli and Frost?" he asked.

Flint coughed. "There was a farm about a league back. They're procuring breakfast, mounts, and a few other provisions, I suspect. They'll be back in a

while. We should rest while we can.” He untied a rolled blanket from the harness and laid it beside Adam. Flint lay near the middle and pulled the other half of the blanket over his body. He held up his arm with the blanket and motioned Adam to crawl next to him. “There’s just the one blanket. I can share, if you can.” Adam blinked. Flint looked over at him, his arm still outstretched, a glint of... *is that amusement?* ...in his eyes. “Come here to me, Adam Byre, and rest.”

Adam gave this strange and beautiful Draq that he barely knew a hard stare, which Flint returned. He was straight-faced except for the twinkle in his eye, and Adam couldn’t tell if the Draq was serious, or if he was mocking Adam. He watched Flint for any further clues before he shrugged, deciding he was too tired to care one way or the other. Adam shifted himself onto the blanket and turned, so his back was to Flint. He carefully kept a few inches of space between him and the Draq. Flint eased the blanket over Adam, and Adam felt him curl up behind him. Flint sniffed and gave a satisfied sigh. “Sleep, Byre,” he murmured. Surprisingly, Adam did.

As he drifted on the edge of sleep, Adam fell into what must have been a dream. He felt a strong arm wrap around his waist, and a nose nuzzling the curls at the back of his neck. It was the nicest dream he’d had in a very long time. In his dream, the arms held him, safe and secure at last. He pressed back into the heat and let himself drift off.

Chapter Three

When Adam awoke, he was cold. Flint was no longer curled beside him, and the blanket wasn't enough to keep him warm. He squinted and forced his eyes to open in the now bright grove. Sunlight streamed in patches to the ground through breaks in the canopy of leaves high above his head. Wind rustled through the branches, and the chill in the morning air made Adam shiver. Adam's left eye was puffy. It was more swollen now than yesterday.

At the edge of the grove stood Flint. He was dressed and rubbing a cloth through his wet hair. Flint's eyes met Adam's, but he looked away and busied himself with digging through one of the packs. Elli was kneeling on a blanket not far from Adam, breaking large chunks off of a loaf of bread. His twin's long, dark curls were twisted up in a messy knot on her head. Dark tendrils escaped the knot as she worked to prepare their food. She was dressed in a simple gray traveling gown that accentuated her thin frame and made the dark blue of her eyes stand out in stark relief.

Elli set the chunks of bread next to four sausages. Adam's stomach rumbled, and he realized he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten anything. Not yesterday, certainly. He groaned and pushed himself up until he was sitting, still wrapped in the blanket. He saw Marin, off in the trees, tending to four horses.

He rubbed his eyes. His companions were all staring at him. "What?"

"Oh, Adam," Elli whispered, her eyes filled with tears.

"What?" he asked again.

"You look terrible, that's what. Gods, Adam, I am so sorry." She knelt next to him and took his hands in hers. Warmth and support filled Adam through their bond, but Adam could feel the fierce anger that Elli was trying to hide from him.

"You saved me, El. I'm here." He wanted to wipe the tears from her eyes, but his hands were filthy. He settled for pulling her close and hugging her. She sighed, and as she squeezed him back, he felt her let some of the anger she'd been holding in go. "*Good girl*," he thought at her. She glared and poked him in the arm.

"Adam, you should know that I hired Kinley to watch the farm," Elli said as she hugged him back. "And, before you ask, when we stopped there to pick up

your trail, everything was fine. Kinley saw them take you, so he was already taking care of everyone.”

Kinley was a strange, quiet man whose small cottage was at the end of Adam's north field. Kinley only kept a small garden and some chickens, so he often helped Adam with odd jobs around his farm. Kinley hardly spoke, but he was big and strong as an ox and was a good worker. Adam nodded. “Orin? He tried to bite one of them, is he... did they?” They'd forced a sack over his head, so he couldn't see, but he'd heard his dog's angry barks cut off in a pained whimper, and he had feared the worst.

Elli squeezed him tighter. “They broke his hip and maybe a rib, but Kinley found him after they took you, and he patched him up. He's going to be fine.” Tears pricked Adam's eyes as he sighed with relief. His pup was okay. “Before you ask, everyone else is fine too.” Adam hugged El harder and winced as she pressed on a bruise.

“Thanks, El,” he whispered as he sat back and took a breath. “I need to tell you what happened, but first I need to eat. There wasn't much to eat where I was and...” Then Flint was there handing him the bread and meat. Adam blinked, and his hands shook as he broke off a piece of the bread.

“Go slowly,” warned Flint. As Adam ate, Marin crossed the clearing towards them, carrying a water vessel. He knelt at Elli's side and offered it to Adam who drank, greedily.

While he finished eating, the others ate their share. “Better?” Flint asked Adam when he was finished.

He nodded. Flint reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, round metal circle filled with white pills. He pressed three into Adam's hand. “Lorrow tree bark. For the pain.” Adam smiled gratefully and swallowed them down. He looked up and realized the three of them were waiting for him to speak. He turned to Elli. “They wanted to know where you were, El. There was a man who was questioning me, and he wanted to know where you were.”

“Can you describe him?” Frost asked as he put an arm around Elli and drew her closer to his body.

“He had black hair that was tied back with a piece of leather, and he had really blue eyes.”

Flint hissed and leapt to his feet. He swore under his breath, and looked over at Frost.

“You know him?” asked Adam.

“The Order calls him the Baker,” said Flint, frowning. “We don’t know his true name.”

“Seriously, the Baker?” Adam asked, and Frost nodded solemnly. “Do we know why he’s called the Baker?”

All three of his companions shook their heads in unison. “Nope, not a ruddy clue, but probably because of something he did...” Flint answered.

“Or someone he killed,” inserted Frost

“Or that,” Flint agreed.

“Elli and I have encountered him before,” Marin explained. “He works for the Order, and he’s been seen with Gifted soldiers, but we don’t know much.”

“And what we know, we don’t like,” Flint added.

“He’s the one who tried to take Elli at Westenfall.” As he spoke, his voice a low growl, Marin kept his eyes on Elli who was staring pointedly down at her hands. Adam’s stomach clenched. *What had really happened at Westenfall, and why wasn’t he told about it?* He stared down at Elli, and reached out to her with his mind.

“*El?*”

“*I’m fine, Adam. Marin saved me.*”

“*No, you’re not fine. I saw your face just now. Elli, what the hell happened?*”

“*Adam. Please. I will tell you, I promise, but not now.*”

“*I’ll wait if that’s what you want, but just so you know, I’m not letting this go.*”

Elli looked up at him, grateful. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “*Thank you, Adam.*”

Marin touched Elli’s nose, bringing her out of contact with Adam. She looked up at Marin’s ice-blue eyes, and gave a weak smile. Adam thought back to the dungeon and the shackles and wished he’d been able to bash them right between the Baker’s blue eyes.

“What else did the Baker want to know?” Flint asked. He was watching Adam warily, as if he might break at any moment.

"I don't know," Adam admitted, frowning. "He'd just come in and started questioning me when the wall to my cell broke open, and you three were there." He looked up and saw three very satisfied grins on the faces of his companions.

"Well," said Frost as he picked up Elli and spun her around, "he knows where we were last night," Elli laughed as he drew her in close to his broad chest, and he kissed her hair gently before continuing, "but, he doesn't know where we are right now, eh?"

"They didn't follow you?" Adam wondered.

"They tried," said Frost.

"Men on horses rode through the gates and tried to follow us. I could see them in the distance once we were clear of the smog, but they couldn't keep up," Elli explained.

"They sent a mechanical bird too," said Flint, "but Marin tore it to pieces."

"How did the city fare?" Adam wondered. Marin looked a little shamefaced. He cleared his throat but didn't answer.

"In terms of Dragon damage, it was relatively mild," said Flint. "Only a few buildings were crushed, and there were very few casualties."

"Casualties?" Adam asked, feeling a bit sick. For a moment no one spoke.

"There was a guard on the ground with a harpoon cannon aimed at Frost," said Flint, his voice quivering a bit. "There was no time. The spell I cast blew up the cannon, and he..."

Adam was horrified that someone was killed during his rescue, but he was oddly glad that it mattered to Flint. Dragon damage sounded ominous, and he needed to know what happened after he collapsed at Flint's feet in the dirt. "Can you tell me how you three got me out of that place?"

"Well let's see..." Flint said smirking. "I snuck into the city, tracking you." Flint snapped a twig from the ground and drew two circles on the ground, one inside the other. The city of New Quidel sat on a peninsula that dipped into the Radyn Sea. The city was the southernmost point of Domin and was perfectly round. The inner circle, a jumble of giant towers extending into the sky, housed the privileged classes and government. The outer circle housed the populace and was divided into four quadrants, North, South, East and West. Adam had visited the city once as a child, and he remembered the foul air and the black stuff that came out of his nose after they left. Most of all, he remembered the

empty expressions and cold stares from the people who lived in the city. Flint tapped his stick to top of the inner circle he'd drawn, pointing to the wall in the middle of the North Quadrant. "When I found you there in the dungeons, I sent up a signal to Marin and Elli."

"The dungeon was inside a wall?" Adam blurted.

Flint nodded and turned to Marin. "I meant to mention, Frost, it looks like the Order kept the underground passes from the old city of Quidel intact, including the passages under the old Citadel. They just built that monstrous tower right on top of it."

Adam had no idea what underground passes Flint was talking about, but Marin's eyes widened. "How did you..." Frost began.

"I had a few minutes while I was waiting for you and Elli to arrive." Flint shrugged. "I leaned up against the wall to the inner circle, and cast a few mapping spells. There weren't even any wards," he scoffed. "The only part of the inner wall that showed any sign of use was the dungeon."

"Once we had you, we got out of there. I carried everyone, flew low between the buildings, and shot up the outer wall, so the guards posted on the outer wall above the smog couldn't see us till it was too late," explained Marin.

"Thank you. All of you." Adam paused, his mind racing. "What will this mean for the Draq?" he asked them. "A Dragon flew into the biggest city in all of Domin, broke me out of a dungeon, and flew away with me."

"We don't know, Adam," Elli said softly. "The Order already knew about Frost because of what happened at Westenfall. They already knew the Draq were not extinct."

"And now the folk in North Quadrant of New Quidel know too," Adam said.

"If the Order doesn't have a way to wipe their memories, then yes, Byre," Flint stated. Adam hadn't thought of that.

Marin sighed and rubbed his hand over his forehead. "We don't know what it will mean for the Draq as a whole, Adam, but I do know what it means for the four of us."

"What?" Adam asked.

"We're being hunted."

The stream was cold, but clean, and Adam was able to scrub himself from head to toe and rinse away the filth that had accumulated since his capture. He was standing in the deepest spot, which was almost up to his waist. He ran his fingers over the bruises that covered his arms and torso, testing for tender spots. He could also see his reflection in the nearly still water around him. Closely cropped dark curls framed his dark blue eyes. He had a bruise under his right cheekbone, and another dark purple contusion covered the right side of his jaw. He poked at the bruise on his cheekbone and winced.

“Byre.” Marin was on the bank with his back to Adam. Guarding him. As if he were a small child. He felt a bit off-balance around his future brother-in-law. Of course, Frost frequently turned into a giant Dragon with breath colder than the north winds. Since Adam had only known the truth about the Draq for mere months, he supposed that couldn't be helped.

Adam jumped, but he didn't turn. “Yes, Frost?”

“I'm sorry to have to ask this, but we need to know. Were you... did anyone...” Marin took a breath before he continued. “Do you have any injuries from your captivity that are internal? Did anyone...”

Adam flushed when he realized what Frost was asking. “No, nothing like that.” *Thank the Gods.* He adjusted the cuff on his wrist. It was wet from the stream. Amazing that such a little thing had saved his life. He sent a silent thanks to his grandmere for making them all those years ago.

Marin's sigh of relief was audible. “Good. That's good.” He remained silent as Adam trudged to the edge of the stream to retrieve his towel.

Adam dressed in clean clothes, borrowed from Flint's packs. The trousers were a bit snug, and the sleeves of his shirt a few inches too short, he observed, as they made their way back to Elli and Flint, but they were clean. That was the important thing.

Marin was silent as he trudged through the forest with Adam, so Adam took a moment to study his sister's mate. The man was huge. Tall and broad, with pale brown skin smattered with freckles, and long thick hair, only a shade lighter than his skin, that he wore tangled in messy dreadlocks tied back from his face. His eyes were a shocking pale blue that contrasted with his coloring. When Elli had first introduced him to Adam, those eyes, Frost's eyes, had instantly revealed him as something other than human. Flint's were the same way. Frost had explained that other people didn't see what Adam and Elli saw, because they could mask the glow from most humans.

Back at the clearing, the horses were ready and waiting. Flint had forgone the gold-trimmed, wine-colored warrior garb that he had been wearing when Adam first saw him. He was dressed in shades of brown: brown leather pants that clung tightly to his figure like a second skin, and a tattered peasant shirt. At his wrists were leather vambraces, and Flint was tucking a small arsenal of knives into all kinds of hiding places in his clothes. A set of tinted goggles sat across his head, pushed up in his hair, which was covered by a brown wrap. Adam hadn't thought of that, but Flint's hair, as bright as it was, probably stood out like a bloody beacon wherever they went.

"Adam." He turned at his twin's voice. Elli, who was already sitting astride her horse, held out a long, brown cloak that matched her own. "Put this on and cover your head. If we get stopped, act like you have a cold, and keep your face covered. Don't let them see the bruises, understand?" Adam nodded.

Marin spoke. "We're thirteen leagues from In'Mai. We should be able to cross the Split there without notice. If we can make it to the city, we have a friend there who may be able to help us. If we are stopped before we reach the city, follow my lead."

Adam nodded again. "Then, after we cross the Split, where do we head?"

