

Xaden POV: Fourth Wing

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Xaden POV: Fourth Wing

by [belle_beebee](#)

Summary

Xaden Riorson thought he had figured out how to survive in this place. Now in his final year at Basgiath War College, he's risen to the rank of Wingleader. He is focused on one thing: getting every kid of the rebellion bonded to a dragon. Then the real work can begin.

But he hadn't counted on Violet Sorrengail, the General's daughter, entering the Rider's Quadrant. She's not supposed to be here and she's about to throw every plan he has made into chaos. Can he trust her? And more importantly, can he trust himself?

This follows the dialogue and events of Rebecca Yarros's Fourth Wing, retold from Xaden's perspective. This was written prior to the release of Iron Flame, so all theories and speculation are my own and unconfirmed. It's my best guess at exploring how Xaden might have felt throughout the story and features new scenes with Liam, Garrick, Imogen, Sgaeyl and Tairn. Major plot spoilers from the very first chapter.

All rights belong to Rebecca Yarros – thank you for building this world and introducing us to these incredible characters!

Notes

Thank you to the kind people that alerted me to someone on social media plagiarising chapters from this work and sharing them in a private FB group as her own writing.

Writing something like this takes a lot of time, patience and creativity - it was something I did because the world Rebecca Yarros created inspired me so, so much and I wasn't able to

leave it just yet. There is space for everyone to have their own words and their own theories. In fact, I can't wait for Iron Flame to be released and watch half of mine here immediately get proved wrong. That's half the fun of writing fan fiction.

I reached out directly to the person copying my writing to get this resolved. The person doing this claims that she intended to credit me in her book once it was completed. But she has not given any credit currently, has lifted whole chapters of my work from AO3, and is actively deleting any comments on her posts that reference or link to my work.

Some of the original writing of which I am proudest, she is claiming as her own. These are not dialogue-heavy scenes from Fourth Wing where one would expect natural similarities. These are wholly plagiarised copies of original interior monologue scenes that I spent weeks imagining and writing.

I'm not sure that anything can be done, other than appealing to her to stop - which I have done. She has said that she intends to list her work on Amazon. I have not given my permission for this. If you see it listed on Amazon, or anywhere else, please report it.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Parapet

Gods, I hate this day. The tension feels thick and heavy, like a sheen that coats my skin, even two hundred feet up in the air. But we're riders and learnt long ago to school our faces, to not betray a hint of any emotion we feel, fear least of all. It's a weakness that's not tolerated in Basgiath.

Everyone dies. Fear just kills you quicker.

Still, I hate watching the young, innocent faces of the new year's intake. Hate seeing the anticipation and thrill of learning how to ride a dragon drain out of their eyes as they finally see the sheer scale of the walkway they must cross, just to have a fighting chance.

Last year, Command had me on the other side of the Parapet, inside the Rider's Quadrant. I can't decide which is worse. There, I would watch every cadet make it those final few steps to safety, see them jump down onto solid ground with their eyes burning with triumph and joy, knowing three out of four will be dead before they leave this hellhole.

On this side of the walls, I see the faces of every single candidate and hear the screams as they fall.

But at least there's just fear. I understand fear.

Today, I stand near the edge of the near-vertical drop, kicking loose grit and crumbling brickwork off the floor and into the valley below, the rocks eaten up by shadows before they hit the canyon floor. My muscles are tensed between boyish excitement to finally see Liam again after all these months and a horrible foreboding that his name will be etched on a tombstone before he ever sets foot inside the Quadrant. No, I shut down the thought before it can take hold. We trained together. If I made it, he can. I refuse to tolerate any other possibility.

I eye the moody storm clouds gathering across the horizon warily, wishing them away. We don't need to stack the odds against us any more than they are already. It rained so hard on this day, two years prior, when I faced down a different kind of terror: one for myself for once, rather than for every other kid my desperate deal had forced into this place.

Back then, the skies were almost black when I waited in this exact same spot, ominous clouds seeming to roll and gather momentum. It felt like they were coming straight towards me, encircling me on all sides and narrowing my field of vision to the thin edge of wall in front of me, a knife's edge between a chance of life and freefall. The rain came in sheets, wind whipping in every direction as I crossed the parapet, trying to put one foot in front of the other without feeling the eyes of every person in this place, willing me to fall.

It was only the weight of the one hundred and seven innocent rebellion kids on my shoulders that kept me upright, willing me to survive. I would make it across for them, prove it could be done. And give them footsteps to follow.

The clouds today look less angry, hovering on the horizon but seeming to hang back, watching, and waiting.

Seventeen have fallen already.

Another forty or so still to fall, by my count. *If* the rain holds.

The next cadet is carrying a pack far too big for his frame and doesn't look even nearly nervous enough. There's a fine line between fear that kills you and fear that keeps you alive. He's grinning

back at another third-year rider, Emery, who's patting the promise ring dangling round his neck to wish him luck. Someone loves him. But I'm certain he'll lose his balance and fall before he's even halfway across the parapet.

I want to help him, want to push him back along the growing line of would-be riders and empty out his pack to give him better odds. But that humanity has long since been trained out of me in this place. *You can't save everyone. Most people won't make it. Don't get too attached.* I've seen people I've known for years, people I've sacrificed everything for, die in this place, despite my efforts. I cannot afford to split my focus and help people I don't even know are worth saving, no matter how many people are waiting for them to come home.

I cross my arms across my chest and gesture him across with a grave, silent nod.

I don't want to watch him walk out or sense his fear kick in when the wind begins to pelt him from all sides once he's out of the relative shelter of the entrance.

I turn and look back along the line, searching for Liam. Instead, my eyes catch on one girl, struck by how different she appears, even in the same black clothes as everyone else here. Why are they all so desperate to don a uniform that makes them infinitely more likely to die than in any other Quadrant? We'd have better odds in Infantry.

The girl is watching me carefully, and looks strangely familiar, as if I've known her in a previous life. The sense of familiarity is unsettling. She is so striking that I'm certain I would remember her if we'd met before. Strands of silver run through the tight braids of her hair, framing a face full of softness in a sea of others that are all honed muscles and harsh angles. Her eyes are piercing, and the intensity of her gaze is startling, like she can see straight through me. Though she's smaller than every other rider in the queue, she exudes a quiet strength I can't quite place.

"See you two on the other side!" the boy on the parapet calls over my shoulder.

I turn to face Emery, who says something to me I don't hear. I'm still watching the girl from the shadows, scanning over her features to try and place her. I'm so sure that I know her, but there's no sprawling rebellion relic, no hint of shared knowledge or experience.

"You ready for this, Sorrengail?" The girl in front of her asks.

The name makes me tense up, like someone's exposed all the secrets I've killed too many to protect.

Then understanding clicks into place.

What the *fuck*. This is Brennan's little sister, Violet Sorrengail.

I turn to face her, looking straight at her now. I see the silvery tips of her hair and the familiarity of features shared between siblings, the shape of her face and soft curve of her lips.

Blood pounds through me in horror that she's standing up here. This makes no sense; she's training to be a Scribe. She loves books and ink and quiet corners. Brennan has talked about her almost every day for the past seven or so years I've known him, eaten up with regret and guilt over leaving her to believe him dead when he lives safely in Aretia. He speaks of her like she's truth and fairness, in a world full of traitors and chaos. In his stories, she is a girl from a world I will never belong. She is sheltered and safe, innocent and good.

She has absolutely no business being up here.

I take a step towards her and ask, “Sorrenghail?” I need the confirmation, the extra moment to sort through spiralling thoughts. I don’t care what it costs me, what it exposes; I need to get her out of here.

She shouldn’t be here. But she is.

And that means something’s changed. My mind is whirring, trying to piece together what’s happening.

She just stares at me with hatred in her eyes. She’s wearing rider’s leathers a little too big for her. And far too slowly, I piece it together. She’s not just Brennan’s little sister. She’s *General Sorrenghail’s* daughter. And if she’s here... that means they know.

My mouth goes dry. If they know about the weapons runs, about Aretia, about Brennan... Suddenly it feels like every person standing round me is an inntinnsic, capable of exposing my innermost thoughts. Is that why they put me on this side of the parapet today? To see how I’d react?

I have absolutely no idea how to play this.

“You’re General Sorrenghail’s youngest,” I say, staring down at her, trying to read the motivations in her eyes. If they knew about Aretia, every single one of the rebellion kids would be dead. They don’t know. They *can’t* know.

But maybe they suspect. And they’ve sent Brennan’s little sister here to force me into slipping up.

She just stares back at me with that same hate-filled glare. “You’re Fen Riorson’s son.”

It lands like a punch. The way she says it makes it crystal clear which side of this war she’s on. Like the rest of the world, she believes we’re traitors and deserve what we got.

“Your mother captured my father and oversaw his execution.” I say quietly, just to see how she reacts.

Her eyes blaze and her body seems to tense. “Your father killed my older brother. Seems like we’re even.”

I think of Brennan safe in Aretia, and my dad’s tombstone on the hills outside the city. “Hardly,” I bite out angrily, still sizing her up. I suddenly remember the other Sorrenghail in Montserrat. One of the most awarded and deadliest riders of her intake. She’s made her own loyalties desperately clear.

Brennan never talks of her. But Violet... if they’re using her to expose us, what does she know? What have they told her to get her here?

“Your sister is a rider,” I say, willing her to slip up. “Guess that explains the leathers.” *Are you with them?* I silently challenge.

Her answer tells me nothing. “Guess so.”

She holds my glare, not backing up an inch, revealing nothing. They’ve trained her well. I can’t read her. This is not the little sister Brennan gushes about. She’s too hard, too unflinching to be a Scribe. She is unassumingly small; it would be so easy to underestimate her. But there’s a current of strength pulsating in her eyes that says she was destined to be a rider. She’s here to expose us, my gut twists in the certainty of it.

“You all right?” The girl next to her asks.

I glance at her. Is she with them too? “You’re friends?” I question, trying to establish how far this threat might reach.

She straightens up at the order in my tone. “We met on the stairs.”

I look her over and my eyes snag on her mismatched shoes, a rider’s boot hastily tied on one foot. Sorrengail wears the same, only the laces on her proper rider’s boot are tied in perfect criss-crosses. Wait, she traded a boot with this girl she just met? It’s so much like something Brennan would do....

“Interesting,” I say, reassessing.

Every bit of certainty I had of who she is and why she’s here seems to scramble out of my grasp. This doesn’t make any sense.

“Are you going to kill me?” Violet’s gaze seems to pin me in my place.

The rainclouds that had paced the horizon menacingly just moments before are on us in full force. Wind howls around us and the rain lashes the ground so hard it sounds like thunder. Even the slight cover provided by the tower does nothing to keep us dry.

The gut-wrenching scream of the boy on the parapet doesn’t shock me, but I see its effects ripple through Violet and the queue of people behind her.

“Pull yourself up, Dylan!” The girl next to her shouts. Violet covers her mouth, her eyes wide in terror. Without ever taking my gaze from her, I know the exact moment he lets go, falling to his death.

Eighteen.

I weigh the probabilities in my head. Maybe she was so affected by Brennan’s death that she decided to become a rider in his honour. But then she’d look stronger, would have trained years to stand in the place where he stood. No, she’s a spy, sent here by Command to expose us. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.

General Sorrengail controls storms. If she’s sent her here, the storm will ease to let her cross safely and I’ll know. And if it doesn’t... well, she’ll be dead. And I can’t save everyone.

For once, I don’t have to make the call on whether someone lives or dies.

“Why would I waste my energy killing you when the parapet will do it for me?” I move aside to let her pass. “Your turn.”

Across

I watch Violet hovering on the outcropping, her hand holding her steady against the last crumbling bit of wall left for balance. She looks so unsteady and uncertain, pulsating winds already whipping the silver-tipped tendrils of her hair free of her braid.

I wait for the winds to ease, as she takes a first, tentative step. Wait for General Sorrengail to give me that tell-tale clue that she knows something about our plans.

But the winds only seem to be gaining in intensity, the rain lashing the parapet so heavy and hard that rushing rivulets of water are pouring off it on both sides.

I think of Brennan talking about his sister, the sheer love and affection shining in his eyes and realise I might have made a monumental misjudgement. That I could have sent this beautiful, innocent girl across the parapet to die. But short of yanking her back from the edge and delivering her to him personally in Aretia, I'm out of options.

Either, she's General Sorrengail's daughter in which case I need to hope she falls to her death. Or she's Brennan's favourite sister who I can't do anything to protect, without exposing everything we've worked so hard for.

I'm just going to need to watch this one play out.

Some hyped-up asshole who is next in line is jumping from foot to foot, cracking his knuckles in his fists. It's the kind of bravado that would usually equal death, but somehow there's always some that seem to sliver through the cracks. I know in my gut that he's going to survive. He looks like the type that wouldn't just laugh at people falling to their deaths but would gleefully push them.

I check the list to commit his name to memory: Barlowe. Whatever side of this war she's on, I want him nowhere near her.

"You better get going, Sorrengail." I say with a warning glare. *Move. Now.*

The asshole lunges at her and she moves, and I watch her walk out onto the exposed section of the wall.

Though the rain is pounding her in every direction, she looks slightly steadier than she did in the relative shelter of the outcropping. She's managing her fear. Sometimes the idea of something is more terrifying than the obstacle itself. Each step is measured, tested then placed. She's not too slow, or too quick.

Frankly, it reeks of careful training.

My shadows stalk after her, skittering through the shifting darkness the clouds cast over the parapet's walls. She's talking to herself. Words I can barely make out over the screaming winds, that still swirl around her in every direction.

"Navarre, my home, is the larger kingdom, with six unique provinces. Tyrrendor, our southernmost and largest province, shares its border with the province of Krovla within the Poromiel kingdom."

She's reciting... textbooks. My heart skips.

Suddenly I'm back in Aretia three years ago, carrying one of the younger kids to Brennan, the boy

screaming with the pain of a leg broken in three places. I remember watching Brennan at work, calm and concentrated, his mouth moving and forming words I couldn't hear.

"That your own personal form of Mender's magic?" I said.

He just smiled at me and shook his head. "No magic, just facts. It keeps you centred, reminds you what's real and what's not. My sister Violet told me she did it when she was nervous and ever since... well, I find myself doing it too."

The way his eyes lit up when he said her name made my heart ache for him. While she might still be alive, his choices mean he's lost her just the same.

The memory settles in my stomach like evidence she is still exactly who he believes her to be. Brennan, who gave up so much to fight with us, to do the right thing, would want me to keep her safe. No matter what it costs me.

My heartbeat thunders in my chest as her next step knocks mortar loose and she wobbles precariously. I cannot interfere. And yet my shadows are stalking her every step, coiled and tense, like they're prepared to grab her of their own accord.

Brennan would never forgive me if I watched his sister fall from the Parapet and did nothing. But if she slips and I intervene... well, we'll both be executed by morning. The Rider's Codex dictates every cadet crosses unaided. Only the strongest survive Basgiath anyway. May as well not waste our time on the ones that won't make it.

And yet my shadows continue to track her. I'm not sure I'll know what I'll do until she falls.

If she falls. She's almost halfway across, despite the insanity of the weather.

But she keeps glancing back over her shoulder at Barlowe behind her, throwing her centre of gravity wildly off-centre with every look. What is she looking at? *Just face forwards.* I want to yell it at her.

I've been so intently watching Violet, that it takes me a few seconds longer than it should to clock what has made her so distracted. All I can do is watch solemnly as Barlowe grabs the smaller candidate behind him and throws him off the parapet into the ravine below.

Nineteen.

I cannot interfere.

Move now, I will it at her.

But it's fear that's controlling her movements now. A lump lodges in the back of my throat as she steps forward unrhythmically, her left foot seeming more unstable with every step. If she falls because she gave a better boot to another Rider... I don't know how I'd ever be able to face Brennan and tell him what happened.

A huge gust of wind hits her and her left foot slips off the parapet, and she falls hard onto her knee with a sickening crunch, grabbing the sides of the wall like a lifeline, even as water pours off on either side. On instinct, my shadows tense, ready to form a floor of darkness should she lose her grip.

But somehow she doesn't. Her knuckles are white with the strain of it, and I watch in disbelief as she swings her leg back up, struggling to get her better boot back underneath her. Her knee must be

shot to shit with that impact, but somehow, she manages to push through the pain and find her feet.

Barlowe behind her shouts and it's the last push she needs to keep going and walk with more confidence than she has yet, despite how close she just came to falling.

She glances back at him one more time, but it's not fear on her face. It is quiet, unstoppable fury.

It is a look I never want turned on me.

I let out a long-held breath as she finally gains the courtyard, my shadows following her inside. And then a rough laugh escapes my lips as she unsheaths her dagger and holds it to Barlowe's balls before he can descend from the parapet's wall.

"Riorson?" Emery looks at me with a puzzled expression, snapping me back into myself before I can see how this plays out.

My shadows are still swirling around Barlowe and Sorrengail on the other side of the parapet, but it's difficult to concentrate fully on what's happening and be here at the same time.

I glare at him. "Is there a problem, Emery?"

He withers under my expression. "No, sir."

I turn back to face the parapet again, but my gaze catches on a familiar face: Liam.

My brother is grinning wide at me, like he's been waiting for me to spot him. It's been two years since I left him at our foster family's home, two years since I first stepped into this hellhole and knew he'd be forced to do the same.

He's four back in the line and I badly want to push past the other candidates to embrace him, but there are eyes everywhere. And I cannot afford for anyone to know how important he is to me. Friendship and family are liabilities that are quickly used against us in this place.

Though everyone knows the rebellion kids are tied together by our shared history and the relics that mark our bodies, only a handful know the full extent of the bonds. I bear responsibility for each of them, all one hundred and seven of them marked on my back. If any of them betray Navarre like our parents did, I'm dead.

I nod once, and he purses his lips, struggling to keep from laughing at my best impression of a superior officer. He has packed on more muscle since I last saw him. Good, he's going to need it in here to survive. His pack is streamlined and light, packed with just the necessities. My eyes glance down at his boots. They are old and tatty, but at least they are proper rider boots with decent grip; I snuck them out midway through last year, taking them off the feet of a dead rider the same size as Liam. We're supposed to burn all the dead's belongings alongside their body, but I'm prepared to anger Malek if it will give Liam even slightly better odds at survival.

He edges closer to the front of the line and gives his name to Emery.

"Mairi? As in Colonel Mairi's son?" Emery says, judgement lacing his tone.

"Yes," I answer coldly on his behalf. Liam tilts his chin up. "Good to see you, Mairi," I add.

He nods curtly at me and turns to face the parapet, taking a deep steadying breath and tightens the straps on his pack before he takes his first step.

If he falls, I've killed him. I sentenced him to this with my hastily made deal with Command all those years ago. It doesn't matter that we were dead if I didn't. I brought them here. And I will use every scrap of power and authority to make sure that they survive it.

We *all* make it through this. And then the real work can begin.

Welcome

Liam makes it. Of course, he does.

Sixty-seven candidates aren't as lucky.

I wear their deaths like a weight on my shoulders as I walk into the courtyard, trying to remember their faces, their names. I met each of them, should be able to remember. But there's too many of them and I can't give them the respect in death that they deserve.

I hate how this place sucks the humanity out of you, makes it so that death is so constant that it seems insignificant. My face is set in grim lines as I cross the courtyard to the dais, ascending to stand in a line-up alongside the rest of leadership. Like I condone any of this.

I stare out at the gathered cadets, searching for her despite myself as Commandant Panchek begins to address the crowd. Violet is stood next to the same girl as earlier. Good, I'm glad she made it too. Glad Violet didn't risk trading a boot with her for nothing.

Barlowe stands about twenty people away, staring murder in her direction. I'm amazed at how quickly she's made such an enemy. Surely, she knows that her name in here is already a target on her back. There's no special treatment for the kids of Command. Here, anyone can kill anyone. And it's best to do it before blatant nepotism can take hold outside the gates.

I look out over the rest of the crowd, assessing quietly. There are fifteen new rebellion kids, all standing upright, shoulders back like the rest of us drilled into them. *You are not afraid. You are not ashamed.* But they are all on high alert, eyes carefully clocking their surroundings, trying to work out who to trust.

No one would be a pretty good start.

Nyra, the Wingleader for First Wing, steps forward to call Section and Squad Leaders to the front to begin roll call.

This part of the proceedings matters a great deal. Command pretends it's random, but it's rare for any marked ones to ever wind up in the same squad. We're spread out, as if it will make us a smaller threat, easier to take out one by one.

In reality, it means we have more access into every Squad, every Wing. We can build relationships that matter, form bonds that overcome the sprawling rebellion relics across our bodies that mere strangers might judge us by. And we have more chance of knowing the signets that each rider channels from their dragons, the unique abilities that Command would rather keep hidden when it suits them.

Five of them end up in First Wing, spread amongst the nine squads. They call Barlowe too and I feel like I'm holding my breath waiting for Violet's name until they finish the roll call.

Instead, Violet and her new friend, Rhiannon, are called into the same squad in Second Wing. It seems too unlikely to be a coincidence. The squads are broadly built in an alternating sequence from the order they cross the parapet. If they've ended up in the same squad, it means someone has intervened. Someone with access and power.

My gaze snags on Aetos, standing at the front of their squad. He's Colonel Aetos's son and obsessed with having an iota of power in this place, like any of it matters in the real world. He's

also a simpering weasel of a second-year who I can't stand, somehow making the rules bend and mould to his will however he needs them to. Like when he conveniently forgot the implied instruction in the Codex and slept with his commanding officer, now Wingleader, Amber Mavis, last year. Or when he was allowed to live, despite the same essence of ability that signs the death warrant of every other inntinnsic in this place.

On the parapet, I was about to risk my life to keep Violet from falling. And now it's becoming crystal clear that there's something else at play here. Something I will have close to zero access to if they're sitting in Septon Izar's Wing.

This cannot be allowed to stand.

"Keep your enemies close, Wingleader." The voice of my dragon, Sgaeyl, speaks directly into my mind.

"Talking to me again, are we?" I say. She's been steadfastly ignoring me ever since our two-day trip to Atheybyne kept her from her mate, Tairn, who had some mysterious business in the Vale and couldn't join her. She doesn't handle distance well.

"For now," she growls back. *"I don't trust it. Do something."*

I rack my brains to come up with a plausible reason that the other Wingleaders will accept. But I'm drawing a blank and running out of time as one of the second-years finishes the list of riders in Third Wing. Liam's standing in the mass of cadets still waiting for their positions. Thankfully, that means he's with me.

We're down to the final few squads, a paltry number of cadets left to be placed and I still don't have a fucking clue how to get Aetos's squad into my wing. I stare at Violet like she has the answer.

As if feeling my gaze on her, she swings her head to look at me and her lips tighten, chin rising in a blatant challenge.

And it hits me. I don't need to reason my way through this. I just need to play to the other Wingleader's worst traits to get my way.

I raise an eyebrow at her and turn to Septon, "I want Aetos's squad in my Wing."

The other two wingleaders start at the order in my tone and turn to face us, already determined to keep status quo.

Septon just tilts his head, intrigued. "Why?" I know he's wondering what game I'm playing.

"Does it matter?" I say. "Pick any squad of mine you want."

That gets his attention. He laughs, shaking his head like he'll refuse me, but his eyes dart out into the formation and I know he's assessing what he can get.

"Riorson. Izar." Nyra snaps. "You cannot just unilaterally switch squads without cause."

"I have cause," I shrug. "I'm just not sharing it."

"But the Codex-" Amber says.

"The Codex doesn't say shit about this," I interrupt her. "If I want to trade a squad with another

Wingleader and he agrees to it, there's nothing in the Codex prohibiting that." I look back at Septon, waiting.

"I'll trade Aetos for Aura," he says, smirking. "But not without knowing why."

Aura is one of the most powerful second-years in the Quadrant, bonded to a huge Blue Swordtail. She's also sleeping with him.

Nyra protests but Septon puts up a hand to silence her and she clenches her jaw, looking furious, hate-filled eyes darting between me and him, like she can't decide which of us she detests more.

"Well?" Septon says, looking straight at me.

"I want the Sorrengail girl," I say, pouring the hatred I feel for her mother into my words. It's a risk admitting it, but I know the truth of it makes it so much more convincing.

An evil grin spreads over his face. I've seen this man take his time with kills, ruling his section through fear and panic. He's one of the worst of us. And I know the hatred in my words, the promise of retribution extracted slowly and painfully, makes his blood pump faster. That he'll get his kicks just from watching.

"Deal," he says and I nod once, turning back to face formation before Nyra or Amber can argue.

My gaze finds Violet's again, and I smile at her knowingly as Nyra announces the formation change.

"Dain Aetos, you and your squad will switch with Aura Beinhaven's," she orders and I watch the realisation dawn in Violet's face as Aetos marches them across to my wing. She looks shell-shocked, her eyes wide in fear. I can practically see her mind whirring, as she tries to figure out her next steps.

There won't be many. She tries anything that puts us at risk, and she's dead.

Nyra looks at me and I step forward, projecting my voice across the courtyard.

"You're all cadets now. Take a look at your squad. These are the only people guaranteed by Codex not to kill you." I watch the cadets look around, clocking eyes with their squad mates like they'll find safety there. But no one is safe here.

"But just because they can't end your life doesn't mean others won't. You want a dragon? Earn one."

I've heard this speech prattled by the Wingleaders every year since I joined. And it always ends the same way, with every first-year cheering wildly, forgetting the fear of the parapet, the death of tens of innocent people that could have been them just as easily.

The rebellion kids notably stay quiet. My gaze catches on Violet who's not cheering either, just watching me, sombre and contemplative. It's so unexpected that I pause longer than I should, and then look away.

"And I bet you feel pretty badass right now, don't you, first-years?" I call to them.

They cheer again.

"You feel invincible after the parapet, don't you?" I shout, egging them on. "You think you're

untouchable! You're on the way to becoming the elite! The few! The chosen!"

They're eating out of the palm of my hand, cheering and malleable to every emotion I want them to feel.

Loose pebbles tremble on the floor underfoot and huge gusts of air sweep around me as the three largest dragons in the quadrant descend on the courtyard, Sgaeyl included. Their sheer size is terrifying the first time you see it, completely at odds with what your imagination conjures up reading a textbook. Shadows sweep over the podium as they land behind leadership, taking up their perch on the wall surrounding us, the sound of brick crumbling beneath their claws.

I want to shout to all the cadets gathered not to run, but this is part of the test too. Right on cue, one cadet breaks free from formation like he can make it to the doorway to the other Quadrants in time. But there's only one way out of this place once you're in. Graduate or die.

I force myself to watch as Septon's Red Daggertail incinerates the cadet before he reaches the door.

Sixty-eight.

You'd think that would be enough of a warning, but it never is. I glare at every first-year rebellion kid I can find, pinning them in place. The fear is palpable even from here, and I know the dragons behind me are locking eyes with the new faces, blowing out hot steam from their nostrils and daring them to run.

Two more do.

Seventy.

The highest death toll on Conscription Day.

It's all such a fucking waste.

"That her?" Sgaeyl asks. *"The one with the silver tipped hair?"*

"Don't even think it," I say, but I'm sure Sgaeyl's already staring straight at her. I glance at Violet who rather than cowering under the gaze of the biggest dragon in the Quadrant, stands up a little straighter, chin raised high.

"I like her already," Sgaeyl says.

"She's undoubtedly working against us," I shoot back.

"Maybe," she says. *"I still like her."*

"Anyone else feel like changing their mind?" I shout at the remaining lines of cadets in front of me. "No? Excellent. Roughly half of you will be dead by this time next summer. A third of you again the year after that, and the same your last year. No one cares who your mummy or daddy is here. Even King Tauri's second son died during his Threshing. So, tell me again: Do you feel invincible now that you've made it to the Rider's Quadrant? Untouchable? Elite?"

There's just silence now, except for a few quiet sobs coming from First Wing.

I brace myself as all the dragons let out a simultaneous exhale, watch the intense heat of the steam blow through the crowd, see its effects ripple through them.

“Because you’re not untouchable or special to them.” I point at Sgaeyl. “To them, you’re just the prey.”

“*So dramatic*, Wingleader,” Sgaeyl practically purrs at me, putting the emphasis on my new title. “*It suits you.*”

Bonds

I've been laying on my bed for what feels like hours, when there's finally a soft knock on my door in a familiar repetitive pattern that I haven't heard in years. I yank it open and see Liam standing there, a huge grin on his face.

Shadows whip out down the corridor, checking he's not been followed, and I motion him inside, leaning back against the door as he walks past me.

He clocks the room and whistles, low and impressed. "Well, if there was ever a reason to gun for Wingleader." He turns back to look at me and I can't help but return his grin, the joy of finally seeing him again filling me up.

"Not too impressed sharing yours with one hundred and fifty other cadets?" I say, arching a brow.

He shrugs and says, "Beats sharing with your snoring ass."

I walk over to him then and pull him into my chest, holding him tight. *He's here. He's alive.*

He thumps my back, and says muffled against my shoulder, "I've missed you too, brother."

I release him, keeping my hands on his shoulders as I look him up and down. He's put on more muscle since I last saw him. "You look good," I say, nodding. "Strong."

He pulls away from me and returns the look, his eyes sweeping over my arms and chest. "*You* look fucking ridiculous."

I throw my head back and laugh. Gods, it feels good to laugh again.

"Yeah, well... once you're spending all morning on a dragon and all afternoon on the sparring mat, you'll look just as ridiculous too."

He shakes his head, but he's smiling and pulls out a chair at the small round table in the corner of the room, leaning back on it so it's balancing on two feet. It's such a Liam thing to do, my chest feels tight. I can't believe he's here.

He reaches out and pats the table, inviting me to sit down too. "So, tell me everything I need to know."

So I do. I tell him about Battle Brief and how to read between the lies the professors prattle, the kind of questions to ask. I tell him about the Challenges, to trust no one on the mat, not even his own squadmates. I tell him about the Gauntlet, that the time and penalties don't mean shit, it's getting up alive that counts.

He looks at me grimly throughout, all laughter and joy slowly draining from his face.

"It really is a death college, huh?" he says, finally.

"Not for us." I am quick to dispel that fear. "*We* make it through this."

He nods, but I can tell he doesn't really believe me, thinking of the four others who we lost the previous two years, the two that died crossing the parapet earlier today.

"What about the weapon runs?"

I shake my head. “You don’t worry about that yet. The rest of us will handle it. *You* focus on bonding a dragon.”

“Yes, *sir*,” he says, with a tight smile and sarcastic thumbs up. He glances at the clock on my desk and stands suddenly, his chair screeching back across the floor. “Shit. I need to get back.”

I pull him into me one more time and repeat myself like it’s an order, “*We. Make. It.*”

His eyes meet mine and I can tell he’s searching for something. I pour the strength of my conviction into my gaze. I am not afraid. Finally, he nods once and heads to the door, before suddenly turning back, a question on his face.

“Who was the girl you couldn’t stop staring at in formation?”

My stomach twists. “Which one?” I know who.

“The small one, silvery hair. She looked weirdly familiar.”

I sigh, taking a deep breath. “Violet Sorrengail.”

His jaw drops. “Brennan’s-“

“-little sister. Yeah.”

“I thought she was training to be a Scribe? Isn’t the whole plan built on her feeding us intelligence in a few years’ time.”

I throw my hands up. “Guess we need a new fucking plan.”

He looks at me puzzled, like he’s trying to piece it together. “Why is she *here*?” He gestures around us.

I run my hands through my hair, rubbing my temples. “My best guess is that she’s been sent here. Whether it’s to spy on us and report back, I don’t know yet.”

Liam’s jaw clenches, and I can see the decision warring in his eyes. “Brennan would want us to protect her.”

Deep down, I know that too. That’s why my shadows tracked her along the parapet. Why I risked exposure to move her into my wing. I have absolutely no clue which side of this war she’s on, if she even knows there are sides to pick.

Either way, I need her close to me.

“She’s made a lot of enemies already.” I think of her again, her knife hovering perilously close to Barlowe’s balls, her face calm and furious. “And you know as well as I do that a few of the rebellion kids will want her dead.” General Sorrengail sentenced our parents to death. It will seem oh-so-poetic for them to kill her daughter in the very place they were sent to die themselves.

“We can’t let that happen.”

“I know. I won’t.” I put my arm around his shoulder and turn him back towards the door. “It’s under control, Liam. You just focus on staying alive.”

He looks back at me, determined to argue but I stare him down until he nods once.

“Now fuck off, so I can get some sleep,” I say and shove him out the door, my shadows pulling it behind him. I hear him chuckling down the hallway as he heads back to his dorm.

I don't sleep, of course. Unless passing out from sheer exhaustion counts, I haven't slept since my father left Aretia to declare the secession six years ago.

After a few hours of laying on my bed, considering the Sorrengail problem from every different perspective, I am no closer to knowing what she knows and how much she's wrapped up in this.

I need more information.

It's not even dawn as I cross the courtyard to the records building, thickening the night's darkness along the walls to keep me cloaked and hidden. By the time the sun is up, I know everything records can tell you about a person.

Born in July, she's the third child of General Lilith Sorrengail. Both her older siblings were riders.

Her older brother, Brennan, died in the battle for Dralor, six years ago. While the facts are all wrong, I'm certain in my gut that this is the story she's been fed her whole life. Her father died within twelve months of Brennan. My heart aches for her at the loss and grief she experienced so young.

She spent the first six months of her life in the infirmary, treated for a condition passed to her from her mother during pregnancy. It's not named, or clear exactly what happened. That's unusual, the records from the Healer's Quadrant are some of the most orderly around.

She's lived in Basgiath all her life. I cross-reference against Rhiannon's file just to be sure; there's nothing connecting them. But Aetos... bingo. Their families lived right next door. So, they're family friends? It makes sense. I can just imagine the family dinner gatherings, Colonel Aetos sat at one end and General Sorrengail the other, secret glances between Dain and Violet, just one year apart in age. Maybe they're not *together*, but there's a history there, either way.

I almost pass over the list of her assignments, where she was stationed during the school break each winter. But my eyes snag on a discrepancy at the bottom of the list. Every year she's spent with Markham in the Scribe Quadrant. Every year, until this one.

This year, she spent it with Major Gilstead, training to become a rider.

The change is so sudden, it feels important. There's nothing else in these files that suggest any interest in becoming a rider. And yet six months ago, bang – she's training to join us in the Rider's Quadrant.

Without years of training, she's almost guaranteed to die in this place. Why would her mother allow it? It's a death sentence.

There's only one reason that makes any sense at all: her mother sent her here to expose us.

I walk with the truth of it back to the Riders Quadrant, feeling it sit uncomfortably in my gut. It's the only thing that makes sense. But it also doesn't square with everything Brennan has said about her, the plans we made or the blatant fear in her eyes. Maybe she doesn't know what she's a part of yet.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I walk straight into Garrick at the top of the stairs in the rotunda, Bodhi right behind him. They're both rebellion kids like me and have fought just as hard against

the discrimination in their names as the rest of us to make it to Executive Officer and Section Leader in my wing.

“Xaden, we’ve been looking for you *everywhere*.” Garrick’s tone is accusing.

I shrug. “I fancied an early morning flight.” Garrick frowns at me.

“*Lies*,” Sgaeyl says, her voice still laced with sleep. “*Everyone knows I would never get up this early.*”

“We were supposed to meet to discuss-“ Bodhi doesn’t finish his sentence, eyeing me pointedly, unable to speak freely with riders and cadets milling around us in every direction.

Shit. The date and location for our first meeting with all the rebellion kids. I completely forgot, so distracted by thinking about Violet Sorrengail and her motivations in all this.

That meeting is exactly the kind of thing she could use against us. It needs more thought and careful planning than ever.

As if I’ve conjured her with my thoughts, Violet walks seemingly out of nowhere into the middle of the rotunda. The light from the windows on all sides seems to glint off the silver tips of her hair.

She pauses and then whirls around to look right at me, as if she can feel my gaze on her.

Garrick says something next to me, but I ignore him, my eyes locked on Violet.

She’s glaring at me, her body tense like she’s about to go for one of the daggers strapped to her ribs. Interesting... she’s scared of me. Or has a death wish, if she’s seriously planning to throw one of them at me, up a flight of stairs with twenty feet separating us. I’m not sure even I could make that shot.

Aetos steps out from the same direction Violet came from. Wow, these two have no subtlety *at all*. I arch a brow at Violet, disappointed in the lack of finesse in this espionage. This is hardly the secret meeting of some master conspiracy with Command.

Unless that’s what they want me to think.

Gods, I’m fucking paranoid.

The crowd is thinning out around them as cadets head in every direction to make it to morning classes. Aetos pushes Violet behind him dramatically, like that would make a single bit of difference if I wanted to get my hands on her.

“I already knew your parents were tight,” I call out, and all the remaining cadets turn back at the sound of my voice. “But do you two have to be so fucking obvious?”

Aetos glares at me, his arm reaching out like a shield in front of Violet.

“Let me guess,” I say. “Childhood friends? First loves, right?”

Violet whispers something in his ear. That pisses me off and my jaw clenches. Aetos is nodding, keeping his eyes on me like he wants to know the second I move. As if my shadows aren’t already circling them and could grab them from any direction before they knew a thing about it. It feels like an insult that they would under-estimate me to such an extreme degree.

Violet might not know any better, but Aetos is sorely misinformed if he thinks I couldn’t take him.

“Correct,” Aetos says, not bothering to whisper it back in her ear. “But you’re not.” He turns to look at her then, the fondness plain on his face.

“I expected you to do a better job of hiding where your affections lie, Aetos.” I walk down the steps towards them. I want him far away from her.

“Run, Violet. *Now.*” Aetos orders, his muscles tensing. Violet runs for the Academic Wing door, heaving it open.

The intensity of his reaction confirms what I suspected: he placed her in his Squad because he has feelings for her. While there’s a chance this levels up to something bigger, I can no longer use her squad placement as the damning evidence I thought it was at the first formation. Just because he’s protecting her doesn’t mean they’re colluding against me.

I take my time descending, enjoying the war in Aetos’s eyes now that he’s not performing the role of protective Squad Leader for his childhood sweetheart. Does he run too? Or does he face me? His hands clench in fists at his sides as he stays exactly where he is.

The Codex forbids me from hurting him, which I’m sure he already knows, but it doesn’t mean I can’t make him squirm.

I stop an arm’s length from him and say nothing, waiting for him to speak first.

He straightens up at attention, “Wingleader?”

“I don’t know what your previous Wingleader allowed on her watch, Aetos. But I strongly condemn *any* relationship with a first-year under your command.” I can tell by the way his eyes flare that he knows exactly which indiscretion I’m talking about from last year.

“Sir, the Codex-“

“-does not expressly forbid it. I’m aware.” I tilt my head and raise one eyebrow. “*I* strongly condemn it, Aetos. I don’t give a shit what the Codex says. Fuck whoever you want in your own year. I want the first-years focused on training. Sorrengail included. Understand?”

I sense a quiet ripple of understanding behind me on the staircase as I say her name, Garrick and Bodhi making the same family connection as I did yesterday.

Aetos nods, but his lips twitch with words he can’t say. He waits and I let the silence stretch out longer than is comfortable before I say, “Dismissed.”

He runs for the same door as Violet.

Battle Brief

You'd think it would be the dragons and daggers that will kill you here, but ever since first year, I've been convinced it's Battle Brief that will be the death of me. It takes every ounce of self-control to hold my tongue as the professors prattle through supposedly unbiased reports from operations on our borders. One wrong word in here, and you're dead.

It's nice to stand at the back of the room for once, the front seats of the auditorium crammed with the new intake of cadets. It gives me the sensation that I could slip out any second, even though listening to this Navarrian propaganda each day is as compulsory as ever.

I lean back against the wall, knowing it won't be long before I'll be forced into taking back a seat. People die so frequently around here, no one's left standing at the sidelines for long. I cross my arms and tilt my head back, waiting for anyone to say anything the remote bit interesting. Every day in Battle Brief, it's the same inane questions and the same evasive answers. None of them getting any of us closer to the truth.

What we should all *actually* be asking is why the fuck are Command keeping the venom secret when the wards are failing? Why are they withholding the only supplies that could give our neighbour's armies an edge before the threat reaches us? What the hell are the venom searching for in every village they attack?

The first few months are the worst, as the first-years get used to the brutal repetition of it all. It doesn't matter how many riders are dead or injured, how many gryphons were killed or how long it took them to rebuild the wards.

None of it matters because it's all built on a shit-heap of lies.

It's only when I hear someone ask what altitude the village is at that my interest is piqued. My head snaps up and strains to see who it came from in the front few rows where the first-years sit, worried it might be one of ours. I can't see who asked the question, until the professors turn to ask why she wants to know.

It's Rhiannon that adds, "Just seems a little high for a planned attack with gryphons."

It's an astute observation. And then I notice the silver-tipped braid of the girl sat right next to her, as she turns to say something in her ear. Of course, it was a good question; it came from the girl destined to be a Scribe.

"It *is* a little high for a planned attack," Professor Devera says. "Why don't you tell me why that's bothersome, Cadet Sorrengail? And maybe you'd like to ask your own questions from here on out."

If she was trying to keep a low profile, she's failed spectacularly. Every person in the room swivels to look straight at her.

I watch with interest as she logics it out, careful and considered. She makes no assumptions, checks her facts and questions everything.

"Then they were already on their way," she concludes, and my brows rise in surprise at how quickly she made the connection. Laughter ripples round the first-years and even from here I can tell her cheeks have flushed with embarrassment.

But she's right. The dragons knew the wards were breaking and mobilised the unit.

I can't help but think that Brennan might have under-sold how smart his little sister really is.

I let the other riders share their questions, waiting for the best moment to ask the most important one.

"What was the condition of the village?" I ask when the professors start to shuffle papers together on the desk.

"Riorson?" Markham asks, slightly surprised. I so rarely contribute at these things, but I want to set an example to the other rebellion kids on how to ask a question that gives us information that *we* can use.

"The village," I repeat. "Professor Devera said the damage would have been worse, but what was the actual condition? Was it burned? Destroyed? They wouldn't demolish it if they were trying to establish a foothold, so the condition of the village matters when trying to determine a motive for the attack."

Keep it just vague enough. Shut off obvious avenues for lies. Ask questions within questions to get more than a yes/no response.

Professor Devera smiles and says, "The buildings they'd already gone through were burned, and the rest were being looted when the wing arrived."

"They were looking for something," I decide. "And it wasn't riches. That's not a gem mining district. Which begs the question, what do we have that they want so badly?"

"Exactly. That's the question." Professor Devera nods at me in approval, looking round the room. "And that right there is why Riorson is a wingleader. You need more than strength and courage to be a good rider."

My eyes lock with Liam's across the hall, who bows his head and slow claps me mockingly.

I roll my eyes.

I'm still dripping in sweat as I trudge back to my room after flight field that day, towelling myself off as I go and desperate for a bath. But as I turn the corner, I see Garrick and Imogen locked in a heated argument outside my door, his hands gripped tight on both her shoulders and know it's still a long way off.

These two just need to get together already.

"She fucking *deserved* it," I hear Imogen hiss at him as I get closer. "Besides I don't answer to *you*."

Garrick finally spots me over her shoulder and nods in my direction. "That's still debatable. But you *definitely* answer to him."

Imogen turns her head to look at me, murder in her eyes.

This is going to be a long night.

"*I'll get the popcorn*," Sgaeyl says, with a snort.

I don't acknowledge them, just unlock the door, and gesture them inside. Imogen plonks down on the bed, her arms crossed tight across her chest. Garrick pulls out a chair to sit on the other side of the room, his foot tapping the ground. I'm left standing in between them to mediate. Brilliant.

When neither of them speaks, I turn to Imogen. "Well?"

She just rolls her eyes at me sullenly and takes out one of her daggers, using it to clean under her nails. She's never been one to break first.

"Ok then," I turn to the other side of the room. "Garrick. You want to tell me what this is about?"

"She put the Sorrengail girl in the infirmary," he says, his eyes locked on Imogen.

I blanch, swinging back to look at Imogen who tilts her chin up at me with a glare.

"You did *what*?" It's a struggle to keep the flare of anger out of my tone.

"It was on the mat, Xaden." She shrugs, like that's all that matters, like I'm concerned for *her* safety. "I stayed within the Codex."

"Imogen," Garrick says her name like a curse, hitting his hand on the table so hard that she jumps. "She's Brennan's *sister*. You didn't need to break her fucking shoulder."

Imogen's eyes flare and her hand tightens around the hilt of her dagger. "I don't care whose *sister* she is. Her mother murdered my family. She deserves whatever she gets in here."

Garrick flings his arms up in the air, his hands clenching into fists. "Fuck, Imogen. This is not who we are. We don't punish kids for the crimes of their parents." The unspoken words hang in the air around us. That would make us just like *them*.

Her jaw clenches, but she's too furious to admit that she's wrong. "She's a fucking cheat, Garrick! She was wearing some sort of impenetrable armour."

"And how the fuck would you know that, if you weren't breaking the same rules?" He roars back, looking at me for back-up.

"Enough!" I shout, holding up one hand. "How many times are we going to have this conversation, Imogen? Keep your fucking emotions out of Challenges. One of these days, it's going to get you killed." And there are enough ways for us to die in here without our own stupidity getting in the way of it.

"Not likely," she mutters, and starts to toss the dagger in the air, spinning it and catching it by the hilt.

Shadows whip out and snatch it out of the air mid-turn, carrying it suspended across the room and placing it in front of Garrick on the table. Imogen tracks it with her eyes and then turns to me, glaring.

"Look," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. "We don't know where Sorrengail fits into all this yet, and until we do, we need to be smarter."

"And for fuck's sake, stop showing everyone the best place to land a few hits," Garrick adds exasperated, but his eyes are soft as he looks at Imogen. Even I can tell he's worried about her.

Imogen lets out a muffled scream of frustration and falls back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Silence stretches out, filling the room.

“I fucking hate it here,” she says quietly, an admission to the room rather than us.

I gesture to Garrick with a glance, who moves to sit down beside her on the bed, pressing the dagger back into her hand like a peace offering.

I take his vacated seat, my head resting heavily on my hand, watching them. “We all hate it here, Imogen. But killing won’t make it any better. Trust me.”

She props herself up on her forearms to look back at me. “I know. You’re right. I just really wanted to kill *her*.”

“If anyone’s killing her, it’s me,” I say. I’m sure as hell not going to tell Brennan I let someone murder his little sister on my watch. It either happens by my own hand, or not at all. “If she poses a genuine threat, I’ll handle her.”

Imogen stares at me like she doesn’t believe me, then finally nods, dropping her head to let it fall back on the bed. Garrick moves his hand like he intends to reach out and comfort her, and I cover a smile as his fists clench, settling back into his lap when he thinks better of it.

I send my shadows snaking out to check on Violet in the infirmary, skirting along the walls and slipping under closed doors until I make it to her bedside.

Having suffered the same injury during my foster years, I fully expect her to already be unconscious from the pain or screaming bloody murder. But they must have given her something for the pain already because she’s completely off her head, her eyes unfocused and slurred words almost undecipherable.

Aetos is there with her. Of course, he is.

“We have to use this opportunity to get you out! Walking out of here and going straight to the Scribe Quadrant is your best chance at survival.” His panic is thick and palpable, pacing up and down by her bedside. He genuinely cares for her.

But you can’t just walk out of the Rider’s Quadrant. You fly out on a dragon or leave in a body bag. There are no take backs. That’s not how this works.

And Violet knows it too. She glares at Aetos, managing to pack a surprising amount of rage into her expression given her condition. “I’m not leaving the riders just so mom can throw me back. I’m staying.”

Even though the words are slurred, it’s an unguarded insight into what brought her here. Her mother is behind this one way or the other. She’s only here on her orders.

“Please Vi,” Aetos begs her. “Please switch quadrants. If not for you, then for me- because I didn’t step in fast enough. I should have stopped her. I can’t protect you.”

He clearly has no skin in this fight. If Violet’s been sent here as a spy, she’s working alone.

“I made my choice,” she says, taking a deep breath. Nolon is hovering behind her, waiting to mend her shoulder.

I leave before I can hear her scream.

Shadows

This night always takes such careful planning, even with every rebellion kid sworn to secrecy. There's over forty of us in Basgiath now, almost double last year and we can't gather in groups larger than threes without it being considered an act of treason against Navarre.

It takes longer than it should to co-ordinate, relying on a handful of us finding enough quiet moments to whisper instructions to the first-years in a way that causes the least suspicion.

My stomach is in knots as I walk silently with Imogen along the riverbank winding towards the trees we've picked as this year's rendezvous point. It's difficult to concentrate, my shadows spread out through the quadrant, trying desperately to ensure everyone makes it out without alerting anyone to their absence. I only realise we're at the trunk of the oak tree, when Imogen lowers the hood of her cloak, the bright flash of pink hair catching my eye.

"Did everyone make it out?" she asks, her eyes fearful.

"Yes," I say and she physically untenses, letting out a long-held breath.

"There's just so many of us, it makes me nervous. What if-" she trails off, and I know she is thinking about last year. The dead eyes of the boy whose neck she'd snapped when he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Your signet makes it easier now," I remind her. Between us we're a formidable duo for this sort of operation; my shadows can get them out, and she can wipe the memories of anyone that sees us along the way.

She nods tight-lipped and looks out towards the river. I follow her gaze to watch the other rebellion kids follow the same path we just took.

There's the smallest snap of a branch above me, and my shadows edge out, winding around the tree on instinct. Noises in the forest are nothing to worry about, particularly not at night with countless animals scurrying through its depths.

I flinch when my shadows find Sorrengail clinging tightly to the trunk, just a few feet above us. My stomach twists. Gods, was I right about her all along? I should kill her now, yank her down from the tree onto the ground in front of everyone as they arrive.

Fuck, no. Spy or no spy, I could never face Brennan again after I murdered his sister in a public execution. If I'm forced to kill her, I'll do it one on one, just so I can live with myself afterwards.

My shadows thicken around her. It doesn't matter what she hears at this meeting, she won't live to report it back to Command.

But the shadows pause, whispering back to me and taking on a mind of their own. *Look at the bag tied to her waist*, they strain. *It's filled with berries*, they urge. They snake up the tree without my direction, spreading out to the top-most branches, where more of these same purple berries hang heavy on the ivy winding through the tree's canopy.

I have absolutely no idea what to make of it. What possible reason could she have to be out in the middle of the night picking berries in the forest? But it hardly fits the story of her as a spy for her mother either... do I really think that she somehow discovered the location of this secret meeting and got hungry while she waited for us all to arrive?

And then it dawns on me. There's a very simple way to know exactly what side she's on here. If I let her hear just enough, I can see how she reacts at the end of it. I've always been good at reading people; it won't take long for her to spill her secrets when I have a dagger to her throat.

"And if they find out we're meeting?" The small, scared voice of one of the first-years brings me back into myself, the rebellion kids spread all around me in a half-circle.

"We've done this for two years and they've never found out," I reassure her, resting my back against the lowest branch of the tree. "They're not going to unless one of you tells. And if you tell, I'll know." I'll know because we'll all be dead, but it never hurts to stretch the scope of your abilities. "Like Garrick said, we've already lost two first-years to their own negligence. There are only forty-one of us in the Riders Quadrant, and we don't want to lose any of you, but we will if you don't help yourselves. The odds are always stacked against us, and trust me, every other Navarrian in the quadrant will look for reasons to call you a traitor and force you to fail."

The quiet murmurs of assent do not fill me with much confidence.

"How many of you are getting your asses handed to you in hand-to-hand?" I ask, not wanting to know the answer. Some like Liam had more freedom to build stamina and bulk, but from the look of others I know their foster situation wasn't as lucky.

Four hands shoot into the air.

"Shit." That's more than I feared.

Garrick sighs. "I'll teach them."

No, I can't have that. Garrick is barely getting enough sleep as it is, sneaking out most nights to other quadrants in Basgiath and the nearby outposts to loot as many weapons as he can get.

"You're our best fighter-" I counter, shaking my head.

"*You're* our best fighter," says Bodhi.

"Dirtiest fighter, maybe," Imogen snarks.

The second and third-year riders laugh, and Liam grins, nodding his frantic agreement at that assessment. I smile too, feeling more at ease and with friends than I have in weeks.

"Fucking ruthless is more like it," Garrick adds.

"Garrick is our best fighter, but Imogen is right up there with him, and she's a hell of a lot more patient," I say. Imogen's lips twitch with the compliment. "So the four of you split yourselves up between the two of them for training. A group of three won't draw any unwanted attention. What else is giving you trouble?"

"I can't do this." I search the crowd to find the quiet, thready voice. Bran. One of the first-years, who is woefully thin, with dark circles around his eyes. Frankly, I'm surprised he survived the parapet.

"What do you mean?" But I already know what he's going to say; there's been one each year, and they've never made it past Threshing.

"I can't do this!" His eyes are white with fear. "The death. The fighting. Any of it! A guy had his neck snapped right in front of me on assessment day! I want to go home! Can you help me with *that*?"

I don't take my eyes off him, but feel every head turn to look at me.

"No." I shrug. "You're not going to make it. Best accept it now and not take up more of my time."

I ignore the gasps around the group, already mentally striking the boy's name off my list as I look away from him. Two years here has taught me how to compartmentalise; I cannot afford to split my focus any more than it is already.

"That was a little harsh, cousin," Bodhi chides.

"What do you want me to say, Bodhi? I can't save everyone, especially not someone who isn't willing to work to save themselves."

"Damn, Xaden." Garrick rubs the bridge of his nose. "Way to give a pep talk."

"If they need a fucking pep talk, then we both know they're not flying out of the quadrant on graduation day. Let's get real. I can hold their hands and make them a bunch of bullshit empty promises about everyone making it through if that helps them sleep, but in my experience, the truth is far more valuable."

I eye the first year-again, willing him to hear me, to rise to this challenge even when it's hard. But this outburst isn't really for him, it's for the rest of the first-years who might have a shot, and desperately need to understand that it only gets harder from here.

"In war, people die. It's not glorious like the bards sing about, either. It's snapped necks and two-hundred foot falls. There's nothing romantic about scorched earth or the scent of sulfur. This-" I gesture all around us, back towards the citadel "-isn't some fable where everyone makes it out alive. It's hard, cold, uncaring reality. Not everyone here is going to make it home..." *Shit*. I suddenly remember Sorrengail in tree. *That* is not a secret I am willing to risk her knowing just yet.

"...to whatever's left of our homes," I add limply. "And make no mistake, we are at war every time we step foot into the quadrant. So if you won't get your shit together and fight to live, then no. You're not going to make it."

I expect him to cry or give me some bullshit about trying, but there's just deafening silence.

"Now, someone give me a problem I can actually solve," I say.

"Battle Brief," Chelsea pipes up and my pulse races, shadows tensing in case she says a little too much. "It's not that I can't keep up, but the information..." She trails off, with a shrug.

"That's a tough one," Imogen responds, looking to me pointedly. Help them, it seems to say. Prove you're not a cold-hearted asshole who cares if they make it here.

But I'm acutely aware of Sorrengail listening to every word in the branches above us.

"You learn what they teach you," I reply, skirting an edge that would reveal the whole truth. "Keep what you know but recite whatever they tell you to."

I look around the group, each face staring at me in grim set lines. "Anyone else? You'd better ask now. We don't have all night."

"When do we get to kill Violet Sorrengail?" asks Kobe, a hulk of a first-year, at the back of the group.

My shadows wrap around her closer in the tree at the sound of her name. I know she'll have heard that. If she *is* innocent in all this, I really don't want to give her any more reasons not to trust us.

"Yeah Xaden," Imogen says icily, her eyes narrowed. "When *do* we get to finally have *our* revenge?"

I return her glare, knowing she's testing me in front of everyone and is determined I make the same promise to her in front of everyone, so I'm held to it.

"I told you already, the youngest Sorrengail is *mine*, and I'll handle her when the time is right."

"Didn't you already learn that lesson, Imogen?" Bodhi says. "What I hear, Aetos has you scrubbing dinner dishes for the next month for using your powers on the mat."

Imogen swings that same glare on him. "Her mother is responsible for the execution of my mom and sister. I should have done more than just snap her shoulder."

"Her *mom* is responsible for the capture of nearly *all* our parents. Not her daughter," Garrick counters, folding his arms across his chest. His jaw is clenched tight, and I know he's pissed at having to repeat the same conversation as the other night. "Punishing children for the sins of their parents is the Navarrian way, not the Tyrrish."

I feel that land among the gathered cadets. But Imogen still doesn't drop it.

"So we get conscripted because of what our parents did years ago and shoved into this death sentence of a college--"

"In case you didn't notice, she's in the same death sentence of a college," Garrick fires back. "Seems like she's already suffering the same fate."

I look at everyone gathered around us, see their eyes soften a little as the vengeance drains away and is replaced with something close to pity. In just a few well-chosen words, Garrick has made them see her not as easy prey to exact their revenge, but as an innocent victim just like them, caught in the crossfire of a war none of us chose to fight. He's always been so much better at this stuff than me.

Gods, I hope she's worth our faith.

When Imogen looks like she still won't let it rest, I interject, "Don't forget her brother was Brennan Sorrengail. She has just as much reason to hate us as we do her." I look pointedly at Imogen and Kobe, hoping the implication lands. She could be as innocent in all this as he is, and until we know, no one touches her. "And I'm not going to tell you again. She's *mine* to handle. Anyone feel like arguing?"

Silence.

"Good. Then get back to bed and go in threes."

I watch them go, cloaking them in shadows the best I can as they head closer to the citadel. I hear Violet draw in a long shaky breath above me.

She won't come out until I leave, she's not stupid. So I walk away, following the same path as the others and allow my shadows to envelop me in the darkness, then loop back round to stand a few paces back in the treeline.

She waits a long time, I'll give her that. But when she eventually jumps the last four feet to the grass, I spear out a shadow to grab her round the waist before she can even fully stand up. My arm is around her neck, and I have her locked tight against my chest before she can blink.

"Scream and you die," I whisper in her ear, replacing my elbow with a dagger, pushing the tip at her throat. "Fucking Sorrengail."

I still have her pinned against my chest, but she has the gall to demand, "How did you know? Let me guess, you could smell my perfume. Isn't that what always gives the heroine away in books?"

It's such an innocent, unexpected question, that a short laugh escapes me despite all my suspicions. "I command shadows, but sure, it was your *perfume* that gave you away." I release her, lowering the knife and stepping back a few steps to look at her.

Her mouth is on the floor. "Your signet is a shadow wielder?"

The sheer shock and awe in her expression makes my brow raise. Interesting. If she's been sent here as a spy, she's clearly not been briefed on her enemy. It feels less likely than ever that it's why she's here, despite her climbing trees and listening to private conversations in the middle of the night.

But surely Aetos would have told her? What was that performance in the Rotunda about last week if he's not been telling her to keep her distance?

"What, Aetos hasn't warned you not to get caught alone in the dark with me yet?" I say, silkily.

She grabs a dagger from the sheath at her thigh and spins to face me, but her grip is all wrong and her stance is off. She couldn't stab me with that if she tried. "Is this how you plan to *handle* me?" she challenges.

"Eavesdropping, were we?" Like I didn't already know she was listening to every word. "Now I might actually *have* to kill you," I say, studying her reaction, but I'm already sheathing my dagger back at my chest.

"Then go ahead and get it over with." She takes out another dagger and walks backwards. Her arms are held out a few inches too wide, she's left her body exposed to an attack.

I look from one dagger to the other and say, "That stance is really the best defence you can muster? No wonder Imogen nearly ripped your arm off."

"I'm more dangerous than you think," she spits back at me, one arm rising even further back.

"So I see." I smirk, enjoying how her eyes burn when she's riled. "I'm quaking in my boots," I add, intrigued to see what she does when that fire is stoked.

She flips the daggers and flings them past my head, and I hear the unmistakeable sound of metal splitting wood. I could tell just from the way her body moved that she was never going to hit me, but my pulse picks up just the same.

I don't move, my eyes locked with hers as they blaze with rage. "You missed."

"Did I?" She tilts her head to the side as she reaches for two more daggers. "Why don't you back up a couple of steps and test that theory?"

That piques my interest, but I school indifference onto my face. I step backwards, my back hitting

the tree and the cool metal hilt of the daggers brushing against my ears.

“Tell me again that I missed,” she says, her voice lethal as she flips one of her daggers to repeat the same move.

Well, what do you know? She’s not easy prey or innocent victim after all. She’s just as deadly as the rest of us, hiding in plain sight.

“Fascinating. You look all frail and breakable, but you’re really a violent little thing, aren’t you?” My lips curve into a smile as I mould my shadows into fingers and pull the blades from the tree, dropping them into my hands.

Like always, I watch the effect on people as I reveal just how lethal my signet can make me. These shadows aren’t just darkness, aren’t just lurking in dark corners listening; they will bend to my will and take on any shape, smother the life out of someone on my command.

Most people physically shrink back, their eyes going wide in fear, but not Violet. I can’t read the look in her eyes as I push my back from the tree and walk towards her, her hands switching the grip on her daggers to prepare for close combat, even knowing I could kill her before she had the chance to blink.

I hold the daggers out to her and say, “You should show that little trick to Jack Barlowe.”

“I’m sorry?” She lifts her daggers higher, not willing to let down her defences. Good, she’s smarter than most.

I move closer to her until the tip of her blade presses against my stomach. “The neck-snapping first-year who’s very publicly vowed to slaughter you,” I clarify, reaching under her cloak to slide the first blade into the sheath at her outer thigh.

She stares up at me, eyes crackling with rage but when she makes no move to stab me, I pull back the side of her cloak to sheath the other at her ribs and pause. Her hair is stark against the black of her leather vest, the silvery strands braided together and seeming to glint in the moonlight.

I knew she’d kept her hair long, but it’s always been pinned up at her head. This feels different, like it’s a tiny piece of *her* amid everything this place strips from you. She looks like the Violet I imagined when Brennan told me stories about her. And now she’s real.

But she’s her, and she’s not her. The Violet in his stories was all soft and sweet. This Violet has an edge, her eyes sparking with an intensity that says you won’t know what’s she capable of until you push her.

I stare at her hair for a breath too long and then sheathe the dagger at her ribs. “He’d probably think twice about plotting your murder if you threw a few daggers at his head.”

“Because the honour of my murder belongs to you?” She challenges. “You wanted me dead long before your little club chose my tree to meet under, so I imagine you’ve all but buried me in your mind by now.”

Her dagger is still poised at my stomach.

“Do you plan on telling anyone about my little *club*?” I stare at her, needing to see the truth in whatever answer she gives me. If she tells, she’s dead. We all are.

“No,” she says simply. There’s no fear in it, she’s not saying no because she knows that’s what I

want to hear. She means it, I'm sure of it.

"Why not?" I tilt my head to one side, trying to figure out where her loyalties lie, wondering if she even knows the rules. "It's illegal for the children of separatist officers to assemble in--"

"Groups larger than three. I'm well aware. I've lived at Basgiath longer than you," she snaps at me.

"And you're not going to run off to Mommy, or your precious little Dain, and tell them we've been *assembling*?" Aetos would use this against us in a heartbeat, clinging to the Codex, like it's all that matters in the world.

"You were helping them. I don't see why that should be punished."

And in that moment, I can feel in my core that she is one of the good ones. That just like her brother, she can see the difference between rule and order, and right and wrong. She is nothing like her snivelling snake of a best friend. And she is certainly not here on her mother's mission.

"I'm not going to tell," she insists.

I believe her.

I stare at her like I can see inside her head. Something deep within me tells me that I'm going to need her. Maybe not today, not now. But soon. And that just because I have decided to trust her, doesn't mean *she* trusts me. She has too many people pouring poison and prejudices into her ears. I'm going to have my work cut out for me to keep her neutral in this war, let alone on our side when the world falls apart.

"Interesting," I say, finally. "We'll see if you keep your word, and if you do, then unfortunately, it looks like I owe you a favour." I turn and walk back towards the citadel before she can argue.

"You're not going to *handle* me?" she calls after me.

"Not tonight!" I shout back, imagining the gawk on her face.

She scoffs. "What are you waiting for?"

I have absolutely no idea. "It's no fun if you expect it," I make up on the spot. "Now get back to bed before your wingleader realises you're out after curfew."

"What?" I can practically hear her jaw drop. "*You're* my wingleader!"

I smile secretly to myself, wrapping the shadows around me.

Challenge

Two days later, I'm in the Challenge Room watching two of our first-years lose spectacularly on the mat. It's brutal to watch, and I can feel Garrick tensing next to me with every blow, as if he's taking each hit himself.

I hate to think how much worse it would have been if he hadn't been pushing them relentlessly the past few nights. A first-year in Second Wing has already been carried out on a stretcher; I doubt he'll live to see morning.

Even with my back to the doors, I'm acutely aware of exactly when Violet enters the hall. I've hardly seen her since the night under the oak tree, and I really don't want to watch her face the same fate as some of the others in here.

The only way to calm my nerves is to think of the furious spark in her eyes as she readied to throw her daggers at me. People *will* underestimate her. If she can use that to her advantage, she'll be deadly.

"Fuck off, Barlowe."

Violet's voice rings out across the mats, and I turn to watch as she gives Jack the middle finger. He's leaning up against the wood-planked wall a few paces from her, murder in his eyes and a sadistic grin on his face.

"I honestly hope you win today's challenge," he drawls at her. "It would be a shame for someone else to kill you before I get the chance. But I wouldn't be surprised. Violets are such delicate... fragile things, you know."

This guy has no idea who he's talking to.

Pride swells in my chest as she flings two daggers at him, just as I suggested. They sail across the space separating them to lodge in the wall behind him, one hazardously close to his balls. The sound of it twangs across the hall, causing nearly every rider not engaged on a mat to turn to look at them. Sniggers ripple out around the room.

She waggles her fingers at him, a mocking smile on her face. Fuck, violence looks good on her.

I hear Liam snort from the benches and catch his eye; he raises his eyebrows at me with a cheeky grin. Guess, he's impressed by her too.

"You'll pay for that." Jack points at her, but the threat sounds weak as shit while he's manoeuvring his way over the hilt of her dagger. I watch him leave, wondering if he'll be able to wait until he clears the door before reassuring himself that everything's intact.

Aetos is clearly furious at her. Some shit about keeping a low profile that is just about the worst plan I've ever heard. Bullies like Barlowe need to be schooled quickly on who they can mess with, and she's proved she has him by the balls. Quite literally.

I'm staring straight at her so it's no surprise when her eyes find mine. She gives me a small smile, which looks an awful lot like a thank you. My brows raise, and I turn to watch the next challenge begin three mats over. But it's hard to keep the answering smile off my face. *You're welcome, Violet.*

I'm on the other side of the room when she's called onto the mat for her first challenge, but somehow, she's taking up all the space in my thoughts anyway. I'm struggling to keep my shadows locked down, they're desperately straining to seek her out and report back on what's happening, even as I keep my eyes locked tight on the challenge in front of me.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I haven't felt my power pull at me like this since I was a first-year still learning how to wield.

"The shadows move where you want them, Wingleader," Sgaeyl's voice trills in my head.

"I want them to stay fucking still," I shoot back.

"Do you?" I can almost feel her snort at me through the bond. *"Or do you want to know exactly what's going on with the Sorrengail girl?"*

I don't answer her, just stare resolutely in the opposite direction, my fists clenched with the strain of keeping my shadows exactly where they are. It's only when I hear Violet shout at her opponent to yield from across the room that I realise I've been holding my breath too.

I allow myself one quick glance over at them. She's on the first-year's back, one knee jutting into his spine and a blade to his throat. But the guy is retching his guts up all over the floor.

I cock my head to one side, brows furrowing. I don't know what I expected to see when I looked in their direction, but it certainly wasn't this.

I watch as Emmetterio finally intervenes, calling it Violet's way. She sweeps her opponent's dagger off the floor without looking back. I can already tell from the size and shape of it that it's all wrong for her. I wonder if I should tell her or if she already knows it too.

The guy on the mat is still vomiting excessively as she heads with Rhiannon back to the benches.

It's so spectacularly lucky that her first ever opponent was incapacitated to such an extreme degree that –

I smother a laugh as I realise what she's done, suddenly connecting it with the bag of berries she had tied around her waist in the forest.

This isn't luck at all.

It's poison.

I watch from the sidelines with barely contained amusement over the next few weeks as she takes out her opponents one by one. She's smart enough to attempt to cover her tracks, making sure each one suffers in a slightly different way. One can barely seem to see straight, another punches out in the wrong direction, like their brain is catching up to their fists, and one trips over his own feet, which had seemed perfectly steady one week prior when he put a second-year in the infirmary.

Gods, she's so much like Brennan.

My shadows are watching her almost constantly, seeming to delight in each new report. They whisper of her late-night trip out to the ravine, almost trilling with excitement as they see her sprinkle something into a cadet's tea.

Sgaeyl is lapping it up too, practically crowing with glee as I watch Violet win each challenge out

of the corner of my eye.

"I knew I liked her," Sgaeyl says after Violet's fourth victory.

I just roll my eyes at her through the bond.

I have absolutely no clue how Violet is figuring out which opponent she'll face next, but she seems to know every time, the effects of the poison always making an appearance when she's already on the mat.

But she's still making stupid mistakes. Her form is off, she approaches too wide and makes herself an easy target. Even poisoned, her opponents are managing to land a few too many good hits. I can tell she's getting sloppy, leaning on her smarts as a crutch, which is going to do her absolutely zero good in actual war.

She's here to learn. And someone needs to teach her.

So when my shadows tell me that Rayma, a second-year from First Wing, is Violet's target that morning at breakfast, it doesn't take much to get her sent to the infirmary early.

I stand leaning back on the walls of the Challenge Room unobtrusively, my arms crossed across my chest, watching the little scene I've created play out.

"Sorry, Violet," Professor Emmetterio says. "You were supposed to challenge Rayma, but she's been taken to the healers because she can't seem to walk in a straight line."

I watch the panic rise up in her face. "That's too bad," she says, already heading off the mat like she'll just grab her stuff and be done for the day. This is too much fun. "Shall I just..."

"I'm happy to step in." I call from the sidelines, pushing off from the wall to join her.

She's frozen where she stands, refusing to look in my direction.

"You sure?" Emmetterio says over her shoulder.

Oh, yes. "Absolutely."

I step onto the mat and wait for her to turn and face me.

The Mat

Slowly, she pivots to look at me, her eyes glinting like the steel she has strapped across her chest. Streaks of silver thread through her braid, tiny tendrils of hair escaping by her neck. She narrows her eyes at me and her jaw clenches. I feel my pulse quicken at how deliciously lethal she looks.

I've not allowed myself to look at her too closely, always glancing from the sidelines and sneaking peeks through my shadows. Now, I can't stop my eyes from roaming, taking in every bit of her. Her leathers cling to every curve, the silver buckles on the sheaths strapped all over her body fight for my attention.

Her gaze is trained on me too, watching me like a snake who's about to strike.

"You're all in for a treat," Emmetterio says, clapping his hands together. "Xaden is one of the best fighters we have. Watch and learn."

Violet mutters something under her breath, undoubtedly some little joke at my expense.

This is already too much fun. My lips curve up into a smirk.

"A little out of her league, don't you think?" Aetos challenges from the sidelines, almost spitting the words. I don't give a shit what he thinks. He's her squad leader and should be doing way more than he is to train her. He might be content to watch her take a few hits on the mat each week, hoping the next one that lands will be the one that finally sends her to the Scribe quadrant, but *I* am not.

She can be so much more than this.

I glare at him over Violet's shoulder. "Relax, Aetos. She'll be in one piece when I'm finished *teaching* her."