"The only place I know where you and Elli will be safe, where the Order won't get you. Our home, Edan Keep, on the Isle of Sera."

"It exists?" The Isle of Sera in his childhood stories was the birthplace of the Draq. He never dreamed that it was a real place!

Frost dipped his head in confirmation. "Aye."

Flint handed a knife to Adam with a thin sheath and strap. "Tie this so it's hidden inside your boot," he ordered. Adam tied it to his right calf while Flint watched him. Flint held the reins of Adam's chestnut mare while Adam swung himself up into the saddle, then handed the reins to Adam, and swiftly mounted his own horse, a gray stallion.

"All set?" Marin asked from atop his mount. "Let's ride."

Chapter Four

The road through the flatlands was a creek of mud. Trees covered in leafy vines crowded the road, and the smell of the forest, heavy, wet, and green, was thick in the air. They'd been riding for half a day. Adam's head had started to throb after the third league, and it had been raining since partway through the fourth. There was just enough of a gap in the canopy above their heads that they were all soaked to the skin.

"Tell me again, why couldn't we fly closer to In'Mai?" Flint grumbled as he tugged at his head wrap. "Even if we were seen, it's not like they could catch us."

Adam, who was riding behind Frost, saw Frost's shoulders twitch in irritation. "Seriously, Flint?" Frost sighed, "Because they would have an entire army waiting for us in In'Mai, that's why. I'm not convinced that we can sneak around the Order, but I'm certainly not going to risk the safety of my mate by exposing us or flying anywhere in an area where Nets are known to have been."

"Nets?" Adam queried.

"The Order has webs of spells that extend into the skies near the Split. They've been there since the Uprising fifty years ago. You can't see them, and if you fly into one, there's no give. The spells the Casters put on the Nets can stop your heart. Not enough to kill a Draq, mind you," Frost said somberly, catching the look of alarm on Adam's face, "but a fall when you're up that high, you're likely to break a great many bones when you hit the ground. A friend of ours was nearly killed not far from here when he flew into one. He was discovered by a boy playing on his family's land. The family took him in and hid him from the Order while he recovered."

"He was flying too close to the Split, Marin. We're still leagues away," Flint protested.

"Drop it, Flint, we're not shifting in daylight, and we will be too close to the Split and the Nets by nightfall."

Flint glared, first at Marin, then up at the sky. He cursed. He yanked the wrap off his head and twisted it, wringing out the water. He proceeded to carefully retie it. Adam watched as all of Flint's bright hair disappeared again under the wrap. When he was done, he turned to Adam with a self-deprecating smile. "I know, I'm a grumpy bastard. I despise being wet in this form," he

explained with a flippant grin. "Scales are so much more water resistant, and I have a built-in heater. How are you holding up, Byre?" Adam noticed his tone changed ever so slightly.

Adam shifted in his saddle. He hurt everywhere. He wanted to go to bed for a week. He wanted to be dry, warm, and safely tucked away on his farm. Which was impossible right now. He glanced over at Flint and saw concern on his face. "I'll be okay, eventually. There's nothing for it now." He kept his face blank as he tried to straighten up in his saddle, which elicited another twitch of pain from the bumps and bruises he had amassed in the last couple of days. Flint nodded in understanding, but his eyes flickered behind his tinted lenses, betraying some emotion that didn't show on his stoic face. He turned forward, and they rode side by side in the rain, in silence.

They didn't stop for lunch. Elli passed out soggy hunks of bread as they continued on. Late in the day, the rain finally stopped, and the clouds parted, which raised everyone's spirits tremendously.

Adam, though weary, did improve as they day went on, and another round of Flint's white pills after their noon meal eased the pain in his head. He was still quiet, even after the rain stopped, usually giving one-word answers when Flint tried to engage him in conversation. He could feel the Draq watching him though, and the awareness of those eyes kept a prickle at the back of his neck. He wished Ori were here, trotting alongside the road. He sighed.

"What is it, Byre?" asked Flint.

"Nothing. I miss my dog, that's all. Wish he was here. Orin, Ori for short." Flint nodded.

"Ah. I met him. Frost and Elli had me meet them at your farm. Ori wasn't moving around all too well, your neighbor..."

"Kinley."

"Right, Kinley had him bedded down in the barn since his leg was in a splint. He's a right smart pup, though. Knew right away that Frost and I were different, but calmed as soon as Elli brought us over for him to sniff us."

Adam smiled, picturing it. He took a deep breath. "Will I ever be able to go back there? We're leaving Domin in a day or so and going to Sera. Half a year ago, I thought all of the Draq had died in the Uprising, and now..."

Flint looked at him and lifted his goggles for a second, so that Adam could see the glint in his eyes as they flared a deeper red. "Now you're running for your life, escaping Domin with two of them?" He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Byre, I don't know if you will be able to go back. We don't know why the Order wanted you or Elli. Either way, you and Elli are no longer safe in Domin."

"I know that. I just wish..."

"I know." Flint paused and then cleared his throat. "I know it won't be the same for you, Byre, and it probably doesn't seem very comforting, in light of losing your home indefinitely, but please know that you will be welcome to stay in Sera for as long as you like. Whether that is until this business with the Order is finished, or longer, is entirely up to you."

"Thank you," Adam whispered, "and thank you for helping to rescue me."

"I'm glad I decided to help," Flint said quietly.

No one noticed the tiny metal bird sitting in the trees to the side of the road.

The glasses clinked together, vibrating with the sway of the ship. The constant sound was grating on the Baker's nerves. He didn't like these new contraptions. If he ever met the man who invented the flying ship, a ruddy great balloon with a ship cradled beneath, he would probably cut the man's throat. However, the ship was not without merit. It was, he had to admit, much faster than a horse and probably the only way to catch up to a bloody Draq. Thanks to the detailed intelligence the Order had provided to his captain on the location of the Order's Nets, they could move through the sky unencumbered by the barriers. He sipped his bitter spirits, and glared at the useless file the Order had on the Byre twins. Chasing down Gifted far past the usually impressionable ages that their gifts had manifested hardly seemed to be good use of his time, especially now that the Draq were involved. *Could the Order even train the twins at their age?*

"Sir?" The timid voice from outside his quarters was that of the first mate.

"Come in," he barked. "Report."

"They were seen, sir. Finch 1572 on the merchant road to In'Mai."

"Are we sure it's them?"

“Yes, sir. The watcher was certain. The woman was also seen on the same road with the tall one near a farm outside of Yuri early this morning. Finch 826.”

The Baker stood. He leaned over the desk to contemplate the charts in front of him and frowned. “They’ll reach the city tomorrow, ahead of us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Telegraph the garrison stationed at the In’Mai crossing. Tell them to increase wait times through the checkpoints. Tell the warders to enforce their Nets.”

“Yes, sir.”

“A diversion at the crossing would be too obvious... What else is going on in the city at the moment?” The first mate frantically flipped through the stack of papers in his arms. The Baker had come to revel in the discomfiture his presence produced in his subordinates.

“Sir, it is the opening week for the market fair in In’Mai. It draws quite the crowd, and there are many performing acts, in addition to the merchants. There are often minor skirmishes and arrests from excess drinking.”

“Good. Get our people into key positions to watch for them. They’ll know they’re being watched, from the moment they enter the city anyway, but it will be much harder for them to move about the streets when they are filled with revelers.”

“Sir, we also received a missive from the Butcher.”

The Baker grimaced. “He’s arrived then?”

“Yes, sir. He’s in the city, and he says that he’ll be watching for them.”

“Excellent.” The Baker schooled his features. He would have preferred not to involve the Butcher in this mission, but for some reason Lord Chandeler had insisted. He drummed his fingers on the table.

“Will that be all, sir?” The first mate shifted uncomfortably.

“No.”

“Sir?”

“I need someone I can trust. Can I trust you?” The Baker stared coolly at the first mate, who stopped shifting and stood at attention.

“Yes, sir.”

“Lock the door.”

“Sir?”

“Lock the door, soldier, and I will tell you what I need.”

Chapter Five

When they finally stopped, it was nearly night. They ate a cold supper and kept the fire small. Elli cleaned Adam's cuts and scrapes and re-dressed the wounds on his head. Marin passed around a flask of spirits he'd procured that morning. When they had all taken a few sips from the flask, he looked stoically right at Adam and Elli and said, "We need to talk."

Elli rolled her eyes at her intended. "So talk, Marin."

"It's about your twin bond, your connection. I've been trying to figure out what the Order wants with you two. I've met a few Gifted Talkers in my travels. They talk to people using their minds in a telepathic link, like you and Adam talk to each other. So, I know you two can talk to each other in your heads, but have you ever tried to talk to anyone else that way?"

Adam looked at Elli. It was something they had not done, not spoken of, in five years. El gave him a small nod for permission. Adam took a deep breath. "We have. We did it when we were kids sometimes."

"Talked to people inside their minds?" Frost clarified, tapping a finger to the side of his head near his temple.

"Yes. It was usually people close to us, like Grandmere and a couple of the hands that worked on the farm," added Elli.

Adam nodded and continued, "It wasn't just talking. Sometimes, I think we influenced people by mistake, or sometimes people near us could tell how we were feeling, like once Elli pushed Mr. Miles, the general store owner, to give her a doll for free..."

"Adam! That was not on purpose!" Elli's voice was indignant.

"I know, El, you just really wanted it. We were what, five?" Adam paused and took a deep breath before continuing. What they had done, however inadvertently, five years ago, still frightened him. "Then, when we were fifteen, we... we did something by accident. Grandmere was sick, it was awful. When she left us, when she died, we... we released our gift, without even realizing we were doing it."

Flint squinted his eyes. "How? I mean, what did you do?"

"We're not sure exactly. There was a blast of grief that radiated from us. Just pure energy. It rippled out in waves. We found out later that everyone

within a few miles of us, including folk in the town nearly five miles from the farm, stopped right where they were. Everyone, all of them, stopped whatever they were doing and began to cry. It was a phenomenon that people talked about for years.” Adam could still feel the pulse that had radiated from them, their minds connected, the ugly twisting pain of loss screaming in their heads, as tears streamed down their cheeks. He remembered the ache in his chest, not being able to breathe, and through it all, holding tight to Elli’s hand. They’d eventually anchored each other and regained control of their grief, containing the howling rush of agony they’d unknowingly unleashed on the unsuspecting world, back in their own bodies.

Adam looked over at Flint and Frost. They both looked a little pale. “No one knew?” Frost questioned.

“The doctor who was treating Grandmere... he was in the room with us when it happened. He fainted in the blast. He was closer in proximity to us than anyone. It gave him a nosebleed. He’d known about our gifts since we were babies, but this, it terrified him. He told us to never do it to anyone again.” Adam had been horrified. They had promised him, never again.

“He told us, we had to control it, keep it secret,” Elli added. She tucked a dark curl behind her ear.

“Was he afraid you would hurt someone, or afraid that the wrong person would find out what you could do?” Marin asked them, his arm encircling Elli’s waist protectively as he spoke.

Adam shrugged. “Both, probably.” His cheeks heated. He could feel Flint’s gaze on him, and he felt off balance. What did the Draq, a Caster himself, think of them hiding their powers? He wished he understood the flicker in Flint’s amber eyes.

Marin rubbed his freckled forehead with his free hand. “I suspect that the Order knows about your gift. It would explain why they wanted you and Elli.” He glanced at Adam and Elli.

“You think they want them for the Gifted,” Flint said. It was a statement, not a question.

Marin nodded. “If you were members of the Gifted Forces, the Order could use your gifts as powerful weapons.”

“But I thought...” Adam paused. He had not even considered that the Order could want their gifts, probably because they so rarely used them. Hardly at all, since Elli had left the farm two years ago.

"You thought they were after me. That they wanted Elli only to get to me," replied Marin.

Adam nodded. "I did. I mean, during the war, didn't they kill all of the Draq? That's what they teach us anyway." Flint snorted.

"There were not many of our kind who survived, no," said Flint. "Those who did made sure to disappear. The Order presumed them dead. Extinct."

"They will come for the Draq, Byre. It's just a matter of when," Marin stated. "This, however, your capture, what happened to Elli, and Westenfall is not about the Draq. I think we're secondary. I'm certain the Order wants you, I'm just not entirely sure why."

"If they catch us, would we have any choice at all about what happens to us?" asked Elli.

Marin placed his hand over hers. "No, El. They won't give you or Adam a choice. If they want you for the Gifted, then they will reprogram you and make you one of them."

"Well, screw that!" declared Elli. Frost chuckled. "I mean it, Marin. We are not getting dragged off by the Order. We are not being forced into becoming Gifted soldiers. So, what do we do?"

"We keep going and get the hell out of Domin. We get you both to Sera, where the Order can't find you, and the Draq can protect you." Frost pulled Elli close and kissed her forehead. "Agreed?" he asked, looking at his three companions.

"Agreed," they answered.

After that, Adam drifted in an uneasy haze, enjoying the fading buzz from the spirits and a full belly, but full of worry about sharing their secret. The others seemed to be trying to put it out of mind and distracted themselves with raucous jokes and outrageous stories. Then, after the fire had dwindled to embers in the pit, and they were all quiet, Frost pulled Elli to her feet, announced that they were going to "walk the perimeter" and led her off into the woods. They sauntered off hand in hand, Elli's cheeks tinted pink as she smiled up at Marin. They were practically glowing. Adam watched them go, forcing himself to keep his mouth shut. If El was happy, that was what mattered, right?

Flint smirked at him from his perch on a fallen log. "Are you going to go dashing after them to protect her virtue?" he asked.

“No. Elli knows her own mind.” Adam frowned.

“Knows her heart too, Byre.”

“They’re not wed yet,” he retorted.

“They’re mated, Byre. With Draq, the wedding is merely a formality.” Flint’s amber eyes were steady, and he was studying Adam intently.

Adam rubbed his eyes. “I know that. It’s just that I worry, because...” He paused, not knowing how to proceed, unsure of what Elli and Frost had shared with their companion. Had he been told? Had Elli shared her secret?

“Adam, I know.”

“You do?”

Flint nodded. “Marin told me. He worried that I would figure it out for myself, and he didn’t want my reaction to hurt her.”

Adam was quiet while he thought about the implications of Frost’s revelation. He and his sister had been born as identical twins. Identical in *every* way. Despite their outward identical appearance as babies, Ellianna had insisted that she was a girl, not a boy. Adam, who had been linked to his twin’s mind since before he could talk, had always thought of Elli as a girl, because that was how she thought of herself. Grandmere was the most wonderful parent in the world. She had seen and understood. She let Elli be *herself*. As Elli grew up, Grandmere found her pills to take to stop her voice from dropping. Her frame stayed smaller and more delicate than Adam’s, her figure became curvy, feminine, and she felt comfortable in her own skin. “Will other Draq who meet her be able to tell?” Adam asked.

Flint nodded his head in affirmation. “Yes, they may notice that she is different. Our senses are more acute than humans. Marin told me before I even met her, so I’m not sure what I would have noticed otherwise.” Adam’s face twisted in concern. “It won’t be a bad thing, Byre.” Flint smiled. “She is the mate of Ilmarin. She is also, as anyone with eyes can see, a beautiful woman. What body parts she does or does not possess is immaterial. Either way, Frost won’t let anyone hurt her. The Draq in our clan will eventually be told or will figure it out for themselves, because she is different.”

“If anyone hurts her, I swear to you...”

Flint reached out and grabbed Adam by the chin, tilting it so they were eye to eye. “Anyone foolish enough to hurt her will answer to her mate, Byre. In the

end, it does not matter. Man, woman, or somewhere in between, she is the true mate to our brother, and she is a blessing.”

Flint's thumb was strong against his chin. Adam stared back at Flint, his gaze heated. He was not sure what reaction he had expected from the Draq regarding his twin, but it was not this. “What about children?” he asked.

Flint flushed at this and released Adam's chin. “What about them?”

“It won't bother them that she cannot produce an heir?”

Flint coughed. “Byre, the Draq are known for their... let's say, varied taste in mates, and we are not human. Not really. There are options for couples who wish for a babe. The gender of the mate does not matter.”

“Truly?” Adam was astonished, and hopeful. The idea that Elli could have a child with Frost if she wanted was a miracle.

“Not that the process is easy, but truly, Byre.”

“Does Elli know?”

“I did not think it was my place to ask that question, Byre.”

“It's Adam.” He blushed when he looked up, and his eyes met the Draq's. “I hope she knows, she'd be thrilled.”

“Adam,” Flint smiled. His eyes flashed a bright orange flame, and Adam felt something, something that had been off, a gnawing in his gut, halt. Something inside stopped and clicked back into place the moment Flint said his name. “Call me Ethon.”

“Ethon,” he agreed. He smiled, and his eyes held Flint's, staring into their glowing heat, until he had to look away. He could feel the heat in his cheeks.

They laid out their pallets next to each other, their heads facing towards the dwindling embers to catch the last of their glowing warmth. Adam sighed and curled up on his side, facing away from Flint, and closed his eyes.

Sleep didn't come. Adam's whole body felt awake. Eventually, Adam rolled over on his side, so he was facing Flint, and sucked in his breath in a quick gasp when he found Flint in the exact same position, nearly nose to nose with him. All Adam could do was stare. Flint's eyes reflected the embers glowing in the fire and were focused on Adam's mouth. Adam instinctively closed his eyes as Flint leaned closer, and his breath fanned Adam's face.

When no lips brushed his own, Adam opened his eyes. What Flint did next surprised him. Instead of a kiss, Flint pulled Adam close and tucked his head

under Adam's chin. Adam's heart pounded as his arms instinctively went around the Draq. Flint's hair was soft and smooth against Adam's fingers. Those same fingers fluttered and clutched at Flint's hair as Flint rubbed his nose in the hollow of Adam's throat. Adam bit back a groan. Flint sighed contentedly. "You still smell hurt, but better than last night," he murmured. "Bye... Adam," he sighed. "Night." Flint tilted his head back in one great yawn, and then, with his fingers laced in Adam's shirt, his head resting with his lips just touching Adam's throat, Flint began to snore.

Adam held the snoring Draq, his hand stroking Flint's soft hair. He was both astonished and frustratingly aroused. *What was this?* He had no frame of reference for whatever was occurring between them. Adam tilted his head down to brush his lips over Flint's hair, which smelled of the forest, sun, and burning wood. "Night, Ethon," he whispered. He closed his eyes, settled himself against Flint, and let the sound of Flint's heavy breathing lull him to sleep.

Chapter Six

The Split was a great gaping wound across the land. The chasm spanned from the northwest to southeast and served as a clear and visible division between the countries of Domin and Loras. There was no official record of what had caused the Split nearly fifty-five years ago. It had been declared a spell gone wrong, but everyone knew that the Order had somehow caused the Split. They knew this, because in the aftermath of the devastation and social unrest that engulfed the continent, the Order quickly rose to power.

Key members of the military threw their support behind the Order, helped the Order usurp the Council of Quidel and arrest and imprison the royal family. The school children of Domin were taught that Nimir Alad, then head of the Order, became the first true Emperor of Domin. His public vision for the people of Domin was one of progress and stability.

Behind closed doors, according to Flint and Frost, the man called Emperor and his Order cared nothing for the people of Domin or their progress and stability. There were hushed-up killings, bribes, and constant propaganda campaigns. The people rebelled, and the Draq sided with the revolutionaries. When the Order first created the Nets, hundreds of unsuspecting Draq were killed. From then on, it was only a matter of weeks until the Uprising was systematically crushed.

The Split itself had been opened further and further in the last half century as the Order mined the chasm, stripping it of ore, digging deeper into the earth. The land they had traveled had been barren for the last two leagues. The wind blew dust in Adam's face.

On the western edge of the Split, on a peninsula extending far over the breach, stood the city of In'Mai. There was a single, long bridge that ran across the Split from one side to the other, from In'Mai on the Domin side to the city of Milloren in Loras.

"I hate this part," Flint said.

"Will we cross right away?" Adam wondered. He hoped it was true what Frost had said, that they'd be safe once they made it across.

Flint shook his head. "It's too late in the day, and too few people are crossing for us not to be noticed. Also, you and Elli need new papers. We have a friend who will put us up for a day or so, while we get the papers we will need to cross."

"Adam, remember to keep your head down and look sick," Marin reminded him. He pushed his tinted glasses as far back on his nose as he could.

"If someone gets close to you, just cough in their face." Elli grinned. Adam rolled his eyes. He adjusted his hood to keep his face in shadow, covering his bruises. Flint placed a hand over his briefly. The contact caused his hand to tingle. Adam had awoken that morning with Flint wrapped around him, and Elli and Marin looking down at them, eyebrows raised. He had managed so far to avoid Elli, and therefore any lecture or advice she would have given him. All he really knew at this point was that being close to Flint felt, well, better than anything had in a long time.

Flint's thumb brushed the back of his hand. "Alright, Adam?" Adam figured he didn't have anything to lose, so he placed his right hand over Flint's. He looked over at Flint and nodded. They sat like that for a moment, until they began to move forward and had to separate.

The gates of In'Mai were open, and a steady stream of people were entering the city. Adam was careful not to look at the guards, because it would be as obvious as screaming in a quiet room. He didn't relax until they were at least a block past them. Then he looked around. There were colored flags decorating many of the buildings, and Adam could hear music playing in the distance.

They made their way toward an area of the city with huge houses. Marin stopped in front of a large house with a giant marble balustrade and pillars looped with marble rope. He dismounted and motioned for the other's to follow. They led their horses through the open gate and into the carriage loop in front of the house. A boy ran forward from the side of the house.

"Mister Summer! Mister Winter! You're back!" He called to Flint and Frost. Adam started a bit at the names but kept his face impassive.

"Aye lad, we're back." Flint handed off his reins to the boy and patted him on the head. "Is the Captain in?"

"Yes, he is. He's entertaining this evening. He'll be glad you're back, sir." He turned to the rest of the party. "Pire, at your service, sirs and lady," He tipped an imaginary hat at Elli. "Please let me take your mounts." He took the reins for two horses in one hand and two in the other. "They look like they've had a right time of it. Did you make them swim in mud?"

Frost chortled at the lad's cheek. "Aye, lad, they had a rough road in the rain yesterday, and they need a bit of sprucing up."

"You can count on me, sir." With that he led their mounts around the back of the house.

Flint turned to Frost. "Entertaining?" he asked.

Frost only shrugged and said, "Let's find out, shall we?" before leading the way up to the door.

The footman who opened the door gave Flint and Frost a nervous nod in greeting and quickly ushered them into a small parlor. The interior of the home was ornate, and very nearly everything in the parlor was covered in ruffles and lace. There was also, Adam observed, an awful lot of pink.

Adam opened his mouth to speak only to have Flint put a finger to his lips. Flint shook his head, eyes wide as he gestured to the walls and pointed to his ears. Someone was listening. Adam nodded. Flint stepped back from Adam just as the door burst open, and a man with silver hair slicked back to his collar and a handsome, albeit rather distinguished face, stepped inside.

"Mr. Winter, Mr. Summer, so good to see you at long last." There was a slight note of overemphasis on the names "Winter" and "Summer", which made Adam think that he knew they weren't really their names.

"Captain," said Frost, nodding his head in greeting.

"You're looking well," added Flint.

"Yes, well... I'm hosting a little soiree tonight. Just two dozen of my closest friends and associates. One can't be too shabby with one's friends, am I right?" The Captain turned to Adam and Elli. "So are you going to introduce me?"

"Of course," said Flint, "Captain, meet our dear friends, Aaron and Lily Green." Adam nodded his head, and Elli dropped a brief curtsy.

The Captain took Elli's hand. "Enchanted, milady." Elli blushed.

Frost cleared his throat, and stared hard at the joined hands of the Captain and Elli. "Actually, Captain, Lily is soon to be Mrs. Winter."

The Captain's eyes widened. He appeared startled for a second but quickly recovered. "But that's wonderful news! I can't wait to hear the story of how you two met, but that is probably best left for later." His eyes swept to the walls as he spoke. "So tell me, how were the mountains of Kita?"

"Rather blustery," said Flint, "and we may have brought the weather with us, I'm afraid."

The Captain visibly paled at that. "Never a dull moment, is there?" He smiled at the four of them, the first real, genuine expression that Adam had seen since the man entered the room. "You'll stay for dinner, of course?"

"Of course," agreed Frost.

"Where in the city are you staying? The Blue Ox, was it?"

"The Prancing Cat, actually," said Frost. He had one eyebrow raised, but the Captain waved his hand dismissively.

"Well, let's get you freshened up!" As the Captain clapped his hands, he ushered them out of the room, and into another room, just down the corridor. A servant was standing in one corner of the room. "Ah yes, Miles, is everything in order?" Miles nodded and stepped from the room, closing the door behind him.

The Captain turned back to them. "Please forgive me. We found a recording device in that parlor a few months ago. I've left it alone because so far, it has kept devices out of the rest of the house. I may need to send my men to pay for rooms at a few different establishments to throw them off your trail, but you'll stay here of course. Rooms have been made ready for you. Go prepare yourselves for dinner, and we can talk more after the guests leave."

"Is the rest of the house clean?" asked Flint.

The Captain nodded. "It was searched this morning. Even so, use discretion. That goes for in the city as well, there are eyes everywhere."

"Captain, can Lily and I speak to you for a moment before we go up?" Frost asked. He looked over at Flint, who nodded.

"Of course," the Captain agreed. He turned to Flint and Adam. "You can go on up. You're in the same room as before, Master Summer, and Mister Green is in the room right across the hall."

"Thank you, Captain," Flint said as he exited the room and turned to the stairs. He placed his hand on the small of Adam's back to guide him. Adam felt the light contact like a brand, and his breath sped up.

"Oh, and Summer?" called the Captain from down the hall.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Dinner is at six. See that you are ready and properly attired. We'll have guests, so I expect you to be well rested." Flint rolled his eyes at the Captain. He turned, grabbing Adam's hand, and pulled him up the stairs.

“Come along, Mister Green,” Flint said. Flint pulled him past servants, a few of whom raised eyebrows at their joined hands, as they made their way down the massive corridor to a door at the end of the hall. Flint’s hand tingled against Adam’s palm.

When they reached the end of the corridor, Flint turned toward Adam and gestured to the room on the right side of the hallway.

“That’ll be your room,” he said. As he spoke, he still held on to Adam’s hand. “There’s hot water piped up through the walls to fill the tub in there, so you can get cleaned up.” A bath sounded like heaven. Despite bathing in the stream, Adam felt like he was covered in grit. “So... I’ll be right here if you need anything,” said Flint, gesturing at his own door.

Adam nodded. “Thanks, Flint.”

“Ethon.”

“Right. Ethon, sorry.” Flint was staring at him. Adam met his eyes, and when he did, Flint’s pupils widened, and the solid amber color he’d held steady throughout their jaunt into the city flared to a glowing gold.

“Go. Get cleaned up.” Flint abruptly released Adam’s hand and turned to enter his room. Two seconds later, Adam was staring at the closed door to Flint’s room, his hand still tingling from the contact. *What was that?* Flint confounded him. He turned with a sigh and opened the door to his own room.

Adam decided that hot water in pipes was the best invention in the world. He had finished his bath and was stretched out on the bed wrapped in a towel. He was lying there contentedly, when there was a quiet knock at his door. “Adam? It’s me, Ethon.” He jumped up, flailed, and cursed, nearly tripping over his towel as it dropped to his feet.