He doesn't even have the balls to look ashamed. In fact, he seems to be completely oblivious to what is expected of him in his position. Leadership isn't just being invited to private meetings, bigger rooms, and an extra badge on your flight jacket. It comes with responsibility. You owe each of your squad your best, so they can be their best. And he is letting his personal feelings get in the way of who Violet could be.

"I hardly think it's fair-" Aetos squeaks.

"No one asked you to think, *squad leader*." I fire back at him.

On the sidelines, Imogen barely manages to contain her grin as I eviscerate Aetos in a few words. I stride over to her, handing every weapon on my body to her until I'm completely unarmed. I need Violet to know she has nothing to fear from me.

But I also need to fire her up and push her to learn. As fun as it is to watch, she can't poison everyone. Eventually, her luck is going to run out.

I turn back to face Violet, who skims her hands over her own blades. She raises an eyebrow at me and asks, "You don't think you'll need those?"

"Nope. Not when you brought enough for the both of us." I smile, watching the taunt land as her eyes blaze, then motion her forwards with my fingers. "Let's go."

Don't go for the throw, Violet. Surprise me.

But she moves into the same stance as she did all those weeks ago out in the forest. It's entirely too predictable to catch the dagger she hurls straight at my chest.

"Already seen that move," I tsk at her, enjoying the flare of fury in her eyes as I flip the dagger round in my hand to face her. It took all of two seconds for her to lose her only advantage and I can sense all the way from here how furious she is for falling straight into my trap.

She kicks towards me in a blur. It's fast but uncontrolled and easier than it should be to dodge her next blade and capture her leg, pulling it out from under her so her back slams on to the mat.

I can tell it's winded her badly, so I give her an extra second to get her breath back, making a show of dropping her first dagger and kicking it off the mat towards Aetos.

But she recovers faster than I'm expecting, shooting up to stab me in the thigh and I wonder if it was all a ruse. I block it just in time with my forearm, gripping her wrist with my opposite hand and squeezing until her grip loosens and she drops the blade on the floor. The strike was raw and untrained, but it's still impressive.

Her rage is almost crackling along her skin, I can feel her pulse pumping hard under my fingertips. I lean in and whisper, "Going for blood today, are we, Violence?"

The name suits her so beautifully I'm amazed I've never thought of it before.

Her eyes burn with fury, as I kick the discarded blade off the mat again. "My name is *Violet*," she seethes at me, through gritted teeth.

"I think my version fits you better," I say, releasing her wrist and stand to offer her a hand. "We're not done yet."

I don't think she'll be stupid enough to trust me, but what do you know. She puts her hand in mine, and I yank her to her feet, tugging her back against me and twist her arm behind her shoulder.

"Damn it!" she shouts, clearly furious with herself.

I take one of the daggers sheathed at her thigh and press it to her neck, determined she learns this lesson properly. I'm not doing this to embarrass her, though I can feel the eyes of nearly ever rider in the room trained on us.

"Don't trust a single person who faces you on this mat," I hiss into her ear, so only she can hear it.

"Even someone who owes me a favour?" she mutters back.

I feel a secret thrill in my stomach that she has the guts to try and collect it from me. But no way am I wasting that favour on this.

I drop the third dagger onto the floor and kick it off the mat in the same direction, ignoring the look Aetos is shooting back at me. This should have been you, Aetos. But I'm more than happy to play the bad guy if it's the shove she needs to fly.

"I'm the one who decides when to grant that favour. Not you." I release her and step back.

She whirls on me immediately, punching up into my throat but I'm ready for it and push her arm aside. It's good, but she's got more. I know it.

“Good,” I say smiling, even as I block her next punch. “Going for the throat is your best option, as long as it’s exposed.”

I can tell that she’s already blown through most of the moves she’s practiced as she tries the same swipe-kick combo she opened with. I grab the same leg as before, pausing to take the dagger sheathed on her thigh, rather than putting her back on the mat again, hoping it will force her to get creative.

I let her go and kick the dagger away once more. The only daggers she has left are sheathed across her ribs, glinting at me to come and get them.

Violet unsheathes one and starts to circle me, but it’s all show. She doesn’t move to attack even when I let her get behind me, prancing back into my periphery entirely too soon.

She’s run out of moves, with five blades still to go.

“You going to prance or are you going to strike?” I know it’s going to rile her.

She punches over my shoulder a second later, and I dip pre-empting it, gripping her arm and use her own forward momentum to flip her past me so she lands face-down on the mat with a thump.

Before she can get her breath back, I’m on top of her, one knee in her ribs and her arm pulled back to arch her back off the floor. She cries out in pain, dropping the dagger from her hand uselessly onto the mat. I ease the pressure off slightly at the sound, even as I slide my hands underneath her to unsheath another dagger and fling it at Aetos. I can’t help my mocking smile as it lodges in the floor at his feet, forcing him to back up a tiny step.

I take another one of her daggers and hold it to her neck, just below her jawline. Her face is pressed into the mat, squeezed tight against the pressure on her arm and ribs.

I lean in and whisper in her ear, “Taking out your enemy before the battle is really smart; I’ll give that to you.”

All the struggle goes out from under me as she stills, holding her breath.

“Problem is, if you aren’t testing yourself in here-“ I scrape the dagger gently down her neck, featherlight, barely touching “-then you’re not going to get any better.”

She shifts a little again underneath me, before biting out, “You’d rather I die, no doubt.”

“And be denied the pleasure of your company?” I tease. But it comes off all wrong with her underneath me. The second I say it, I want to take it back.

“I fucking hate you.”

There’s so much venom in it, that it lands like a physical blow on my chest. I don’t want her to hate me.

But hate is better than fear.

I lean my body closer to her and say, lethally quiet, “That doesn’t make you special.”

I release her and get to my feet, reaching out a hand towards her to help her up. She avoids it, scrambling back from me to stand up on her own.

I smile at her, cocking my head like I’m impressed. “She can be taught.”

“She’s a quick learner,” she fires back.

“That remains to be seen.” I walk back a few paces to the edge of the mat, the furthest point from the spectators lining the far side and then gesture her forwards again. This isn’t over until I say it is.

“You’ve made your damn point.” She’s so angry it echoes round the hall, setting off a chain of gasps and quiet murmurs. The intensity of the rage in her eyes makes my stomach flip.

Oh, hate is *so* much better than fear.

“Trust me,” I fold my arms across my chest and wait, “I’ve barely gotten started.”

She moves quicker than I expect her to, her hot temper fuelling a burst of speed. She manages to kick out my legs from under me, throwing all her weight low and solid into the back of my knees.

It’s a good move and she’s on top of me in seconds, her thighs squeezing tight on either side of my back, her arm threading round my throat to squeeze. But her balance is all off, and I throw my weight into her, grabbing her thighs as I do it to roll us across the mat until I’m on top.

I have her pinned beneath me, my forearm at her throat as she draws in deep heavy breaths, her chest rising. But all I can think about is her thighs on either side of me, what it would feel like if she were to wrap them round me, how easy it would be to just lean in...

My blood pounds through me and I just stare at her, my breaths deep and fast, matching hers, not entirely sure what to do now that I have her here.

She decides for us both, jutting a dagger out to pierce my shoulder, but I grab her wrist with the blade just an inch away. I push her arm back, so it’s pinned above her head. The motion shifts my face right over hers.

Her face flushes pink and her lips purse, like she’s struggling to hold herself together. I push my fingers into her fist wrapped around the blade and send it skittering across the mat, then lean back slightly, releasing her wrist.

“Get your dagger.” She has one left and I want to show her how to use it. This is not an exercise to show her all the ways she is weak; it’s an exercise to prove all the ways she could be strong.

“What?”

“Get. Your. Dagger.” I repeat, threading my fingers over her hand and guiding it towards her ribs to get the last blade. Our hands are locked together so tight I can feel her pulse pounding.

“You’re tiny,” I say. I’m sure she sees it as a limitation, certain that’s what has driven her to use her smarts over her skill. But being small and fast can be lethal. She just doesn’t know it yet.

“Well aware.” Her eyes narrow at me, in a way that tells me that’s been thrown at her as an insult more times than she can count.

“So stop going for bigger moves that expose you.” I guide her hand holding the blade down my side. “A rib shot would have worked just fine.”

“Are you seriously going to show her all the ways to kill you?” Sgaeyl suddenly interjects.

“She’s not the enemy here”, I respond, moving Violet’s hand around my back. It’s an unnatural angle for my own arm and it throws my weight off balance.

“Kidneys are a good fit from this angle, too.” If she wanted to kill me right now, she could do it.

She swallows and I feel her shift a little underneath me, bringing my attention down to where my crotch is pressed between her thighs. My eyes are locked with hers; the icy blue seeming to spark and crackle.

“*So I see,*” Sgaeyl says, silkily. She’s enjoying this far too much.

I lead our joined hands to my waist. “Chances are, if your opponent is in armour, it’s weak here. Those are three easy places you could have struck before your opponent would have had time to stop you.”

She blinks and I wish I could tell what she’s thinking. If she realises what it takes for me to show her every way she can hurt me.

“Do you hear me?” I ask, and it comes out all soft and caring.

She nods.

“Good.” I say a little more firmly. I lean into her and whisper, “Because you can’t poison every enemy you come across. You’re not going to have time to offer tea to some Braevi gryphon rider when they come at you?”

“How did you know?” Her voice is breathy, and I feel her thighs tighten around me in a way that sends a secret thrill running down my spine.

“Oh, Violence, you’re good, but I’ve known better poison masters.” The truth is out of my mouth before I can stop it. I might have spent the past few minutes disarming her, but she’s pulled down every wall I keep around myself and my secrets while I did it.

I swallow, my mind racing with thoughts of Brennan and what he’d think of all this, and add, “The trick is to not make it quite so obvious.”

Aetos suddenly interjects from the sidelines, reminding me we have an audience for this little encounter. “I think she’s been taught enough for the day.” A small part of me wonders how it took him quite so long to intervene.

“He always that overprotective?” I ask, leaning up a little.

“He cares about me,” she fires back in a way that implies I don’t.

“He’s holding you back.” I hope she can see it too, hope my little lesson here taught her what she can achieve. “Don’t worry. Your little poisoning secret is safe with me,” I add with a knowing look. We can both keep each other’s secrets now.

My hand is still locked with hers, gripped tight around the dagger and I guide it back into the sheath at her ribs, the implication of it not lost on me. Her pulse races against mine and I wonder if she’s affected by our closeness as much as I am. I push up from her in one quick motion, straightening up.

“You’re not going to disarm me?” she challenges, rising up onto her forearms to look up at me from the floor.

“Nope. Defenceless women have never been my type. We’re done for today.” I turn and walk back towards Imogen, trying to think of anything except how Violet’s body felt under mine, the blazing

fire in her eyes.

I concentrate on resheathing every dagger one by one, taking slow, steady breaths. I can feel Imogen watching me carefully, but I refuse to meet her gaze.

When I feel more in control of myself, I turn to glance at Violet, whose fingers are trembling slightly too as she resheathes all the daggers Aetos is holding.

His hand goes to stroke her cheek and I snap out, “Aetos.”

His head swings to look at me, his hand falling back uselessly to his side.

“She could use a little less protection and a little more instruction,” I say coolly, holding his gaze until I see Rhiannon loop a friendly arm around Violet and walk her back to the benches.

He nods, turning back to the mat to watch the next challenge.

I look back at Imogen, and gesture for her to follow me.

Promises

Imogen and Garrick sit on opposing sides of the table in my room, resolutely not looking at each other. Instead, their eyes are glued to me as I pace, Imogen with a grim, expectant look on her face and Garrick with his brows furrowed, the most puzzled expression that I've ever seen on his. He's certainly never seen *me* like this. But I don't know what to do, and I have finally concluded that I'm going to need some fucking help.

"Aetos is a problem," I say, standing still and turning to face them both properly.

Imogen's brows quirk upwards, and her tongue sticks out into her cheek, but she says nothing.

"Xaden?" Garrick says, like he's not heard me correctly.

"He's too close to her." It comes out too fast, too angry and I'm acutely aware that it sounds a bit too much like jealousy. My eyes dart between them, hoping one of them will give me a solution that I can't see.

But Garrick is still lost. He turns to Imogen who mouths, "Sorrenail."

"Ah." He turns back to face me slowly, his hands raising in the air like he's trying not to spook a dragon. He clears his throat, "And why is that a problem?"

I frown. How can he not see the risk?

"Aetos has retrocognition." When he stares at me blankly, I motion with my hand that I'm going to need him to keep up, and say, "And Sorrenail knows too much."

Garrick leans back and asks, "What does she know?" at the same time as Imogen pushes forward, her hands on her knees and says, "What the *fuck* have you told her?"

Shit. The silence drags out between us, the only sound the heavy rain on my window and the distant rolling boom of thunder over the mountains surrounding the citadel.

Finally, I admit, "She heard the meeting at the oak trees a month ago."

Garrick's eyes blaze in understanding.

Imogen stays exactly where she was, perfectly still. Then she grabs a dagger from the sheath at her ribs and stands, every muscle coiled and tense. "I'm going to fucking kill her."

She strides towards the door, then stops still three paces from it like she's hit a wall.

"Sit. The. *Fuck*. Down." My tone is lethal.

Shadows are locked around her feet, snaking round the wrist holding the dagger and twisting it back towards us in the room. Imogen cocks her head to one side, realising that struggling would be futile and sags slightly against the bonds. I could kill her before her hand touches the door. My shadows push her back to her seat, forcing her down into it. They hold her in place as she glares murder in my direction, pulling in deep, angry breaths.

Garrick watches us carefully as one of my shadows forces Imogen's hand open, dropping the blade on the floor. She's still armed to the teeth, but the clatter of metal serves as a reminder of exactly what I'm capable of when pushed.

“You can’t kill a squad mate anyway. You’ll be executed.” Garrick says to her, but his eyes are following the shadows.

“I’d rather *me* die than all of you.” She doesn’t look at him, her eyes locked on me, her tone venomous.

“You’re not listening,” I say, loosening the shadows’ grip until they sink back into the darkness. “She heard the meeting at the trees *a month ago*. We’re all still breathing. She’s not with them.”

Imogen’s mouth clenches around all the words she wants to say.

Garrick shakes his head, confused. “Then why is she *here*? She’s supposed to be in the Scribe quadrant.”

The question scratches at my skin. Why *is* she here? Aetos has offered to get her out, get her to where she’s *supposed* to be, but she hasn’t taken it. She is staying by choice, finding her own ways to survive this hellhole.

A boom of thunder echoes round the quadrant, louder this time as the storm draws closer. I think back to Violet crossing the parapet, and the storm I was convinced would be damning proof of her motivations. And perhaps it was, just not in the way I thought?

The final piece of the puzzle clicks into place.

“Her mother sent her here to die,” I say, to myself as much as to the others.

Imogen’s eyes widen.

“You’re reaching,” Garrick says, looking at me like I’ve lost it.

I throw my hands into the air. “I don’t fucking know, Garrick! Ok? I don’t know.” I start pacing again without realising. “Does it matter why? She’s here. She’s Brennan’s little sister. And she already knows more than she should.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Imogen asks, her eyes tracking my movements across the room. “I could have fixed this; it’s too late now.”

My steps still, my back to them as I say, “It was a test. She passed.”

I don’t want to see the glance they exchange behind my back. The pause stretches one beat, two.

“Bit of a risk, brother,” Garrick says quietly.

“Yeah,” I say, finally turning to face him, expecting to see the judgment in his eyes, but it’s only soft understanding I find.

It’s one of the biggest gambles I’ve ever made, a gamble with all their lives and it’s only now, saying it out loud, that I realise how much of a risk it was. At the time, looking at Violet that night and seeing the truth and goodness in her eyes, it hadn’t felt like much of a risk at all.

I pull out the last chair next to them at the table and sit down, resting my head in my hands. I feel the two of them swivel to face me.

“Is that what that was on the mat today?” Imogen asks. “Another one of your tests?”

I lift my head up a fraction, my hands sliding down so my fingertips press into my temples and

hold her gaze. “No. She needed teaching, so I taught her.”

Imogen stares back at me like she can see through me. “I could still kill her without breaking a sweat.”

I know she’s saying it to rile me. I don’t give her the satisfaction, just smile at her tightly like I think she’s joking.

“No one’s killing her,” Garrick says. “We get word to Brennan in Aretia. See what he thinks about all this.” He looks between us like he’s waiting for us to object. When no one does, he adds, “We can sneak it in with the letters home in a few days when we meet up with the fliers near Athebyne.”

Finally, someone with a fucking plan.

I nod a few too many times. “Yes, good. Good. Give me a pen.” I gesture to Garrick, my hand outstretched.

“Now?” He’s incredulous.

My hand falls. “What’s wrong with now?”

“What the hell are you even going to say?” Imogen asks. “Hey Brennan, Violet is a rider, not a scribe. Got any ideas what your bitch mom is up to?”

“P.S. I think your sister looks hot in her leathers.” Sgaeyl quips.

“*Not now,*” I shoot back, pouring shadows into the bond to try and block her. But my mind is suddenly preoccupied with exactly how good Violet looked on the mat earlier today, the blades strapped around her waist, the ribbing in the leather accentuating every curve.

“You’re not writing it now,” says Garrick. “Besides, we’ll need Bodhi to code it anyway.”

“Ok, ok.” I say, leaning back in my chair. Garrick blows out a heavy breath.

“Imogen-“ I start.

“No, Xaden.” She raises both her hands like she can stop this line of questioning before it begins. “I know what you’re going to ask, and the answer is no.”

“Im-“ I plead. I don’t want to order her to do this. I need her to see how necessary this is, to *want* to do it. It’s the only way for sure I know she won’t fail.

“No!” She slams her hands down on the table, making Garrick jump with the force of it. “I am not shadowing that Sorrengail bitch.” She bites it out through gritted teeth.

“I’m not asking you to take her out for picnics in the flight field,” I fire back. “I just need you to watch Aetos. Intervene when you can. Wipe when you can’t.”

“Or you know, you could just stop giving her information that could kill us all.” Imogen shoots back, her tone vicious. It lands like a hit to my gut. That’s not what is happening here.

“I’m not passing her information,” I say, my fists clenching on the table, shadows drawing in around us.

Garrick puts his hands out, one in front of each of us in an intervention. “I think she’s just saying you need to keep your distance.” When he’s confident neither of us is about to kill the other, he

adds, “We attack this problem from two sides. Imogen watches Aetos. You steer clear of Sorrengail. Simple.”

“Fine,” Imogen says, slumping back in her chair, her arms crossed across her chest.

“Fine,” I say, but my chest feels tight as I think of Violet’s furious, burning eyes under me on the mat.

This doesn’t feel fine at all.

Fliers

“Tell me again,” Sgaeyl says, as we cruise closer to our meeting point outside Athebyne. We’ve been flying for hours already, but it’s a beautiful night; the moonlight shimmers off the snow on the peaks and shadows dance through the treetops as they sway under the beat of the dragons’ wings.

I’ve read it so many times it’s engrained in my brain. *“General Sorrengail has put Violet in the Rider’s Quadrant. We’re watching over her for you. Can we trust her?”* Bodhi wrote it in the end, ignoring Imogen’s insistent pleas to strike out the second line that implied she’s on protection detail.

It’s factual, reassuring and puts the power in Brennan’s hands to decide how far we can trust her. I sure as hell don’t want to make that call.

Sgaeyl snorts. *“I still like my version better.”*

“Your version would have ended with Brennan’s hands around my neck,” I mutter under my breath.

She dives down vertically, and it’s so unexpected, I struggle to keep my seat, my shadows whipping out to grip her pommel.

“I heard that,” she says as she brings us parallel to the ground once more, glaring back at me over her shoulder with one golden eye.

“I meant you to,” I retort, but I grin back at her.

We’re almost at the clearing now, and I send my shadows spilling out along the ground before we land. Two gryphons and their fliers wait in the darkness near the edge of the clearing, moonlight glinting off the lake where it laps near their feet.

It’s a risk coming tonight with the moon so full and high, the skies cloudless after the intensity of the storms that raged the past few nights. Any passing patrol could spot us. But back at Basgiath, it’s the first day of Gauntlet trials and the sheer scale of death that comes from the first few runs is as good a distraction as any.

“All clear,” I say to Sgaeyl, who wordlessly communicates with Garrick and Bodhi’s dragons flanking us. The three dragons curve downwards over the clearing, landing near the lake.

Syrena and Nyal stride out of the treeline to meet us as we dismount, the dragons turning to drink deep from the lake at our side.

“We’ve been waiting for hours!” Syrena yells it at us, gesturing up at the skies when she’s still a good thirty feet from us. Garrick sighs heavily next to me, already accepting the tone for this meeting.

“Well, we’ve been flying for hours.” I retort as they draw closer, the gryphons following close behind. Shadows tense in the treeline surrounding us, waiting.

They stop a few feet from us. Syrena’s face twists as she clocks the bags we’re holding.

“Is that it?” The anger has leached from her voice, the disappointment so clear in her words as her eyes dart behind us like she’s hoping there’s more.

Bodhi and Garrick throw the two bags onto the grass separating us, the weapons clinking together inside. We all know it's not enough.

Syrena stares at the bags in disbelief, silence stretching between us.

Eventually, Bodhi cracks, "Be grateful we managed to get our hands on these." Garrick tenses beside me.

Syrena locks eyes with Bodhi, who's just given her a target to channel every ounce of fear and desperation she feels. "Grateful? You want me to be grateful?" Her gaze pierces each of us in turn. "Oh, I'm sorry, should I be *grateful* that it's sheer dumb luck that puts your people safe behind the wards, while mine get slaughtered?"

Bodhi has the sense to stay silent. Garrick asks, "Have the attacks—"

"—increased?" Nyal interjects, reaching out a hand to stroke down Syrena's back. "Yeah. It seems to be spreading. Even when we kill one, two more crop up in their place." He turns to look at Syrena, and even from here I can feel their exhaustion, how close they are to losing hope. They're not in this fight because they think they can win, they're just out of options.

Garrick moves to ask another question, but I hold up one hand. "Don't say any more. We can't risk the interrogation."

Syrena stares at me, her jaw clenched tight. Then she kneels on the ground and opens the bags, searching through the paltry haul of weapons we've managed to sneak out of Basgiath and the surrounding outposts in the past few weeks.

She lifts out three envelopes, tied together with string. "What's this?"

"Letters," Garrick says. "We need you to get them to Aretia."

She gapes up at us and her hand clenches tight around the handle of the bag she's holding. "We're fighting for our lives," she bites out, slinging one bag onto her shoulder and passing the other to Nyal. "And you want me to take some time out to deliver some drivel to your families?" She locks eyes with me, her mouth lifting in a sneer.

"Our families are dead," I say, holding her gaze, my tone calm and even. "They were executed for trying to help yours."

The words hang heavily between us. Nyal reaches out and touches her arm and she breaks her stare to look at him, like she's searching for something in his eyes.

"Fine," she says eventually, turning back to us. "But Xaden, we need more next time. *Please*."

The desperation in that one word, the admission of just how badly they are losing this war, lodges tight in my throat. But I can't make any more promises to help them. We already risk everything just to get them this.

"I'm trying," I say with a shrug.

Syrena's expression tightens, but she nods once and turns without another word. We watch as they mount the gryphons and take off into the night, flying in the opposite direction to the way we arrived.

No one speaks until the silhouettes of the gryphons have disappeared into the distance, the only

noise the gentle lapping of the water on the shore.

“What are we even doing here?” Bodhi murmurs, staring at the sky. He turns to look at us. “We’re seriously going to fly back to Basgiath and sleep in our nice warm beds?”

I know the feeling. But Garrick and I have been doing this for much longer than him; we’ve long built walls against the hopelessness of it all.

It’s Garrick that finally says, “What are the alternatives?”

Bodhi looks around wildly. “Stay? Help them?” He gestures uselessly around us.

Syrena’s *please* feels like it’s still echoing through the clearing. I would love more than anything to mount Sgaeyl and fly after the gryphons, to do *something* in this war that’s not sitting and waiting.

“We *are* helping them,” I say, reaching out to grasp Bodhi’s shoulder. “We’re their only access to the material that works against the venom.” If we leave Basgiath, we cut off their supply line. Yes, they’ll have a couple more riders and dragons in the war but for how long if the weapons run out.

“Leaving Basgiath is the easy choice, not the right one,” I reassure him. “We all wonder what’s possible in this war. If our powers might be the edge that they need to turn the tide. But we have to focus on the probabilities right now. And 100 riders bonded to dragons is better than three.”

“I know you wish you could do more, cousin,” Garrick says softly. “We all do. But this war isn’t won in one battle. We need every rebellion kid bonded to a dragon. We slip the fliers supplies whenever we can. We plant seeds of the truth, and hope that when the time comes, enough people are brave enough to see it.”

Bodhi’s dragon has edged back towards us and dips his head down to blow a small snort of steam on his back. Bodhi sags back a little against him.

“We make it through all of this,” I say, squeezing his shoulder once before letting go. Sgaeyl has come to stand next to me and I reach out, resting a hand against her lower chest. “And then we fight.”

“*Then we fight,*” Sgaeyl agrees, rearing back and shooting a short, hot burst of fire towards the sky.

We’ve flown for almost a full day, each of us on our own dragon with too much time to consider what more we could have done. By the time we land in Basgiath, Bodhi has countless ideas for ways to increase the amount of weaponry we can get our hands on. None of them good ones. Garrick tries to shut him down, reminding him of the risks as we walk through the door to the courtyard.

“There has to be something more we can do,” Bodhi argues quietly, looking at me for back-up but I’m distracted by my shadows alerting me that we’re no longer alone.

There’s a couple tucked in one of the alcoves behind the dais, but they’re wrapped up in each other, oblivious to the rest of us. Violet sitting on the gravel, concealed by the darkness, and watching our every move, poses an entirely different problem.

I stop mid-step, no more than ten feet from her.

“What’s wrong?” Garrick asks, looking around. He spots the couple in the alcove and narrows his eyes, trying to see who it is.

“Go on. I’ll meet you inside,” I say.

“You sure?” Bodhi’s gaze rakes over the darkness where Violet sits and I wrap the shadows around her more completely, tucking her out of sight.

“Go,” I repeat, watching them make their way across the courtyard and back to the rooms. The door swings shut behind them.

“I know you know I’m here.” Violet steps out of the shadows into the moonlight. “And please don’t prattle on about commanding the dark. I’m not in the mood tonight.”

Prattle? I don’t prattle.

“No questions about where I’ve been?” The second I say it I remember I’m supposed to be keeping my distance, not inviting her to help herself to more information that could sign our execution papers by morning.

But she doesn’t seem the slight bit interested. “I honestly don’t care,” she says with a shrug and then winces in pain. Her hand reaches out towards her shoulder but her fist clenches and she brings it back to her side. She’s clearly hurt. But she’s also smart enough to try and hide it before someone can use it against her.

I cock my head to one side at the complete indifference in her tone. “You really don’t, do you?”

“Nope. It’s not like I’m not out after curfew myself.” She sighs like the weight of the world is on her shoulders. I want to lift it off her and carry it myself.

“*Distance, Wingleader,*” Sgaeyl reminds me through the bond.

Shit. But I’m desperate to know why she’s out here so late, desperate to know what’s troubling her.

“What *are* you doing out after curfew, first-year?” I say, the best impression of uncaring wingleader I can muster in her presence.

“Debating running away,” she retorts. “How about you? Feel like sharing?”

Gods, I wish I could. And not because I want to run away from danger and darkness, but because I want to run straight for it. Everything feels so fucking hopeless here, like nothing we do makes any difference to the real fight waging around our borders. And each day, death closes in a couple more inches.

“The same,” I admit.

But Violet just stares at me and rolls her eyes. Guess she doesn’t buy it.

“Look, are you going to kill me or not? The anticipation is starting to annoy the fuck out of me.”

She moves her hand to her shoulder again, rolling it. She’s either in so much pain she can’t help it, or she trusts me a little more than she did thirty seconds ago.

“Haven’t decided yet,” I answer, watching her wince as she squeezes the muscle. My eyes scan the

rest of her for injuries, catching on the long gash that runs down the side of one cheek.

“Well, could you?”

The ridiculousness of this conversation hits me. Is she really negotiating with me on when I decide to kill her? Surely the fact that I haven’t done it yet is more than proof enough of my intentions? Just like I know she has zero intention of telling anyone about what she heard by the trees a month ago.

I can’t help the smile that curves my lips as I say, “Am I affecting your schedule, Violence?”

But it seems to make her even more furious, her hands curling into fists. “I just need to know what my chances are here.”

My smile spreads wider. I can’t help myself; she looks so adorable in her rage. “That’s the oddest way I’ve ever been hit on—

“Not my chances with *you*, you conceited prick!” She storms past me, but I catch her wrist, not willing to let her go just yet. Despite the ridiculous topic of conversation, things feel lighter between us. I want to cling on to her lightness for just a little bit longer tonight and chase the darkness of the day away.

Garrick’s warning to stay away from her echoes through me, as I gently pull her back towards me, until she’s close enough that her arm brushes against mine.

“Chances at what?” I say. I can feel her pulse hammering under my fingertips on her wrist.

“Nothing,” she mutters, refusing to look up at me.

“Chances at *what*?” I repeat. *Trust me, Violet.* “Do not make me ask three times.” I should drop her wrist, but I know the second she does she’ll pull away from me and I can’t bring myself to let go.

“At living through all of this! I can’t make it up the damned Gauntlet.” She tugs at her wrist, but with so little effort, I wonder if maybe she doesn’t want me to let go either. Maybe she needs someone tonight too.

“I see.” She’s scared. But not of me, for once. It’s oddly comforting.

“No, you don’t. You’re probably celebrating because I’ll fall to my death, and you won’t have the trouble of killing me.”

Everything I’ve done to keep her alive flashes through my mind. My shadows stalking her down the parapet. The note to Brennan. Moving her squad into my wing. Cloaking her in shadows. My shadows wrapping around Imogen’s blade.

“Killing you wouldn’t be any trouble, Violence. It’s leaving you alive that seems to cause the majority of my trouble.”

I see Garrick’s face again, telling me to steer clear of her. But then I think of Brennan reading the letter we sent, the fear he would feel knowing what his sister still faces. He’s stood where we do now. He knows more than anyone that it only gets harder from here. She needs someone to trust. Why shouldn’t that someone be me?

“Sorry to be a hassle.” Sarcasm spears me through every word, and she searches my face like it has all the answers.

“You know the problem with this place?” She tugs on her arm again. “Besides you touching things that don’t belong to you?” Her glare tells me she means it this time.

I let go, my fingers and thumb lingering at that last touch of her skin on mine.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” I say, arching a brow.

“Hope.”

It’s so unexpected, that it lodges in the back of my throat.

“Hope?” I choke out. Gods, all I want is some hope.

“Hope.” She nods. “Someone like you would never get it, but I knew coming here was a death sentence.” I want to stop her right there, tell her just how much I understand. But I don’t have the words, so she continues, “It didn’t matter that I’ve been trained my entire life to enter the Scribe Quadrant; when General Sorrengail gives an order, you can’t exactly ignore it.”

She’s letting me in. My heart seems to beat harder in my chest. I don’t want to speak, determined not to ruin the moment so she’ll keep confiding in me. But she’s looking at me expectantly like I’m supposed to answer. Was there even a question?

“Sure you can.” I shrug. “You just might not like the consequences.”

She rolls her eyes, but leans in a little closer. I find myself mirroring her, leaning in just the same amount. It’s the closest we’ve even been without her holding a blade to me.

“I knew what the odds were,” she says, quietly. “And I came anyway, concentrating on the tiny percentage of a chance that I would live. And then I make it almost two months and I get...” She shakes her head. “Hopeful.”

She still doesn’t see how strong she is.

“Ah. And then you lose a squadmate, and you can’t quite get up the chimney, and you give up. I’m starting to see. It’s not a flattering picture, but if you want to run off to the Scribe Quadrant—”

She gasps, pulling back from me. “How do you know about that?”

I smile. “I know everything that goes on here.” I pick up tendrils of shadow, moulding them so they seem to dance and swirl around us, creating our own intimate little cocoon of darkness right here in the courtyard. “Shadows remember? They hear everything, see everything, *conceal* everything.”

It’s just us in here. The rest of the world is gone. None of it matters. There’s just... her.

“My mother would definitely reward you if you told her about Dain’s plan,” she says, watching the shadows whirl all around us.

“She’d definitely reward *you* for telling her about my little... what did you call it? *Club*.”

“I’m not going to tell her.” She seems outraged at the idea of it.

“I know.” I almost whisper it, my gaze locked on hers. “It’s why you’re still alive.”

One tendril of her hair is falling loose from the braid framing her face. I want desperately to reach out and tuck it back behind her ear, to stroke my hand along her cheek.

I swallow. “Here’s the thing, Sorrengail. Hope is a fickle, dangerous thing. It steals your focus and aims it towards the possibilities instead of keeping it where it belongs – on the probabilities.” The words I said to Bodhi earlier come back to me, but they’ve taken on a whole new meaning.

“So I’m supposed to what? Not hope that I live? Just plan for death?”

“You’re supposed to focus on the things that can kill you so you find ways to *not* die. I can barely count the number of people in this quadrant who want you dead, either as revenge against your mother or because you’re just really good at pissing people off, but you’re still here, defying the odds.” A tendril of shadow strokes down her cheek where my fingers can’t. “It’s been rather surprising to watch, actually.”

“Happy to be your entertainment. I’m going to bed.” She storms through the shadows, and I watch her walk away from me. No, we’re not ending this conversation like that.

I race after her, grabbing the door to the barracks before it can slam behind her and call out, “Maybe if you stopped sulking in your self-pity, you’d see that you have *everything* you need to scale the Gauntlet.”

“My self-*what*?”

“People die.” I shrug, thinking of all the people I’ve lost, all the stupid, unlucky ways that they were taken from me. “It’s going to happen over and over again. It’s the nature of what happens here. What makes you a rider is what you do *after* people die.”

I take a deep, steadying breath. She is not going to die. She is good and kind and strong. Not just in Brennan’s stories but here, now. She is a tiny fragment of truth and goodness in a world full of liars and death. I *trust* her. And I desperately want her to trust me too, to be worthy of that trust from someone like her.

“You want to know why you’re still alive? Because you’re the scale I currently judge myself against every night. Every day I let you live, I get to convince myself that there’s still a part of me that’s a decent person.” I am not the villain this place would turn me into, able to kill without question or guilt. I am not driven by an insatiable need for vengeance against the people that killed my father. I am on the *right* side of this war.

That knowledge is the only thing that keeps me standing against the hopelessness of it all.

Violet stares back at me across the hall and her eyes are molten white-blue fire. I can be the person for her to hate if it’s the fuel she needs to survive this place.

“So if you want to quit, then please, spare me the temptation and fucking *quit*. But if you want to do something, then do it.”

“I’m too short to span the distance!” Her anger seems to whip out and strike me where I stand. She will survive this, I’m sure of it.

“The right way isn’t the only way. Figure it out.”

I turn and walk away, feeling my heart pound against my ribs, a tiny piece of hope fluttering against all probabilities.

Gauntlet

“Fourth Wing, move out!” I call from the front of formation the next morning, refusing to look back at the lines of first-years waiting behind me. This is one of the deadliest days in the quadrant. Even if they make it up the Gauntlet, they still have to survive Presentation.

That’s the reward you get for besting an obstacle course designed to push every physical and mental limit you have. The chance to walk in front of a group of temperamental dragons and hope they don’t finish the job.

I lead the files of cadets to the gate, trying to kid myself that I can’t look at *any* of them. When really, it’s only one face I don’t want to see.

But even avoiding Violet, I can’t stop replaying the memory of her from last night, the raw fury in her eyes as she screamed her limitations at me. How even when she said she couldn’t do it, her eyes lit up in a way that said she knew she would.

She will not die today. I feel it echo with every footstep as we march through the tunnel.

My shadows linger behind me, determined to check on her. They swirl in the darkness of the tunnel as the rest of the sections trudge through, tracking her steps despite my best efforts to keep them locked down.

She’s walking next to Aetos, and I feel my stomach squeeze as his hand threads through hers in the darkness. “*Please*,” he begs.

“I can’t.” Violet says quietly, shaking her head. “Any more than you would leave Cath and run to the scribes yourself.”

Even now, he’s pedalling this same old story. It takes every ounce of self-control to not send one of my shadows to spear for his mouth and gag it shut. This narrative of how she’s too weak to survive here is the only thing that’s going to get her killed. And he won’t stop talking. It’s like he thinks if he can say it enough times, he can convince himself he did everything he could to save her.

When really, he should just get out of her damned way.

“That’s different,” Aetos says. “I’m a rider.”

She is too, asshole.

“Well, maybe, I am too,” she whispers. I can’t tell if she believes it.

“I don’t want to bury you, Vi.” The morning light streams into the tunnel as they reach the exit, and my shadows stutter against the brightness. I force them to follow their final few steps into the open air.

“It’s inevitable that one of us will have to bury the other,” Violet says. Fuck, what is he doing to her? He should be building her up, not telling her she’s going to end up in a body bag.

“You know what I mean. Please don’t do this.” In his desperation, he says it so loudly that I’m sure the cadets in front of them can hear.

They pause at the exit, staring out at the panorama of soaring mountains and dipping valleys that is

the backdrop to today's futile exercise. The Gauntlet is carved into the face of the cliff, each obstacle leading to the next with an even greater distance to fall. My shadows pool against the cliff face, unable to stretch out after them without creating suspicion.

I strain to hear the last wisps of their conversation.

"I don't know if I can watch," Aetos says, his voice fading into the distance.

"Then close your eyes."

My eyes are trained on the last obstacle, my mouth so dry that it's painful to swallow. She can do this. I'm sure of it.

The scream that pulls from her throat is so guttural that I physically tense with the restraint of not running to her. I see her fingers first, clawing at the edge of the ramp, the tips turning white as they strain to hold her weight. Her elbow. The top of her head. Finally, she pulls her torso over the edge and then uses the blade she's jammed into the wood as a step to collapse onto the grass.

It's brutal and raw, but she's done it; I press the stopwatch, feeling the motion of it tense down my forearm where I'm gripping it so tight.

She swivels, laying down on her stomach to yank the blade free, and barely has a second to gain her feet before she's grabbed by a whooping Rhiannon and Ridoc.

It doesn't take long for the accusations to start. I wait, my pen hovering over the records to see if any of them will stick.

"Cheating!"

Of course, it's Amber Mavis who can't handle a little creative licence. She rushes towards us and points at Violet, the muscles in her arm vibrating with her sense of righteousness.

Garrick steps in between us, but Amber yells over his shoulder. "The cheater clearly used foreign materials not once but *twice*. It's not to be tolerated! We live by the rules or we die by them!" It takes indeterminable force of will not to roll my eyes.

"I don't take kindly to calling anyone in my section a cheater," I hear Garrick say. "And my *wingleader* will handle any rule-breaking in his own wing." He moves to the side once he's made the extent of her authority here crystal clear.

Amber glares at us, her gaze flitting between me and Violet.

I arch a brow at Violet, confident she's prepared for this exact challenge. "Sorrengail?"

She's still catching her breath, but her voice is steady as she replies, "I expect the thirty-second penalty for using the rope."

"And the knife?" Amber demands, gesturing wildly at me. We all know the rope is not the issue here. "She's disqualified."

I don't look at her, certain that Violet's not done yet.

But the pause riles Amber even more. “Surely she’s out! You can’t tolerate lawlessness in your own wing, Riorson!”

“A rider may only bring to the quadrant the items they can carry-“ Violet starts, and I want to fling my head back and laugh. She’s quoting the fucking Codex. At Amber Mavis, the woman who lives or dies by the rules.

“Are you quoting the Codex to *me*?” Amber shouts, but Violet ignores her, raising her voice at the interruption. “-and they shall not be separated from those items no matter what they may be. For once carried across the parapet, they are considered part of their person. Article Three, Section Six, Addendum B.”

I desperately want to see Amber’s face as she says, “That addendum was written to make thievery an executorial offence.” But I can’t take my eyes off Violet. I don’t think I could be prouder of her if she’d beaten Liam’s time up the Gauntlet herself.

“Correct,” Violet nods. “But in doing so, it gave any item carried across the parapet the status of being a part of the rider.” She unsheathes the blade to show it to me, an old, battered blade on palms that are so red and bloodied that my own hands clench involuntarily. But she doesn’t seem to even be aware of it, the adrenaline of beating the Gauntlet still pounding through her. “This isn’t a challenge blade. It’s one I carried across and therefore considered part of myself.”

Brilliant *fucking* woman. I struggle to contain my grin, fighting to keep my mouth in semi-professional lines.

“The right way isn’t the only way.” She repeats my words from last night back to me, daring me to refuse her this win. Her gaze feels like a caress, the words the shared secret of lovers.

“She has you, Amber.” I say, unable to tear my gaze from Violet.

“On a technicality!”

“She still has you.” I finally turn to look at her, wordlessly promising retribution if she dares to object one more time.

“You think like a scribe.” She flings it at Violet like an insult, but it slides right off her.

“I know.”

Amber marches off and Violet’s shoulders sag, the adrenaline leaving her in a rush.

“Sorrenigail,” I say, and she turns to look at me again. “You’re leaking.” I look pointedly at her blood-soaked hands, trying not to draw more attention of the crowd to us. “Do something about it.”

I turn to write Violet’s name and time in the records and feel that little spark of hope again, flickering deep in my chest.

Threshing

Across the wings, we lose twenty-nine first-years on Presentation Day, the majority of those to the parade of dragons. Somehow those deaths are always easier to swallow; at least these cadets have been weeded out by something other than dumb luck.

There's no deciphering the choices of dragons. Even Sgaeyl stays unusually silent on the topic, bound by whatever mysterious ties all dragons have to the Vale. The roll of names of the dead feels as random and unpredictable as on parapet day, some of the most skilled and promising cadets spoken alongside ones we knew were struggling. But *something* prompts the dragons to let some cadets keep walking, while incinerating others until there's just a scorch mark left where they once stood.

All I see is hollow eyes among the first-years at the first formation two days later, even the most arrogant riders coming to terms with their own mortality. Today is Threshing, where they'll be forced to fight through each other to have a chance at bonding with a dragon. And with less than one hundred dragons and almost one hundred and fifty cadets, this year's Threshing is bound to become a bloodbath. Septon has been taking wagers with his squad leaders all morning on how many cadets in his wing will make it out alive.

I clock eyes with Liam in the lines, giving him the tiniest hint of a nod which I hope he can interpret as my utter conviction that he will be bonded by nightfall. He has the fastest time up the gauntlet and already feels a pull towards a certain Red Daggertail, that he's determined to find in the forest. He'll make it.

My eyes scan the crowd searching for Violet, but she's not looking in my direction, her gaze trained on the ground. Garrick told me Aetos's squad suffered worse than most during Presentation, losing two to the dragons. I wonder if she's thinking about her squad mates, or if her mind is filled with an insistent pull from the green dragon who approached her during the parade. For her sake, I really hope it's the latter.

I stare at her, willing her to look up at me so I can give her the same little bit of silent support I gave to Liam, but she's doesn't. When Panchek dismisses us, she turns to her squad mates on either side, unguarded nervousness clear on her face.

I motion to the section leaders, and stride past them towards the forest, even as my shadows stretch back towards formation like they're not ready to leave just yet.

The forest where Threshing takes place every year is too beautiful a backdrop for the amount of death that occurs within it. The trees burn bright with red and orange foliage as the season shifts, the first of the leaves starting to float towards the ground.

The section and squad leaders are dotted throughout the forested valley at random, on the pretence of observation. But there's no rules to enforce today; any cadet can kill another among the trees without punishment. Command send us out here to watch, a brutal and unsubtle reminder that even with authority and position, you're just as powerless as anyone else.

The only rule that exists in this forest today is for us: intervene, and you die.

As wingleaders, we're given the aerial posting, the only dragons flying in the sky above the forest except for those here to bond with the new intake of cadets. From this vantage point, we can see the dragons launch up from the ground, their chosen rider clinging precariously between their wings. It took under two hours for Liam to bond with his dragon, a huge Red Daggertail that Sgaeyl tells me is called Deigh. I watch him leave the field with a huge grin on my face, feeling like my heart is soaring through the skies right next to him.

We've been in the skies for hours since then, Sgaeyl and I skimming the treetops at the highest point of the mountain, her giant wings casting huge shadows into the forest below as they block out the late afternoon sun. The valley is an awe-inspiring sight, but it's a nightmare to keep track of anything happening under the canopies with so much ground to cover. We fly in tight, sweeping lines so I can scan through the shadows below, both of us pretending that I'm not searching for anything in particular.

I've not seen her in the skies, which means she's still out here somewhere. Every blast of fire through the trees makes me tense up in my seat, every crack of a branch sends my shadows whipping out to check if it's her.

But even though I'm certain I've scanned every inch of this forest, I can't find her. I steadfastly ignore the growing knot of anxiety in my stomach. She's not dead. If she were dead, I would have found her by now. She's just a moving target.

Without warning, Sgaeyl suddenly dips down towards the ground, breaking through the treeline so fast that branches whip out at me in all directions before I know what's happening.

"Sgaeyl, what the hell!" I shout furiously, my shadows arcing out to form some protection around me. Her feet crush into the mulch on the forest floor, and I cling on tightly to her neck, squeezing my thighs to keep from being thrown off with the momentum as she comes to a skidding halt. Her head swivels in every direction, before whipping to the left, her mouth curling up to bare her teeth with a low snarl.

"Sgaeyl," I say again, through the bond this time. But she still doesn't answer, pressing forward through the trees, her eyes locked on something I can't see. I send my shadows snaking out in the direction she's heading, and they pool at the edge of a clearing in the forest.

The sun is starting its descent towards the horizon, and a warm, golden light spills through the clearing. At the northernmost edge, a tiny golden dragon is baring its teeth and growling as three cadets approach from the south, hands gripping tight around the hilt of their swords.

Even through my shadows I can tell they're not here to bond it; there is nothing but murder in their eyes. Just as I recognise one of them as Jack Barlowe, a shout from the opposite side of the clearing makes my stomach fall out from under me.

"You can't do this!"

I watch in horror as Violet walks into the centre of the clearing like she's prepared to put herself between the little dragon and *three* cadets twice her size.

"Dismount," Sgaeyl hisses through the bond, and I realise with a jolt that we've caught up with my shadows. I slide down her leg and look up at her, but she only has eyes for the little dragon, pinning it with a glare. My gaze swings towards it as it cocks its head to one side, but I don't have time to wonder what they're saying to each other.

I edge forward the last few steps to the clearing, leaning up against a tree and thicken the shadows as naturally as I can in the branches above us. It's not foolproof, but it's the only thing I can think to do that will stop another wingleader spotting me on the ground from the air.

Barlowe and his two mercenaries have spread out to pin Violet on all sides, her back to the little golden dragon. I recognise them now: Tynan is in the same squad as Violet and Seifert is the one she beat in her first ever challenge. He has every bit as much reason to want her dead as Barlowe.

She's clutching two daggers tight, but her face is white with fear. She is completely outmatched here, and she knows it. They have the numbers *and* the weapons advantage. She doesn't stand a fucking chance.

My heart thumps against my ribs. I cannot intervene. But something deep in my chest, quiet and insistent, tells me that's exactly what I'm going to do.

"You can't," Violet says to the boy on her left. Seifert. "It goes against everything we believe in!" She's still trying to bargain with them, even with their swords drawn against her.

Seifert doesn't answer. Instead, it's Barlowe who shouts, "Letting something so *weak*, so incapable of fighting, live is against our beliefs!"

A deep, angry growl slips from Sgaeyl next to me, her head swivelling from the golden dragon to the threat that's rallying against it, the only thing separating them one reckless woman clutching a blade in each hand.

Violet raises her chin, and I can almost see the fear drain from her face as she comes to terms with her decision, flipping a dagger onto its tip. Her eyes burn with fury as she says, "You're going to have to get through me, then."

I can feel my blood pounding through me as Jack snarls back at her. "I don't really consider that a problem." I see the muscles in his arms tense as he prepares to strike.

All three of them raise their swords.

"I would strongly recommend you rethink your actions."

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, echoing through the clearing and every head swivels to look straight at me.

Violet's eyes go wide as she sees it's me, her shoulders visibly sagging in relief. But it's short-lived. Even from across the clearing, I see her figure it out; if I could stop this, all three of them would already be dead.

And from the expression on Barlowe's face, it's clear he knows it too.

"And if we don't want to *rethink our actions*?" Barlowe shouts.

My jaw clenches with the effort to keep my shadows from shooting out to strangle him. On any other day, I could kill him without blinking. My eyes are locked on Violet, but I'm as helpless here as the little golden dragon at her back.

“There’s nothing you can do, right? *Wingleader?*” Barlowe bellows.

“It’s not me you should worry about today,” I posture, as Sgaeyl tilts her head towards them, teeth bared. But Barlowe smirks, turning his back on us to face Violet again as if it’s no problem at all having the quadrant’s biggest dragon and a shadow wielder at your back.

He knows the rules just like the rest of us.

Sgaeyl is not supposed to be here. Dragons can only bond with one rider, and the Threshing field is a sacred place for dragons to forge those bonds. While humans have no say in the laws of dragons, I’m certain that if she kills three cadets during Threshing, either one or both of us will be dead by dawn.

I glance up at her, her lip curling up in a sneer and a deep, warning growl low in her throat.

“*Don’t even think it,*” I say, through the bond.

“*We have to do something,*” she snaps back, her gaze whipping towards the golden dragon.

“She can do this.” I say it out loud like that will make it true, as Barlowe roars a battle cry and charges at Violet, rousing the others to do the same.

She flings a dagger at Barlowe as he rushes her, and it lodges in the shoulder of his sword arm. His sword falls to the ground and he collapses forwards onto his knees, crying out in pain. She doesn’t stop to look, swivelling her head and lands her second dagger in Tynan’s thigh. He stumbles for a second, looking down at the blade jutting out but unlike Barlowe, it’s clearly not hit anything vital.

My heart is in my throat as Seifert swings for her neck, but Violet ducks under it, unsheathing another blade and slices him along his ribs. Her feet are planted square on the ground, Seifert’s momentum carrying him forwards and past her.

She needs to turn around and face him. But she doesn’t move. Why isn’t she moving?

A wave of nausea floods through me as I realise she must already be hurt. Violet’s speed is one of her best weapons against their strength and she would never throw that advantage. She’s not moving, because she *can’t* move.

I feel Seifert’s next move cut through her like it’s my own stomach he’s sliced into, feel the blade of his sword cutting deep in my abdomen. But somehow, it skims right off her. There’s no way she could survive it and yet she’s still standing, pulling out another blade from the sheath at her thigh.

“What the hell?” Seifert shouts.

Barlowe finally gains his feet, doubled over and clutching his upper arm. “She’s destroyed my shoulder! I can’t move it!”

His cries distract the other two and they both glance towards him. *Now, Violet!* But she turns to him too, grinning. Is she enjoying this?

“That’s the thing about having weak joints,” she says. “You know exactly where to strike.” She goes for another blade, readying to throw it again now he’s an even slower target. She looks utterly deadly and a spark of something other than fear races through me.

“Kill her!” He orders, even as he runs doubled over towards the tree line on the other side of the clearing. The shadows there pulse and pull at me, determined to finish the job.

While Barlowe was clearly the instigator of all this, the two remaining cadets at least have the pride to stay and finish the fight.

Tynan recovers fastest, jabbing out with his sword right for her. Violet spins into his guard in a few steps but her face is tight in pain like it's cost her badly. My eyes race over her, desperately trying to see where she's wounded, but there's no blood, no notable sign of injury.

She's completely off-balance, her weight uncentred and still she manages to plunge a dagger into Tynan's side, pulling it back out and shoving up with the force of her elbow into Seifert's chin as he launches an attack from her other side.

She is fucking *brilliant*.

"You *fucking* bitch!" Tynan screams, clutching at his stomach as blood gushes from the wound. I almost smile, my thoughts suddenly preoccupied with the possibility that she might actually beat them.

"Such an original-" She slices through Seifert's side as he stumbles back from her. "-insult!"

But she's over-extended, her balance completely off-centre and I feel her scream of pain hit deep in my chest as Tynan's sword cuts into her arm. My heart lodges in my throat as I see Seifert lift his sword high, swinging for her neck.

"Behind you!" I shout, my voice echoing out across the clearing.

Her head snaps to face him but it's too late. He's too close to her, she doesn't have time to move.

Then the golden dragon snaps its jaw, baring its teeth and Seifert hesitates. It's all Violet needs, stepping into his guard and smashing into the base of his skull with the handle of her blade. He falls to the floor in a heap, unconscious, the sword falling from his grip to land with a thud in the grass next to him.

"You can't interfere!" Tynan shouts, but his eyes are locked on Violet as if finally seeing that *she* is the one who presents the biggest threat.

"No, but I can narrate." I shout back.

It's one-on-one now, finally a fair fight.

But whatever adrenaline was pulsing through Violet up until now is wearing thin. She's desperately trying to ensure Tynan can't get past her to reach the dragon at her back, but her movements are slowing and choppy, her right foot almost dragging along the ground.

If he was smart enough to rush her on that side, she wouldn't have time to stop him. She's clutching at the wound on her right arm, trying to put pressure to stem the bleeding.

"Your arm is shot, Sorrengail," Tynan hisses at her. I see it too; she's run out of options.

"*I need to help her,*" I say to Sgaeyl, but she snaps her jaw at me, pinning me in place with one golden eye.

"*She doesn't need your help.*"

"I'm used to functioning in pain, asshole. Are you?" Violet raises the dagger in her right hand, blood streaming down her arm and dripping from the blade. She's losing too much blood. Her grip

slackens.

“Sgaeyl- “ I try again, a hand inching towards my own blade.

“No, Xaden. *I’m not losing you.*” The desperation in her tone freezes me in place.

Tynan adjusts his grip on his sword, shifting his balance. Violet twists the blade in her hand, her face white and contorted in pain with the motion.

She throws it.

And my stomach clenches as it lands uselessly in the grass several feet away.

All our gazes lock onto it. She doesn’t have time to reach for another. She doesn’t have the strength left to use it even if she could.

My hand tightens around my own dagger.

Tynan switches his grip, reaching up and back with two hands on the hilt of his sword.

And I step forward, my arm raising to fling the blade straight at Tynan’s chest before he can reach her.

The second I move, I know it means I’m dead.

But some things are worth dying for.

Violet’s eyes lock on mine. And then she stumbles forward with a cry of pain, flinging her arms out on either side to keep her balance. A huge shadow envelops the clearing, the trees on all sides bowing backwards under the force of the wind as a giant black dragon lands beside the little golden one. Tynan’s sword falls from his hands as he stumbles backward, scrambling to get out of its way.

Tairn.

Sgaeyl growls at her mate from across the clearing, as Tairn tucks the little golden dragon under one wing. His gigantic, scaled neck undulates as he surveys the humans at his feet, teeth bared and a deep, thunderous growl escapes him.

He looks straight at Violet, huge teeth dripping saliva onto the ground. *Don’t run, don’t run.*

She stares at him, eyes wide in shock. My heart leaps into my throat as she limps a few tiny steps to one side. Tairn swivels his head to face Tynan, who is running for the trees like they can save him.

Fire blasts across the clearing, incinerating the grass and everything in its path. Scorched black earth smokes where Tynan once stood.

Tairn’s head turns back to look at Violet and my pulse quickens. She was protecting the golden dragon now under his wing. Surely, he won’t hurt her.

“I can’t kill an unconscious man,” Violet says.

And it’s only then that I realise what is happening. It hits me so hard I stagger back, my hand reaching out to keep me standing against the tree. He’s *choosing* her.

I look up at Sgaeyl, who pulls her gaze away from Tairn and Violet to face me as if she’s heard my thought.

“What did you do?” I say.

She lets out a small huff of steam in a sigh. *“Only what needed to be done.”*

She sounds resigned, like this was the last thing she wanted either.

“But-” I start, trailing off before I can finish my thought. My head is whirring at the implications of what this means, a million thoughts fighting to be heard at all once.

Tairn is one of the most powerful dragons in Navarre. And he’s choosing Violet, one of the strongest women I’ve ever met. Their power will be... unstoppable. *If* she can survive long enough to use it. And if she can’t-

If she can’t-

“Let’s go Wingleader,” Sgaeyl orders and I mount her back in a daze, clinging tight to her as she shoots up into the air.

Air rushes by as Sgaeyl rises higher and higher, until finally we break through the cloud bank surrounding the mountain’s peak. I can’t sort through the thoughts in my head.

And then one settles deep in my chest, pounding through me and quietening all the others.

She’s alive.

Fight Or Flight

“Did you do this on purpose?” It spills angrily out of my mouth before I can stop it, but Sgaeyl ignores me, her head stoically facing forwards as she flies us towards the mountain’s peak.

“Sgaeyl, please,” I plead, opening up to her through the bond. *“Tell me what happened.”*

“Andarna was in danger.” Andarna? The little golden dragon, I realise. *“I couldn’t interfere, just like you. So I called for someone who could.”*

“Tairn.” His name tastes like ash in my mouth.

Sgaeyl’s head swivels back to look at me, eyeing me like I’ve lost my mind. *“Obviously.”*

She starts to descend towards the mountain, looping in long, lazy spirals like we’ve got all the time in the world. I realise she’s giving me space to process this before reality hits thick and fast on the ground.

We fly in silence for a few beats of her wings, and I lean back, taking a deep, steadying breath. But the second I try to focus, a million thoughts begin pinballing round my head.

“Violet was Tairn’s choice.” She cuts into the chaos of my mind. Her tone is insistent, determined I accept that she had nothing to do with it.

I sigh, the weight of everything I’m carrying bearing down on me. “I don’t want her caught up in this, Sgaeyl.” My eyes rake the clouds beneath us like I can see her through them. I wonder if she’s already climbed onto his back, if they’re already in the air. *“How could you let him do this?”*

“You think I let him do anything?” She fires back, outraged.

“You know what I mean.” Her angry snort is a big fucking clue that she doesn’t. *“I mean, why is he bonding now? He’s not bonded since-“*

But she cuts me off. *“That’s not my story to share.”*

Fuck this. I deserve to know what they have wrapped me up in, what Violet’s now wrapped up in too. I don’t believe for a second that there’s not some other dragon politics at play here. He doesn’t pick a rider for six years, contently following Sgaeyl around wherever she goes, and now suddenly he’s decided it’s time to get back in the action? Most dragons that lose their riders in the way that Tairn did, don’t bond again for decades, if ever. And yet, he’s here... choosing *her*.

Do they seriously not realise what they’ve done? They’ve made everything we’re working towards a million times harder than it was this morning.

“He’s the most powerful dragon here,” I say quietly.

“Yes,” she hisses, pride burning through the bond.

“And he’s just put a huge fucking target on her back. There are going to be at least fifty unbonded cadets at the end of this.” I gesture down to the forested valley beneath us. *“Every single one of them will want her dead to get to Tairn.”*

“He won’t let that happen.” But her voice is smaller and less certain than before.

“He won’t have a choice!” I roar it at the sky and Sgaeyl flinches beneath me. “A dragon can’t defend her on the challenge mat, or in the dining hall, or in-“

“*Stop it, Xaden.*” Sgaeyl snaps at me, her head twisting back. “*She’s not going to die.*”

But I can tell she’s nervous, that she hadn’t considered the *humans* in all of this, and our incessant, unstoppable quest for whatever power we can find.

“*She could though,*” I push back through the bond. “*It doesn’t take much. A snapped neck. A slice through her throat. Humans are fragile little things.*”

Silence stretches between us.

“*We’re not going to die,*” Sgaeyl says firmly, like that’s the end of it.

But it’s not. Sgaeyl and Tairn are mates, which makes their lives interdependent. If Violet dies, there’s a very strong probability that it kills Tairn and sets off a chain reaction that ends with Sgaeyl and I dead too. I’ve known that from the second I realised Tairn was choosing her back in the clearing, but it’s not fear that’s pulsing through my veins now.

It’s guilt.

Because even though I know one tiny mistake could kill us all, I’ve never been scared of dying. But in choosing Violet, Tairn has made my life and hers interdependent too. If Navarre uncover the weapons runs or Aretia or gods, if just one of the rebellion kids puts a toe out of line, it might not be only me that dies, but all of us... including her.

Gods, why does everything have to be so fucking hard?

I don’t say it to Sgaeyl but she answers my unspoken thought just the same. “*The most important things in life are worth fighting for, Wingleader.*”

We’re in the cloudbank now, blooms of cloud that look like smoke falling away from us as Sgaeyl banks down back towards the flight field. There’s still a handful of dragons in the air, but I shut my eyes tight. I can’t see her on his back just yet, not ready to face reality so soon.

When we’re almost on the ground, I say, “*Swear to me that Tairn chose her on his own, that there’s not some bigger dragon plan in motion here.*”

“*I’m not going to dignify that with a response.*” She seethes, her tone quiet and furious. She doesn’t look at me, scanning the crowds of riders and dragons beneath us to find a clear space to land.

I stand at attention in front of Sgaeyl, who towers over the lines of all bonded dragons on this side of the field. Across from us, the newly bonded dragons stare back, the first-year riders shifting uncomfortably at their feet, still not used to being around so many dragons at one time.

The last of the sun’s rays wink out on the horizon as it dips into the valley, and a soft, orange glow casts over the waiting lines. In front of us, Command stands expectantly on the dais erected for today’s proceedings, looking up at the sky for the final bonded dragons to make their descent.

“Move,” Sgaeyl hisses through the bond, and the lines on both sides of the field ripple as each rider receives the same message and are forced back five steps to widen the stretch of field separating us. Every dragon turns and roars at the sky, as Tairn shoots down towards the ground, a tiny silver-haired rider clinging tight between his wings.

I’ve never seen dragons defer to another before and somehow my eyes find Garrick in the crowd, his expression mirroring the utter confusion on mine. He raises a questioning eyebrow at me. I shake my head slightly. I have no fucking clue what’s happening either.

Tairn hovers over the ground, beating his wings to keep airborne and I glimpse Andarna’s golden feathers appear behind him, her wings flapping frantically to make up for her size. One final beat of Tairn’s wings blows through the crowd, and they land together. The dragons all around us let out one collective roar.

My shadows snake between riders and dragons to get closer as this unlikely trio edge towards the dais. Violet has wrapped a piece of cloth around the gash on her arm, but it’s already saturated with blood, and thick droplets are sliding down onto Tairn’s scales. Her face is frighteningly pale underneath the pink burn from the wind on her cheeks. I have no idea how she made it onto Tairn’s back in this condition, let alone survived the flight.

I can do nothing to stop my sharp intake of breath as Tairn juts out his leg at an unnatural angle to allow Violet to slide down rather than make the jump, like the rest of us. I hear the echo of that same shock ripple through the crowd on both sides. Dragons kneel to no one.

She gains her feet and begins to hobble towards the golden dragon, her face lit up with joy at seeing her alive. Watching Violet smile, with tendrils of hair blowing around her face in the fading light, I know exactly how she feels.

Dusk is falling and the shadows thicken, spreading out underneath me towards the dais, tracking each of Violet’s careful steps. More than a dozen officers stand on the podium, their mouths gaping as they take in the sheer scale of Tairn.

“Is that really-“ Commandant Panchek starts.

“Don’t say it,” General Sorrengail holds up a hand, staring at Tairn. “Not until she does.”

My eyebrows quirk up at the oversight. She’s refusing to look at Violet, to even acknowledge that her daughter has bonded with this legend. Violet’s expression gives nothing away, though I’m sure she must have heard it.

Finally, Violet reaches the front of the line, stopping before the roll-keeper.

“Violet Sorrengail, nice to see that you made it.” She can’t keep the fear out of her eyes as she takes in Tairn, the hand holding her pen shaking slightly. “For the record, please tell me the name of the dragon who chose you.”

“Tairneanach.”

My fists clench as I hear her name on his lips, like she’s signing her own execution.

Gods, I am so angry. She was never supposed to be here. She’s meant to be safe in the Archives of the Scribe Quadrant, not tethering her life to mine. The probabilities of me making it through all this with my life intact are... well, next to zero.

I had come to terms with that for myself. I already feel like I’m living on borrowed time; I should

have died alongside my father six years ago. The deal I made with Command was never about saving me, it was to give every other kid of the rebellion a chance to get out of this alive.

But now there's... her. If I die, there's a very real chance that she dies too. And I can't bring myself to come to terms with that. She's supposed to survive this, I'm sure of it.

"You're spiralling, Wingleader," Sgaeyl says to me down the bond. I look up at her, but her gaze is locked on Violet. *"Pay attention, this next part should be fun."*

Violet swivels to look back at the dragons, her eyes flitting from Tairn to the little golden one, the little blood she has left draining from her face.

My shadows pulse uncertainly under the desk of the roll-keeper, as she asks, "Violet? Do you need a mender?"

I have absolutely no clue what is happening.

Violet turns back to face the dais. Her shoulders sag as she clears her throat.

"And Andarnaurram," she whispers.

"Both dragons?" the roll-keeper chokes out.

Violet nods.

"What the fuck," I say, my words swallowed up as nearly every rider in the field says a version of the exact same thing.

"Told you," Sgaeyl chuffs.

Bonded

The generals have been at each other's throats for at least thirty minutes. It would be amusing to watch them tear themselves apart from the inside, if it wasn't Violet who was the topic of all their frustration.

Two dragons... Not just *Tairn*, but *two*.

Because she wasn't a big enough target already.

I'm stood across from the medical tent, my shadows pulsing around it in the darkness. Every stitch Kaori threads through her upper arm feels personal; I should have stepped in earlier.

Sgaeyl's head snaps up from across the field, the little golden dragon, Andarna, at her feet. "*You are not responsible for her, Wingleader,*" she warns.

I roll my eyes, my arms crossing over my chest. "*Thanks to Tairn, that's not strictly true anymore, is it?*"

She huffs steam in an angry snort, startling Andarna who flicks her head to look at me too.

Towering over them both, Tairn stares pointedly ahead, his gaze fixed on the healer's tent just like mine.

I watch Violet limp over to join them and wonder if she knows that every rider in the field is tracking her steps. That it's not just awe or jealousy, but unadulterated hatred they fling at her with every stare. She's General Sorrengail's daughter, she should have never made it this far, and now she's bonded with the best of them, breaking our most long-standing tradition in the process.

Two dragons... no wonder people hate her.

Gods, I'm so proud of her.

The errant thought comes from nowhere but is quickly swallowed up by growing apprehension as General Melgren's brute of a dragon, Codagh, approaches from the valley. His eyes are narrowed at Tairn, a low growl stirring in his throat.

Tairn takes a protective step over Violet, pinning her between his claws and growls back, deep and thunderous. Violet stares up at Codagh, her chin tilted in the same way she looked at me on Conscription Day. This woman has no fear.

Codagh gestures with his muzzle for the dragons to follow him, and my eyebrows quirk up as every dragon turns to lumber down the field and take flight. Tairn is one of the last to leave, his head turning back over his wings to pin Violet with a stare, his eyes flicking towards me once.

I can't hear what they're saying but get the message loud and clear: I'm on protection detail until he returns.

Violet looks around searching for me as Tairn takes off but doesn't stride across the field to join me when our eyes lock. There's not an ounce of panic in her face, and I realise that she has absolutely no clue how many people in Basgiath now want her dead. Her name is being spoken in hushed groups all across this field, my shadows carefully collecting who and carrying it back to me to deal with later. They are all threats to her, which makes them a threat to me by default.

I already know from the record book that forty-one cadets didn't bond this Threshing. That's forty-one enemies she didn't have this morning.

And there she is across the field, oblivious and celebrating.

I am furious at her complete lack of self-preservation, still nursing the soft burn of anger from watching her deliberately put herself between three armed cadets and a dragon. But I can't help myself from smiling when Ridoc catches her around the waist. She deserves this moment of happiness after everything she went through today.

That is... until I see her pulling Aetos tightly against her. Jealousy flares instantly, burning hotter the longer he holds her. She's so *free* with him, all warm smiles and light touches. With me, her walls are built up so high I have no idea what she's thinking.

I watch as Aetos pulls away, tugging on her hand for her to follow him away from the group.

They head towards a more deeply forested part near them that's blanketed in shadows. I take my chance before I can overthink it too much. I need to know what Violet tells Aetos about Threshing. I'm certain she knows I was a breath away from intervening.

But it doesn't matter what lies I tell myself; I'm following them into their secret little tryst for completely selfish reasons. I need to know who they are to each other. The knowledge that seemed unimportant until now, suddenly feels urgent and vital.

I move smoothly across the field, stepping unobtrusively through the celebrating riders until I reach the tree line. I sheathe myself in the darkness and inch towards where Violet and Aetos stand.

"Xaden was there when you defended Andarna, and then Tairn just... showed up?" Aetos says, but his tone is loaded. His hands are gripping Violet's shoulders too tightly, his knuckles white.

"Yes," Violet says. "That's what I just said. What are you getting at?"

"Don't you see what happened? What Xaden's done?" The veins in his forearms bulge and I see Violet flinch. The tiny twinge of pain is all it takes for me to move.

I step out of the shadows and both their faces swing towards me. Aetos takes his hands off Violet instantly and straightens up at attention. I can't look at Violet, refusing to face the woman who is sentenced to a life tethered to me.

"You manipulated Threshing." Aetos's words echo through the clearing, he's so het up on his own righteousness.

"Dain, that's-" Violet says, trailing off.

It's paranoid, idiotic, reckless and unfortunately for me, 100% correct. But I'm not about to give him the satisfaction of using that knowledge against me. Defending myself is only going to make him more certain. So, I turn to the next best weapon at my disposal: absolute contempt.

"Is that an official accusation?" I say, forcing boredom into my tone.

"Did you step in?" Aetos demands, raising his chin. His choice of words makes my eyebrows raise. Did he already see? Did she tell him? Or did he take that memory from her unknowingly?

My heart pounds in my chest. If Command know what I did, I'm dead. But it's not fear that swirls

inside me, it's rage. I'm furious at Aetos for being here, for seeking her out before I could. I'm fucking furious at Violet for even attempting to do what she did. But most of all I am furious at myself. How could I risk *everything* for this one woman?

Except I know how. She has this singular way of making me forget everything else.

"Did I what?" I say. "Did I see her outnumbered and already wounded? Did I think her bravery was as admirable as it was fucking *reckless*?"

I allow myself to look at her then for the first time. She's glaring back at me, all challenge, daring me to judge her.

"And I would do it again," she says, tilting her chin like she still has nothing to fear.

"Well-the-fuck-aware," I shout, every bit of anger and helplessness I've felt over the past few hours bursting out of my mouth. Violet shrinks back a step. Fuck, I never lose control like this. Of course, the first time I do it's with her.

I take a shallow, calming breath, trying to look anywhere but at her. "Did I see her fight off *three* bigger cadets? Because the answer to all of those is yes. But you're asking the wrong question, Aetos." I glare at him, delighting in the taunt. "What you should be asking is if *Sgaeyl* saw it too?"

I say her name like a curse, still furious that she called for Tairn.

"His mate told him," Violet says under her breath.

"She's never been a fan of bullies. But don't mistake it as an act of kindness toward you. She's fond of the little dragon. Unfortunately, Tairn chose you all on his own."

"Fuck," Aetos mutters.

I smile tightly. "My thought exactly. Sorrengail is the last person on the Continent I'd ever want to be chained to me. I didn't do this."

The extent of what an insane mess this is clenches deep in my chest. In the eyes of Navarre, I'm a fucking traitor. And if I die, she –

I don't let myself finish the thought, glancing at Violet who is staring at me like she wants me dead anyway, no matter the consequences. And now that he's no longer throwing accusations at me, Aetos doesn't know where to look. His eyes dart around the clearing like he's searching for an escape route.