“Just a moment,” he called. Adam’s eyes fell on the dress clothes laid out on the end of the bed. He grabbed the trousers, pulled them on, and hurriedly buttoned them. He stopped at the edge of the bed, cleared his throat and called, “Come in.”

Flint opened the door and closed it behind him. His long hair was wet, and his shirt was only partially buttoned over his pale chest. He looked at Adam’s shirtless frame, a small smile hovering around his lips. “I couldn’t sleep,” he admitted. “I wanted to see how you were, if you needed anything.”

Adam flushed. He wasn't sure what to say. Flint's eyes halted at the bruises along Adam's ribs, and he hissed.

Adam looked down at his side. He traced the tender skin with his hand. The bruises on his ribs were still angry and purple, the edges tinged in green. Flint stepped closer to Adam, covering Adam's fingers with his own, and Adam's eyes snapped up, gazing into Flint's. Anger flickered in Flint's eyes.

"S'okay Ethon," Adam whispered.

"No. No, Adam. They hurt you. It is not okay." He sighed and removed his hand. "You should be resting. Come." He gestured to the bed.

Adam looked at him, bewildered and a little frustrated. Where did Flint get off ordering him to do anything? "I don't understand you," he said quietly.

Flint looked at him. "I know. I can explain. I'll feel better if you're not in pain from holding yourself upright while I do, though. Please, Adam," Flint pleaded.

Adam was tired, and he didn't have any energy to argue with Flint, not when Flint looked at him all concerned and so caring. He climbed up in the bed, not bothering to pull the covers back, and reclined against the pile of pillows propped against his headboard.

Flint watched him settle in and then gestured to the bed. "Is it okay if I sit?" he asked.

They had slept cuddled against each other the past two nights, so Adam acquiesced with a tilt of his head. Flint settled himself on the edge of the bed near Adam's hip. He studied Adam for a moment before he spoke.

"What do you know about Draq and their mates, Adam?" Flint said it very softly. He was watching Adam carefully.

Adam thought about what Elli had told him, when she and Marin had come to the farm to introduce his twin's mate. "Not much," he shrugged. "Elli told me that Draq know their mates instantly, an instinctual knowledge. Elli said that Marin knew the very first time he saw her. Then there are the stories, I suppose. Is it true that before the Uprising, Draq just claimed their mates on sight and dragged them off to a cave somewhere?"

Flint snickered. "You make it sound awfully barbaric." Adam raised his eyebrow skeptically, and Flint sighed. "It was a different time then, and I'm quite certain that no one was, as you put it, dragged off to a cave against their

will. Draq hold their mates in much too high regard to ever harm them in any way. You are right though, about the Draq knowing their mates instantly. If a Draq ends up mated to another of their kind, the mates both know instantly. It's very simple for them. If a Draq is mated to a human, however, what the human experiences is a little different." He cocked his head to the side, studying Adam. "Did Elli tell you what it was like for her when she first met Frost?" he asked.

Adam nodded. "She said that she was drawn to him. She said, she was incredibly attracted to him, but that more than that she felt safe with him. She..." Adam broke off. He realized that he could just as well have been describing his own feelings for Flint, not Elli's for her mate. Adam was too stunned to move or speak. He just looked at Flint with wide eyes, his heart thudding loudly.

"Ah. So you understand where I was going with this." Flint pushed his wet hair back from his face and kept watching Adam's expression. "You're my mate, Adam. I think it's how I could find you through your bond with Elli from so far away. I could see the trail of the spell so brightly. Usually there are wisps of the magic that I see, flashes of clarity. Following the trail to you was like following a white-hot wire. I didn't know it until I saw you, but when I did, it was like a kick in the gut. When you passed out at my feet, starved and beaten, I very nearly unleashed my Dragon on them for what they did to you."

Mates. It explained the attraction, the inexplicable connection he felt to Flint. It explained Flint's behavior as well. He blinked and looked up at Flint. "We're mates?" Flint reached up and ran his fingertips over the bruises on Adam's face. His hand lingered, cupping Adam's chin, and Adam shivered at the touch.

"You feel it too." It was a statement. Flint's hand stroked his neck, his fingers tracing Adam's collarbone.

"I..." There was no denying it, Adam realized. "Yes," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. Flint smiled and pressed his nose to Adam's neck. He gave a happy sigh and opened his mouth on the base of Adam's clavicle. He kept his mouth open along Adam's neck up to Adam's chin. "I feel it. I... Gods, Ethon, I can't think when you do that."

"No thinking, mate," Flint grinned. He took Adam's head in his hands, suddenly serious. He leaned forward slowly, giving Adam ample opportunity to stop him, before he pressed his lips to Adam's.

Adam's eyes closed, and his lips parted wide against Flint's. They both sighed in relief as their mouths came together. Flint's tongue was petite, lithe, and he repeatedly licked into Adam's mouth like he was trying to taste every inch of it. Adam wrapped his arms around Flint and kissed him deeply.

Adam had never really been one for kissing. There was usually too much teeth-gnashing or too much saliva and no spark. His experiences had mostly been quick fumbblings and not very memorable. With Flint, his kisses were incredible, and holding Flint felt so gods-be-damned good! He moaned as Flint sucked on his tongue.

Adam let go of everything around them and lost himself in the sensation of Flint's mouth on his. They kissed until the kisses became slow and lazy. Finally, Flint pulled back, and Adam was surprised when a whimper escaped his mouth.

Flint leaned forward and placed several tiny kisses on Adam's bottom lip. "Soon," he whispered to Adam, smiling. "Very soon." He leaned his head against Adam's throat and let their breathing slow, and their heartbeats stutter back to their normal rhythms. Flint took a deep breath, and his expression became quite serious. "Adam, you know little about me or our world. I won't mate with you until you are certain of what you want as well. The connection between mates is permanent. When we get to Sera, there will be time for us to get to know each other. Will you stay with me?"

Adam nodded, feeling a bit overwhelmed. He brushed Flint's bright, damp hair back from his face. "I'll stay with you."

Flint kissed his forehead. "Good." He smiled at Adam and settled him back on the bed. He kissed Adam on the mouth and then turned on his side to curl up in the crook of Adam's arm. "We should rest before we get ready for dinner." He yawned.

Adam, now becoming accustomed to Flint's ability to fall asleep quickly, chuckled when a minute later Flint was snoring at his side.

Chapter Seven

Adam stared somberly at the dead cow's head sitting artfully on a platter in front of him. He'd come to the conclusion that rich people had decidedly horrid taste in food. Either that, or the Captain had deliberately chosen dishes to discomfit his guests, which wouldn't really have surprised Adam either. Every meat dish on the table, from fish, to boar, to duck, was plated with the head attached. Adam had found himself consuming an inordinate amount of vegetables in order to avoid having sad, dead eyes stare up at him from his plate. The Captain had introduced their party as *Misters Winter, Summer, and the Greens*. The guests made small talk but mostly conversed among themselves. They occasionally stared down their noses at the four companions as if they were curiosities instead of guests. It was off-putting. Adam pushed his food around on his plate and listened quietly to the chatter around him.

Finally, to Adam's relief, the plates were cleared, and everyone was served a sweet berry ice cream. It was divine. He closed his eyes and savored the sweet mixture as it melted on his tongue. He opened his eyes to catch Flint watching him intently from his place beside Elli on the other side of the table.

"You have a beautiful home, Captain," said a pale woman with angular features and a mass of brown curls piled high on her head. Her eyes scanned the great dining hall, taking in the odd collection of taxidermy, weapons, and paintings displayed on the pink satin wall coverings of the room. Her lips were pursed in disapproval.

"How sweet of you to say so, Lady Williams. I'm very fond of it myself," replied the Captain. His eyes twinkled as he sipped his wine.

"Such a unique collection of animals you have here, Captain," remarked a portly gentleman with a mustache.

"Ah, yes. I'm afraid I cannot take credit for the animals. My grandfather, Admiral Harold Tiggs the First, amassed the collection in his travels during the Uprising. I'm afraid too, Lady Williams, that I cannot take credit for much in the appearance of my home. My mother did a great deal of the decorating."

"Very fond of pink," Marin murmured from his seat next to Adam, causing Adam to snort into his wineglass.

Somehow, all the way at the end of the table, the Captain heard him. "Quite so, Mr. Winter," he called. "As some of you know, the admiral was one of the

first to settle in In'Mai when they began to rebuild after the Split. Used to be part of Milloren in Loras before the Split ripped the city down the middle." He shook his head and sighed. "Tragic. When the Split opened up, so many folk fell into the chasm and perished. Both from Loras and Domin. Where was I? Ah, yes. Grandfather was one of the city planners, you know. During the Uprising he traveled a great deal and was of great assistance to the Order. His daughter, my mother, Lizzie was her name, was left here on her own. She used to surprise him by renovating various rooms in his absence. He once returned to find that she'd repainted the library in amaranth and poppy and the servants' quarters in lavender."

The entire party chuckled at that. Adam pushed his mind out to Elli, who raised her brow at the contact. "*The Captain, his grandfather worked for the Order?*"

A small frown crossed Elli's face. "*Marin explained that, during the Uprising, it was the only way he could help the people. The Captain used to work for the Order too. Marin says, they've only ever worked to help people, and they've always been friends with the Draq.*"

So the Tiggs-men are double agents. *Interesting.* He nodded. "*El, what's amara-what and poppy?*" he asks.

"*Shades of pink and red, silly,*" Elli shrugged. Her eyes drifted over to Flint, and she turned back to glance questioningly at Adam. "*You two looked rather cozy this morning,*" she thought at him, a small smile hovering on her pursed lips, as she sent Adam a flash from her memory of her looking down at Flint and Adam, asleep with their arms wrapped around each other.

Adam flushed and snuck a glance at Flint, who was watching their exchange. He realized that he and Elli were making faces at each other, even though they weren't speaking out loud. He carefully schooled his features. "*Not now, El.*"

"*Later?*" she pleaded.

"*Later,*" he agreed. He shoved the last of his sweet berry ice cream into his mouth and sat back in his chair.

The Captain stood up from his seat and clapped his hands. "Spirits and cordials will be served in the conservatory, friends. It's all the way down the hall on the left. Chartreuse upholstery. Can't miss it." The guests began to file out, but Flint and Frost remained quietly seated. Adam and Elli saw them and

did the same. The Captain turned to them. "Ah yes, Mr. Winter, Mr. Summer and the lovely Green twins. Miss Lily, you look most fetching."

Elli, who was wearing a pink satin dress that the Captain had lent her, blushed. "Thank you, Captain, you're too kind," she murmured.

"Nonsense, my dear. So sorry that you won't be able to stay for the rest of the festivities." The Captain spoke loudly, his voice carrying down the hall, as he motioned for the four of them to stand. Flint stood and rolled his eyes. "Are you certain you can't stay? Well, nothing for it then." While he spoke, the Captain walked over to the far wall and gestured to the butler's pantry adjoining the dining room. They followed behind him. The Captain popped open a door at the end of the pantry. It opened to a very purple hallway. He smiled widely at them and nodded to Frost. "He's expecting you," said the Captain. He turned and swept from the room, only to stick his head back through the doorway a moment later. "Four hours should do it, I think."

"Thank you, Captain," Frost replied.

Four hours of what? Adam wondered. He followed behind Elli, as Frost gripped her hand and led them through a series of winding passages. They took steep staircases that led down, and down again. Adam watched his feet to avoid the hem of Elli's satin brocade dress as it trailed down the steps behind her. *How deep into the ground did the Captain's house go?* Adam wondered. They had gone underground with the first set of stairs. Adam had seen the grass at the edge of a window they'd passed.

At the bottom of a flight of narrow, wooden stairs was a stone room with a green door. There was a sign above the door, a bright blue placard with the words "JAM RESERVE" painted in white. Adam burst out laughing. "Jam reserve? Seriously? Is he worried about a shortage?"

"Captain likes to hide things in plain sight." Flint smirked.

"And he's got an odd sense of humor," Frost agreed.

"This is the strangest house I have ever seen," said Adam.

Adam stared up at the odd sign, and Flint's hand caressed his back. "You have no idea," Flint said softly in his ear. Adam shuddered as Flint's breath brushed his neck. He subtly pressed back into Flint's warm hand and Flint chuckled. Frost ushered them under the JAM RESERVE sign, and Flint closed the door behind them. They wove through the rows of dusty shelves, past neat rows of preserves with faded handwritten labels. Adam traced his hand along

the tops of the jars. A thick layer of sticky dust came off on his hand. *Ugh*. He wiped his hand discreetly on his dress trousers.

They caught up with Frost at the back of the pantry. He stood, studying the jars, one arm stretched to the back of the shelves. With a click, the shelves swung into the room. Elli gasped.

Behind the shelves was an arched opening. Adam could just make out a set of stone steps leading down into the black. It looked like a pit. *Where in the Gods were they going anyway?* Frost grabbed two lanterns from off the shelf and looked over at Flint who waggled his fingers and the lanterns sparked and lit. Adam blinked. That was going to take some getting used to. Frost grinned at the stunned look on Adam's face and handed one of the lanterns to Elli. She gave Frost a fond look, gathered her skirt in her other hand and stepped down into the darkness, her lantern illuminating a small area around her.

"Where..." Adam began. His heart pounded. The black darkness beyond the electric lights of the cellar room seemed ominous.

"Shhh. One moment," said Frost. He gestured for Adam and Flint to follow Elli.

Once they were all inside, Frost swung the bookcase closed behind them. There was a click, the sound of a bolt sliding into place. That was it. With the click, Adam started to shake. He knew it wasn't the dungeon, but it felt like the dungeon. His chest felt like it was going to explode. He couldn't breathe...

Strong arms wrapped around his shoulders and cradled him. "Breathe, Adam. Breathe. I have you, I won't let anything hurt you. Breathe, love."

The world spun out of focus. Black spots swam in front to Adam's eyes, and he closed them. He heard nothing over the rushing sound of his own heartbeat. Strong, solid hands grasped his wrists tightly. Somehow, the hands tethered him to reality, and he heard Elli's voice. "Adam. Adam. Listen to my voice Adam, we're in In'Mai, beneath the Captain's house, on steps made of stone. The stones are gray and cold. I'm here and Marin and Flint. You're safe. Can you feel the steps?" Adam gasped and shuddered, taking in a great gulp of air, before he nodded. "Flint is holding your wrists, can you feel his hands?" Adam nodded again. He felt the cold stone beneath him and against his back. He felt Flint's hands holding tightly onto his wrists. Breathing became less of a struggle. He uncurled his hands, and his fingers touched silky hair, and stiff fabric.

When Adam opened his eyes, Flint was crouched in front of him. Adam's hands were pressed against Flint's chest. Flint's worried gaze held his, and suddenly the fear that had brought him to his knees no longer seemed important. He pressed himself against Flint, and he felt Flint's hands release his wrists as his arms wrapped around Adam. He clung to Flint like a small child and buried his face in Flint's shirtfront.

"Sorry." Adam murmured, speaking into Flint's chest. "So sorry. This place, it made me think of the dungeon." Flint cursed and held Adam tighter.

"Do you want to go back, Byre? We can find another place to hide, but we've got to be quick about it," Frost asked.

Adam lifted his head from Flint's chest. "I'm okay. It just took me by surprise, that's all." He wiped his eyes and looked up at Frost. "Why are we hiding?"

"We need to pick up something too, but the Captain thought, if we were seen today entering the city and were followed to the Captain's, someone from the Order might come by looking for us. We decided the best thing we could do, for his sake, was leave for a bit," Frost said softly.

"We're not in the Captain's house anymore?" Adam asked.

"Not technically, no. We're under the Captain's house at the moment, but the place where we're going is under the city," Frost explained

"Adam." Flint ran his lips over Adam's hair. "Shall we go?"

Adam nodded, and Flint and Elli helped him to his feet. He was unsteady, but Flint followed behind him, keeping one hand on the back of Adam's neck.

Adam followed Elli forward through the long, narrow corridor. He stared at her lantern and tried not to think about the darkness around them. At the end of the corridor was a large metal door, at least six inches thick. They pushed the door open and were in some kind of enormous library. There were gas lights glowing dimly near the doors. Flint reached out and turned them up. As the lights lit throughout the room, Adam forgot about the dungeon, forgot about being locked in a small, damp stone room and just stared.

"What is this place?" asked Elli.

"The Captain's private collection. His grandfather helped hide information during the Uprising. The Order was controlling the flow of information. When they occupied a town, they would ransack the libraries. The histories and

genealogies of entire generations were lost," Frost said, a slight tinge of anger escaped with each word he spoke. "He started working with towns to move their valuable books and records in advance of the occupation. The histories of half of Domin are in this room," he continued, the rage in his tone subsiding.

"From what he's said, the Captain's grandfather became one of the city planners of In'Mai, and he moved the collections here," Flint explained.

The library was tremendous. There were files and shelves as far as the eye could see. Balconies encircled the room at four levels. There were also worn couches, chairs, and tables, as if people studied here regularly. "Who knows about this place?" Adam wondered.

"Few. Very few." An unfamiliar voice sounded across the chamber. The words echoed in the vast space as a man stepped out onto one of the upper balconies. "Welcome to the Analects. I'll be with you momentarily." There was a pole just off the edge of the balcony. The stranger hooked an arm around it and dropped out of sight. His feet echoed when they landed, and he crossed the room to greet them. "In this place I am called Vero. I do not need your names, only what you want to be called."

Frost stepped forward. "You can call me Winter. This is Summer, Aaron, and Lily." His voice softened when he introduced Elli, and she blushed as their eyes met. "The Captain sent us to you because we need papers for Aaron and Lily, and all four of us need endorsements for travel to Loras."

Vero looked them over and gestured for them to follow. There was a small room off to the right of the large chamber which held a table piled high with official-looking papers. He and Frost sat opposite each other and began conversing in low tones while Vero ruffled through the stacks in front of him, pulling together small sets of papers from the stacks. Flint followed them a moment later. As he walked away from Adam, he ran his hand over Adam's shoulder and down his arm. Adam rubbed the place on the back of his hand where the ghost of Flint's caress lingered on his skin.

"Adam?" It was Elli. She stepped up next to him and touched her cuff to his in a familiar gesture.

"Hullo, Elli."

"You okay?" Adam nodded. "Why don't we find somewhere to wait while they work with Vero? It looks like it could be a while." Elli hooked her arm through his and steered him to a battered velvet sofa propped against the wall.

Adam sat with a sigh. The nine days since the Order took him off the farm had caught up with him. He leaned back, exhausted.

On the other side of the room, Flint was talking animatedly with Frost and Vero. As Adam admired the striking figure Flint made in his fine dress clothes, Flint shifted on his feet as he spoke and gestured wildly with his hands. Vero and Frost laughed heartily at whatever he said, and Adam couldn't help but smile at Flint. He turned to see Elli eyeing him knowingly. He blushed, but he ignored his twin and turned his head to watch the Draq and Vero. Flint was bouncing about as he acted out what appeared to be Adam's rescue from New Quidel.

After watching Flint for a while, Adam turned back to his twin. "Is it always like this?" Adam blurted out. Elli blinked at him, confused. Adam gestured to the Draq, who were still talking animatedly with Vero. "I feel like we've been running for days and those two? They don't stop, ever." *Except to sleep*, thought Adam, as he pictured Flint curled up beside him. "I'm exhausted just looking at them sometimes."

"No." She smiled at him. "No, it's not always like this. When you were taken, Marin and I had been staying with a friend of his who lives up in the mountains of Kita. It was really peaceful, actually. But you are right. Draq tend to be pretty intense." Elli smiled, and Adam looked over at Flint as Elli continued. "Since the Order took you, we, none of us, have stopped. I know it must seem like Marin and Flint are just great bodies of unending energy, but they do know how to slow down. I swear they do. Just, when they have a task, and they think it's important, they focus every ounce of their energy on it. It's rather endearing, actually."

"I hope we get to slow down soon. I know that we can't stop until we're out of Domin, Elli, but Gods, am I tired."

"I know, Adam. You need to heal, and the days on the road are not helping you do that. We should be in Sera in two days, and then you can rest."

Adam sighed. He looked back over to Flint and saw him running his fingers through his long, bright hair. He caught Adam watching him and gave a knowing, little smirk. "Can I ask you...?" Questions about being the mate of a Draq churned around in his head.

"Anything."

"With Frost, did you know right away?"

"The first moment I saw him," she glanced over at Frost, who was deep in conversation with Vero and Flint, and smiled.

He sighed. He'd never believed in fate or destiny, but this pull he felt towards Flint seemed inevitable. "Same." Elli grinned wide at that.

"I made Marin court me, you know. I didn't just let him carry me off into the woods and wrap me in a blanket." She poked him in the ribs. She was teasing, he knew, but that wasn't fair.

"I... I had a head injury. Nothing happened." Well, not then anyway, he thought. His face felt warm.

Elli snorted. "Uh-huh." Adam blushed. She probably felt something when Flint kissed him earlier. When Elli met Frost, she had been near Kita in the northern mountains, half a world away. Even with all that distance between them, Adam had dreamed of Marin and Elli. When he woke from the dream the next morning, he knew his sister had found her mate. He looked down at his leather cuff. He wouldn't ever regret his connection with his twin, especially not since it saved his life. For good or ill, they were stuck with each other. He studied his sister. Her profile was so similar to his own, but smaller. She looked spectacular in the satin brocade dress the Captain had provided her, feminine yet strong. She had always been so strong. "Elli, are you happy with him? Is he good to you?"

Elli smiled and grasped Adam's hand, her palm smooth and cool. Adam felt their minds link, and Elli unlocked her memories, showing Adam flashes of Marin and their life together.

The flashes came so fast that he couldn't describe or detail them, but they were beautiful, and Adam was overwhelmed by the utter happiness that radiated from his twin in waves. By the end of Elli's last memory, tears had blurred Adam's vision. His only thought as he wiped his eyes was, *Grandmere would be thrilled*. She'd worried that Elli'd never find this.

"He's so good to me, Adam. You know, before I met him, I didn't think that I would ever have this. He's the first person, other than you or Grandmere, who simply accepted me without question. He's the best thing that has ever happened to me." She wiped her eyes as she finished, and they sat there smiling at each other.

"I'm glad." He gripped her hand tighter as he began to speak, "Flint says I am his mate."

Elli grinned at him. "We kind of figured that. Marin's positively gleeful because he's never seen Flint act like this before. He's a loyal friend, but he tends to be very closed off from people when he first meets them. With you, I see how he looks at you." She squeezed Adam's hand. "How do you feel?"

So much more than I should feel. So much that it's bloody terrifying. "I've known him for less than three days, El." She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and Adam caved. "I'm so attracted to him, El," he confessed. "What I feel is..." He trailed off, unsure how to put it into words.

"Intense?" she whispered.

Adam nodded. "So much that it scares me. I'm not sure what will happen once we're safe. He's asked me to stay with him when we get to Sera."

"Good. You can help me plan my wedding. Be my person of honor."

Adam smiled broadly at the thought and hugged his sister tightly. "Of course, El, I'd be honored."

It was late when Pire came down to the Analects to tell them the coast was clear. Adam had fallen asleep next to Elli and awoke in Flint's arms, being carried up the stairs through the now dark hallways. Adam pressed his head into Flint's shoulder.

Flint carried him into Adam's room and set Adam gently on his feet, leaning against the wall. Flint smiled up at him as he closed the door. Adam heard the lock click, and then he was pressed against the door. Flint was rubbing their noses together, running an open mouth over Adam's jaw, his neck. He groaned as Flint's mouth skimmed the hollow at the base of his throat. "Ethon," he gasped.

"I want to bite you, Adam," murmured Flint as he nuzzled the hollow of Adam's neck with his perfectly turned-up nose. "From the first moment I saw you, and you fainted at my feet, I've thought of nothing else. I've wanted to hold you down and bite you, put my mark on you, and make you mine."

"I... mmmmp," Adam tried to speak, but all that came out was a garbled moan. He was on fire. Flint pressed his hands against Adam's chest, and Adam's arms instinctively moved to cup Flint's head and hold him in that exact, perfect spot, lips against the hollow of his neck, that nose, that sweet little nose, rubbing against Adam's throat, his fingers tangled in Flint's soft, thick mane. Keeping their lips fused together, Flint propelled Adam off of the

door, into the room, and over to the bed. Adam fell back. Flint quickly divested them of their boots. He growled in frustration as he wrestled with his belt, and he had to stop and pull ten—Adam counted—ten knives from hiding places all over his body. *He wore ten knives to an elegant formal dinner?*

Flint crawled forward to straddle Adam's hips, the position pressing their stiff lengths together. They both groaned, and Flint released Adam's mouth to arch his back and rub his cock against Adam's.

Adam watched Flint's flame-red hair sway as Flint's tongue darted out and licked at his lower lip. He reached with a shaking hand to cup Flint's jaw. As he brushed his thumb over Flint's lower lip, out darted that tongue again. Flint leaned forward and plundered Adam's mouth. Adam arched under Flint's touch. Flint made a purring sound in his throat. He unlaced Adam's shirtfront and pressed kisses to the flesh he uncovered.

His hands brushed the waist of Adam's breeches, and he looked up at Adam, his eyes flashing fire, and his hair a tangled mess of brilliant red. Adam reached a trembling hand to Flint's face. Flint made mewling sounds in the back of his throat and nuzzled into his hand. He leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. As their heads touched, Flint sighed and relaxed into Adam's hold. Adam groaned. He was so hard, they both were, and now the man was lying there like a bloody cat, which would have been amusing and adorable if he wasn't so completely aroused and on fire for him. "Ethon," he whispered, and Flint pulled back and studied his face.

"I want you so very badly, Adam Byre." Flint said, his pale cheeks pinking, "I was told that my mate's scent would be like a drug to me, but I truly did not know what they were talking about." He smirked. Adam smiled up at Flint, and Flint leaned down to brush his lips against Adam's. "We should rest now. You're still healing." Adam groaned and glared up at Flint. He pressed his hardness up against Flint's own, and Flint groaned. Adam captured his lips once more, and Flint kissed him deeply before pulling away.

"No," Adam whimpered when Flint's lips left his.

"Hush," said Flint, brushing his lips to Adam's once more. "Soon," he murmured. With that, he lifted Adam, and settled him under the covers. He crawled under the covers himself and curled against Adam who wrapped an arm around Flint, and they both slept.

Chapter Eight

“So, here’s the plan. Along with your new papers, Vero made endorsements for Aaron and Lily Green to visit their convalescing Aunt Chloe who lives in Milloren. The Captain says he thinks the house is being watched, so we’ll go out one of the back exits from the Analects. The exit runs into a sewer main and comes out about a league away from the bridge to Milloren.” Frost pointed to a map of the streets of In’Mai as he spoke. He was tense. “The fastest way to get you across is to split up. We’ll be a few minutes behind you.”

There they were: Adam, Elli, Flint, Frost, Vero, the Captain, and Pire, seated at one end of the Captain’s enormous dining table. Everyone was dressed to look their parts for the day. Adam’s face itched. Elli had sat him down earlier and used creams and powders to cover his bruises, so they could avoid questions at the border crossing. It worked, but he wanted to rub his face in the worst way. He dug his fingers into his leg, forcing himself to keep still.

“I’m sending Pire to walk near you through In’Mai. If anything happens, we’re hoping he’ll be able to report back to us,” the Captain explained to Adam and Elli.