"And even if I had." I move towards Aetos so I'm looking down at him. "Would you really level that accusation knowing it would have been what saved the woman you call your best friend?"

His pause says everything.

"There are... rules." Aetos tips his chin up, like that's something worthy of pride. But in my experience, it's the ones who live most by the book that can't be trusted. There's a difference between what's permitted and what's right. And it takes strength to know which is which.

"And out of curiosity, would you have, let's say, *bent* those rules to save your precious little Violet in that field?"

Because I did.

And I would do it again.

“That’s unfair to ask him,” Violet tries to save him, but I am not ceding this point. She needs to know who she can trust, who will go to the mat to defend her when it matters, rules be damned.

I don’t bother looking at her, my gaze locked with Aetos as the conflict wars in his eyes.

“I’m ordering you to answer, *squad leader*.”

He swallows then admits what I already knew, what I’ve known for months. “No. I wouldn’t have.”

And this is the man she puts her faith in? Who she goes to when things are tough?

Aetos turns to Violet, clearly desperate to try and salvage the shreds of their relationship, “It would have killed me to watch something happen to you, Vi, but the rules-“

Watching Violet awkwardly comfort Aetos and tell him it’s alright feels cruel and satisfying in equal measure. From the pained look in her eyes, she’s realised that’s he’s not worthy of her trust in him, let alone anything more. It feels evil to enjoy it, but I can’t stop the quiet thrill that races through me that she finally sees she deserves so much more.

“The dragons are returning,” I say, desperate to speak with Violet alone. “Get back to formation, *squad leader*.”

Aetos is hardly ten steps away when Violet whirls on me, hissing, “Why would you do that to him?” She moves like she’s going to shove me and then thinks better of it, muttering under her breath and storming off across the field.

I catch up to walk alongside her, measuring my pace to match every two steps of hers, and answer anyway, “Because you put too much faith in him. And knowing who to trust is the only thing that will keep you alive – keep *us* alive – not only in the quadrant but after graduation.”

Trust *me*, Violet. I want to scream it at her.

“There is no *us*,” she snaps back.

Does she not know? Has Tairn not told her? “Oh, I think you’ll find that’s no longer the case,” I say, grabbing her elbow to steer her out of the way of oncoming riders, who are rushing to get across the field back to formation.

“Tairn’s bonds are so powerful, both to mate and rider, because *he’s* so powerful. Losing his last rider nearly killed him, which, in turn, nearly killed Sgaeyl. Mated pairs’ lives are-“

“Interdependent, I know that.” She almost bites my head off. I always underestimate her; the keenness of her intelligence is almost as attractive as the way she looks like she wants to murder me.

“Each time a dragon chooses a rider, that bond is stronger than the last, which means that if you die, Violence, it sets off a chain of events that potentially ends with *me* dying too.”

I don’t know why I think appealing to Violet’s altruistic side is going to do me any favours. But I’m running out of ways to beg her to have *any* self-preservation, and this seems as good an idea as any.

“So yeah, unfortunately for everyone involved, there’s now an *us* if the Emphyrean lets Tairn’s choice stand.”

Violet stares at me, like it’s only just sinking in. But there’s more to this than she realises yet.

“And now that Tairn is in play, that other cadets know he’s willing to bond...”

“That’s why Tairn told me to stay with you,” she whispers, staring across the field at the group of three dozen unbonded cadets that my shadows are stalking. “Because of the unbonded.”

“The unbonded are going to try to kill you in hopes they’ll get Tairn to bond *them*. Tairn is one of the strongest dragons on the Continent and the vast power he channels is about to be yours. The next few months, the unbonded will try to kill a newly paired rider while the bond is weak, while they still have a chance of that dragon changing its mind and picking them so they’re not set back a full year. And for Tairn? They’ll do just about anything. There are forty-one unbonded riders for which you are now target number one.”

I lift up a finger to emphasise the point and make sure it lands.

Instead, Violet snorts like it’s a joke. “And Tairn thinks you’ll play bodyguard? Little does he know just how much you dislike me.”

I’m sure Sgaeyl will be the first to tell him that dislike has nothing to do with it.

“He knows exactly how much I value my *own* life,” I say, looking her up and down, but she’s not tense, there’s no fear. If anything, she looks more relaxed than ever. “You’re freakishly calm for someone who just heard she’s about to be hunted.”

She has the gall to shrug it off. “It’s a typical Wednesday for me. And honestly, being hunted by forty-one people is a lot less intimidating than constantly watching dark corners for you.”

This woman has no self-preservation *at all*. And I refuse to add Violet’s bodyguard to the growing list of expectations on me. I am already at my absolute limit, stretched too thin just to keep all the rebellion kids alive and do what I can for the people beyond the wards.

No, I am not adding her to my list too.

Tairn chose her. He can defend her. Fuck this.

“*Watch your rider,*” I fling the thought in his general direction, as he lands behind us and storm off across the field to join Garrick.

“*Watch your back,*” Tairn’s deep, booming voice reverberates through my head.

Fuck. If it wasn’t clear how annoyingly linked we all were before, his voice in my head puts an end to any questions. I keep walking, determined not to acknowledge it.

I watch as General Melgren approaches the dais to announce the outcome of the dragon’s decision. My stomach is twisting itself in knots. I desperately want them to undo this, to tell me that Violet’s life is not forever wrapped up in my own. But there’s another smaller part of me that’s nervous. What if they *can* undo this? What will that mean for Violet? And what will that mean for *us*? Because if they undo this, then there is no *us* again.

And deep down, I’m not sure that’s really what I want at all.

“Both Tairn and Andarna have chosen Violet Sorrengail,” Melgren says to the waiting crowd.
“And so their choice stands.”

Relief washes over me so tangibly that I blink. Gods, this is so messed up. I should want her safe and as far away from me as possible; instead, the decision makes me feel like I can breathe again.

There’s an *us*.

I feel Violet’s gaze burning from across the field. I turn and raise my index finger, reminding her what this means.

As the riders step forward for the relic ceremony, Garrick turns to me and says, “Twenty-three Fourth Wing cadets bonded.”

I nod, tight-lipped. I know this already.

“And all of ours,” he says quieter, the words almost lost in the fiery roar of dragons and the whooping celebrations of riders on all sides. He doesn’t mean his section. He’s talking about the rebellion kids. Every single one bonded to a dragon, some with extremely powerful dragons like Liam’s towering Red Daggertail.

“It’s good,” I say.

“Good? It’s fucking great.”

“Sorrengail and Tairn is a problem,” I counter, completely unable to meet him in his celebratory mood.

Garrick says something but my shadows pick up my name from across the field, and I glance towards the source over his shoulder, not hearing him.

Aetos is holding Violet’s face in his hands, his thumb stroking over her cheek like she’s the most precious thing in the world to him. And Violet’s staring up at him like he’s all she can see. Something twists in my gut, but I can’t look away. I stare, frozen, as he pulls her face towards him and kisses her.

And she kisses him back.

A torturous wave of jealousy washes through me, cutting off my air.

She’s kissing *him*? After he admitted he would do nothing to protect her...

I stand motionless watching them, feeling that tiny bit of hope deep in my chest flicker out.

I can’t watch this, but I also can’t look away. And then finally, after seconds that feel like hours, my own self-preservation kicks in.

I mumble something to Garrick and head off in the opposite direction across the field.

Survival

It's been hours but I can't sleep. Instead, I lay wide-eyed in my bed, turning a dagger over and over in my hand. Every time I close my eyes, I see Violet wrapped around Aetos, clinging to him like he's the only thing that matters in the world. Their bodies pressed together, and hungry kisses that scream of years of pent-up sexual tension. It's my worst fucking nightmare come to life.

It's not even that I wish it was me instead. It's that it's *Aetos* that makes my skin crawl. He doesn't deserve her, he's a damper on a fire that should be fed into an inferno, burning clear and bright. *Gods*, General Sorrengail's daughter and Colonel Aetos's son... it's such a cliché my eyes burn.

But fuck, there was a moment today when I thought maybe this was going to end differently. For a few seconds, there was an *us*... and then just as suddenly, it became a *them*.

The idea of having to see them together makes my chest feel tight. Violet's eyes lighting up when he looks at her. Violet reaching out to grab his hand. Violet throwing her arms around his neck, her hair flying free as he lifts her up and spins her round.

The insidious burn of jealousy rages through me. How could she want him when he told her he would have been content to stand by and watch her die? And yet she chose *him*, kissed *him*.

A quiet knock on my door interrupts my thoughts. Three raps, pause, then two more. *Garrick*.

I don't move. I'm in no state to talk to anyone right now.

"Xaden, open the fucking door," he says quietly.

"Fuck off," I shoot back, sending shadows underneath the crack in a menacingly slow motion towards where he stands.

"Seen that little trick before, brother." He's not buying it. I roll my eyes, and send my shadows wrapping upwards towards the handle, moulding into the shape of the lock and twisting with a click.

Garrick comes in and closes the door behind him softly, leaning his head back against it and crossing his arms. The room is pitch black, the moonlight through the window long since smothered out by shadows. Just because he's here, doesn't mean I have to talk.

"You going to tell me what's crawled up your ass tonight?" Garrick says into the darkness. My only response is the quiet swoosh of the dagger in the air.

"Ok, why don't I start if you're not going to talk." The bed shifts as he sits down on the far end. "You're scared shitless that your life is now bound up with Sorrengail, who quite frankly is statistically one of the most likely riders to die at this point. You're terrified that even if she lives, all the plans we've made for next year will fall apart, with her glued to your side." I don't answer. "And you're probably pissed that she bonded the biggest, scariest dragon and not you."

I can't help myself; I laugh. Garrick chuckles in response.

"Seriously, brother," he says. "We will figure this out."

It's suddenly so important to me that he knows. This has gone far beyond loyalties and secrets; I am a liability that they shouldn't trust with their lives.

"I saw her bond Tairn." I admit into the darkness. When he doesn't say anything, I continue, "I was there. In the Threshing field." It's not just against the rules, it's completely nonsensical. I had absolutely no business being there, no reason to intervene. If Command knew... shit, I'm thinking that a lot recently.

"Why?" There's no judgement in his tone.

"Because she was going to get herself killed," I blurt out. "And I couldn't let that happen. There were three of them, Garrick. She was already injured, and she still thought *she* should be the one to defend that little dragon."

"She sounds just like Brennan." The words sound heavy and important.

I sigh. "She kissed Aetos," I say quietly, as if the quieter I say it, the less true it will be.

"I figured," says Garrick. "What do you think it means?" I feel his frown through the words.

"I have no idea," I admit into the darkness. After months and months of trying to work out which side she's on, which way she'll side when war inevitably comes, the answer feels further away than ever. Her brother on one side. Her best friend and mother on the other. And traitors and liars surrounding her whichever way she looks.

The only conclusion I'm sure of is that she's better than all of us. And that whatever side she ends up on, neither one deserves her.

"Tairn wouldn't have bonded-" Garrick says.

"Yeah, I thought that too. He's so caught up in this already, he must be sure about her." I agree. "He knows exactly what's at stake here."

Shit. Is Tairn going to tell her? I reach down the bond to Sgaeyl.

"I have already discussed this with him, Wingleader," she says, her tone curt. "He is willing to keep your secrets for now out of respect for our bond. But don't expect his patience to hold for long."

"Tairn will keep the venom a secret for now," I relay to Garrick, trying to ignore the overwhelming rush of relief that washes over me.

"She'll have to know eventually. Maybe we need to tell her?"

"No." It seems to reverberate round the room in the darkness. I try to soften it. "Not yet. Not until we know if we can trust her." I pinch the bridge of my nose. I *do* trust her. It's *him* I don't trust. This is so confusing.

"Ok." He gets to his feet, pausing at the door. "It's ok if she means something to you, you know?"

"She doesn't mean anything to me," I snap. "But she's so tangled up in this now, we need to make sure nothing happens to her. I haven't gone through all this just to die because my dragon's mate's rider has fallen down the stairs." I force bitterness into the words, so they sound more convincing.

"We'll keep her safe for you." He says it like he's following orders, but there's a softness in his voice that tells me there's more to it.

"Get some sleep." He opens the door to leave, his silhouette visible as light pours into the

darkness, “And try to stop picturing it, brother.”

Which of course has the entirely opposite effect. I close my eyes, but all I see is Violet. Her hands wrapped around his neck, pulling him towards her like she’ll die without him kissing her.

“I am trapped with this for eternity thanks to you,” I think at Sgaeyl.

“You can thank us later, Wingleader,” she sends back.

“Why the fuck isn’t she answering?” I seethe at Garrick the next morning, standing together in the corridor outside of Imogen’s room.

I lift my fist to bang on the door again, but Garrick’s hand flashes out and grips my wrist before I can.

“She’s not really a morning person, remember.”

No shit. The floor is almost empty already, most riders already headed to the mess hall to eat breakfast. The morning after Threshing is always interesting to observe, the bonds of dragons restructuring the power dynamics overnight. Most of the second-years will undoubtedly be there early just to watch it play out.

But apparently, not Imogen.

I’m about to force my shadows through the locks on her door when I hear her shuffling about inside. It’s still a good minute before she appears, and my patience is at breaking point. She’s fully dressed, armed and even her hair is done, swept over to one side in a way I know will have taken far longer than I have time for today.

She crosses her arms and leans against the doorframe, waiting.

“I need you on Sorrengail,” I snap.

She arches a brow, and her eyes flick towards Garrick. Something passes between them, and she sighs, choosing the path of least resistance for once.

“I’m already watching her like a hawk, Xaden. If Aetos gets near her-“

“This isn’t about Aetos.” I correct her.

Garrick shifts slightly next to me. Ok, it is a little bit. Imogen’s eyes flick towards him again, looking for confirmation. But he doesn’t give the orders around here, I do.

“Tairn and Sgaeyl are mates,” I remind her. “If Sorrengail dies, there’s a fucking good chance I die too.”

Imogen’s face is unreadable. She gazes back at me blankly, like she’s waiting for a better reason.

“I need her to survive, Imogen. I need *you* to help her survive.” All the order and rage has leached from my tone; it’s pure desperation now.

“Why me?” She says, after a few seconds. She looks at me intently, as if she’s trying to read my thoughts. “Why not Bodhi, or Liam, or hell- *anyone* else?”

I know this is asking a lot of her, that she sees the world in stark black and white lines. Violet is the daughter of the woman that executed her entire family. In Imogen’s mind, she deserves whatever she gets.

“You’re already in her squad,” Garrick says, but even I know that’s too limp a reason to sway her.

Her gaze narrows at him. “I wasn’t asking you.” I can almost feel him wither beside me.

“Why *me*, Xaden?” She presses, knowing there’s more to this.

My fists clench at my sides. “She hates you,” I bite out. Imogen’s eyes flare, but she doesn’t say anything. “You broke her shoulder on day one. If you’re the one that helps her now, *helps* her rather than hurts her, maybe she’ll begin to trust us.”

“And why the fuck should I care if she trusts *us*?”

The way she says it makes my blood boil and I take a steadying breath. Does she really think this is about me? That I don’t think I have a shot if I’m friends with the girl that smashed her shoulder to pieces? Fuck, how does she still have no idea how much this *matters*?

“She’s bonded to Tairn, Imogen. *Tairn*. Together they could be the edge we need in this war.” I stare back at her, willing her to hear me. “I need her on our side at the end of this.”

We stare at each other in silence, neither of us willing to back down, her eyes searching mine for clues.

“Ok.” Her shoulders relax and she moves out into the corridor, warding the door behind her.

The acceptance is so quick and sudden, I start to doubt I heard her correctly.

“You’ll do it?” I shout after her, as she starts walking in the direction of the mess hall.

She turns back to look at me, pausing for a second and smiles tightly.

“Only because it’s you.”

Garrick and I place our trays down at the leadership table, and he immediately turns to speak with some of the squad leaders on his other side. A few seats down from us, I see Aetos locked in conversation with Amber, a smug, sickly smile still lingering on his face. I pick up my fork to move the food around my plate.

Across the hall, Imogen is already sat at Violet’s table, the first-years looking at her and Quinn with wary eyes. My shadows are straining to reach over to them and listen in on the conversation, but I keep hold of them tightly, determined to re-establish the distance between us. I trust Imogen to play her part in this. I don’t need to know what Violet is doing or saying anymore. It’s not just my secrets I need to protect, it’s myself. I don’t know if I can survive being much closer to her.

My gaze once again finds Aetos, who is laughing at something Amber has said, but it’s forced and

fake. Every move the guy makes is a power play. Was that what him kissing Violet was about last night? I look out at the hall, assessing how the ripples of who the dragons chose to bond play out over the riders. Is Aetos trying to get close to Violet now because she's bonded with Tairn?

"Sorrenghail's mine."

The shadows whisper her name back to me from the food counter. Without looking up, I know it's Seifert. The shadows snatch the hissed, whispered words of his conversation with Barlowe as he spoons beans onto his tray.

"I haven't gone through all this to end up on fucking kitchen duty. I should have bonded in that forest like the rest of you."

"You're better than her," Barlowe agrees, spurring him on. "You were unconscious when Tairn showed up. There's no way he picks *that* over you." The venom in his voice makes my skin crawl.

"He should have been mine," Seifert mutters again under his breath, as Barlowe moves down the line.

Right now, it's just talk, the angry rambling of a man who is not self-aware enough to realise he chose this path for himself. As if Tairn would ever bond with a human who tried to kill another dragon. Frankly, I'm surprised Barlowe managed to find himself one in that forest either.

But I'm going to have to watch this closely. There's over forty unbonded cadets and they have numbers and time on their side. The bonded riders will now find all their time and energy drained by flying and then once their dragons start channelling power to them, wielding too. The unbonded have nothing to focus on but their own shortcomings and need for vengeance. It's the exact environment where poison can spread quickly.

I have even less of an appetite than when I first sat down and saw Aetos's face. I pick up the apple on my tray, just to have something to do with my hands, starting to peel it with my dagger in one long curl.

Garrick's knee hits mine under the table and I lift my gaze to find Violet staring furiously at me from across the hall. I glance at Imogen for a second who gives me an almost imperceptible nod, then look back at Violet.

But all I can see is her kissing Aetos on the flight field last night, and I can't hold her gaze for long.

The Knife

Chapter Notes

An earlier version of this was posted as a stand-alone piece: Xaden POV: The Unbonded. Small edits have been made for consistency and clarity with the overall story.

I lean against the wall of the academic building with Garrick, riders streaming like water around us to keep their distance.

“Tonight is our best shot,” Garrick urges. It’s been over a month since Threshing and we haven’t been able to slip away since. It’s the best night we have, but I still can’t quite nod my agreement.

Despite my shadows searching, the unbonded have been quieter than usual and it’s making me nervous. Watching them has been the distraction I needed from Violet for the past few weeks, but experience has taught me the difference between talk and action and I’m tense, waiting for them to make a move.

“If we wait much longer, we’re sentencing them to another month without any –“

“I know,” I snap back. I know exactly what the consequences of each failed trip entail, feel the weight of deaths of people I have never met settle on my shoulders. I rub my temple, weighing the balance between hundreds of lives and the growing risk to one annoyingly significant rider.

“Riorson asked her to–“ Shadows catch my name in the tunnel to the flight field, whispering it back to me, urging me to listen. *Fuck*, it’s Violet and Aetos. I ground against my signet, desperate to draw back from the shadows before I’m forced to confront whatever little moment they’re having in the darkness. I’ve avoided them for weeks and still the idea of seeing them together feels like a blade slicing through my gut.

But the more I pull against the shadows, the more they push against me. I hear Garrick say my name, but it’s muffled, like he’s standing miles away not leaning against the wall right next to me. *Come with us*, the shadows urge. *See*.

“Riorson accepted it. He’s a wingleader, too.” My name on Violet’s lips is all it takes to snap the last restraint on my self-control, and suddenly I’m right there with them, seeing everything from the shadows in the tunnel.

“Fine. You made it up.” Aetos stands a few paces from her, his arms crossed against his chest. “Don’t get me wrong, I couldn’t stand myself if something happened to you, whether you were handling it the right or wrong way. And I thought you’d be fine if you survived Threshing, but even bonded to the strongest of them...” He shakes his head.

It takes me a few seconds to even understand what he’s saying. Is he seriously talking about *Violet*? The rider who took out three cadets twice her size. The rider who bonded with two dragons, breaking every precedent in this place. The rider who bonded with *Tairn*.

Violet’s hands curl into fists at her side. Fuck, I hope she punches him in the face.

“Go ahead. Say it.” Her voice is all quiet fury.

“I’m terrified you’re not going to make it to graduation, Vi. You know exactly how I feel about you, whether I can do anything about it, and I’m *terrified*.” My heart lurches at his words, and I pull at the shadows again, desperate not to see how she reacts to the softness in his voice.

But then Violet laughs. An exasperated, hateful little laugh that makes me pause.

“This place cuts away the bullshit and niceties, revealing whoever you are at your core. Isn’t that what you said to me? Is this who you really are at your core? Someone so enamoured with rules that he doesn’t know when to bend or break them for someone he cares about?” My heart lurches again, but in the complete opposite direction. She sees what I have always known about him. And she doesn’t like it. “Someone so focused on the least I’m capable of doing, he can’t believe I can do so much more?” My heart pounds against my ribs.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Dain.” She takes a step closer to him and I feel like I can’t breathe. “The reason we’ll *never* be anything more than friends isn’t because of your rules. It’s because you have no faith in me. Even now, when I’ve survived against all odds and bonded not just one dragon but *two*, you still think I won’t make it. So forgive me, but you’re about to be some of the bullshit that this place cuts away from *me*.”

“*I knew I liked her*,” Sgaeyl growls with approval in my head, throwing me completely off-balance.

I’m looking through my own eyes again from the opposite direction and see Violet stride out of the tunnel, squinting at the sudden sunlight.

I try and re-centre, my hand flexing against the rough brick of the wall. I shift one foot on the ground, feel the gravel crunch under my boot. The sudden snap back from the shadows is always disorientating if I’m too lost in it, but this feels so much more than that. She doesn’t want him. It pulls everything I thought I knew out from under me.

Violet storms past me, her eyes finding mine for a second. I don’t know how to react, not sure what I’m supposed to know or not know. So, I just raise a questioning brow at her.

She flips me off.

But it makes me smile. I’ll take her furious angry eyes over all this distance between us, any day.

“Everything all right?” Rhiannon asks her.

“Dain is an ass-“ Her body is tense with rage, fury radiating from her every pore.

“Make it stop!” someone screams, and I move on instinct, my shadows reaching out towards Violet without a thought. It takes less than two seconds for me to reach her side, my hand hovering over my blade.

A first-year from Third Wing screams in the centre of a growing circle of students, clutching at his head, as if he can claw the thoughts from his mind. My shadows slip between the legs of students, poised to strike if he so much as utters one word about the rebellion kids. I’ve been waiting for this since Threshing.

“Jeremiah!” someone shouts across the circle, pushing to the front.

“You!” Jeremiah turns, pointing at them, his eyes growing wide. “You think I’ve lost it! How does

he know? He shouldn't know!"

This never gets easier to watch. The slow realisation that the power you have worked so hard to manifest, has signed your own death sentence. My shadows alert me to Carr hurrying towards us, and I suppress the feeling of relief that it will be him that deals the killing blow this time and not me.

"Is Violet going to hate me forever?" My heart skips at her name, my shadows tensing to strike, but the kid is looking at Aetos. I relax a little. If anyone deserves to have their innermost thoughts broadcast to the world, it's him. "Why can't she see that I just want to keep her alive? How is he...? He's reading my thoughts!"

Ridoc comes up behind me to get a closer look and I push him back, moving an inch closer to Violet without taking my eyes off Jeremiah. One wrong word and – *where the hell is Carr?*

"Do something," Violet says and it makes me tense. The only thing I can do to help this first-year is kill him quickly.

"Start mentally reciting whatever bookish shit you've learned," I tell her. As if on cue, my own mind does the opposite, jumping to the secrets we are keeping for each other, and I curse silently.

"I'm sorry?" Violet hisses up at me.

"If you value your secrets," *Our secrets*. "Clear your thoughts. *Now*." I order.

"And you!" Jeremiah whirls, locking on Garrick. *Fuck*. "Damn it all to hell. He'll know about—" My shadows are on him in a heartbeat, covering his mouth in a gag, another curling around his neck.

Carr arrives but I don't move, my eyes locked on the first-year, even as I sense Garrick pushing his way out of the circle of students. I don't let go until I hear the crack of Jeremiah's neck snapping, my shadows slipping away to let his body fall to the ground. It wasn't me this time, but his dead eyes stare up at me in the exact same way as the two others from last year who met the same fate.

Carr's eyes find mine in the crowd and he gives me a small, grateful nod, before leaning down to carry out the body.

I take what feels like my first breath since I heard that scream minutes ago. I can't look at Violet. The fear of what was almost revealed has my heart pounding against my chest. Death always lurks so close here; it feels like a third companion as I walk beside Garrick back to our rooms.

Though nothing has changed, the stakes feel higher than ever. "Ok," I agree, finally. "Tonight."

Bodhi, Garrick and I are almost at the end of the tunnel, the exit to the flight field lit by a single mage light. Between us we've gathered an even smaller amount of weapons over the past few weeks than we delivered before.

"It's still something, cousin." Bodhi brushes my arm with his.

But it doesn't feel like enough. These flights risk so much, exposing every single one of us, just to

deliver a tiny arsenal of weapons, a tiny edge on an enemy that seems to be besting the Poromish at every turn.

"I'm here." Sgaeyl. *"You plan on brooding much longer?"*

"I'm not in the mood," I reply. I can't take her teasing tonight. My hands flex over the wards on the door.

"Well, I don't really fancy flying all the way to Athebyne either, Wingleader. But you don't hear me complaining."

"You literally just complained," I snap back with a wry smile.

I feel her snort. *"So I did."*

Garrick shoves into the door, holding it open for Bodhi and me to carry through the too-light bags of weapons. I look out towards the flight field, my shadows sensing Sgaeyl and the others when –

"She's in danger!" Sgaeyl's words are frantic, and I instantly know they are not her own. Tairn.

My eyes go wide at the tone I have never heard from her. "Violet," I bite out, the bag of weapons falling from my hands. I'm instantly running, my shadows streaking past me as if they can somehow beat me to her.

I don't look back. Don't hear the others shout. Don't stop to assess or find out more. I just run towards her, faster than I ever have.

"They're in her room." Sgaeyl's tone is still edged with panic, but I can tell she's desperately trying not to distract me. Only vital information. Where to go. Where she is.

"How many?" I'm still too far away.

Silence. Then, *"Too many."*

"FUCK." I yell, turning the corners so fast that I'm forced to brace my hands against the wall for momentum.

I see the end of the tunnel. My breath is ragged as I rush through the hidden entrance and up the stairs, taking the steps three at a time.

"GET THERE NOW." Sgaeyl screams it at me.

Through the courtyard. Along the corridor next to the dorms. I've lost all sense of direction, I don't even feel like I am running towards her, instead it's like I am being pulled and pulled closer to her. I'm close enough now that it's Tairn's roar of rage that fills my head, and my heart feels like it's about to burst out my chest.

I run faster. Then suddenly I'm there. I shove the door open, the lock breaking and wood splintering everywhere. And freeze.

I immediately see her. She's in the middle of the room, Seifert behind her and a knife at her throat. I seem to clock a thousand details all at once, my entire world narrowing to her. The strain of his muscles holding her against his chest. The angle of his arm. How tight he holds the blade. The indentation of it against her neck. Her beautiful, perfect neck.

Even as I throw out my shadows, I know that I'm too late. That he is going to cut her throat before I

can stop him. That I will be forced to watch her bleed out on the floor.

Time seems to slow, like it's letting me soak up the final second of a world that she still lives in. A world with her silver-tipped hair a few rows ahead of me in Battle Brief. A world where she flips me off just for daring to look her way. A world where she might have met her brother again. A world where she might have known me, truly known me and wanted me anyway. A world that we would have made better, and whole again.

But I'm too fucking late. And I will burn down this world instead.

About Time

Chapter Notes

An earlier version of this was posted as a stand-alone piece: Xaden POV: The Unbonded. Small edits have been made for consistency and clarity with the overall story.

One second, I feel like the earth is falling out from under me, as I watch Seifert's knife slice across Violet's neck. The next, she's right in front of me, her eyes wide and warring between fear, shock, and downright relief.

My entire world seems to shift on its axis, righting itself. What. The. Fuck.

I haven't taken my eyes off her. She was lost to me. And now she's here, just two paces away. I don't question it. I move on instinct, my shadows stretching out to sheathe the room in darkness until I'm right by her side. I snap my fingers and mage lights whip out, illuminating the room.

The unending rage I felt at losing her settles in my stomach. I have never felt so at peace with vengeance as I scan the room and see how many of them thought they could take her from me.

"You're all fucking *dead*."

The words sound far away, like they have come from someone else. Every single one of these cowards turns to look at me, the flare of panic and fear in their eyes stoking the endless fury I feel at almost losing her.

"Riorson!" Seifert's dagger clatters to the floor. Rage and power burn through me at the sound.

I almost laugh. "You think surrendering will save you?" *These fucking cowards*. "It is against our code to attack another rider in their sleep."

My gaze rakes in the scene of the struggle, re-enacting it beat by beat in a way I know will haunt me long after tonight. The tangle of bedsheets. The cadets she wounded but didn't kill. The sheer number of these traitors to overpower an innocent girl, asleep in her bed.

"- We're just correcting a mistake." Seifert says, his palms up in surrender and I risk a glance at Violet.

The deep, purple bruise around her neck is all it takes for me to lose it and I throw my shadows out to grab every single one of them but Seifert around their throats, squeezing tight. I savour the feel of their struggle, their useless, pitiful hands scrambling against the shadows, their pulses quickening, then slowing as I cut off all their air.

"Dragons don't make mistakes." I look at Seifert, enjoying the flare of panic in his eyes as he watches his pack of traitors sag to their knees in front of him. I smile as I walk closer to him, a shadow scraping the dagger off the floor.

My entire world had been centred on this dagger just moments ago. It feels poetic that the same weapon that would have taken Violet from me will rid the world of him instead.

“Let me explain.” Seifert begs, unable to take his eyes off the blade that he knows will end his life.

“I’ve heard everything I need to hear. She should have killed you in the field, but she’s merciful. That’s not a flaw I possess.” I slice through his throat, watching the wound gape open and stream blood in a torrent, Seifert’s eyes going wide as he tries to stem the bleeding on instinct.

I feel my heartbeat in my chest. And see Violet collapse on the floor instead of him, her blood growing in a pool around her, not his. It was so *fucking* close.

“Damn, Xaden.” Garrick walks in, sheathing his weapon. He could only have been moments behind me and yet I’ve killed all six of them in seconds. “No time for questioning?”

I’m not even sorry, feeling none of the guilt that can sometimes threaten to overwhelm me. This doesn’t feel like death, it feels like justice.

“No need for it,” I counter. Bodhi’s right behind him.

Violet giggles, snapping a hand over her mouth and my gaze snaps to her. It’s the adrenaline.

“Let me guess,” Bodhi says. “We’re on cleanup?”

I can’t take my eyes off Violet. “Call in help if you need it,” I say without looking at him, wiping the blood off her dagger.

The fear has broken down any walls between us and it’s as if she’s standing next to me on the hills outside Aretia, just the two of us. *I’m alive. I’m alive. I’m alive.* She’s practically shouting it at me.

I respond before I can catch myself, “Yes. You’re alive.” *She’s alive.*

I step over Seifert and force myself not to head straight for her, pausing to pick up her dagger from a dead first-year’s shoulder. I need to figure out what the fuck happened in here. How did they get past her locks? How did she survive against all six of them? And how the fuck was she almost dead one minute and in front of me the next?

I have no doubt the dragons are involved. We need to talk to them. Now.

I head to her armoire as Bodhi and Garrick drag out the first bodies, grabbing the first cloak and boots I can find.

“I didn’t realise I’d said that out loud,” she says.

Shit. “It’s the shock,” I say, smoothly. Which it is, of course. I’d never hear her thoughts if she hadn’t lost control of every basic barrier in her mind.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, knowing the answer. I’ve marked every one of her breaths since I arrived.

“Come on, Violence.” I can’t make the words match my tone. I can still feel the panic of almost losing her, skittering under my pulse. I focus on what I can control, folding her cloak over my arm and slowly walk towards her. I hardly notice the bodies around me, all I see is her. “Pull your shit together and tell me where you’re hurt.” Her breaths are shallow and short.

I drop her boots on the floor at her feet, place her cloak next to her. And then I do the scariest thing since I smashed through that door; I risk touching her, lifting her chin to look into her eyes. I try my best not to see the bruising on her neck, try my best to control my heart still beating in panic against

my chest. “You’re breathing like crap, so I’m guessing it has to do with–”

“My ribs,” she says. “The one by the bed hit the side of my ribs with the sword, but I think they’re just bruised.” If they weren’t already dead, I’d kill them again.

“Must have been a dull sword.” I raise an eyebrow. *Tell me*, I plead with my eyes. *Trust me*. “Unless it has something to do with why you sleep in your leather vest.”

Her eyes go blank for a second, and I know she’s speaking to Tairn. “It’s dragon-scale,” she admits.

“*Thank you*,” I say silently to Tairn. Somehow, I know he’s heard me and not bothered to reply. No doubt he’s pissed at me for how close we came to losing her.

“Mira made it for me,” Violet says, lifting her arm so I can see the hole in her nightdress. “It’s why I’ve lived this long.”

I’m suddenly aware of how close I am to her. And how very exposed she is. I’ve not seen her in anything but her leathers before. I tense at the direction of my thoughts, so at odds with our conversation and surroundings.

“Ingenious, though I’d say there are multiple reasons for why you’ve made it this far.” I refocus on her throat, my gaze narrowing at the bruise I see blossoming against her skin, the purple press of fingers. “I should have killed him slower.”

“I’m fine.” But I know she’s not.

“Never lie to me,” I say, looking her straight in the eyes, imploring her to trust me. It’s a promise I desperately need from her, even with all my secrets between us.

“It hurts,” she admits, finally.

Of course it does. I feel like I’ve failed her in every possible way. “Let me see,” I say, determined to make it better.

“Is that a request or a demand?”

Even after six people tried to kill her, she’s still absolutely untameable. The burning challenge in her eyes makes me want to pull her against me, to hold her close to me and tell her she’s safe. But that’s not who we are to each other; my hands curl into fists at the thought.

“Your pick as long as I get to see where that fucker broke your ribs,” I say.

Liam and Ciaran arrive, Garrick and Bodhi directing the clean-up. They lift the last of the bodies out and I shut the door behind them with a quiet thank you and a flick of my hand. “Now, let me see your ribs. We’re wasting time.”

She stands in front of her mirror, her gaze locked with mine in the reflection as she shrugs out of the sleeves of her nightdress, exposing her shoulders. She clutches the fabric above her breasts, revealing the laces of her leather vest down her back. I swallow as I rake in the sight of her, so inappropriately turned on that I grind my teeth.

“*Really, Wingleader?*” Sgaeyl’s sing-song voice is disarming.

I ignore her, but pause, suddenly unsure what to do.

Violet seems to notice I'm standing gaping at her like an idiot. "You'll have to--"

"I know how to handle a corset," I say. It takes more effort than I care to admit to brush her hair over one shoulder, to not lose it at the feel of her soft, bare skin under my fingers.

I work on the laces quickly, all business, trying to distract myself from imagining taking off her corset in an entirely different setting. Inch after inch of her back is exposed. Blood pounds through me at the sight of it and I clear my throat.

"How the hell do you get yourself into this thing every morning?" I ask, desperately trying to think of anything else.

"I'm freakishly flexible." *Well, that doesn't fucking help, Violence.* "It's part of the whole bones-snapping, joints-tearing thing," she says looking over her shoulder at me in the mirror. The eye contact is somehow even more intimate. Shit.