Frost cleared his throat and continued, “Summer and I have our own endorsements. We’ll be going through the crossing separately. I will be driving a cart of goods belonging to a friend of the Captain’s that are going to the market in Milloren. Summer is posing as a scholar and has endorsements to access the University Library in Milloren. If we all get across, and everything goes to plan, we’ll connect here.” He pointed to the map. “The market square of Milloren. There is a tavern off the square that is owned by a friend. It’s called The Dragon’s Den. If you need help, or if we don’t show, go in and ask for Boreus. He’ll get you to Sera if we can’t.” Frost looked at both of them to make sure they understood.

Adam bit his lip. There were so many things that could go wrong today. All he could do was pray that they could make it to Milloren unscathed. He watched as Frost gathered the maps and handed Adam the papers for him and Elli. The Captain, Pire, and Vero left the room to collect some last minute provisions.

“Before we go, I want to ask you both something.” Flint put his hands on the table and leaned forward. He looked at Adam and Elli. “If you have to, use

your gifts to contact us. If the Order catches you, we'll have to get to you fast," Flint instructed.

"Call out to us," added Frost. "Call out to us, and we will come to you."

Elli looked up at Flint and Frost and nodded. Adam hesitated. He was afraid.

"Promise me." Adam saw the worry in Flint's eyes. "Promise us, you'll call out to us." He stepped forward and reached up to cup Adam's face as he stared into Adam's eyes.

Adam stared back. "I promise," he vowed.

"I promise," Elli echoed.

With that, Flint pulled Adam forward into a rough kiss and held him tightly. They stayed locked together until Pire knocked to tell them that it was time.

The sewers beyond the passages of the Analects were foul-smelling and cramped. Thankfully, there were walkways along the waste canals, so they didn't have to trudge through excrement. Flint, Frost, Adam, and Elli followed Pire in a single file. When they reached the ladder to the street, they paused, each twin embracing their mates one last time before they departed.

"We'll be right behind you," Flint whispered.

He could hear Frost murmuring similar reassurances to Elli. "I love you, Marin Frost," she said.

Frost picked Elli up off the ground and crushed her to his chest. "And I you, Elli Byre."

"Ethon, I..." Flint kissed his forehead and stepped back.

"I know, Adam. Go, and I'll see you soon."

Pire clambered up the ladder and poked his head out of the cover to the sewer. He climbed all the way out, and gave a knock signaling the all clear.

Adam and Elli followed him up. The alleyway they were in was dark, and all of the windows were boarded up. They could hear the bustle from the market and busier streets nearby, but the street they walked out to was empty.

Pire spoke to them, "Mister Green and Miss Lily, I am going to walk ahead of you. Captain gave me a message to deliver, so I'll just pretend I'm on my

regular errands. I'll go along the path you have to take to the crossing, and you can stroll behind me a ways like you don't know me. If it's not too forward to say, I wish you well on your journey."

"Thanks Pire," Adam smiled, and with that they were off.

The Market was mobbed. Elli and Adam were having trouble keeping Pire in their sight as he weaved in and out of the crowds, occasionally stopping to greet people. The market was nearly a mile long, and they would have another mile to go past it to reach the bridge for the crossing. Adam kept feeling someone's eyes on him, but every time he turned to casually scan the marketplace for anyone suspicious, he would find nothing. It was unnerving.

Elli leaned into him. "Do you see anything?" she whispered.

Adam shook his head. There was nothing.

The nagging feeling of being watched stayed with Adam as they exited the market and made their way east to the border crossing. They walked up the crest of a hill. Just past the marketplace, the fortress that surrounded the bridge at the Split rose up in front of them. The burnished helmets of the border guards, who stood atop the wall, glinted in the morning sun.

There was a line to cross the Split. It extended through the gate, to the fort, and up the street, winding through several blocks of neatly kept row houses. Adam and Elli joined the line of folk and carts bound for Loras, which moved sluggishly forward. Finally, they made it up to the fortress where they had to pass through the giant gate at the entrance. Before they went inside, Adam looked behind him to see if there was any sign of Flint or Frost. He scanned the faces of those in line, but there was no hint of familiarity.

Elli tugged on Adam's right wrist. "Adam," she whispered. "They're not there. It's too soon." Adam nodded, and they stepped through the great gates. He felt off-kilter without Flint nearby. The Draq had become a constant in the past few days and being separated from him felt wrong.

The inside of the fort was, if anything, more intimidating. The Order's soldiers stood at even intervals along three stories of balconies that surrounded the fortress, giving the appearance of an amphitheater to the folk on the ground, who were passing through to the bridge.

Everything was fine, until a merchant cart far in front of them was searched, and a child was pulled out of a trunk by his hair. There were cries of dismay

from the cart owner, followed by shocked gasps from the crowd when the man holding the child screamed in pain and released his hold on the boy. "Bloody hell!" cursed the guard. "Get Evers here now, the kid just zapped me." The child tried to dart through the crowd, only to run smack into a man dressed in black and wearing a green top hat. The man touched two fingers to the child's forehead, and the child slumped to the ground unconscious. Adam wasn't sure if he possessed magic or was a Gifted himself, but he was clearly dangerous.

The man looked back at the guard. "A Gifted?" he asked the guard.

"Little bugger zapped me. Shot pain right through my hand and out my feet. Good thing you were nearby, Evers, that really hurt."

"Hmmm. It sounds like the boy may be a Static. It's a rare gift." Evers stared down at the boy on the ground, his face cold. "Bring him," he ordered the guard, who lifted the boy. "I'll have to contact the Order." They carried the boy out of the square. Not one person in the line moved or protested. The merchant who owned the cart, the boy had been hiding in, was arrested, and his cart and horse were moved out of line and confiscated.

Elli was squeezing Adam's arm so hard, she was cutting off his circulation. He laid his left hand over hers where it tightly gripped his forearm. He was afraid to look at her, afraid that the impassive expression he had schooled on his face would falter if he did.

"*This is wrong, Adam.*" Elli thought at him. Of course, it was wrong. That boy could just as easily have been him or Elli as children, and it was very, very wrong. Adam wondered how many Gifted children met similar fates at the foot of this bridge and never made it to the other side. He didn't answer her, he just patted her hand, offering what little comfort he could.

The line moved forward. When Adam and Elli reached the front of the line, he handed over their papers which were stamped, approved, and handed back to him with barely a glance. He looked up to see a guard at the foot of the bridge motioning for them to cross.

The Split was nearly half a league wide, and the bridge, though made of metal and wide enough for carts and horses, swayed slightly in the wind. Adam was glad when they stepped off the other side of the bridge onto the solid ground in Milloren. Before entering the city, Adam had to present their papers to the Milloren guard for stamping, and then they were through.

The city of Milloren was quiet. A handful of folk wandered through the colorful market square, but it was nowhere near the crowds that he and Elli had forced their way through in In'Mai. They had made it to the end. *Thank the Gods*. There, at the far end of the square, stood The Dragon's Den. Their salvation was a rather squashed-looking building, pressed into the space between a milliner's and a bookstore. Adam sighed in relief and tugged Elli forward.

Suddenly, a wind whipped through the square. The cloak of a man who stood to their right flapped in the wind and revealed the golden crest of an Order soldier on the man's chest. Elli saw it too, and she cursed under her breath. "*Adam,*" she thought sharply at him.

"*I saw, El. Stay close,*" he instructed. Adam glanced over his shoulder. There were three other men in identical cloaks spaced throughout the crowd. "*Three more behind us,*" he thought at her. He tugged on Elli's arm as she turned to look. She stopped and stared at him.

"*What should we do?*" she asked. Adam didn't know. *Were the soldiers here for them?* Adam's heart pounded in his chest as his eyes scanned the crowd. No one even looked in their direction, and it seemed deliberate. "*We have to get out of here,*" he told her. He squeezed Elli's hand, and they walked, as slowly and as casually as they dared, down the block, away from the square.

As they walked, Adam scanned the buildings around them for places to hide. There were a few narrow alleyways, but if someone followed them, they'd be trapped. "*Can we get to Boreus?*" Elli wondered. Adam sighed and shook his head. The risk of being stopped by the soldiers while trying to enter The Dragon's Den was too great.

When he and Elli turned the corner at the next road, Adam realized that the moment they'd set foot in the square, they'd walked into a trap. The blue-eyed man, *the Baker* loomed in front of them. By the Baker's side stood a mountain of a man who looked like he could crush Adam and Elli with his bare hands. Adam hissed, and Elli cursed under her breath. He and Elli pivoted on the spot. They turned to run but froze after two steps; their exit also blocked.

Spread out across the road back to the market, were the soldiers they had seen in the square. With them was the man with the green top hat—*Evers?*—from the bridge crossing in In'Mai. They were surrounded. Evers was smiling a sickly sweet smile of victory.

Adam felt Elli press her left wrist to his right, so their leather cuffs were touching. "*Ready, Adam?*" she spoke inside his head.

Adam wasn't ready. He and Elli hadn't used their gifts intentionally on anyone else since before Grandmere's death. He was so far from ready. He was afraid.

Behind them, he heard a soft footstep, and Adam knew they had no choice. None. He opened his mind to Elli. He felt a rush of power, and in that moment, he could feel Elli like they were one person. In concert, they raised their joined hands, Adam's left, Elli's right, and together they called out to Flint and Frost.

The sonic pulse that radiated outward with their telepathic cry to Flint and Frost was so intense that it knocked a few of their captors to their knees.

Suddenly Adam's connection to Elli was ripped from his mind, and he reeled from the shock of the loss, even as he watched Elli fall to the ground unconscious. He knew he had only seconds before he would join her on the ground. "Flint! Flint!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, as well as in his mind, his cries echoing. Then something hit his head, and everything went dark.

The Baker looked down at his two captives. What the hell had the twins done before he knocked them on the head? Two of his soldiers stumbled up from their knees with a trickle of blood coming out of their noses. Next to them stood the Butcher, in a ridiculous green top hat, who also peered down at the twins.

"A club, Baker?" The man in the green top hat glared angrily at the Baker and held up two fingers. "One touch, just one, and I could have kept them unconscious for hours and controlled when they woke up! Now, thanks to your club, it will be left purely to chance."

"You didn't appear to be in any hurry to stop them, *Butcher*," retorted the Baker. "What the hell were they doing anyway? They knocked me off my bloody feet."

"It's *Evers*, please," the Butcher snapped. "My nickname is too conspicuous here. They were calling someone. Probably their Draq companions."

The Baker let out a string of curses. "We need to move. NOW!" he ordered. "Get them out of here. Take them back to In'Mai and put them in the tower. We have to wait for nightfall for the ship to pick us up. And you!" He pointed angrily at the Butcher. "Stay with them. If either of the Byre twins wakes, put them back to sleep."

Within moments, the twins were loaded into a sleek, black carriage, and the streets near the Milloren market were empty.

An hour later, the Baker pushed through the doors of The Dragon's Den, and everyone in the Den looked up at him. He ignored the hard stares and crossed to the bar. This was the place all right. He'd seen Adam staring at it when the twins first reached the square. He'd overseen the twins' transport as far as the bridge back to In'Mai, but something in his gut had stopped him from crossing with the unconscious pair. He didn't know why the Lord Chandeler wanted the twins, but he suspected that there was more to it than just conditioning them to be Gifted soldiers. More importantly, he knew how this would end. It was inevitable. The Draq would not stop coming for the twins. The Draq would recover the twins, and this time, they would kill anyone who got in their way. The Baker didn't know how he knew this, but he was certain of it. He knew what he had to do. He leaned on the bar and addressed the barkeep, "I need to talk to the owner."

"You're looking at him," the rugged man behind the bar said, eyeing the Baker warily. He pushed a tangled haystack of wheat-colored hair off of his face. "Who wants to know?"

"Nobody important," the Baker replied. "Some friends of mine might stop in here, and I wanted to leave them a message."

"Do they have names?" The barkeep eyed him skeptically. The Baker noticed that the man had exceptionally bright green eyes.

"I think you know them, or know of them. The first is brown, freckled, and impossibly tall with ice-blue eyes. His friend is short, with long orange hair, white skin, and amber eyes."

"A pair like that I would remember, *friend*. I've no idea who you mean." The man was lying, the Baker could tell. He glared at the barkeep. He reached into his purse and pulled out two gold coins stamped with the Order insignia. He slid them across the bar.

"Look, just keep an eye out, and if you *do* see them, can you give them a message?"

The barkeep looked him up and down. "Aye, *friend*, I'll give them a message. If I *see* them, what do you want me to say?"

“Tell them that I’ll be going away for a bit, and that the friends they were meeting, were detained. They can meet up with them at the Order’s Guardsmen Station in In’Mai.”

The barkeep snorted at this. “You know those two don’t really need your help to find them, right?”

The Baker smiled. “Oh, I know,” he said. “I just thought some information might expedite the process.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!” called the barkeep. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

The Baker paused at the door. “You don’t,” he said as he left. If he had turned back to look at the bar, he would have seen the tall man with ice-blue eyes and the man with orange hair as they stepped out of the shadows and stood behind the barkeep.

Chapter Nine

Adam woke up chained to a wall, his head pounding. The room was lit by a single lantern. He could see Elli, also chained, to his right. Curled against the wall, hands and feet tied with ropes, was the little boy who'd been pulled from the trunk that morning at the bridge crossing. The boy's eyes were closed, and he appeared to be sleeping. *Were they in In'Mai?* Seated in a chair opposite them, was the man with the green top hat. The wall behind him held two windows that were shuttered closed. Elli looked over at Adam, her eyes wide.

"The Byre twins, we meet at last." The man smiled coldly as he stood and walked toward Adam and Elli. He stopped a few feet from the chained pair, and looked them up and down. His gaze lingered on Elli, and he licked his lips.

"Where are we?" Elli spoke, her voice raspy.

The man smiled. "I can't tell you that."

"What is this place?" Adam asked.

"Just a short stop on our journey. It's immaterial." He leaned closer. "I was supposed to call someone as soon as you awakened, but I thought we should chat for a few moments." His smile didn't match the twisted cruelty in his eyes.