I finally get to the bottom of the laces and carefully pull the armour apart, gently stroking over her ribs and prodding to see where's tender. Her skin is already a mess of mottled greens and purples, but I can't feel any cracks or protrusions. "You have one hell of a bruise, but I don't think they're broken."

"That's what I thought. Thank you for checking." I don't think she's ever thanked me before.

I nod, carefully doing the laces back up. "You'll live. Turn around."

I bend down in front of her before she can realise how affected I am by the feel of her. Her hands reach out to hold my shoulders, steadying herself as she sways slightly.

"You're going to have to walk through the pain, and we have to do it fast." I tap her foot. "Can you lift it up?" I put on her boots and lace them up. It's a strange feeling to care for someone in this way, it's been a long time since I've been so intimately close to another person without trying to kill each other.

I stand and wrap her cloak over her shoulders, buttoning it at the collar carefully, to avoid the bruising round her neck.

"Let's go."

Her hair is a tousled mess around her face. She looks so fucking beautiful. And so alive I could cry. I blink and pull up her hood, grasping her hand tight and yanking her out into the hallway. I can't look at her. But I hold her hand firm in mine. *She's alive. She's alive. She's alive.*

I steer her down the same corridors I ran through only minutes earlier.

"Where are we going?" she asks, as I haul her past the closed dorm rooms.

"Keep talking loud enough for others to hear, and someone will stop us before we get anywhere."

"Can't you just hide us in the shadows or something?"

"Sure, because a giant black cloud moving down the hallway isn't going to look more suspicious than a couple sneaking around." I pin her with a look that dares her to argue.

Tracing my earlier footsteps with her hand firm in mine is strangely cathartic, so at odds with the terror and helplessness I felt running towards her in the opposite direction just minutes ago. We

reach the entrance to the tunnel, and I gesture Violet inside, keeping her hand tight in mine for a few moments more.

“Holy shit,” she whispers, taking it all in.

“Hope you’re not afraid of the dark,” I say, feeling her hand tighten and I return a comforting squeeze. “But just in case you are,” I snap my fingers and a mage light immediately illuminates the space, hovering above us to light our path.

That’s enough. I’m fooling no one here, except myself.

I let go of her hand and storm ahead, putting some much-needed distance back between us. We are not a couple sneaking around in the night. We are just two people caught up in a ridiculously entangled and precarious situation.

“Keep up,” I fire back over my shoulder.

“You could-“ I see her wince and feel like a total bastard. “Be a little more considerate.”

“I’m not going to baby you like Aetos does. That’s only going to get you killed once we get out of Basgiath.”

“He doesn’t baby me.”

“He does and you know it.” And even though I heard every word of what she said to him in the tunnel yesterday, I probe further, desperate to hear her tell me that he doesn’t mean anything to her. “You hate it, too, if the vibe I’m picking up on is any indication.”

When she doesn’t immediately congratulate me on my spectacular insight, I fall back to her side, my pulse racing as I ask, “Or did I read that wrong?”

“He thinks this place is too dangerous for someone... like me, and after what just happened, I’m not sure I can really argue with him. I don’t think I’ll bother sleeping again. And if you even *think* about suggesting that you sleep with me for safety from now on-“

I laugh, surprised where her mind has wandered. “Hardly. I don’t fuck first-years – even when I was one – let alone... you.” I trail off, hardly my most convincing performance.

“Who said anything about fucking?” she retorts. Shit, she didn’t even mean that. “I’d have to be a masochist to sleep with you... and I can assure you, I’m not.”

But her words make me smirk. “Masochist, huh?”

“You hardly give off snuggly morning-after vibes. Unless you’re worried about *me* killing *you* while we sleep.” The idea of her killing anyone at this point is frankly ridiculous. She’s had every opportunity, every reason to lash out even defensively and yet somehow she’s the only one in this Quadrant with a shred of morality left intact.

“I have zero concerns about *that*,” I admonish. “As violent as you are, and skilled with those daggers, I’m not even sure you could kill a fly. Don’t think I didn’t notice that you managed to wound three of them and never went for a kill shot.” It’s as admirable as it is downright idiotic.

“I’ve never killed anyone,” she whispers, like I don’t already see every bit of who she is.

“You’re going to have to get over that.” It’s suddenly so important to me that she can find a way to

exist in a world that is filled with death. “All we are after graduation are weapons, and it’s best if we’re honed before leaving the gates.”

“Is that where we’re going? Are we leaving the gates?”

“We’re going to ask Tairn what the hell just happened. And I’m not talking about the attack. How the hell did they get past your locks?” She shrugs like she doesn’t even care. Like she’s resigned herself to facing opponents, whether the odds are fair or not.

“We’d better figure it out so it doesn’t happen again. I refuse to sleep on your fucking floor like some kind of guard dog.”

“Wait. This is another way to the flight field?”

“Yes. It’s not exactly common knowledge.” Only eight of us know about it, in fact. “And I’m going to ask you to tuck this little tunnel into the file of secrets you keep on my behalf.”

“Let me guess, and you’ll know if I tell?”

I have absolutely no way of knowing that, but it’s adorable that she still believes it. “Yes.” I smirk.

“Are you going to promise me another favor?”

The question catches me completely off-guard, taken aback at the cheek of it when I just killed six people for her without breaking a sweat. “Having one of my favors is more than enough, and we’ve already reached mutually assured destruction status, Sorrengail.”

Her breath labours as we climb the incline towards the hilltop. “Now, can you push through it, or do you need me to carry you?” I ask, even though I’m sure touching her again would be a mistake.

“That sounds like an insult, not an offer.”

“You’re catching on,” I reply but wrap my arm around her waist anyway, careful not to put any undue pressure on her ribs.

Her arm hooks up around my neck, pulling me down to support her up the final few steps. But her hood has fallen back, and I can feel the tickle of her unbound hair beside my face, tumbling across her shoulder between us. I try not to breathe, try not to feel my pulse racing at the intimacy of being so close to her. And even though I know it’s only circumstances that have brought us to this moment, it feels like she trusts me, more than I ever dared hope would be possible between us.

“What were you doing tonight anyway?” she asks, just as we pass the wooden crates where we stash the weapons until we can get them out of Basgiath. She can’t know that, of course – they’re cloaked in darkness here – but the timing of the question makes me tighten the hold on my secrets.

“What makes you ask?”

“You made it to my room within minutes, and you’re not exactly dressed for sleeping.” Says the girl wearing a dragon scale armored vest.

“Maybe I sleep in my armor, too,” I evade.

“Then you should pick more trustworthy bedmates,” she fires back.

I laugh before I can stop myself, it sounds so much like something Sgaeyl would say. I swallow and attempt to be serious again; she has an incredible way of making me forget myself and the role

I'm supposed to be playing.

"So, you're not going to tell me?" Gods, she doesn't let up.

"Nope. Third-year business." We're finally at the end of the tunnel and I release her to unlock the wards, hoping the change of scenery once we're outside will distract her from this line of questioning. I hold the door open for her as she steps out, earning a shocked whisper from her, "What the hell."

"It's camouflaged," I say simply, as a wave of my hand has the outline of the door blending back into rock and moss.

Tairn, Sgaeyl and Andarna land in front of us, a golden blur of fur and feathers rushing out straight towards Violet. I hear Tairn's voice in my head, even as he steadfastly refuses to speak or look at me. For some reason, it makes me see red. There's obviously so much more going on here than I realise, so much information that I am not privy to and yet somehow, I'm the only one that seems to be doing the damndest bit to keep her alive. To keep us all alive.

It's the first moment since I arrived at her room that I even remember what's at stake. I've been so single-mindedly focused on Violet that somehow I've forgotten her death could kill all of us. A new wave of fear pulses through me, fuelling my temper as I turn to the dragons.

"Yes, I want a word," I snap at Tairn. "What the hell kind of powers are you channelling to her?" I need answers. Now.

"None of your business what I choose or do not choose to channel toward my rider." His voice rumbles through my mind, utterly dismissive.

"He says--"

"I heard him." I cut her off, done with this charade. It's time she realised how deeply intertwined our lives have become.

"You what?" she says, her mouth dropping open. I ignore her.

"It's absolutely my business when you expect me to protect her," I say, glaring up at Tairn.

"I got the message to you just fine, human."

"And I barely made it." I see Violet under Seifert's knife again, feel the powerlessness of that moment threaten to overwhelm me. Surely, he realises how close we were to losing *everything*...

"She would have been dead if I'd been thirty seconds later."

"Seems like you had thirty seconds gifted to you." Tairn growls deep and low in a warning, but I am passed caring.

"And I'd like to know what the fuck happened in there!" I shout at him, losing control of my temper along with the shadows that shrink back from me like even they're scared of the intensity of my rage. His utter lack of responsibility has made me furious. They were there for *him*. He did this.

Violet moves like she'll intervene, as Tairn's neck twists like a snake eyeing up its prey.

I look at her, hoping to gain a little more control of myself and say, "We need to know what happened in that room." But looking at her, seeing the bruising at her throat, only makes my heart beat faster.

I turn back to face Tairn, wishing I could see inside his head. He must be channelling something to her, something he's told her to keep secret from me, as well as everyone else in this place.

"Do not dare to try and read me, human, or you'll regret it." His mouth opens, baring his huge teeth and a snake-like tongue flicking up at me.

I glance at Sgaeyl. *"Back me up here, will you?"*

Violet stands directly between me and Tairn, looking up at him, "He's just a little freaked out. Don't scorch him."

"At least we agree on something." Sgaeyl. *Finally.* I step forward next to Violet, fighting the need to reach out and hold her hand once more.

"She talked to me."

"I know. I heard." I fold my arms across my chest. "It's because their mates. It's the same reason I'm chained to you."

"You make it sound so pleasant."

"It's not." I look at her then, really look at her and hope she hears me. "But you and I are exactly that, Violence. We're chained. Tethered. You die, I die, so I damn well deserve to know how the hell you were under Seifert's knife one second and across the room in another." From the look in her eyes, it seems like my words have finally sunk in. She thinks this is about me. That I'm a selfish prick, looking out for my own skin. And in this second, I don't care what she thinks of me. If this is the only way to get to the truth, the only way to keep her safe, then I'll take it.

"Is that the signet power you've manifested with Tairn? Come clean. Now."

"I don't know what happened." Then she whirls to look at Andarna, her eyes sorting through unheard words. "She says that nature likes all things in balance. That it's the first thing they're taught."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I ask her.

But a long stretch of silence follows.

I know I've missed a big chunk of the conversation when Tairn huffs in frustration, *"This is why feathertails don't bond."*

"Let her explain," urges Sgaeyl, in a tone I've never heard from her. She sounds almost motherly.

Violet fills me in. "Andarna says feathertails shouldn't bond because they can accidentally gift their powers to humans. All dragons are born with something special, even before they can channel." She turns back to the dragons and asks, "Like a signet?"

"No," Sgaeyl answers. *"A signet is a combination of our power with your own ability to channel. It reflects who you are at the core of your being."*

Andarna tilts her head, and her eyes flare with something that looks like pride.

"She says she gave her gift directly to me. Because she's still a feathertail." Violet translates, without taking her eyes off her. I feel like I'm still missing something here because I'm lost. Violet gets there before I do. "You're *still* a feathertail? You're... you're a hatchling."

“She’s a what?” I sputter, not sure I heard her correctly.

Violet glares at Tairn. “You let a juvenile bond. A juvenile train for war?”

“We mature at a much faster rate than humans. And I’m not sure anyone lets Andarna do anything.”

“How much faster? She’s two years old!” Violets shouts. Fuck, what the hell were they thinking letting her come here?

“She’ll be full grown in a year or two, but some are slower than others.” Sgaeyl sounds defensive. *“And if I thought she’d actually bond, I would have objected harder to her Right of Benefaction.”* She chuffs at Andarna like a disapproving parent and a terrifying thought surfaces.

“Hold on. Is Andarna *yours*?” How the hell have they kept this a secret from me? And if they’ve kept this from me, then what else are they hiding? “Have you hidden a hatchling away from me these last two years?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Sgaeyl’s snort ruffles my hair in the playful way she does when she thinks I’m worrying too much. *“Do you think I’d let my offspring bond while still feathered?”*

“Her parents passed before hatching.” Tairn explains.

Violet looks devastated. “Oh I’m sorry, Andarna,” she says.

“- Feathertails don’t bond because their power is too unpredictable. Unstable.” Tairn grumbles.

“Unstable?” I ask.

“The same way you wouldn’t pass a toddler your signet, would you, wingleader?”

“Gods no, I could barely control it as a first-year.” I shake my head, immediately remembering the struggle to keep the shadows locked down rather than spilling out from me in all directions.

“Exactly. Bonding too young allows them to give their gift directly, and a rider could easily drain them and burn out.”

Violet objects instantly, “I would never!”

“Of course, you wouldn’t know. Feathertails aren’t supposed to be seen.” Tairn glances at Sgaeyl.

I suddenly understand their fear. “If leadership knew riders could take her gifts for themselves, rather than depending on their own signets...” I don’t finish it. All I see is death.

“She’d be hunted,” says Violet.

“Which is why you can’t tell anyone what she is,” Sgaeyl says. *“Hopefully she’ll mature once you’re out of the quadrant, and the elders are already placing more... stringent protections on the feathertails.”*

“I won’t,” Violet promises, as if anyone of us believe she’s the weak link. “Andarna, thank you. Whatever you did saved my life.”

A ripple of something rolls through Violet. Fear? Shock? I’m not sure. I grip her shoulders and turn her to me, a little too forcefully. “What did she say?” I ask.

Tairn blows a puff of hot steam over us. *"I'd take your hands off the rider,"* Sgaeyl warns.

I loosen my grip but keep my hands on Violet's shoulders. This information feels important, like a key that could unlock something far bigger than us. "Tell me what she said." I think twice and add, "Please." I'm not her Wingleader right now. She doesn't have to take orders from me. No matter how much I think I need to know this, she gets to choose what she tells me and what she doesn't.

"She can pause time. Briefly."

My jaw drops before I can stop it. I've never heard of anything like this. It's impossible. I stare wide-eyed in shock at Andarna. Death and time are about the only constants in this world. And yet, this unassuming ball of golden feathers has a power capable of stopping both. "You can stop time?" I ask, needing the confirmation.

"In small increments," Violet whispers.

"In small increments," I repeat, like an idiot. I don't have my own words. Nothing to add to this momentous revelation.

"And if I use too much, I can kill you." Violet says, looking at Andarna. She nods once, a tear glistening in her eye before she says, "I'll do my best to be worthy."

Suddenly her entire demeanour changes. "Is Professor Carr going to kill me, too?"

What on earth made her think that? All of us, dragons included, pin Violet with a watchful stare. This woman is too intuitive for her own good.

"Why would you think that?" I probe, rubbing her shoulders in a soothing motion.

"He killed Jeremiah." Her eyes bore into mine. "You saw him snap his neck like a twig right in front of the whole quadrant." The intensity of her fear makes me even more relieved that it was Carr's hands round his neck and not my shadows that ended the first-year.

"Jeremiah was an inntinnsic." I say softly. "A mind reader is a capital offense. You know that." Her sharp intelligence constantly has me on edge, like she's just moments away from seeing all the secrets I'm trying to keep hidden.

"And what are they going to do if they find out I can stop time?"

"They're not going to find out." But my pulse races at the thought of this knowledge in Command's hands. "No one is going to tell them. Not you. Not me. Not them. Understand?"

I think of Aetos and wonder if I should tell her that her memories might not be her own around him. But I can't think of a way to say it without it sounding all wrong, like I think her best friend would help himself to her memories or betray her bond with her dragon and report it to Command.

But I need to find a way to keep Aetos away from her, at least for a few days.

"He's right," Tairn says. *"They can't find out. And there's no saying how long you'll have the ability. Most feathertail gifts disappear with maturity when they begin to channel."*

Andarna yawns deeply and Tairn says, *"Let's go, Golden One."* All three of them take to the skies.

Violet and I head back into the tunnel in silence, both stewing over the revelations of this evening.

"Promise me, you won't tell anyone about the time-stopping," I say suddenly, but it comes out

wrong. It sounds like an order not a plea. “It’s not just for your safety. Rare abilities, when kept secret, are the most valuable form of currency we possess.” I think of the others then, the past year of duplicity and using every underhand tactic we can think of to keep some of our abilities out of the record books. Even though I know I can’t involve her in our plans, the idea of what *this* power could mean someday proves difficult to shift.

“We need to figure out how unbonded cadets got in your room,” I say, realising the dragons offered no insights on the topic. And that I’ll be dropping her back in her unguarded dorm room in just a few minutes time, with absolutely zero protection other than six fewer opponents to worry about.

“There was a rider there,” Violet says. “Someone who ran away before you arrived. She must have unlocked it from the outside.”

I stop, turning to look at her. “Who?”

She shakes her head. Even after tonight, she still doesn’t trust me.

“At some point, you and I are going to have to start trusting each other, Sorrengail. The rest of our lives depend on it. Now tell me – *who*.”

“Amber Mavis,” she says. “Wingleader Amber Mavis.”

Accused

Chapter Notes

An earlier version of this was posted as a stand-alone piece: Xaden POV: Accused. Small edits have been made for consistency and clarity with the overall story.

I should be shocked, but I'm not. Experience has taught me enough about the poison leeching its way through leadership, hidden behind rules we're told are here for our protection. No, it's not surprise that I feel after I leave Violet in her room. It's absolute resolve to fix this, to suck out the poison and make *anyone* involved in hurting her pay for what they've done.

When I get back to my room, Garrick, Bodhi and Liam are already inside, all three of them sat around the small table in the corner. Liam doesn't look up when I enter, and I realise he's asleep, his blonde head propped on his arms on the table. I check the clock on the bedside table; it's almost four in the morning. But we're not done tonight.

"She ok?" Garrick asks quietly.

I want to tell them everything. The way I feel about her. How sure I am we can trust her. How much she could help us. Not just because of who she is, but *how* she is. Instead, I nod, my lips tight.

"We've got work to do," I say, shaking Liam awake. "Bodhi, speak to the others. Get the weapons out tonight."

"But Xa-" he challenges.

"I know, I know," I say, my fingers pinching the bridge of my nose. "It's not ideal. But if they leave now, they'll still land back here under cover of darkness. And I can create a distraction that will buy them enough time to return here before anyone notices that they're missing."

"We've got formation in the morning." Bodhi objects. But he's already getting to his feet, ready to follow orders, even if he doesn't agree.

"What kind of a distraction?" Garrick presses, as I take a seat next to them round the table.

"A fucking big one," I say. "It was Amber. Violet saw her. She let them in her room."

"What the fuck," says Liam.

"Yeah, that'll do it," agrees Bodhi, heading to the door. "I'll wake the others."

"You'll need proof, Xaden," says Garrick, bringing my attention back to him. "Tell me you've got something beyond Sorrengail's word. Something that's enough to accuse another wingleader of a capital offence."

I shake my head. "No, but I still can't let it stand."

Garrick's face falls, and I see the huge risk I feel mirrored in his eyes. One wingleader accusing the

other... it's never ended well. And it's unlikely to go much better for me given my family's glowing reputation.

"She was *asleep*. It's the one fucking place any of us should be safe and she stole that from her. I've been waiting weeks for the unbonded to make their move, but I never even considered they'd have help from *her*." I can't say her name again.

"But it's your word against hers..." Garrick counters.

"I can be pretty convincing, when I want to be, brother." I reply smoothly, with a confidence I don't feel. "Just have my back. So I can have hers."

Liam looks between us warily, waiting for Garrick to nod his agreement. When he does, he asks me, "What can I do?"

"I need you to be where I can't."

It doesn't take much to spread out the riders at formation to cover the spaces where Ciaran and Soleil would usually stand. I send some to the Archives on an invented, urgent task. Another mysteriously slips on the stairs and is helped by two squad mates to Nolan. A handful more I order to clear out the dorms of the dead unbonded from last night. I create just enough disruption that no one questions the absence of two rebellion kids from their squads.

The rest of the riders stand in formation, listening to Fitzgibbons read through the list of traitors I killed last night. The second he sends up the prayer to Malek, I move. Time to tackle the few outstanding items on my list.

My gaze snaps to Violet as I head towards where she stands, straight backed and beautiful, her hair braided back with small wisps of silver-tipped strands breaking free and blowing in the wind. I don't look at her neck, don't want to see the bruising around her throat and be reminded of how close I was to losing her. No, I need to put some distance back between us. Nothing can happen, no matter how much part of me wants to try. I could feel it last night, how easy it would be to let down all my walls and fight for her. But she has no idea how I feel about her, no idea where my mind wanders when I glance her way. This longing I feel for her is fucking selfish; it's everything I want, with no thought for what's best for her. The further she is from me, the safer she'll be.

I snap at Aetos, pouring the frustration I feel into the order, "There's a change to your squad roll."

"Wingleader?" He snaps to attention. "We just absorbed four from the dissolution of the third squad."

"Yes." *Shut up, Aetos. Does he have to be such a know-it-all?* I turn to address the Squad Leader of Tail Section, "Belden, we're making a roll change."

"Yes sir," Belden nods. *See, Aetos... that's how to do it.*

"Aetos, Vaughn Penley will be leaving your command, and you'll be gaining Liam Mairi from Tail Section." I dare him to argue, but he keeps his mouth tightly shut, nodding. *Much better.*

Liam and I exchange a glance as he trades places, my eyes flicking for just a second towards Aetos.

He nods in understanding, remembering my orders from this morning. *Under no circumstances should Aetos put his hands on Violet. Do what you have to do. Her memories from last night stay her own.*

Violet's face is frozen in fury. She bites out at me, "I do *not* need a bodyguard."

I ignore her, addressing Aetos. "Liam is statistically the strongest first-year in the quadrant. He has the fastest time up the Gauntlet, hasn't lost a single challenge, and is bonded to an exceptionally strong Red Daggertail." My heart fills with pride as I list through his achievements. "Any squad would be lucky to have him, and he's all yours, Aetos. You can thank me when you win the Squad Battle in the spring."

"I. Do. Not. Need. A. Bodyguard." Violet repeats, her body thrumming with rage. She says it so loudly half the formation hears her.

The challenge in her eyes makes my stomach flip. She is just... incredible.

I stride past Aetos and stand right in front of her, towering over her to remind her I am much more equipped to defend her than she is herself. "You do, though, as we both learned last night." I say it firmly, not caring who hears. They'll all know in minutes anyway. "And I can't be everywhere you are. But Liam here"—I gesture to Liam over her shoulder who smirks at me — "he's a first-year, so he can be in *every* class, at *every* challenge, and I even had him assigned to library duty, so I hope you get used to him, Sorrengail." I bite out her surname, doing my best to reinforce the reporting lines and achieve even the tiniest bit of authority in her presence.

"You've overstepping," she snaps back at me.

"You haven't *begun* to see overstepping," I shoot back, wondering if there's any limit to what I would do to keep her safe. "Any threat against you is a threat against me, and as we've already established, I have more important things to do than sleep on your floor."

Something like hatred flares in her eyes. "He is *not* sleeping in my room."

"Of course not," I smirk, enjoying the way her cheeks blush at the idea of it. "I had him moved into the one next to yours. Wouldn't want to *overstep*." I watch that parting shot land and storm back to position at the front of the lines, preparing myself for the much bigger fight that's coming next.

Still, I can't help myself when I reach out with my shadows, checking on the fall-out of the confrontation. Liam stares straight ahead, eyes forward but I know he's following the interaction between Aetos and Violet just the same. The riders closer to them are blatantly staring, as Aetos demands, "Is that what Riorson meant by *last night*?"

Violet nods, dipping her head as if she can hide the deep purple bruise around her neck.

"I didn't know," he says. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Why, what would you do about it, Aetos? It certainly would have taken you longer to kill six people just to save her. Better consult the Codex first and check it's within the rules.

Seeing him look at her, his eyes strained with concern and affection makes jealousy twist sharp and painfully in my gut.

"I'm fine," Violet says. "Later." She nods towards the dais, and it forces my attention back to Commandant Panchek. I'm nervous. Really fucking nervous.

“It has been brought to my attention as your commandant that a breach of the Codex has occurred,” Panchek says to the crowd. “As you know, breaches of our most sacred laws are not to be tolerated. This matter will be addressed here and now. Will the accuser please step forward?”

I take a deep breath and go to take a step, but I can't move. Instead, an image of my father flashes through my mind. In that instant, I am overwhelmed by the bravery he needed to accuse the leaders of Navarre of their treachery. My heart is pounding in my chest as I force myself slowly towards the steps that lead to the dais like I'm walking in his ill-fated footsteps, feeling the gaze of every rider burning on my back.

Well, not every one. I can still hear Violet across the Quadrant, teasing Ridoc about his latest encounter. She seems completely unaware of the sacrifice I am making to ensure she's safe.

Instead of being annoyed, it makes me smile. Even after everything she went through last night, she feels safe. I did that.

I almost trip when my shadows hear her say, “I miss sex,” with a heavy, lust-filled sigh. It's exactly the distraction I needed to push me up the stairs towards the dais.

“I miss *good* sex,” she teases Ridoc. *Oh Violence, I would be all too willing to oblige.*

“*What happened to keeping a professional distance, Wingleader?*” Sgaeyl's teasing voice dances through my mind.

I smile, recognising it for what it is. Another distraction to keep me going, to get me in front of the podium and make an accusation that once spoken, I can't take back.

I look out at the grids of riders, standing in straight, uniform lines. It feels prophetic ahead of the chaos I know is about to rip out around us.

I take a deep breath. “Early this morning, a rider in my wing was brutally, illegally attacked in her sleep with the intent of murder by a group primarily composed of unbonded cadets.” I try to look anywhere but her, and yet my gaze still picks her out. Violet stares at me, a frown between her eyes.

“As we all know, this is a violation of Article Three, Section Two of the Dragon Rider's Codex and, in addition to being dishonourable, is a capital offence.” My knuckles are white where they grip the podium stand hard, though my voice betrays nothing of the fear I feel. I can't tell if my heart is pounding reliving last night's events or out of fear for the consequences if this doesn't go my way.

“Having been alerted by my dragon, I interrupted the attack along with two other Fourth Wing riders.” Garrick and Bodhi climb the steps towards me. “As it was a matter of life and death, I personally executed six of the would-be murderers, as witnessed by Flame Section Leader Garrick Tavis and Tail Section Executive Officer Bodhi Durran.” They stand at my back, the crowd murmuring.

“But the attack was orchestrated by a rider who fled before I arrived.” I project my voice louder, using the tiniest bit of the power I channel from Sgaeyl to make it ring out across the quadrant. “A rider who had access to the map of where all first-years are assigned to sleep, and that rider must be brought to swift justice.”

It feels as if every rider leans toward me to hear what I say next.

“I call you to answer for your crime against Cadet Sorrengail.” I finally take my eyes from Violet

and look at Amber for the first time since I started speaking. “Wingleader Amber Mavis.”

A cacophony of voices breaks out, the disbelief spreading like waves across the formation.

“*You did great,*” Sgaeyl reassures. “*She must be made to pay.*”

Amber steps forward, no emotion in her eyes. She can play this game as well as me, if not better. She’s always been careful to keep her loyalties to Navarre perfectly clear. “I have committed no such crime!” She says it evenly, pitched just right with a tinge of innocence and surprise.

The voices around the quadrant get louder, faces whipping left and right between Violet, Amber and me. I risk a glance at Violet and see her stepping back from Aetos’s outstretched hands.

“Give me the memory,” he orders. Liam has silently moved out of formation in the chaos, inching closer to Violet, ready to step between them if necessary. Imogen watches them quietly too, two rows back.

But she doesn’t need a bodyguard.

“Touch me without permission, and you’ll spend the rest of your life regretting it.” Her voice is viciously quiet. I feel a secret thrill deep in my chest that she’s never once turned that tone on me.

“Wingleaders,” I say. “We need a quorum.”

Nyra and Septon climb the stairs and we turn our backs on the formation, standing in a half-circle. This is the moment that matters most. They must believe me over Amber. A marked traitor’s son over a rule-abiding liar.

I feel the beat of Sgaeyl’s wings as her and Tairn land on the walls of the citadel alongside the other wingleaders’ dragons.

“I assume you have proof, Riorson?” Septon asks. He raises an eyebrow at me with a look that says he knows I don’t.

“Cadet Sorrengail saw her with her own eyes. Mavis was in her room with the unbonded cadets that tried to kill her. She let them in.” I say simply, with a shrug.

“That’s not proof,” Septon replies. “That’s hearsay.”

“How else did six unbonded cadets get through a locked door? Only a handful of us know who sleeps where. Even fewer have access to the keys.”

“That doesn’t mean she did it, Riorson,” Nyra snaps. “Just because she had means, it doesn’t equal that she had cause. Why would Amber want the first-year dead?”

The use of her first name startles me. I’m Riorson here, and she’s Amber. Not a great start.

“I don’t care what her motive was,” I fire back. Sgaeyl lets out a blast of hot air over my head that makes the other wingleaders stiffen, but I know it’s really meant as a warning to me. *Calm down.* “She had means and Cadet Sorrengail is an eyewitness. What possible reason would I have to accuse her if it weren’t the truth?”

Suddenly Amber shouts from the crowd, “You’re using this to get your revenge on my family! For not supporting your father’s rebellion!” It’s too conveniently timed to be a coincidence; Sgaeyl whips her tail at Claidh on the perch behind us, who snaps back with her teeth.

I ignore the accusation, keeping my back to Amber. Nyra raises her eyebrows questioningly, letting the pause drag out long enough that I'm forced to fill it.

"I am simply defending a rider in my wing. Surely the evidence of last night's attack in *her locked bedroom* is all the proof you need."

Septon shakes his head, a sick little smile already spreading across his face. "Sadly not, Riorson." He's enjoying this, the bastard. "The only person who's admitting to murder here today is you."

Suddenly Violet's memory fills my head.

"*Tairn*," I think. "*Don't do this.*" It's such a violation, exposing her memory to us all.

"*It was her request, Wingleader.*"

I see Amber in Violet's room, the chain of keys in her hand. She's staring at me – no, at Violet – with a hateful smile, before she turns and locks the door behind her, leaving the six Unbonded cadets in her room. I feel Violet's fear pounding through me like it's my own.

There's no refuting evidence like this. Nyra looks at Septon and he nods his agreement, waving me forwards towards the podium to deliver the verdict.

"The wingleaders have formed a quorum and are in unanimous agreement," I say to the crowd. "We find you guilty, Amber Mavis." I look straight at her, turning that same hateful smile from Violet's memory on her.

"No! It is no crime to rid the quadrant of the weakest rider! I did it to protect the integrity of the wings!" She's pacing like a caged animal, her eyes pinballing round the crowd.

In a deafening motion, the formation moves back, leaving her exposed.

"As is our law, your sentence will be carried out by fire," Nyra states, no emotion in her voice.

"No!" Amber panics, looking out towards her dragon like he can save her. "Claidh!"

This is hard to watch, harder than the traitors I killed so quickly last night. I've known Amber for years; she's a Tyr like me. I make myself look at her, giving her some respect in death.

"Please don't," I hear Violet beg. I stare at her, wanting to go to her. I know she will feel like this is her fault, know she'll feel guilty for telling me, only for me to mete out this punishment on her behalf. I picture my shadows reaching out, stroking her cheek and taking the guilt away, carrying it back to me and tucking it in my jacket pocket. This is my doing, not hers; I can take it.

"Please give her a chance," her voice chokes on the words, as she stares back at me across the formation.

But I won't. This is no place for second chances. Here we get one chance: live or die. And Amber deserves to die for what she did.

Amber whispers once more for her dragon, and I watch as Tairn incinerates her before I can take another breath.

Claidh's scream rends through the air, and I cover my ears, feeling that scream tear through me. But then I think of the bruise on Violet's neck, the sheer terror in her eyes when she stood trapped under Seifert's knife.

“Justice,” Sgaeyl growls low.

“Justice,” I agree.

Safe

It's almost dawn the following morning when I hear a tentative tap on my bedroom door. Soleil looks like shit as I gesture her inside, closing the door behind her. Her eyes are bloodshot from lack of sleep and heavy dark shadows sink into her cheeks. She's never been particularly comfortable in my presence, but this morning her hands are trembling at her side.

"What happened?" Fear pulses hot and thick through my veins.

"Nyal's dead." It's barely a whisper.

Syrena's... someone. I don't even know who he was to her. But I remember how she looked at him in the clearing, like he was the only one giving her the hope to carry on.

My jaw clenches, and I gesture for Soleil to sit down. "How?"

"It was just after we met them. We were already on our way back to Basgiath, when the dragons heard it from the gryphons. They were spotted by a patrol near Sumerton."

"Did they find the weapons?"

I'm sickened with myself that the first thought is whether *we're* all safe. The fliers are already suffering all the losses in this war, surrounded by enemies on both sides and all I can think is whether the people I care about will make it.

Soleil shakes her head. "Dragonfire." I swallow through the lump in my throat. There will be no evidence left after that. "Syrena managed to get away when the rest of her drift arrived." She looks like she's close to tears. "I'm sorry, Xaden. We should have gone back--"

I cut her off. "No. It's not your job to protect them."

She stares up at me with hollow eyes like she doesn't believe it. Then she reaches into her inner jacket pocket and stands up, handing me an envelope. "Syrena gave me this for you."

Brennan's scrawl is recognisable even in the near-darkness. Soleil gives me a tight-lipped smile and heads toward the door.

"Soleil," I say and she turns back to look at me, her eyes still haunted. "Go see Imogen before you head to bed."

She opens her mouth to argue but I cut her off. "If she gives you any shit, tell her I sent you."

It's safer for all of us not to remember the specifics. And at least this way, maybe she'll get a few hours sleep without thinking about what else she could have done.

The second she leaves, I rip open the envelope but the letter is coded. Without Bodhi, it takes me almost an hour to decipher it. I try to focus on each individual letter as I work through it, not wanting to read the words until I can see the complete sentences, but some pull at me anyway. Trust. Safe. Important.

Each one adds a new weight to my chest, the burden of her survival feeling heavier with every letter. It's not just me that needs her to survive this. It's Brennan.

Xaden,

Trust her like you would trust Liam. She has only ever tried to do what is right. Her bonds were always to our father and sister, not Command. We can trust her.

The news of her two dragons reached us here. It feels right that Tairn has chosen her. She is the only person I can imagine worthy of sitting in the place where Naolin once did.

You must keep her safe, Xaden. I know this is a lot to ask, that you already do too much with too little. But she matters. I can't shake the feeling that she is more important than any of us yet realise.

Keep her alive. Whatever it takes.

I trust you.

- B

I can almost feel the fear in his words as he wrote them, and that's without the knowledge of the attack just last night in her room. My heart pounds in my chest. There's still thirty unbonded cadets, plus Barlowe and everyone else who would like to see her or me dead. Suddenly, just having Liam next door to her doesn't feel like enough.

I light the candle on the desk, watching the letter catch in one corner and burn across the page, feel the heat lick into my fingers until it's almost unbearable, before I drop it in the tray.

I head to the first-year rooms before breakfast, knowing that Liam and Violet will already be on their way to the archives. It takes me less than a minute to ward her door, keying it so that only she can enter.

"And you, of course," says Sgaeyl.

"It's my magic. Of course, I can enter," I snap back at her, not sure what point she is trying to prove.

"Well of course, Wingleader," she says with a huff that sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

I have no fucking idea what is funny about that.

Each morning the words of Brennan's letter replay over and over in my mind, taunting me that I'm not doing enough to protect her. But I can't let myself get any closer, knowing that the more I entangle our lives, the greater the risk that she doesn't make it out of here alive.

I've done what I can. The wards. Imogen. Liam. The rest is up to her.

I manage to avoid seeing Violet for almost a week, finding someplace else to be during our only shared class each day. When Panchek asks for volunteers to run supplies to a midland outpost, I almost knock over my chair with how quickly I agree. But I spend the whole flight there with only person on my mind.