"Why? Why should we talk to you?" said Adam.

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked. "I am a recruiter for the Order's Gifted soldiers. I sometimes go by other names, but most people call me the Butcher."

"What do the Gifted, or the Order, want with us?" asked Adam.

The Butcher snorted. "Based on your display in Milloren this morning, I should think that would be obvious."

"We're not children. You can't..."

"Can't what? Take you away from your friends and family and train you to obey me? Commit your lives to the Order? If you think I cannot, if you think the Order in its infinite wisdom and power cannot, you are sorely mistaken. I can break you down; I can pick your minds apart."

He ran his hand up Elli's cheek and wound his finger in one of her ringlets. "You, for example, hate it when people call you by your given name, don't you, *Elias*?" Adam gasped, but Elli was stone-faced, refusing to acknowledge the

name that had never been hers. Gods knew, and Adam knew, she'd heard far worse than that when they were children. The Butcher set a finger under her chin and tilted it up. Elli kept her face blank, and he chuckled. "No. I see you don't like that at all. I can make you do anything. While you are in my care, you will answer to Elias, is that understood?" When he received no response from Elli, he coolly backhanded her across the face.

"Leave her alone!" Adam pressed against the chains.

"I've read your files. I know all about your strange proclivity. The boy who lives as a girl." He scoffed, looking her up and down. "I have to say, I'd never know you were a boy by looking at you. You look just like a girl."

"I am a girl, idiot." Elli glared at him. Adam felt sick as he struggled against his shackles.

The Butcher laughed. "Oh, *Elias*, I'm going to have such fun with you. We'll have to find you something more suitable to wear... the Order uniforms worn by male officers, perhaps?" He smiled wickedly. Adam looked over at Elli. Her eyes blazed with fury, but she faced the Butcher bravely, proudly, a small smirk on her face. That was when, over the pain that pounded in his head, Adam felt it. A pulse. Elli still called out to Flint and Frost. Then he felt another. Adam could feel it now, and he was amazed that the Butcher couldn't, but the Butcher was preoccupied with getting a rise out of Elli.

"When we get back to New Quidel, I'll be put in charge of training you two. I'll be your instructor. I will control what you wear, when you sleep, what you eat, and who you talk to. I can punish you however I see fit, and I can make you obey me." The Butcher pulled a knife from his pocket and pressed it against Adam's throat. He grinned at Elli. "Now, tell me, *Elias*, what name I should I call you?"

From the doorway came the sound of a throat being cleared. In came the Baker, and he walked very carefully into the room, glaring at the Butcher. "What are you doing, Evers?" he asked. "I told you not to talk to them without me."

The Butcher shrugged. "You have your orders, and I have mine, Baker."

The Baker glared at the Butcher, but didn't argue. "Our transport will be here in an hour. Make sure they're ready to move." He glanced to Adam and Elli. "I'll have the guard send up something for them before we embark." Adam stared after him. There was something off. The last time he'd met this man, Adam had been starved and beaten. The Baker had obviously been looking for

Elli as well, but now he was not acting like the same cruel, sadistic man he had encountered in New Quidel. *What was going on?*

The Baker stepped outside the cell and turned to the soldier, a man from the local squadron, who was standing guard at the door. "No one goes in or out without my say so, understand?"

The man nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. My men and I will leave within the hour."

The Baker signaled to two of his men who were also waiting at the door, and they followed him. He led them up the winding stairs of the tower and out onto the turret. The turret was at the top of the Order's Guardsman Station in In'Mai. It was the tallest structure in the city. At the wall of the turret stood a man who looked out over the city with a spyglass. The Baker leaned over to the man. "Any sign of them?" he asked. The man shook his head. "Only a matter of time," murmured the Baker. Then in the distance there was a loud crash. "Time to go. They're coming," he called. His loyalty to the Order only extended so far, and one thing it did not extend to was sticking around to be eaten by an angry Draq.

At that moment, a ladder descended from the clouds above the tower. The Baker took hold, and one by one, he and his men climbed upwards to his balloon ship. When he finally reached the deck one of the men rushed to help him up.

"Sir." The first mate saluted the Baker.

"Time to go," barked the Baker. "We need to get out of here as quickly as we can."

"Where to, sir?"

"Kita is always nice this time of year." The Baker smiled.

"Yes, sir. What of the prisoners?"

"The Draq will be coming for them. I thought it best for our rather flammable ship to get clear of the carnage."

"And the Butcher, sir?"

The Baker shrugged. "Collateral damage."

The Baker had gone, and the Butcher had once again placed his knife at Adam's throat. "Now, where were we? Ah, yes. Elias." He grinned.

Adam glared at the man holding the knife to his throat. "What orders?" he asked.

"What?" The Butcher looked surprised that Adam was speaking.

"You said to the Baker 'You have your orders and I have mine,' so what orders?"

The Butcher chuckled. "I already told you. I'm supposed to bring you back to New Quidel, of course, and I will be in charge of training you. That starts here and now. Far too important to wait till we're back at the training facility."

Adam looked over at Elli. Her face was set in concentration as she continued to call out to Flint and Frost. "I don't understand. What makes you think we'll accept your training? And why are we so important?" he asked, keeping the Butcher's attention on him.

"You will accept the training. I can make you," the Butcher asserted, holding up his index and middle fingers. "The reason you are so important to the Order should be obvious. We want you because of who you are." The Butcher cocked his head to the side. Far in the distance, there was a loud crash.

"Who are we?" Adam asked. "Is it because we're Gifted?"

The Butcher grinned then. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"Who you are." The Butcher pulled the knife back from Adam's throat and laughed. Then he looked at both of them. "She didn't tell you?"

"She?" Adam asked.

"Your mother."

"She died giving birth to us," said Elli.

"Ah. Well, that explains it then." The Butcher paused. "We thought you knew. The Order would probably have approached you differently if it had known. They despise inefficiency, you see. Well, I suppose it's up to me then. Or would you rather wait till we get to New Quidel?"

"Please, tell us," both Elli and Adam pleaded.

"Very well, this is going to be such fun." The Butcher smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Mind you, if you don't behave, I'm going to wipe it from

your memories, understand? I might do that anyway, butcher your memories, just for fun, so I can see the looks on your faces when I tell you again.”

The man is insane, Adam realized as the Butcher continued. “Well then. Twenty-one years ago, there was a Gifted soldier who fell in love with a prisoner in his care. When he discovered that the woman was carrying his child, he betrayed the Order and helped her escape. He died helping her flee.”

Both Adam and Elli were shocked. “Our mother was a prisoner of the Order?” Elli whispered, stunned.

The Butcher nodded. “In a manner of speaking, yes.” There was another crash in the distance. The Butcher glanced in the direction of the sound.

“Who...” began Adam. “Who were they? Our parents.”

“Your father was called Cal. Callum Byre. I’m told he was possibly the most powerful Gifted the Order has ever seen. The Order assigned him to keep all of the prisoners under control. These prisoners weren’t kept locked in the dungeons, you see, so monitoring them took special care. You two clearly inherited his gifts. You’ve only begun to touch your powers, you know. I can’t wait to see what you’ll be capable of after a little training. Your mother, she was special too.”

“How?”

“You know your history, yes? Remember how the Order imprisoned most of the council and the royal family when they took charge of the government in Quidel? Your mother was Princess Illariya Stanhope, youngest daughter of King Lucius the First. She was born after the Uprising when her mother and father were in the custody of the Order. When she ran away, she was nineteen years of age and betrothed to one of the Order’s finest, Lord Chandelier. Though you are not legitimate, you are now the last surviving members of the royal family. Then, though I don’t believe in such things, there is also the prophecy.”

“Prophecy?” Adam asked.

“Some garbage about fire and ice and mated twins. Rubbish really.” Another crash sounded outside, closer this time, and the Butcher, who had opened his mouth to continue, paused. He stepped over to the outside wall and listened as the crashes grew louder and came ever closer. Elli released another pulse, and the Butcher noticed it. He turned to her. “You are a clever one, aren’t you? Calling for help. You’re going to pay for that.” He flipped his knife open and advanced on Elli.

Suddenly, right outside was a tremendous roar. There was an enormous impact against the building that shook the entire structure. Adam nearly collapsed with relief. Flint and Frost had found them.

The Butcher cursed and ran toward the door of the cell as the outer wall of the room collapsed. He ran out just as Flint's Dragon head peered through the opening. Flint's eyes followed the Butcher, and he breathed a flare of fire that shot through the doorway after the man. The flames found their mark, and Adam heard the Butcher's howl of agony.

Frost was there too, and Adam felt a tangible relief flow from Elli when Marin climbed up Flint's neck and slid to the floor. Frost ran to Elli. "Are you hurt?" he asked, his hands betraying his concern with a slight shake as he checked her for injury. She shook her head. Frost murmured in relief and brushed a quick kiss to her lips. "Hold on," he said. Frost turned his head and stepped over to the great metal peg that anchored Elli and Adam's chains to the wall. Frost grasped the peg with both hands and pulled. The peg came free, and he pulled the chains from the twin's shackles, releasing them.

Adam fell down when Frost released his shackles. He pushed off of his knees and stumbled over to Flint. He touched him on the snout, placing his palm between Flint's nostrils. Flint huffed, as if in relief, and pressed his snout to Adam's chest. Adam closed his eyes for a brief second, reveling in the closeness of his mate.

When Adam opened his eyes, Frost was releasing Elli from a tight embrace. He then took Elli by the hand and led her over to Flint. "We'll get the shackles off later," he explained to Adam and Elli, "there's no time. Let's go." He directed them towards Flint's back.

Adam was about to climb up when he hesitated. His eyes searched out the small boy tied in the corner. The boy was awake, and he stared at the Dragon with big eyes.

"Come with us!" Adam called to the boy. While Adam and Elli climbed on Flint's back, Frost raced to the boy's side and used a small knife to cut his bonds. He leaned in and spoke softly to the wide-eyed boy who nodded, and Frost pulled the boy to his feet. He picked up the boy and settled him on Flint's back between Adam and Elli.

Marin climbed up on Flint's back behind Elli and made fast use of their shackles, threading Flint's harness through first Adam's and then Elli's, before he took the ends of the harness himself. Elli wrapped one arm around the tiny

boy in front of her and leaned forward, whispering words of encouragement into the boy's ear. "Hold on!" Frost hollered.

With that, Flint roared. He launched himself off the building and soared into the air. There was a terrifying moment when they were suspended high above the city and then dropped swiftly down. They all clung to Flint for dear life. Flint flew frighteningly low to the ground, between the buildings, as he wound through the streets. Adam wondered where they could fly to when the Nets in the sky were blocking the Split. Suddenly Flint swerved around a corner, and Adam saw the fortress at the border crossing and the bridge to Milloren looming before them.

The gate to the fortress was closed, but that didn't stop them. Flint sailed over the high walls of the fortress and landed in the courtyard, facing the gate to the bridge. The gates were also closed, the entrance to the bridge over the Split blocked. Flint gave a huff and charged the gate. The guards took one look at the great red Dragon as it catapulted towards them and hurled themselves out of their way.

Flint breathed fire on the gate to the bridge and smashed the heated metal with his head like it was made of wood pulp. He charged through it at full speed, and they raced over the bridge. Flint's nostrils flared, and his wings were tucked close to his body. Adam heard someone racing up the bridge after them, but they were too late. Flint was already thundering down the other side of the bridge. Adam looked up and was astonished to see that the guards of Milloren had opened their gate and were beckoning them through. Flint took a great leap and dove through the gate. His claws scraped against the stone pavement, and they slid to a stop inside the courtyard of the border crossing fortress in Milloren.

The guards of Milloren were cheering as they closed the gate behind them. Adam looked around. No one was frightened, judging by the grins on their faces, so this was clearly not the first time the guards had seen a Dragon. Loras was very clearly different from Domin, and Adam wondered what else he and Elli had missed growing up in Domin under the thumb of the Order.

Flint turned his head to look back at the three of them, and his eyes glowed with satisfaction. His breath was heavy, and a little puff of smoke escaped his nostrils. Adam leaned forward and rubbed Flint's neck. Frost smiled, leaning forward to hug Elli. He fixed his ice-blue eyes on Flint and said, "No more Nets, Ethon. Take us home."

Flint huffed exasperatedly and looked pointedly at the little boy on his back. Frost chuckled and nodded. The boy, who was still wide-eyed, stared back at the Dragon. He reached out a small hand, and Flint leaned forward to press his nose to it. While he watched the boy pet his mate, Adam overheard Elli quietly telling Frost about the boy's capture that he and Elli witnessed that morning at the border crossing. Frost's eyes widened, and his features softened as she explained. "What's your name, boy?" Frost asked.

"Jas," came the soft reply. The boy had strangely green eyes, sandy hair, and a great many freckles.

"Elli tells me you were trying to cross to Milloren this morning, and you were stopped by the guards," Frost continued.

Jas nodded. "Yes."

"Do you have a place to go, or were you just trying to escape?"

"My cousin's in the village of Halon. My mum sent him a note before she passed." Jas had a forlorn look on his face when he mentioned his mum.

Marin nods. "Would you like us to take you to him? We can if you like."

"Truly?" Jas seemed excited by the possibility.

"Truly, Jas. You could come to Sera with us, but if your cousin is expecting you, you should go to him." Frost smiled as Jas nodded.

"Please then, sir..."

"Forgive me, Jas. I'm Frost, and this is Elli, Adam, and Flint."

"Please then, Sir Frost, could you take me to Halon?"

"Of course, lad. Flint?" Frost eyed his Flint who had kept his head turned and watched the whole exchange.

Flint gave a satisfied huff, smoke puffed from his nostrils as he looked to the sky. He leapt into the air and flapped his wings. As they rose higher, Adam, Elli, Jas, and Frost waved to the guards and folk of Milloren, shouting their thanks. Milloren shrunk and disappeared below the clouds as Flint flew higher, soaring above the clouds and to the East, towards Halon and Sera at last.