I check in on Liam every evening, but he doesn't have much to report, and I can tell he's already getting bored of the frequency and subject of my visits. No, no one's tried to kill her. Yes, Aetos is keeping his distance. No, she's not channelling.

Eventually I run out of plausible excuses to be anywhere but Battle Brief and find myself filing into the room after every other rider. Somehow, my gaze still instantly finds Violet. Her beautiful silvery plait knots around her head, sandwiched between Rhiannon's braids and Liam's dishevelled blonde locks. The second I take my seat, Liam turns round to look at me and leans over to say something to Violet.

She holds up her middle finger to me, without even bothering to turn around to look.

What a lovely response from the woman I'm doing everything within my power to protect. I glare at her, only to see Liam snort with laughter at my response.

My foot taps in frustration. It takes all of ten seconds for Garrick to reach out and grip my knee hard to force me to stop.

Gods, this woman knows exactly how to get under my skin.

Several rows back, my eyes catch on Barlowe staring daggers at the back of Violet's head. His hand is gripping his quill so tightly I'm amazed it hasn't snapped. A girl I don't recognise leans to whisper something in his ear; my shadows strain to hear it but can't quite catch it. The sickening grin that spreads over Barlowe's face sends a wave of unease over me.

"Don't mind her, she's just sexually frustrated. Makes a girl crabby." Rhiannon is so loud, most of the riders in the front few rows turn to look at them. The shadows slowly snake towards her of their own accord, pooling under the seats where Violet and Liam are sat.

"I'm sure Riorson would be fine with my reviewing a couple candidates, especially if it means you'll stop flipping him off in front of his entire wing," I hear Liam say.

"I sincerely doubt that," Sgaeyl drawls. I ignore her along with the gnawing sensation in my stomach.

Violet laughs, and my chest clenches at the sound. "Thanks for the offer, though. I'll make sure to run any potential liaisons past you."

Rhiannon says something, but I don't hear it, completely distracted by the sound of Violet's laugh. She has all her walls up with me, I don't think I've ever really heard it before. It's so free and weightless. It makes me want to smile despite myself.

"I'm just saying that since you're protected at night now - " Liam says, but it makes them all laugh harder.

"Wait." Violet stops laughing. "What do you mean I'm protected at night? Because you're next door? Please tell me he's not making you sleep in the hallway or something obnoxious."

I already know from her tone that she's not going to like what he says. Should I have asked her first? Shit.

"No. Of course not. He warded your door the morning after the attack." He pauses at whatever look he sees on her face. "I'm guessing he didn't tell you?"

Obviously. I could punch him.

“He *what?*”

“He warded your door. So only you can open it.”

I can’t see her from the shadows around their feet, only able to pick up the sounds of their conversation. I have no idea how she reacts, no idea if she’ll see it as me doing my part to protect her or if this is just another example of me *overstepping*.

My pulse races imagining the expression on her face if she were to turn and look at me.

“Distract me,” I say to Garrick.

“What?” His brow furrows in confusion, but then his gaze flicks to the front row.

“I don’t know, just tell me what formation you’re planning for flight field later.”

His lips twitch, but he grabs a pen and starts drawing it out on a piece of paper between us and talking me through it. It’s utter babble but I force myself to nod, like I’m following every word.

But my fucking shadows betray me anyway. Violet drops her quill and before I can stop them, they gather it from the ground and rise up a couple of inches to hand it back to her.

I stare resolutely at the paper on the desk, even when I can feel her gaze burning at me from across the room.

“*Smooth, Wingleader,*” Sgaeyl teases.

Heat and Fire

Chapter Notes

Part of this chapter was posted as a stand-alone piece: Xaden POV: Heat and Fire.
Small edits have been made for consistency and clarity with the overall story.

I manage to keep my shadows to myself for the rest of November. Deigh starts channelling to Liam about mid-way through the month, and Bodhi and I take turns teaching him to wield in his room. Violet's still not channelling, and I can't have Liam out of action for half the afternoon in Carr's class when she can't get in there yet.

Garrick and I are already dripping with sweat as we enter the Challenge room after a particularly gruelling afternoon on the flight field. Panchek had us out in the skies for hours, repeating the same drills over and over until every rider was struggling to stay seated. To most it was a ridiculous exercise, a test to stretch our capabilities in the air, but for the rebellion kids it was just another reminder of exactly what we stand to face beyond the borders.

We were both silently seething the whole way back, so fucking angry at what Command is prepared to hide to save their own skin. So, when Garrick suggested a round of sparring, it felt like he was seeing inside my head.

Now that I'm here, it feels like a decidedly bad idea when my eyes immediately pick out Violet, even in a throng of riders all gearing up for Challenges to restart in a few weeks' time.

Fuck, she looks incredible as she circles Rhiannon on the mat, giving me a view of her from every angle. Her cheeks are flushed pink with the exertion, but she looks so much stronger than she did a few months ago, the muscles in her arms flexing as she swings the weapon in her hands.

Rhiannon has her training with a bow staff, but I can see from here that it's all wrong for her. That kind of weapon needs size and strength; it throws Violet's balance off with every strike. The words in Brennan's letter haunt me: Keep her alive. Whatever it takes.

In my selfish attempt at distance, I've left her training and protection in the hands of a first-year. A first-year who also has no idea of the extent of the threat we face.

As if to prove my point, I watch from the doors as Rhiannon puts Violet on the mat and waits an extra beat before re-engaging.

I'm walking towards them intending to teach her myself, when Violet says, "You're taking it easy on me." She glares up at Rhiannon who grimaces back at her, swishing the staff through the air.

"We've been at this for an hour. You're tired, and the last thing I want to do is hurt you."

"Challenges resume after solstice," Violet says, as she gets back on her feet. "You're not doing me any favours by holding back."

"She's not wrong," I say, unable to stop myself from reinforcing the point. I lock my eyes with Rhiannon pointedly, who drops her gaze to the floor. Liam jumps to his feet from where he was sat on the bench, like he's suddenly remembered he's supposed to be looking out for her too.

Do these people not realise what's at stake here? I walk past them with Garrick before I can say something stupid.

"Well aware," Violet says, tracking me with burning, angry eyes as I walk past her. She flicks her hand at me dismissively. "Go away unless you have something useful to say."

Gods, I love the way she talks to me, the fiery challenge in her eyes. She is so completely unafraid. I want her so fucking badly, I'm scared it's all over my face.

I don't look back at her but call out, "Move faster. You'll be less likely to die. How's that for useful."

Garrick can barely contain a laugh, as we reach the first empty mat in the centre of the gym.

"You can shut the fuck up too," I say, unbuttoning my flight jacket. We're not dressed for sparring, but I'm so tense with all this pent-up rage and frustration, I couldn't give a fuck who sees the scars today.

But he's still struggling not to smile as he walks onto the mat. I throw my arm out to knock it right off his face, but he blocks it, anticipating the move and grabs my wrist in two hands to twist my arm up in the air.

This guy has never fought fair, even when we were younger. It's the only way he thinks he can win. We lock eyes and he wiggles his eyebrows at me, his eyes squinting as he grins.

I twist round sharply, shifting his weight off balance and shove him away from me. We're a few paces apart, and the world narrows to the corners of this mat. It's the freest I've felt in weeks.

"You good, brother?" Garrick says, watching me with careful eyes.

I nod, tracking his movements as he shakes out his arms, shifting his stance a little. "Let's go."

He comes at me then, blow after blow. It takes every bit of concentration to block each hit, dipping under or leaning back sharply when I can't so they sail right past me.

All I can focus on is anticipating his next move, weeding through the feints to spot the hits he intends to land. It's brutal and unrelenting, and exactly what I need. There's no time to be afraid here.

We find our rhythm, familiar patterns of moves mixed up to create new combinations. My breaths come hot and fast, another layer of sweat coating my skin and dripping down my back.

We circle each other, both breathing heavily and I see the exertion and adrenaline I feel mirrored back on his face.

His eyes flick behind me, and he grins. "Seems we've got a bit of an audience."

But I've seen this trick before, and don't dare to turn around. So it's my shadows that look behind me, only to find nearly every rider in the gym watching us. Violet is tracking us with eyes that are all fire, her mouth parted slightly, her tongue dancing on the inside of her bottom lip. Gods, the things I want to do with –

"Concentrate, Wingleader," Sgaeyl's voice cuts through my thoughts. *"You know I don't like to lose."*

Garrick smirks at me across the mat, clearly aware of exactly where my thoughts have gone.

“Let’s give them something worth watching then,” I say, with a grin. I gesture him forwards again, and he kicks out low trying to take my knees out from under me. I jump over it and swivel to face him, each hit coming at me more furiously than before.

It’s only when I hear Violet’s back hit her own mat, that Garrick manages to land a punch, hitting me so hard in the jaw that I feel it reverberate up to the top of my skull.

“Idiot fool,” Sgaeyl seethes.

But I can’t help myself, I stop and glance towards her to check if she’s okay. She’s on the floor, the wind clearly knocked out of her as she struggles to take in a breath. Garrick sees it too, coming to stand at my side and towelling off like he needed the break.

Rhiannon’s on the ground next to her, but my jaw clenches as Barlowe approaches to throw some insults at her now that she doesn’t have the air to fight back. *Fucking coward.*

Liam is on his feet and standing between them before Barlowe can manage a single step onto the mat. But the sadistic smile curling up on his mouth has me moving towards her before I can think better of it.

“Walk the fuck away, Barlowe,” Liam warns.

I stand on the other side of Violet and cock my head. Barlowe looks up at me and spits out, “She’s only alive because of you.”

I’m sure that’s the lie he tells himself so he can sleep at night, when Violet could have killed him three times over.

“Right, because I’m the one who buried a dagger in your shoulder at Threshing,” I say, relishing the fear in his eyes as I picture all the ways I could kill him.

Violet scrambles to her feet, grabbing hold of the bow staff so she’s armed. Where the fuck are her daggers? And why the fuck isn’t she wearing her vest? I spot it laid out on the bench where Liam was sat. What good is it going to do there? She’s lucky that whatever hit put her on the mat didn’t break her ribs.

“We could just settle this now,” Barlowe says to her, stepping to one side of Liam. “If you’re done hiding behind the big strong men.”

For a second, I wonder if she’s going to be stupid enough to take the bait. But then I remember this is Violet he’s talking to. And she’s smart enough to ensure the next time she faces him will be on her terms.

But gods, I would love to prove just what he’s up against. I could kill him before he took a step. Liam could beat him even on a bad day. It warms my heart a little as I see Garrick and Imogen step in a bit closer, like they’re prepared to stand between them too. I don’t know if they’re doing it for Violet or me, but it’s a sweet little reminder that we’re all on the same side.

Barlowe takes her silence as an admission of weakness, not proof of her smarts. “That’s what I thought,” he says, blowing a kiss at her.

“You ran,” she flings it at him like it’s one of her daggers, her voice ringing out through the hall. “That day in the field, you *fucking ran* when it was three on one, and we both know when it comes

down to it, you'll run again. That's what cowards do."

I don't think she could have eviscerated him more if she'd kicked him in the balls. Barlowe flushes as the sniggers break out around the gym.

I feel a burst of pride in my chest. "She's not wrong," I say and Garrick laughs.

Barlowe goes to move onto the mat and my shadows tense, but Liam muscles him off and pushes him back towards the open door. I flick my hand sharply and swing the door shut with my power from across the room.

"What the hell were you thinking egging him on like that?" Aetos shouts, marching towards Violet.

No, not happening. If anyone is meting out discipline on this mat today, it's me.

"Oh, *now* you feel like talking to me?" Violet seethes, turning to him but I step in between them. She's coiled to strike, determined to lash out. Well, that makes two of us.

"Give us a second." I say to Aetos and Rhiannon, without ever looking their way. My eyes are locked on Violet, tendrils of hair escaping from her braid, her skin flushed with exertion. I couldn't take my eyes off her if I wanted to.

"You want to tell me why the fuck you're not wearing that?" I ask softly, but we both know it's loaded with tension as I point to her discarded leather vest, the only thing separating her from life and death on more than one occasion.

"I have to wash it at some point," she chimes back, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

"And you thought that would be a good idea during *sparring*?" I don't even know what to do with her, it's like she's trying to get a rise from me. I'm burning up with emotions; half of me furious and desperate to get her to have some – hell, *any* – self-preservation, the other half wondering if she's doing all this just to get my attention. Either way, she has it completely.

"I washed it *before* sparring, knowing it could dry while your guard dog keeps watch, as opposed to sleeping without it because we both know what happens behind locked doors around here." Her eyes burn into mine.

"Not behind yours anymore." I know, she knows, but I make sure anyway: *there's nothing I won't do to keep you safe*. "I made sure of it."

"Because I'm supposed to trust *you*?"

Her tone is vicious and it slices through me worse than if she'd cut me with one of her blades. I'm desperate for her to trust me. But there is still so much she doesn't know, that she can't know just yet.

I swallow and it physically pains me to simply say, "Yes." Nothing about this is simple.

"And you make it *so* easy."

"You know I can't kill you." What doesn't she understand about this? "Fuck, Sorrengail, the entire quadrant knows I can't kill you." I move closer to her, expecting her to back up but she doesn't. She's never backed up, refuses to yield to anyone; instead, I'm now a step closer than professional would dictate.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t hurt me,” she whispers.

I would never. After everything, how can she still...? I blink and lean back a fraction, my brows furrowed. Why doesn’t she know that I would do anything to keep her alive?

“Stop training with a bow staff.” I try to make it sound like an order, a wingleader instructing a first-year on basic sparring. But I’m so close to her, it comes out all wrong, it’s kind and soft and sweet. “It’s too easy to knock out of your hands. Stick to the daggers.” I make a mental note to send word back to Aretia and get some real weapons made for her, my pulse racing just imagining her holding two Tyrrish daggers in her hands.

“I was doing just fine until Tairn barged into my head with all his anger and distracted me,” she retorts, determined to turn this into an argument.

“Then learn how to block him out.”

“What, with all this power I’m wielding?” She’s so furious at her own shortcomings. That’s what this is about, I realise. “Or were you unaware that I’m still not channelling?”

Gods, I love her like this. Fired up, passionate and determined not to budge an inch. The tension between us feels electric. I lean in, so close I can almost feel her hot, angry breaths against my lips.

“I am annoyingly aware of *everything* you do,” I admit just to her.

“Wingleader Riorson,” Aetos interrupts, snapping me out of myself. “She’s just not used to the bond yet. She’ll learn how to block it out.”

“Remind me again why you moved this idiot into your wing,” says Sgaeyl.

“Pretty sure that was your idea. Keep your enemies close and all,” I send back.

I feel her huff out hot steam in a snort. *“That doesn’t sound like me at all.”*

I step back, but Violet’s eyes have a heat in them that I’ve not seen before, and I can’t go far.

“You choose the oddest times to defend her, Aetos.” I tear my eyes from Violet’s to look at him. “And the most convenient times *not* to.”

I watch the words land like a hook to his gut. Aetos looks like he wants to punch me. I’m half-minded to let him, just for an excuse to put him on the ground in front of her.

Instead, I turn back to Violet and say, “Do us both a favour and put the fucking armour back on.” I stride off the mat before she can stop me, taking my shirt from Garrick’s outstretched hand.

Her gasp tells me she’s seen the ugly mess of scars across my back. I tug the shirt over my head quickly and keep walking.

I don’t want her pity. That’s the last thing I want from her.

“Not tonight,” I beg of Sgaeyl. But there’s no response, just yearning and fire.

I've been laying fully dressed on my bed, staring at my ceiling for over an hour, replaying that parting look from Violet on the mat, the fire burning in her eyes that looked more like lust than anger. It's only when I'm walking towards her room without remembering how I got there that I put two and two together.

This isn't me. It's *them*, Sgaeyl and Tairn.

The second I'm fully aware of it, it becomes more intense. Even blocking them does little to take the edge off; their antics are kindling for a fire that is already smouldering inside me. I need air. I've got to get out of here.

I'm not even wearing a cloak, just a shirt and pants that shouldn't be enough against the cold, but I'm warmed by the fire that's raging through my veins. I head down the spiral staircase to the walls lining the citadel, patting my jacket pocket to feel for the rolled stick of churam I save for moments just like this. A burst of heat from Sgaeyl burns through me, and I put an arm out to steady myself against the crumbling walls. Usually, I would go further into the trees, breathe in the scent of mulch and dirt and darkness. This will have to do.

I light the churam and take a deep inhale, savouring the release of tension that comes with that familiar sweet, smoky taste. I immediately feel more in control of myself.

It's beautiful out here tonight, snow falling in soft clouds around me, melting into the gravel at my feet. I take another long drag, feeling the churam giving me some much-needed distance from the mated dragons. But with that mental clarity, my own thoughts quickly follow: *Violet*.

I wonder if she's feeling this too, hoping she's still blissfully unaware of what Tairn channelling to her will mean in moments like this. I think of her just hours earlier, furious with me on the mat, her eyes lit with rage and the edge of something much more interesting. For the first time I wonder if the crackling tension between us isn't only in my head. I take another deep inhale, leaning my head back on the cold wall behind me, savouring the icy burn against my skin.

I feel shadows shift on the same staircase that brought me here and realise I won't be alone much longer: it's Violet, tracing my footsteps just a few minutes later.

"Are you two doing this on purpose?" I fling at Sgaeyl, but there's nothing.

I debate bringing more shadows around me, shielding so she won't know I'm here. But another part of me wants to see her again, is desperate to get answers.

And with heat still smouldering inside me, I do the dishonourable thing for once: I do nothing.

She stumbles out into the snow, tipping her head back like a kid seeing it for the first time. I watch tiny flakes of snow fall around her in a blur. She looks like an angel, her cloak blowing out in the wind behind her, her braid loose down her back. I stare at her greedily, drinking in her flushed cheeks and wide eyes as she stares up at the sky. Suddenly as if realising she's not alone, she whirls to look straight at me. Our eyes lock.

"Is that churam?" she says accusingly. I dramatically inhale and blow out a long puff of smoke, savouring the warm air, the sweet smell, and the growing look of shock on her face.

"Want some?" I gesture the roll towards her, not moving from the wall. If she wants it, come and get it. "Unless you want to continue our earlier argument, in which case none for you."

She looks so adorable in her outrage. "No," she says, her jaw dropping. "We're not allowed to smoke that!"

I keep my eyes on her as I take another long drag. “Yeah, well, the people that made that rule obviously weren’t bonded to Sgaeyl and Tairn, now where they?” I smirk, knowing she’s feeling exactly what I’m feeling if she’s out here too. For once, we’re in entirely the same position.

“It helps with... distancing yourself.” I gesture again for her to come closer. “Beyond what shielding does of course.” She shakes her head but comes toward me anyway, leaning back against the wall just beside me with a sigh. If I stretched a hand out just a few more inches, it would brush against hers.

“Suit yourself,” I say, taking a final long drag before extinguishing it against the rough bricks behind me.

There’s a long silence, where all I can hear is her short, rapid breathing. Then she says like she’s admitting a secret to the darkness, “I feel like I’m on fucking *fire*.”

It’s such a perfect description for how I feel when I’m near her that I laugh. “Yeah, that happens.” It feels evil to enjoy this, when I know these emotions aren’t her own, but I’m so grateful she feels what I feel for once. I can’t keep the smile off my face.

I sense her watching me and slide my eyes over to lock with hers. She’s staring at me with the same heated, angry eyes from earlier on the mat, only this time they are *blazing*. I know that look.

“Oh Violence,” I tease. “You’re going to have to learn shield against Tairn or his escapades with Sgaeyl will drive you mad.” I can’t look at her gazing at me like that, so I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes as I add, “Or into someone’s bed.”

“Oh, I know,” she says, her voice breathless. “I am *horrified* to see Liam again.”

My eyes spring open. “Liam? Why?” What happened between them? I can feel my heartbeat in my throat, as I add with a casualness I don’t feel, “Where is your bodyguard anyway?”

“I’m my own bodyguard,” she flings back, her head twisting to rest her cheek on the stone so she’s facing me, eyes shutting against the insistent pounding of heat I know she must feel just like I do. “And he’s in bed.”

“*Your* bed?” I demand furiously, shadows whipping out from me uselessly into the night. Liam would never, the rational part of me protests. But I’m paranoid and jealous and burning with emotions that aren’t mine. I don’t care how it sounds.

“No,” she says, and I feel like I can breathe again. “Not that it should matter to you.” She’s looking at me with a puzzled expression.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” I say, forcing boredom into my tone. Like she can’t see straight through me anyway. “As long as you’re both consenting. And believe me, you’re in no condition to consent.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of consenting.” I feel a surge of heat behind my shields that powers my imagination anyway; I see her legs wrapped around me, her fingers in my hair, and... Nope, not happening. I pour my shadows into my mental shield against Sgaeyl, reinforcing whatever distance I can muster.

Without warning Violet pitches forward, her knees going out underneath her and I grab her instinctively, hands and shadows whipping out to catch her round her waist. The second I touch her... oh *gods*. She’s not just feeling what I’m feeling, this is on an entirely different level. Her skin practically burns me through her leathers, and I can almost sense hot, raw power sparking off

her in urgent, pulsing waves.

“Why the hell aren’t you shielding?” It’s difficult to keep my hands on her like this, and it takes far too much strength to steel myself and keep her upright.

“Not all of us have been given lessons,” she hisses back, a few inches from my face. “He just started channelling before all... this. And in case you forgot, you’re only allowed to attend Professor Carr’s class when you can wield.”

“Always thought that was a ridiculous rule.” I sigh, trying not to feel her hands wrapped around my shoulders. “Alright, crash course. Only because I’ve been where you are and woken up with more than a few regrets.” And I really don’t want to be one of yours.

“You’re actually going to help me?”

That pisses me off. Does she think I frequently go around intervening during Threshing, warding first-years bedroom doors and accusing wingleaders of treason? “I’ve been helping you for months.” I say through gritted teeth, my hands flexing at her waist.

“No,” she seems genuinely confused. “You sent Liam to help. He’s been helping me for months, well weeks, almost months... whatever.”

The way she says his name sends a pang of jealousy through me, and I plaster a mask of great offence on my features so she can’t see it. “I’m the one who burst through your door and killed everyone who attacked you. And then I removed the other threat to your life with a very public, very polarizing display of vengeance. Liam didn’t do that. I did.”

“The crowd wasn’t polarized. They were all for it, I was there.”

“You were torn. In fact, you begged Tairn not to kill her, damn well knowing she’d just come after you again.”

“Fine,” she shrugs. “But let’s not pretend you didn’t do most of that for yourself. It would be inconvenient for you if I died.”

I can’t believe she still thinks that is what this is all about. Guess all it takes is a few weeks of pretending I’m a selfish asshole, looking out for his own skin. But I thought it was fucking obvious that I can’t seem to stay away from her, how I can’t stop myself from intervening in every little thing she does.

I stare at her in disbelief, shaking my head. I am so done rehashing this same argument. “You know what? We’re not fighting tonight. Not if you want to learn how to shield.”

“Fine. We’re not fighting. Teach me.” She tilts her chin up at me in challenge.

My hands still wrapped around her, I lean in closer to meet the challenge in her eyes, “Ask me nicely.” I say silkily.

“Have you *always* been this tall?” She asks disarmingly.

“No. I was a child at some point.” She won’t win this challenge with me, either. “Ask me nicely, Violence,” I whisper. “Or I’m gone.”

I’m so wrapped up in her, I wouldn’t leave if the world was on fire.

“How often is it like this with them?” She deflects again.

“Often enough that you’re going to need proper shields,” I parry back. “You won’t ever be able to block them out completely, and sometimes *they* forget to block *us*, like tonight.” I still have my suspicions about that. “That’s why the churam helps, but at least it’s like walking by a brothel instead of actively participating in one.”

Her eyes blaze in understanding. “Right then. All right. Will you teach me to shield?”

I smile at her, knowing she needs me just as much as I need her for once. “Say please.” My gaze drops to her lips before I can help myself, determined to hear those words from her.

“Are you always this difficult?”

“Only when I know I have something you need. What can I say, I like making you squirm.” Gods, I’m enjoying this far too much. After every look she’s given me, every challenge sparking in her eyes that I feel racing up my spine... “It’s like a sweet little slice of payback for what you’ve put me through these last couple of months.” Snowflakes have settled on her hair, little icy shards peppering through the braid that frames her face. I reach out and brush them away, like she’s mine.

“What *I’ve* put *you* through?”

Shit. I try to take back the words. “You’ve scared me nearly to death once or twice, so I think saying *please* is a fair request.”

She glares at me and takes a deep, steadying breath. “As you prefer. Xaden?” I can already tell from her tone and her sweet little smile that she’s going to make me suffer just as much. She inches closer to me, “Would you pretty, pretty please teach me how to shield before I accidentally climb you like a tree and we *both* wake up with regrets?”

Oh, she’s good. But I’m better. I smile back at her, knowingly, “Oh, I’m firmly in control of my faculties.” A shadow strokes down her arm, featherlight, barely touching. I know I’m balancing on an edge, a wafer-thin line between control and freefall, but it feels right being here with her.

“And since you asked so nicely,” I croon back at her, my hands lifting to slide along her cheeks, wrapping back to cup her head in my hands, angling her eyes up at me. She stares at me, her eyes burning. “Close your eyes,” I whisper.

“It requires touching me?” Her voice is shaky.

“Not at all. Just one of the perks of not thinking too clearly. You have incredibly touchable skin.” It makes my heart pound to just say it. No double meaning. No ulterior motives. Just the truth.

“You need to envision somewhere. Anywhere.” I guide her, my eyes closing as hers do and my own mind already centring myself in Aretia, working through the steps that have become as natural as breathing. “I prefer the top of my favourite hillside near what’s left of Aretia. Wherever it is, it needs to feel like home.” I picture her standing there with me, looking out over the soft curves of greenery in every direction.

“Feel your feet hit the ground and dig in some,” I tell her.

“Got it.” Her voice is quiet but determined, and my eyes blink open to look at her.

“That’s called grounding, keeping your mental self somewhere so you aren’t swept away by the power.” Her eyelids flutter in concentration, her brow furrowed. It feels so intensely intimate to be

so close to her, my hands on her and her eyes shut tight, trusting me.

“Now call to your power. Open your senses.” Her body reacts to the picture she’s forming in her mind, her fingers twitching and muscles tensing.

“Too much,” she says, the warmth of her breath caressing my face.

“Focus on your feet. Stay grounded. Can you see where the power flows from? If not, just pick a place.” I’m so focused on her, shadows crowding out everything else around us, narrowing my field of vision so she’s all I can see. I watch her eyes squeeze tight, her breaths coming deep and heavy, her chest rising. *You can do this, Violet. I’ve got you.*

“I see it,” she says, surprised at herself.

“Perfect. You’re a natural.” My tone is even, despite the pride bursting in my chest. “It takes most people a week just to learn how to ground. Now, do whatever you need to mentally do to wall yourself off from that current. Tairn is the source. You block that power, and you’ll have some control back.”

I feel a blast of heat through my own bond with Sgaeyl, the same time as it’s fired back at me through the contact with Violet and through her, Tairn. The intensity of it takes my breath away and I grit my teeth to keep still and steady, willing her to keep her focus. Her hands cling onto my arms like I’m the only thing keeping her standing.

“You’ve got this,” I say for myself as much as for her. “Whatever you create in your mind is real to you. Shut off the valve. Build a wall. Whatever makes sense.” I’m mentally reinforcing my own shields as I talk her through it.

“It’s a door,” she says, her fingers fisting in my shirt. A glimpse of a heavy, antique, shield-like door flashes through my mind, and I push it back towards her. This is *hers*. I’m determined that she has somewhere that is her own, in a world full of *us* and *ours*.

“There you go. Keep going,” I urge, steeling my voice against the utter disbelief that she’s doing this on day one.

Her hands tremble against me, her muscles squeezed tight. “I’ve got the door shut.”

Unbelievable. “Great. Lock it.”

She physically sags against me, letting out a long-held breath. “It changed. I can see through the door.” Her voice is full of wonder and delight, her head moving like she can see it in front of her with her eyes still shut tight.

Well, fuck. “Yeah. You’ll never be able to fully block him. Got it locked?”

She nods.

“Open your eyes but do your best to keep that door locked. It means keeping one foot grounded.” I think back to my first few months learning, when the intensity of Sgaeyl’s power would roar through whatever shadows I could muster and add, “Don’t be surprised if it slips. We’ll just start again.” I want her to know how strong she is, how capable, no matter what comes next.

She blinks open her eyes, looking straight at me. I wait for Tairn’s power to take her back under, but there’s nothing but the wind whipping snow all around us. She smiles at me and starts to say something.

I can't believe she just did that; she made it look so easy. How is it that she constantly manages to surprise me? I can't take my eyes off her, studying the way her smile spreads across her features, how her eyes sparkle with joy.

"You are-" I realise I don't have the words. "-astonishing," I finish uselessly.

Her smile widens and it feels like a jolt in my chest. I shake my head. "I couldn't do that for weeks," I admit, fully expecting her to use it against me.

But she doesn't. There's no mockery in her voice, it's soft and breathy as she says, "Guess I have a superior teacher."

I don't even realise I'm touching her; it feels like a habit between lovers of years. My thumbs are making idle circles by her ears, stroking her soft, beautiful skin. I risk a glance at her lips, and it feels so natural to lean in and kiss her, my hands move her head towards mine like muscle memory.

A torturous heat blazes through me and I let her go like she's burned me, backing up a few steps. "Damn it. Touching you was a bad idea."

But my eyes are glued to her. "The worst," she agrees, as her tongue skims across her lower lip and I can't help but groan at the sight of it, wanting so desperately to close the space between us.

"Kissing you would be a cataclysmic mistake." One of us needs to stop this, this is only going to end one way.

"Calamitous," she agrees, but her tone doesn't match her words.

"We'll both regret it." I'm not strong enough to stop this. *Say no, Violet.*

"Naturally," she whispers, her eyes locking with mine in a challenge.

That final look does it.

"Fuck it."

I stride forwards two paces and grab her towards me, my mouth *finally* on hers. At first, it's all heat and fire, the idea alone that I'm finally kissing her scorching through me, incinerating every reason to fight against this. In less than a heartbeat, I have her pressed up against the stone wall, and she's kissing me back feverishly like she never wants it to stop.

I want to touch her *everywhere*. I rake my hands through her hair, angling her head up to kiss her deeper, sliding my tongue into her mouth. Her hands are all over me, running over my chest and back, gripping at my shirt to pull my body closer to her, to pin her harder against the wall. She seems to melt into me, softening to let me touch every part of her. My heartbeat thunders in my chest at the feel of her like this, desire pounding through my veins in heavy pulses.

I can't get enough of her. I kiss her deeply, savouring the taste of her, the way her tongue pushes back against mine, the press of her lips. I feel like she's breaking me, cracking through the last shreds of self-control I have left.

"Violence," I can't help but groan it against her lips.

Closer, closer.

I can't tell if it's my thought or hers, I just pull her harder against me, recklessly seeking out every

part of her. I want her wrapped around me, under me, on top of me, *everywhere*. My hands trail down the curve of her back, skimming the knots and laces, tracing the memory of revealing her back from her corset inch by inch, just a few weeks ago in her room. But this time, I don't stop myself. I keep moving, my hands gripping her ass and lifting her up, wordlessly inviting her to wrap her legs around my waist, pressing her up higher against the wall as her thighs squeeze my hips.

We're face-to-face now and her hands fist into my hair and palm my cheeks, our mouths sliding against each other. *More, more.*

Gods, the way she wants me... it feels like she's holding my heart in her fist, squeezing tight. I want her just as badly, my hips rock into hers of their own volition, pressing myself against her even harder. She gasps and the sound echoes through me. I break the kiss to look at her, her eyes and hair wild, lost in me, in this. I kiss along her jaw, her neck, greedily seeking out any and every part of her I haven't tasted. She moans into me, her hands and nails and mouth all over me, her thighs squeezing tight around my waist.

A blinding flash of white light bursts around us like a warning, and I feel my shadows skitter and miss a beat at the answering boom of thunder. What the hell. Was that...?

It's like a jolt to my system, resetting my conscience and I push back, panicked. What the hell are we *doing*? I have completely lost control and her eyes are locked on mine, panting in long drawn-out breaths as I step back from her, setting her down on the ground.

What have I done? How did I let this get so completely out of control? It's her *first* day channelling, the first time she's been bombarded with the emotions of Tairn and Sgaeyl and I just... Nausea threatens to overwhelm me. It took me months to control myself against that onslaught of power and feeling. This isn't real. This isn't her. She doesn't want this.

I back up a few steps, without taking my eyes from her, almost choking on the intensity of how far I've betrayed her. But my pulse still echoes through me, as I bite out, "You have to go."

"Why?" Her voice is breathless, lust and want so clear on her face. The snow falls in light clumps around her, the wind tugging at her hair. This isn't real, this isn't *her*, I tell myself again.

"Because I can't," I say.

Focus on what's real. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Dig in. Put your hands behind your head. Visualise. I try and centre myself, grounding like a first-year. "And I refuse to act on a desire that isn't yours. So, you have to walk back up those steps. Now."

She stares at me, eyes wide and burning with heat. "But I want--"

"This isn't *your* want." I am so unjustly furious at Tairn and Sgaeyl I want to scream it at the sky. But *I* did this, not them. "That's the fucking problem. And I can't leave you out here on your own, so have just a little mercy on me and go." I feel like my heart is breaking. This isn't real.

I watch the realisation at what I almost let happen dawn in her eyes, and she just nods and runs. My shadows race after her, like they don't want to let her go.

Cloaking myself in the darkness, I sink down onto my knees and put my hands in the icy gravel, squeezing, feeling the sharp shards of stone bite into my skin. This isn't real, I think over and over.

Except that it still feels real to me.

Distance

Chapter Notes

An earlier version of this was posted as a stand-alone piece: Xaden POV: Distance.
Edits have been made for consistency and clarity with the overall story.

Back in the flight field the next morning, I'm still replaying kissing her over and over, just to punish myself. Each time feels more brutal than the last. I hear her gasps and moans, then the boom of thunder through the air. I taste her lips on mine, then bile as I realise what I've done without her consent. I see her eyes heated and burning, like nothing else in the world matters but me, then a searing flash of hurt and betrayal.

It plays on repeat, torturing me. Sgaeyl flies us up high into the clouds, a watchful eye turning to look back at me between her wings. She's not said anything to me all morning.

I stopped us, at least. If we're tallying rights and wrongs here, that's got to count for something, right? And it's not like I was completely unaffected by Sgaeyl and Tairn's encounter; my fists clench at the memory of that blazing heat ripping through me while I tried to keep her upright and shielding. Maybe not in the same way as Violet, but still... does it count? Barely.

I sort through the memory of last night, searching for clues. Where did I let it go too far? When *should* I have stopped it? But in the harsh light of morning, it all feels so fucked up. I can't untangle our emotions from the dragons, my feelings from hers, what's real and not real.

She was relying on me to protect her, to teach her to shield and keep her safe. And instead, I let our emotions – no, *my* emotions – override everything else. I think of the moment when I cupped her face in my hands, her eyes closed and trusting me as she built those first shields in her mind. She put her faith in me, and I betrayed her.

We're bound together forever through our dragons, but it's become brutally clear that I cannot trust myself around her. I am so overwhelmingly attracted to her that it took less than twenty minutes for me to have her pressed against the wall and every rational reason not to kiss her gone from my head. She's Brennan's *sister*. She's bonded to *Tairn*. I need her on our side at the end of this. I need her to trust us. And I am going about it in every possible wrong way.

Gods, I would love to tell her everything. I'm dying to bring down the walls between us and let her see who I really am. But if I do that, I betray everyone who has placed their trust in me. She would never tell, I'm certain of it, but it only takes one unguarded moment with Aetos and all of us are dead. As much as I want her to know, I can't risk it. I need to stay the fuck away from her.

"It has to be soon, Xaden." Sgaeyl only addresses me by name when she's furious with me.