Chapter Ten

The Isle of Sera, Fortress Edan Keep, Sixteen Days Later

The Isle of Sera was a tiny island off the southeastern coast of Loras. The great fortress encircled the entire island, including the fields where food was grown, in thick, great walls of stone. The heart of the isle, Edan Keep itself, was a series of tall gray spires. The strangest part was that the Keep didn't actually exist. Flint had tried for hours to explain the series of spells and unravel the magic that protected the enormous structure of the fortress, but in Adam's mind, what it came down to was that no one who wanted to harm the Draq would ever even know it existed.

It was all too much for Adam at times. They were safe here, but they didn't tell the Draq leaders everything. Adam and Elli, their minds reeling from the events in the tower, had told Flint and Frost what the Butcher had revealed to them about their lineage, and what he had mentioned of the prophecy. The four of them had decided that for now, they were keeping that information a secret. Flint and Frost didn't trust that Aeolos and the Council of Edan Keep wouldn't try to use the twins for their own gain. Frost had taken to spending his days in the library pouring over old prophetic texts, searching for some mention of fire and ice and mated twins. So far, he had found nothing. Adam and Elli grieved for the parents they'd never known and again mourned the passing of the woman they called Grandmere and wondered if even she ever knew who their parents were.

There were hundreds of folk who called Edan Keep their home. Mealtimes where loud and boisterous affairs, and children, Draq and human alike, ran in loud, merry packs down the castle corridors. There were fifty manifested Draqborn or full grown Dragons, nearly thirty Draq children, thirteen Draq mates, and a great many fugitives from Domin.

On top of everything, Adam and Elli's revered status as Draq mates within the strange hierarchy that was Edan Keep took some getting used to. Mates were revered, deferred to, treated like royalty. It set Adam's teeth on edge. All he wanted was to spend time with Flint, but all of a sudden nothing was that simple. There were so many rules of courtship and archaic protocols for treatment of unclaimed mates; none of which Flint and Frost had bothered to follow before arriving in Edan Keep.

To make matters worse, the Council of Edan Keep insisted that unclaimed mates could not share a room or a bed. Adam barely slept his first few nights alone in the fortress. Elli and Frost, already being mated, bypassed these ridiculous rules. Adam and Flint, however, were not so fortunate because Adam was as of yet “unclaimed”.

For three days, Adam was forced to sit through lectures on Draq history, Draq law, and Draq customs. For three days, he was only allowed to see Flint at mealtimes in front of hundreds of people or to go for walks with him in the garden accompanied by a stuffy chaperone. By the fourth day, Adam was ready to claw everyone's eyes out. The learning was all-important, Adam knew that, and despite his irritation with the chaperone, he treasured those walks in the garden with Flint. He loved talking to him for hours, but he missed Flint's touch so badly. He felt irritated and on edge.

On the fourth night, Flint's eyes flashed fire when they met Adam's across the dinner table, and Adam knew that Flint was done, just as done as he was with waiting. *Soon*, Flint mouthed, smirking at Adam. That night, Flint came to him. He flew up onto the parapet of Adam's tower, shifted and strode through Adam's balcony door and into his chamber, wearing only a smile.

Adam launched himself into Flint's arms, his legs wrapped around Flint's waist, and they clung to each other, mouths sealed together, as Flint carried his mate to bed. They spent the night wrapped in each other's arms and the next and the next. They explored every inch of each other's flesh, fell asleep in each other's arms.

In the morning, no one from the council said a word. Adam wondered if they actually expected him and Flint to follow the rules, or if they just wanted them to appear to be following them. They behaved exactly as expected during the day, but the nights became their own.

A small part of Adam was still unsteady because, for all of their intimacy, Flint had not claimed Adam. The tenth night that Flint came to him, when Adam and Flint lay panting and sated, Adam reached up to run his fingers through Flint's fiery hair, a sad look on his face.

Flint stopped Adam's fingers with his own. “What is it, love?”

Adam ducked his head, burying his face against Flint's chest for a moment before responding. “You said soon,” he whispered. His face heated, but he didn't move until Flint gripped his chin and forced his gaze up to meet Flint's eyes.

“I did, Adam, and I meant it too, but I also meant it when I said that I would wait until you were ready.” Flint leaned forward, and brushed his lips against Adam’s. “Adam Byre, mate of my heart, are you ready to mate with me? To claim each other?”

Adam nodded.

“Words, Adam,” Flint purred as he nipped at Adam’s neck. “Use your words.”

Adam groaned. He pulled back from Flint and held him by the shoulders, suddenly serious. He began to speak the oath he’d been taught in one of his many classes. “Ethon Eldhrimnir Flint. I claim you as my heart, my Soulsword, my mate. I will join with you, for the rest of my days... Ethon, please make me yours.”

“You are already mine, Adam Byre. Since I first saw you, you were mine, my heart, my Soulsword, my mate.” He held Adam’s hand to his heart, and Adam felt the steady pulse against his hand. “Before I claim you, Adam, before I make you mine, I want you to claim me.”

Adam ran his hands up Flint’s arms to cup his face. “I’ve never...”

“We’ll do it together.” Flint leaned forward and kissed Adam. They went slowly, kissing as Flint rolled, so he was straddling Adam. Flint reached for the small jar of scented oil on the nightstand. He used the oil to prepare himself, stretching himself with his fingers and liberally coating Adam’s length. He braced himself and slowly sat down, taking Adam inside him, pausing with a gasp before slowly sinking down his length with a sigh. “Mate,” he whispered. Then he began to move, and Adam couldn’t help but move with him.

Adam groaned into Flint’s mouth as Flint rode him. Flint growled and mewled with Adam’s thrusts. He started to shake as he watched Flint ride him. The tight heat was like nothing he’d ever felt, and he wasn’t going to last. “Ethon!” he cried.

“Go, Adam, go. I’ll join you soon,” Flint whispered. Adam groaned and shot inside Flint who gripped his erection tightly as Adam came apart inside of him. Still hard, Flint leaned forward and pressed his mouth to Adam’s, licking Adam’s mouth with his tongue. He made a purring sound as he rocked forward, and Adam felt his cock slip free.

Flint kissed him everywhere, traveling down his body—nose, lips, tongue, and throat. Flint scooted down and buried his head in Adam’s crotch. His nose

and mouth brushed Adam's curls, and he moved lower, leaving behind a trail of heat. He lifted Adam's legs up and traveled still lower, his nose coming to rest on Adam's taint. Adam whimpered. Then Flint's tongue darted out to lick along Adam's crease. When Flint's tongue trailed over the puckered flesh of his hole, he nearly lost his mind.

"Ethon!" Adam gasped. His hips bucked, his cock started to fill, and he could feel, bloody *feel*, the answering grin on Flint's face against his thighs as he darted in to lick again.

Flint murmured a litany of "My... mate... my Adam," between kisses, sucks, and licks. His tongue circled Adam's hole and pressed inside, making Adam shudder. Flint settled back between Adam's thighs with the bottle of oil and used his fingers to open Adam up. Adam rocked against Flint's slender fingers, moaning when Flint hit that spot inside him. Flint coated his own length and positioned himself at Adam's entrance. He paused to look Adam in the eye before he thrust in. "Soulsworn," he growled as he surged forward.

As Flint moved inside him, Adam's whole body surged with a prickly heat, radiating from where they were joined and running throughout his entire body. Adam watched Flint's face and knew the Draq couldn't hold back much longer. Flint's rhythm stuttered, his nails lengthened, and the tips turned black. As he came inside Adam, he wrapped his arms around his mate, and Adam felt a sharp pinch as Flint bit down on his shoulder. Ecstasy flowed through his body with the bite, and Adam cried out as he followed Flint.

Warmth swept through Adam, and they lay there gasping, holding fast to each other. The mating bite on his shoulder tingled as it swiftly healed. As it healed, the connection between them grew until Flint was a bright spot in Adam's mind. His eyes widened, and he stared at Flint.

"Elli tried to explain, but it's so much more," Adam whispered.

"Soulsworn," Flint replied, his fingers tracing over the bite before kissing Adam deeply.

"Soulsworn," Adam agreed as he curled up against his mate. Flint curled around him, burying his nose in Adam's hair as he promptly fell asleep.

"We should check on Jas soon," Elli announced as they wandered through the garden the following day. Adam smiled. In the brief time that Jas had traveled with them, only a day, he'd made quite an impression. When they'd

delivered him to his cousin's in Halon, all four of them had walked the boy into the small village and left him safely in the arms of his cousin Fiona, before they said their goodbyes.

"We should," Adam agreed. He wondered about Jas's gift, and he worried about how the kid was coping with it all by himself. The Order would have turned him from a sweet child into a Gifted killing machine, but being the only Gifted out in the middle of nowhere probably wasn't the best thing for him either. "I've been wondering if we should offer to let him stay here. We could work with him on controlling his gift?"

"Adam, I see your point, but we hid for so long, we can barely control our own gifts."

"I know, El. We need to train too, but we can't just leave him there to figure it out on his own. Plus, there are Casters here. I know magic's not the same, and Jas's gift is different than ours, but you, me, and Flint could help him with control at least."

She sighed. "I know. We'll think of something." Adam smiled and absently rubbed a finger over the roughened flesh on his shoulder from Flint's bite. "Stop picking at it," Elli ordered.

Adam stopped. "Where is yours, by the way? I never thought to ask."

Elli's cheeks pinked. "Somewhere you can't see it." Adam raised an eyebrow, smirking. "That is all I will say about it." Elli blushed brighter, and Adam laughed. "Are you worried about what the council will say about your mating?"

Adam shook his head. "You know, for all of their interfering, Flint didn't seem worried. You know, if they hadn't thrown all of those stupid rules at us, it would have taken us much longer to..." Elli looked at him, a growing look of surprise on her face. "Those manipulative bastards!" he declared.

Elli laughed so hard, she fell off the bench. Adam glared at her. "I wondered why they were fussing so much over the two of you when they didn't so much as bat an eye at me and Marin," she admitted, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Gods, El. I feel like an idiot. I was so angry at all of them."

"But you love him, don't you? His cute little nose, his luxurious red hair, I know how your mind works, brother mine."

"Shut it." He grinned, and poked her in the side.

“Tell me, I’m right.”

“It’s wonderful, you’re right, but if you don’t stop, I’m going to compose a sonnet about Marin’s braids and his ice-blue eyes to read at your wedding,” he said as he grinned wickedly.

“If you’re happy, and you’re not worried about Flint getting in trouble for mating with you, what is bothering you?”

“Flint said that the Order may have captured a Draq. I’m worried he’ll be sent back to Domin.”

“He won’t make the decision to go without asking you, you know that, right?”

“I do. We talked about it. Part of me wants him to go too, but not yet. Not till I’m strong enough to fight at his side. It’s not over, El. The Order’s still out there, and people like the Butcher. I want to help the Draq. I want to learn how to fight. I want to learn how to use our gift.”

“What about the prophecy?”

Adam rubbed his forehead. “The Butcher could have been making that up, you know. All of it, El. Even our parents. I don’t think so, but I think we need to go talk to Vero. It’s a place to start anyway.”

“And the farm?”

“The farm will be there when all of this is over. I hope. Maybe when we go back, I can pick up Ori. I really miss my pup.”

Elli was silent for a moment. Then she smiled. “You know...” she said, nudging his shoulder, “our gift does seem to work better when we’re together.”

Adam smile answered her own. “You and Frost would come with us?”

“Well, I’ll have to talk to Marin about it, but those two work better as a team anyway. I want to help too. And find out the truth,” she added.

“First we get you married. Then we train, and we’ll see what we can do, okay?”

Elli squeezed his hand in affirmation.

Adam took the steps up to his room in the keep two at a time. The council meeting should have ended by now. He burst into his quarters and found Ethon

sitting on the bed, wrestling with his boots. He paused in the doorway and watched his mate.

“Adam.” Flint looked up. His face lit up at the sight of his mate. Adam grinned back. He’d been smiling so much today his face hurt.

“Hey. What happened at the meeting?”

“Aeolos is sending Brant and Keegan to investigate,” Flint answered. Adam let out a relieved huff and sat next to Flint to take off his own shoes. “I spoke with Aeolos. About going back to Domin. He wants to assist with your training.”

“Really?” Flint leaned his head on Adam’s shoulder. “I told Elli today, and after the wedding she wants to help. She’s going to talk to Marin.”

“Mmm. Good.” Flint rubbed his chin on Adam’s shoulder and then kissed up his neck to Adam’s mouth. He nipped Adam’s lips. “Marin’s already in, we talked after the meeting. Missed you today.” He laid back on the bed and pulled Adam on top of him. Adam wrapped his arms around his mate and pressed kisses to Flint’s soft lips.

Flint brushed his finger over the bite mark on Adam’s shoulder. “How are you feeling today? Any regrets?” Adam glared and hit him with a pillow which led to wrestling, which led to many kisses, which led to more vigorous activities.

When they were finished and cuddled together, Adam answered him. “No regrets, Ethon. Not a one. This, with you, it’s everything.” Adam blushed as his eyes met Flint’s.

Flint’s eyes grew wide as he looked at his mate. “It’s everything to me too, Adam Byre, mate of my heart.” He kissed Adam, and they held each other close. Whatever dangers would come, and Adam knew they would come, they’d face them together.

The End

Author Bio

Penny Wilder is an avid reader and sometimes reviewer of romance and erotic novels. She lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her amazingly supportive husband and three cats. She works for a nonprofit by day and by night, in addition to reading way too many books, moonlights as a blogger, artist, illustrator, and also sometimes as a business manager for a fledgling theater company. She has spent a good deal of her life working in theater, either onstage as a performer or backstage doing just about every job imaginable. Her love of writing dates back almost as far as her love of reading.

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