"Yeah, well.... sorry I'm struggling to bring up your dead brother is alive in everyday conversation." I fire back at her, still prickly that her antics last night and suspiciously forgetful lack of blocking has gotten me into this situation.

"That's not the information I'm referring to you and you know it." Her golden eye pins me to my seat. She's right. That has – and will always be – Brennan's secret to share. *"She must know about*

the venom and the threat beyond our borders. I will not ask Tairn to keep it from her much longer. It's breaking him."

"I'm not keeping this from her for fun. Her powers are too new, she needs time to build proper shields."

"The Aetos boy does pose a problem," Sgaeyl murmurs. "I could still torch him if you like."

I roll my eyes, a small smile spreading across my face, despite myself.

"Ok, not yet," Sgaeyl agrees, all jokes aside. "But soon, Xaden. She must know soon."

Dark storm clouds are starting to gather around us and I think back to last night, the one crackling flash of lightning that scorched the skies. I've been so obsessively rethinking every intimate moment between Violet and me that somehow the big, dramatic flash of lightning seemed insignificant. At the time it had felt like a warning, but up here in the skies, my own power flowing through me as we bank amongst the clouds, it feels like I've stumbled on a piece of a puzzle that I've been missing.

"Sgaeyl, do you think Violet could be..." I don't have the words to finish the thought, it's been decades since someone controlled lightning in that way.

"It's too early to know."

"Has Tairn said-"

"That's not how signets work." She is quick to shut down any talk of him. *"You know that, Wingleader,"* she adds more softly.

I know the chances are tiny. But my mind whirrs with the possibilities of raw power like that, finally in the hands of someone that could use it for good and bring some balance back to our world.

A few hours later, I'm in the Battle Brief tower, squaring off against Septon who's determined it should be riders in his wing headed out tonight on the Commandant's orders. I put up a good fight, mixing bits of truth with the lies to make the performance more convincing. *I need Tail Section to have more long-distance flight time. Claw Section missed out on aerial manoeuvres during the storm last week, they need the challenge.*

The more he thinks I've ceded to him, the better. When the orders come in for Sumerton again in a few days, I'll have the precedent he created to get my team close to the meeting point at Athebyne without suspicion.

The new wingleader, Lamani, tries to mediate and I glare at him, my arms crossed before finally nodding in agreement, like they've worn me down.

I've been preparing myself for this moment all day, but Violet's gaze from across the hall still feels like it's stroking along my skin. My eyes snap to hers like a magnet, expecting to see the same look of betrayal as she left me last night. Instead, she's looking at me like she's replaying the kiss in her mind, her lips parted and eyes knowing. It makes me want to close the distance between us and do

it all again.

I spot Aetos pushing through the crowd at the door behind her and tense, my gaze searching for Liam to intervene, but he's locked in conversation with Ridoc.

I hear Aetos say, "Vi, can we talk?" and that's all that it takes to tear Violet's gaze from mine.

Jealousy burns through me as I watch them talking and see Violet turn to leave with him, telling Rhiannon she'll be right back. My eyes catch on Liam who gives me an apologetic grimace. Shy of tackling her to the ground, he can't force her not to go with him.

I desperately want to send shadows snaking after them, to listen in on this specific conversation for just one unguarded insight on how she feels about last night. But that would make me as bad as him. If I follow her, even if it's to make sure he doesn't lay a hand on her and help himself to her thoughts, I would be just as bad as him.

After last night, I owe her more than that. I pull the shadows closer to me, determined to give her the distance we both desperately need.

Weeks pass in the same routine.

Drills. *Distance*.

"She's getting stronger, Xaden," Imogen reports after weights practice.

Formation. *Distance*. Stare straight ahead, don't look at her.

Battle Brief. *Distance*. Pretend you can't feel her eyes burning into the back of your skull.

"She's fucking *pissed* at you, man!" Liam says, unable to stop laughing late one night in my room.

Distance.

Challenge room. "It was all her, Xaden – just strength and speed," Liam reports back.

Weapons run. A note from Brennan on a set of daggers: *Strike true*.

Flight field. *Distance*. She still can't keep her seat.

In late January, I'm on the flight field with Sgaeyl at my back, as she tries to convince the other dragons it's not too cold to fly. But just as I think she's won this battle, my gaze snags on a lone rider running across the wide expanse of field towards us from the quadrant. Liam. My heart drops like a stone in my chest. I race towards him, not caring who sees, almost slamming into him before he's even a third of the way across the field.

He bends over for air, clutching his chest and I grab his shoulders to keep him upright and facing me. "Violet's challenge," he gasps out. "Barlowe."

"Is she alive?" I demand, immediately anticipating the worst. My eyes frantically search his for answers.

He winces like he's in physical pain. "I...I don't... I came straight here to tell you."

My jaw drops. "She's facing him *now*?" I don't know whether to run to her or stay and hit Liam in the face. "You left her to face him on *her own*?"

He has the nerve to look affronted. "She made me promise not--"

He knew about this, I realise. My hands grab tight fists of his shirt with the effort to not lash out at him. But if he knew, then *she* knew; she somehow always knows who she'll end up facing on the mat.

A short burst of laughter escapes through my lips, and then I laugh, *really* laugh in a way I haven't for years. Liam stares at me like I've completely lost my mind.

Gods, she's so much smarter than all of us. She sent Liam here as a messenger, a 6ft something delivery addressed straight to me that screams *I don't need your help, stay the hell out of this*.

My heart is pounding, terrified for her, but my head knows she's smarter than Barlowe too, that she'll use his size and bravado to her advantage. She knows all his tricks, will have pre-empted every strike.

She will not die today.

I force myself to walk, not run, across the field towards the challenge hall. Liam walks next to me in stunned silence, clearly desperate to race back to her.

"Xaden, she begged me not--" Liam starts.

"Don't apologise," I say before he can, putting an arm around his shoulder. "You're not here to follow orders. You're my brother, sure, but you're also her friend. I trust you to make the right call."

He sighs, visibly relieved. Then he probes, "You're not worried?"

"I'm fucking terrified," I admit, with a tight laugh.

"Then...?" He gestures at me, like we should pick up the pace.

I shake my head. "She wants to do this on her own."

I feel my pulse quicken as we near the building a few minutes later, my imagination taking over and painting an image of what I'll see when I reach the doors. Violet on the ground, her neck snapped and lifeless eyes staring up at me and my hands curl into fists, squeezing tight.

There's commotion on the other side of the courtyard, the double doors that lead to the Healer's Quadrant banging open and Nolan and four others rush through, one in rider leathers. My heart drops and I lose all pretence of calmness to race towards the doors, Liam right behind me.

I would know if she was dead. I would know if she was dead.

I get there first, shoving the doors open and my eyes snap to her on the mat. She's on her back, Ridoc tying a strip of something above a dagger protruding from her left forearm. There's blood all over her. I'm next to her on my knees in an instant, my eyes running over her, assessing for injuries. She looks pale and broken, but she's alive. I can see the indentations of fingers in her cheeks, a series of small bruises and burst capillaries that spill out unnaturally, like something

thicker than blood was forced through her veins. I want to fucking kill him.

Liam arrives with the two healers to lift her onto a stretcher and get her to the infirmary. I look over my shoulder to where half the hall is gathered around Jack's lifeless body on the floor, and send shadows snaking through their legs, evaluating. Emmetterio's on his knees, a discarded vial and needle on the floor next to him, pressing rhythmically into Jack's chest.

The healers raise Violet on the stretcher, and the rest of us stand with them, my hand gripping hers with a soft squeeze.

"What did she do to him?" I ask Ridoc, curiously.

"Apparently he's allergic to oranges," he says with a smirk.

I snort, not sure even Brennan could have turned oranges into a lethal weapon.

"Sounds like Violence," I say, and we head towards the doors.

Daggers

Chapter Notes

A bonus chapter today before we return to regularly scheduled programming - enjoy!

I stay with her while they stitch her up. I lean against the wall with my arms crossed while they insert tubes and drips. I tug at my hair restlessly as night falls and she's still not conscious, seeking comfort in the feel of her steady pulse at her wrist.

When they wheel Barlowe in a few hours later, it takes everything in me to not send my shadows over to finish the job. I try to distract myself, flipping a dagger over and over, catching it by the tip.

The bed shifts next to me, and I look at her, watching her eyes blink open and narrow at me. *She's alive.*

I want to kiss her. I want to take her face in my hands and make her promise to never scare me like that again. But I don't. Instead, I arch an impressed brow and ask, "Oranges?"

She tries to move but blanches in pain. "How many stitches?"

"Eleven on one side and nineteen on the other." I watched every single one like a penance for not protecting her better. I lean forward and say again, "You turned *oranges* into a weapon, Violence?"

She wriggles up the bed so she's sitting and shrugs, like it was nothing. "I worked with what I had."

"Seeing as it kept you alive – kept *us* alive – I can't really argue, and I'm not going to ask how it is you always know who you'll end up challenging." I'm furious at her for not asking for help, but it's softened by the relief that she's awake and talking and *here*. "Telling Ridoc allowed Emmetterio to get him here in time. Unfortunately, he's five beds down from you, and he'll live, unlike the second-year a row over. You could have killed him and saved us all a lot of trouble."

"I didn't want to kill him." *I did*. She tests her shoulder in a practiced motion. "I just wanted him to stop killing *me*."

"You should have told me." It bursts angrily out of my mouth before I can stop it. I already know why she did what she did. Hell, I even respect it. But even after all this distance, I wish that she needed me like I need her.

"And you could have done *nothing* about it besides make me look weak." She's glaring at me again, and it's oddly comforting. It's been weeks since I allowed myself to look at her, I'll take all the glares I can get. "And you haven't exactly been around to talk about *anything* in weeks. If I didn't know better, I'd think that kiss scared you."

It's the first time she's spoken about it and my heart skips. The way she says it... it's like she's missed me. She thinks *she* scared me. Does that mean *I* didn't scare her? My gaze softens for a second, surprised, before I remember: *distance*.

"That's not up for discussion," I say coolly.

“Seriously?” She arches a brow at me, and I wither inside. All I want to do is talk about it. To know how she felt. To do it again. But I keep my face neutral.

“It was a mistake. You and I are going to be stationed together for the rest of our lives, never able to escape the other.” The words sound over rehearsed and practiced, even to me. “Getting involved – even on a physical level – is a colossal blunder. No point talking about it.”

She stares back at me, her brow raised like she doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. A long stretch of silence drags out between us.

“What if I want to talk about it?” she says, finally.

“Then feel free, but it doesn’t mean I have to be a part of the conversation. We’re both allowed our boundaries, and this is one of mine.” I force finality into my voice. *Don’t press me, Violet. I’ll break.*

When she looks like she’ll try anyway, I add, “I’ll agree that keeping my distance didn’t work out so well, and if today’s little stunt was about getting my attention, then congratulations. It’s yours.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She moves to get out of the bed, but I put an arm out, stopping her. She knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“Apparently I can’t trust Liam to report deadly situations or Rhiannon to train you on the mat, seeing how easily Barlowe had you pinned, so as of this moment, I’m taking over.” Neither critique is fair. But I can no longer leave the responsibility of her survival in the hands of others. Whatever it costs me, however hard it is to just be near her, I need to know I did everything to keep her alive.

“Taking over what?” Her eyes narrow at me.

“Everything when it comes to you.”

The next day, I watch Violet stalk onto the mat, clad in leather and steel. Her eyes rake over me, clocking the dozen daggers I have strapped across me in various positions. She looks just as deadly, knives strapped along her ribs like she’s going for blood.

“Leave your blades off the mat,” I say, aware of the curious looks from other riders all around us. I’ve picked a mat closest to the walls, tucked in the far corner but there’s so much tension crackling between us, we’re bound to cause a scene.

“But you’re armed,” she protests.

I tilt my head at her in a challenge, “You either trust me or you don’t.”

She sighs in frustration, unsheathing every dagger and laying them carefully on the floor. Guess, she trusts me.

I don’t deserve it.

She swings back round to face me. “I’m unarmed. Happy now?” Not really. I much prefer her dressed in metal, looking all angry and lethal. She rolls out her shoulder. “Though we probably

could have waited a couple of days for my arm to heal up before doing this.”

“No. The enemy doesn’t give a shit if you’re wounded.” I unsheathe one of the daggers and walk towards her. “They’ll use it to their advantage. If you don’t know how to fight in pain, then you’ll get us both killed.”

“Fine. That’s actually a good point, so I’ll let you have it.”

I smirk at her. “Thank you for being so gracious,” I say, a sarcastic edge lacing the words in a way I know will make her see red. I need her angry for this to be even remotely convincing to the other riders stealing glances at us from their mats.

“The problem isn’t necessarily your fighting style,” I continue. “You’re fast, and you’ve become pretty damned formidable since August. The problem is you’re using daggers that are too easy to pluck out of your hands. You need weaponry designed for your body type.” I turn over the blade in my hand so she can study it more closely.

It feels like I’m revealing a tiny slice of myself. The blade is Tyrrish, engraved with runes from the old language of my ancestors. It’s carefully honed and perfectly balanced, made for throwing and close combat. It suits her.

“It’s spectacular,” she says, a finger running along the blade.

“It’s yours.”

Her head snaps up to look at me, a thousand questions in her eyes.

“I had it made for you,” I say, offering her a small smile, like that statement doesn’t invite a hundred more.

“What?” she asks, incredulous. Question one.

“You heard me. Take it.” She’s still staring at me like I’m a different person as she lifts it out of my hands, wrapping her fingers round the hilt. I try to ignore the gentlest brush of her fingers across my palm.

“Who made it?” she asks. Question two.

I’d anticipated this interrogation from the girl who needs to know everything. “I know someone,” I say.

“In the quadrant?” Question three. Her expression tells me she knows damn well this wasn’t made here.

I evade it, shrugging and saying, “You’d be surprised how resourceful you get after three years here.” It’s still the truth, but I know she knows what I’m not saying. I can almost see her connecting the dots to the tunnel to the flight field in her mind.

“It’s incredible.” She shakes her head and hands it back to me. “But you know I can’t take it. The only weapons we’re allowed to have are the ones we earn.”

“Exactly.” I smile, then pounce, sweeping her feet out from under her so her back hits the mat and I have her on the floor. She doesn’t fight back, lets me pin her hips under mine.

“And what point are you making with this little move?” she asks, looking up at me with an arched

brow.

“There are a dozen of these daggers strapped to my body, so start disarming me.” I lean back and gesture down my chest. “Unless you don’t know how to handle an opponent on top of you, and if so, that’s a whole other issue.”

“I know how to handle *you* on top of me,” she says under her breath.

She’s flirting with me. I have her pinned on the floor, completely unarmed and she’s fucking *flirting* with me. It’s so far from her fear of me on the Challenge mat just a few months back. Things have changed between us. And apparently that’s all it takes for me to lower my mouth to her ear and whisper, “You won’t like what happens if you push me.”

She turns, her lips brushing against my ear as she says, “Or maybe I will.”

Fuck, her voice sends shivers through me. I jerk up, feeling heat flood through my body, suddenly hyper aware of the sensation of her thighs wrapped against me. She’s playing with me.

Well, two can play that game. “Disarm me before I test that theory in front of everyone in this gym.” I think about kissing her, letting the memory of that moment burn through my expression.

“Interesting. I didn’t take you for an exhibitionist.” Her eyes are all challenge, and she shifts her thighs a fraction, inching me closer to her.

“Keep pushing, and I guess you’ll find out.” I let my gaze drop to her mouth.

She stills. “I thought you said kissing me was a mistake.”

“It was.” I smirk at her. “I’m just teaching you that blades aren’t the only way to disarm an opponent. Tell me, Violence, are you disarmed?”

She scoffs and starts grabbing knives from the sheaths she can access on my upper torso, skidding them across the mat. I can tell she’s furious with me, quietly huffing in a way that reminds me so much of Sgaeyl that I can’t help a smile from spreading across my face.

She squeezes her thighs tight around my hips to roll me over. I comply without protest, a willing participant in this game, but she continues our ruse, pinning me down on the mat with her forearm to access the knives running along my side. The sight of her on top of me almost undoes me.

She leans into me, her body sliding along mine. “And lastly,” she whispers, as she plucks the final dagger I’m still holding in my hand, “thank you.” The sincerity in her eyes practically sparkles.

I move lightning fast, desperate to get her off me before she can feel exactly how much I want her. In less than a second, she’s underneath me again, her back flat on the mat. “That’s not fair to use your powers on the mat.” She’s all breathless words and heavy-lidded eyes.

“That’s the other thing,” I say, jumping to my feet and offering my hand out to her. She takes it, ignoring everything I said to her at our first challenge. I pull her up, trying to keep my pulse from racing as the realisation settles over me: she really trusts me. “Emmetterio doesn’t allow powers in order to level the playing field when it comes to challenges. But out there? The field is anything but level, and you need to learn to use what you’ve got.”

She starts collecting the discarded daggers from around the mat, sheathing them along her ribs. They glint at me like jewellery. She looks beautiful. Lethal. Strong. “I can’t do much beside ground, shield, and move a piece of parchment.”

“Well, looks like we’re going to have to work on that, too.” I look at her in a challenge. “Now, earn your nickname and try your best to kill me.”

For You

I spend all of February with Violet consuming almost every thought. Violet in the sparring hall. Teaching Violet to lower and raise her shields until it's as natural as breathing. Violet under me on the mat, staring up at me with burning eyes.

And when I'm not physically with her, I'm thinking about her. Is she getting stronger? How many times did she fall today? When is her signet going to finally make an appearance?

I ask Liam how she is. I lose it at Imogen on several separate occasions when Violet still can't keep her seat on Tairn, determined she's not doing enough in the weights room to help her. It's only Garrick's gentle squeeze on her arm that stops Imogen from refusing to train her at all.

It's such a stark contrast from the distance I promised us after that stupid night outside the citadel. She's different with me now too, like she's finally decided that maybe she doesn't have to hate me anymore. Every time she mentions the kiss, I change the topic. Every time, she shifts her hips under me on the mat, I move.

I can't tell if she wants me, or if she's just enjoying playing with me now that she is confident I am not going to kill her.

The need to know what she's doing, to be the one she's doing it with, is near-overwhelming. And it's only at night, when I'm replaying whatever moment I snatched with her that day, that I hear the tiniest little voice in my head reminding me to keep something between us. That however hard she pushes, this needs to stay professional. I'm just doing whatever it takes to keep her alive.

It's March now and there is at least a foot of snow on the ground, which the unbonded cadets have been shovelling to the side all morning to clear. Grey slush lines the walls of the courtyard and nearly every rider in formation has their arms folded across their chest, trying to cling onto any bit of body heat they can muster.

Violet looks particularly beautiful this morning, her cheeks flushed pink in the cold. The second formation breaks, I stride straight towards her. Riders are moving in a hundred different directions between us, but each of them moves aside as I walk in a beeline for her. Her back is to me, but Aetos is talking to her, an unreadable expression on his face.

"She's going to miss Carr's class today," I interrupt their conversation while I'm still several paces away.

"No, I'm not," she argues, shaking her head before she's even turned to look at me.

"She needs to go," Aetos snaps, but then realises who he's talking to. "I mean, unless the wing has more pressing matters for Cadet Sorrengail, her time is best spent developing her wielding skills." Just the way he speaks gets on my nerves.

"I think we both know she's not going to manifest a signet in that room," I glare at Aetos, wishing he would find someplace else to be. "She would have already if that was the key. And yes, the wing has more pressing matters for her."

"Sir, I'm just not comfortable with her going a day without at least practicing her wielding, and as her squad leader--"

I'm her fucking *wingleader*, Aetos, I want to scream at him. What part of chain of command don't

you understand.

“For Dunne’s sake,” I sigh, pulling out a pocket watch and hold it out on my palm. “Pick it up, Sorrengail.”

Violet glances between us and tentatively raises her right hand. It takes her a few seconds, but then I feel a tingle and spark in my hand as the watch rises fractionally.

“You got this,” Rhiannon urges.

I can’t keep my eyes off Violet as she pulls on her power, flying the watch towards her. Her eyes are lit up, seeming to crackle with tiny sparks of energy. She smiles broadly as she catches the watch out of the air and my heart skips a beat.

I close the few steps separating us and pluck the watch out of her fingers, dropping it into my cloak pocket. “See? She’s practiced. Now, we have things to do.” I rest my hand on the small of her back and steer her towards the first-year dorms.

There are at least three layers of clothing separating us, and my pulse still races at this tiny innocuous touch.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m assuming you’re not wearing flight leathers under that cloak.”

We reach the door that leads to the first-year rooms and I hold it open so she can walk inside, but she pauses just two steps down the corridor, turning back to look at me with the oddest expression on her face.

“What?” I say, closing the door behind us to keep out the chill.

“You opened the door for me.” Everything I’ve done to keep her alive, all the people I’ve killed, and *this* is the thing that she wants to thank me for.

I shrug. “Old habits die hard. My father taught me that – “ I stop abruptly, not wanting to talk about him. It was so natural to open up to her that I’m terrified; this feels like extremely shaky ground.

“Don’t you think it’s a little cold for flying?” she asks, changing the subject. But suddenly all I can think about is how to rebuild the walls between us that are the only thing keeping one hundred and seven rebellion kids alive.

The idea of going into her bedroom feels like a physical impossibility. I blink, trying to clear my head and say, “I’ll wait here.”

She returns in less than a few minutes, dressed in winter flight leathers. We walk in tense, unbearable silence for a few minutes, crossing the now-empty courtyard to reach the flight field.

“You didn’t answer me,” she says finally.

“About what?” I look straight ahead, preparing myself for whatever question she’s going to ask next.

“About it being cold for flight.”

Much safer ground. “Third-years have flight field this afternoon. Kaori and the other professors are just taking it easy on you guys, since the Squad Battle is coming up and they know you need the

practice in wielding.”

I push the gate open wide, so Violet has time to hurry through it without me holding it for her.

“But I don’t need the practice?”

“Winning the Squad Battle is nothing in the scheme of keeping you alive. You’ll be on the front lines before the rest of them come next year.” The fear of that and what will happen if her signet doesn’t manifest soon is the only thing greater than my fear of getting too close.

“Is that what’s going to happen next year?” she asks, raising her hand to shield her eyes as we exit the tunnel and the harsh winter sun glints off the snow in every direction. “I’m going to the front lines?”

“Inevitably. There’s no telling how long Sgaeyl and Tairn will tolerate being separated.” It was a problem I never expected to have to deal with in my lifetime, with Tairn losing his previous rider in the way he did, but here we are. I sigh heavily. “My best guess is that we’ll both have to sacrifice to keep them happy.”

Silence falls over us again but it’s easier now, the tension between us melting away. As we pass the Gauntlet, Violet gestures to the riders halfway up the run. “Second Wing. You sure you don’t want your own squads out here practicing?”

There are more than enough ways for us to die without practicing on that frozen death trap over and over. “When I was a first-year, I thought winning was the pinnacle, too. But once you’re in your third year, and you see the things that we do…” My jaw clenches, seeing all the staring dead eyes looking up at me. “Let’s just say that the games are a lot more lethal.”

I’m lost in the memory of the dead faces of people whose names I can’t remember, my feet following the path from muscle memory when I notice Violet has stopped at the bottom of the stairs. When she straightens to attention, I follow suit, bracing myself for whoever’s coming. It’s Commandant Panchek and Colonel Aetos. My stomach clenches.

“At ease,” Colonel Aetos says to us, before smiling at Violet. “You’re looking well, Violet. Nice flight lines. You must be getting a lot of airtime.”

“Thank you, sir, I am.” She relaxes next to me, and I remember that she will have known him for years, will have grown up right next door. “Dain is doing well, too. He’s my squad leader this year.”

I hate how she says his name.

“He’s told me,” he says, grinning. “Mira asked about you while we were touring the Southern Wing last month. Don’t worry, you’ll get your letter privileges in second year, and then you can keep in touch more often. I’m sure you miss her.”

“Every day,” Violet says, and I can hear just in those two words how much she misses her sister. It breaks my heart to think of what she must feel for Brennan.

And then General Sorrengail steps out from the stairwell. I freeze, caught completely off-guard.

“Mom,” Violet blurts out. That name hits me even harder than Dain’s. I think of Violet so often as Brennan’s sister, that I forget she’s her mother’s daughter too.

I expect her face to soften and smile in the same way Colonel Aetos did when he spotted Violet,

but General Sorrengail's expression doesn't shift an inch. Her gaze rakes over Violet, assessing her before she says, "I hear you're having trouble wielding."

Violet takes a tiny step backwards, like it will stop the words from landing. She tilts her chin slightly and says, "I have the best shields in my year."

"With a dragon like Tairn, I would certainly hope so." The icy tension between them is palpable. She arches a brow. "If not, all of that incredible, enviable power will have been..." she sighs, and it's so cold out that it looks like a dragon's exhale. "Squandered."

"Yes, General." Violet says but her voice doesn't sound like her at all. It's all meek and submissive, her untameable fire smothered out with just a few well-placed words from her mother.

"You have been the topic of some conversation, though." She looks at Violet with such disdain that I want to step in front of her and bear the brunt of it myself.

"Oh?"

"We're all wondering what powers – if any – you're wielding from the golden dragon?" The way she smiles forces a lump into my throat. It looks so unnatural on her face, like a second skin that doesn't quite fit.

"Nothing yet." Violet's lie is smooth and steady, and I force myself not to look at her. "Andarna told me that feathertails are known for being unable to channel power to their rider. It's why they don't bond often."

"Or ever," Colonel Aetos adds with a good-humoured grin, but I catch a look between him and the General. "We were actually hoping that you might ask your dragon to allow us to study her. For purely academic purposes of course."

"*Are you getting this?*" I say to Sgaeyl through the bond.

"*Every miserable word,*" she fires back, her tone seething.

"Unfortunately, I don't see her being comfortable with that." Violet says it like they've just asked if now is a good time to drop round for tea, rather than invade the most closely guarded secret of the Vale. "She's pretty private, even with me."

"Pity," Colonel Aetos says. "We've had the scribes on it since Threshing, and the only reference they can find in the Archives about the power of feathertails is hundreds of years old, which is funny because I remember your father doing a bit of research about the second Krovlan uprising, and he mentioned something about feathertails, but we can't seem to find that tome." He scratches at his forehead. He's a terrible liar and so clearly fishing for information. I already know Violet isn't stupid enough to take the bait.

"I don't believe he finished his research on that particular historical event before he died, Colonel Aetos. I couldn't even tell you where his notes are." Violet's voice is as smooth and steady as before, and so convincing that I have no idea if this is now the truth.

"Too bad." General Sorrengail smiles again, but it still doesn't reach her eyes. "Glad to see you're alive, Cadet Sorrengail. Even if the company you're forced to keep is more than questionable." It's the first time any of them has acknowledged I'm standing less than a foot away from them.

"I always felt that we resolved any of those *questions* years ago," I say, trying to keep the anger out of my voice.

She doesn't deign to look at me let alone respond. "Hmm. Do see if you can master some kind of signet, Cadet Sorrengail. You have a legacy to live up to."

"Yes, General." Violet's voice is quiet and resigned.

"Good to see you, Violet." Colonel Aetos says, and the three of them follow the path we just came from, towards the citadel.

Violet and I climb the stairs in silence, but I keep glancing at her, certain that she's not okay. When we reach the top of the cliffside, I turn to her and say, "You didn't tell her about how you got out of the attack in your bedroom. And I'm not talking about me showing up."

"I don't ever see her." Her brow furrows a little, confused. "And you told me not to tell anyone."

"Didn't realise it was quite like that between you," I say. The idea that I had once thought Violet was here on a mission from her mother to expose us seems ridiculous now.

"Oh, that's nothing," Violet says, as we make our way towards the flight field. "She spent almost an entire year ignoring me when Dad died." She laughs, her eyes rolling up towards the sky. "Which was almost as wholesome as the years she spent barely tolerating my existence because I wasn't perfect like Brennan or a warrior like Mira."

The self-deprecation in her words makes me frown; she's so much more perfect than Brennan and undoubtedly ten times as fierce as her sister.

"She doesn't know you very well, then," I say.

Violet scoffs. "Or she sees right through me. Problem is, I'm never quite sure which it is. I'm too busy trying to live up to whatever impossible standard she sets to ask myself if they're even standards I give a shit about." Suddenly she turns her burning, angry eyes on me. "And what was that about anyway? Saying that you resolved questions years ago?"

"Just reminding her that I paid the price for my loyalty." I don't look at her.

"Paid what price?" she demands.

I could tell her this. But if I tell her now, will she think it's a trick? That I've seen the chink in her relationship with her mother and waited for the perfect moment to reveal the horrors of Navarrian Command. Something my father used to say rings through my ears: the truth is only as good as the moment you choose to tell it.

So, I avoid it. "Boundaries, Violence," I say, glancing towards where Tairn, Sgaeyl and Andarna land across the field.

"We're all flying today?" Violet asks, already smiling at the sight of her little golden dragon bundling towards her in a blur of fur and feathers.

"We're all learning today," I correct. "You need to learn how to stay on, and I need to learn why the hell it's so hard for you." I have the beginnings of a frankly insane plan to try and help that, but I need to understand exactly where she struggles to keep hold to make it work.

"Andarna needs to learn how to keep up," I gesture to the little dragon who cocks her head to one side at my words like I've offended her. "Tairn needs to learn how to share his space in a tighter flight formation, and every other dragon but Sgaeyl is too scared to fly closer."

“And what is Sgaeyl learning?”

I grin. “She’s been leading for almost three years now. She’s going to have to learn how to follow. Or at least practice.”

“*I never agreed to this,*” she says, snapping her teeth at Tairn, inches from his jugular. He chuffs at her affectionately.

“Dragon relationships are absolutely incomprehensible,” Violet says, shaking her head as Tairn extends his foreleg so she can mount.

“Yeah? You should try a human one sometime.” The second I say it I want to take it back, as an unreadable expression passes over Violet’s face. My heart is pounding at the idea of it, trapped between the sheer impossibility of an *us* and tortured by the idea of her with anyone else.

I laugh with a sharp exhale, trying to pass it off as a joke. “Just as vicious, but less fire.”

But she’s still staring at me, like she’s not sure how to reply.

I run towards Sgaeyl and jump onto her back.

“Now, let’s go,” I say, gesturing for her to follow without looking back and take to the skies.

This year’s Squad Battle mission is to acquire the one thing that would be most advantageous to our enemies in the war. My brows quirked up slightly when Panchek relayed the information to us earlier, a notable change from the previous years of hunting hidden eggs or professors. It seemed entirely too self-aware for Command to be actively seeking the cracks in their defence.

But it’s been almost four hours since then, with all the section and squad leaders holed up in the adjoining chamber from Panchek’s office. Being stuck in a room with Dain *fucking* Aetos is a new form of torture that only Command could be sick enough to dream up for me.

Even though he’s studiously ignoring me as much as I am him, his presence in the room is sucking out all the air. I keep thinking about his hands on Violet’s face, pulling her close to him in the flight field to kiss her. It replays over and over, and even though I’m fairly confident that she doesn’t want him anymore, the part of me that desperately needs her pushes against my shadows, straining to strangle the smug little grin off his face.

At the beginning of our imprisonment, there were hushed conversations happening all over the room. But it’s been so long now, that all of us are sat in silence, lost in our own thoughts.

Whatever Garrick sees on my face makes him take pity on me and he leans forward towards where I’m sat. “Any bets on a winner?” he asks, quietly.

Violet, I want to say. Squad Battle relies on smarts and strategy and is the area where she undoubtedly has every other rider in this place beat. There’s no way any other squad will measure up.

But I don’t say it; instead, I shrug, unable to give Aetos the satisfaction, knowing he’ll see it as his win and not hers.

After what feels like an eternity, Panchek finally unlocks the door and leads us back to the courtyard. The squad leaders take their seats on the dais, ready to take the glory of whichever of their squad wins. The rest of us stand behind them, our backs to the crumbling brick walls, ready to assess and cast a slightly more unbiased vote.

One by one the squads start to re-enter the courtyard, carrying their prizes. My mouth twitches as I keep in a laugh when one squad marches in a terrified scribe, their lips shut comically tight.

Time is running out and there's no sign of Imogen, Liam or Violet yet. I can see Aetos tapping his foot nervously under the table from here. But even with the last seconds counting down I don't share his concern; it's *Violet*, she'll be here.

Right on cue, their squad rushes through the courtyard doors, Liam and Sawyer carrying a huge rolled up *something* under their arms.

The quiet confidence in Violet's eyes makes my stomach flip. I barely listen to the other squad presentations; from the look on her face, I already know she's won.

When it's their turn to present on stage, Liam and Sawyer unroll their haul. It's a map of Navarre, hardly groundbreaking. My brow furrows, not sure what to expect next even as mutters break out amongst Command.

But Imogen nudges Violet forward, whispering something into her ear that I'm too slow with my shadows to catch.

I push off the wall as Markham and Devera stand in my line of sight; their mouths gaping open at the map in the first-years' hands. I'm still not quite sure what's causing the ripple of panic through the professors.

Violet clears her throat and gestures towards the map, her voice ringing out clear across the courtyard. "We have brought the ultimate weapon for our enemies. An up-to-date map of all current outposts of Navarrian wings, to include troop strength of infantry battlements."

My jaw drops. How the fuck did they get their hands on *this*? But she's not done.

"As well as the locations of current skirmishes in the last thirty days. Including last night."

Hushed conversations break out across the quadrant. The way she says it sends a thrill through my stomach. *Last night*. With two little words she's told every single rider in this quadrant that the updates we get in Battle Brief are utter trash, and not to be trusted.

Brilliant *fucking* woman.

"And how do we know this map is, in fact, current?" Kaori asks, clearly desperate to quash the rumours before they can take hold. Instead, he's given her all the tools she needs to start a riot.

Violet's smile is deadly as she says, "Because we took it from General Sorrengail's office."

I should get down on my knees and worship at her feet. Chaos breaks out between us, professors pushing back riders who are trying to run to see the details on the map close up. But all I can see is Violet, my gaze locking with hers. I smile at her slightly, tipping an imaginary hat at her and bow my head. Her smile back at me is all lightness and joy, it spreads across her whole face and dances through her eyes.

Somehow, without even knowing there are sides to pick, she's done more to help the rebellion in

an afternoon than I've managed in three years.

My gaze finds Imogen who gives me an almost imperceptible nod of approval.

It's been two days since they left for Montserrat and I am going out of my damn mind.

I keep thinking about the briefing I gave to Imogen and Liam in my room before they left, insisting they always have eyes on her, like that somehow superseded my previous order to always have their *fucking* eyes on her. The look they exchanged did nothing to make me feel any better.

And when I'm not thinking about that, I think about Violet. The smile on her face and the quiet flare of victory in her eyes as she unveiled the map they stole. She is so much smarter than all of us, it makes my chest ache.

This morning, Sgaeyl and I are in the skies above the flight field, hovering in the highest position as the few remaining third-years from Fourth Wing circle up to us in a tight spiral.

My breaths are laboured but not from flying. I'm here and I'm not here, my eyes studying the formation of the dragons approaching us, while I fight an intensifying, urgent need to abandon my position and fly as fast as possible towards Montserrat.

"Sgaeyl," I hiss through gritted teeth. "Please, *please* I am begging you. Can you keep it under control."

But she doesn't answer, twisting back to stare at me with one glaring golden eye.

The strongest sense of yearning burns through me, seeming to spark in my chest and ripple outwards, catching on every nerve in my body. My skin tingles with the sensation of it, demanding to touch and be touched.

I pour shadows into the link with Sgaeyl in my mind, trying to ground but it's useless. This fire is already *everywhere*, sparks jumping between the trees that line the hillside. I feel like I'm burning up from the inside out.

Gods, if this is what I can feel after *two days* how the fuck am I going to survive the next few years. Tairn will be here in Basgiath with Violet, and Sgaeyl and I will be hundreds of miles away in some gods-forsaken outpost on the front lines.

Just thinking her name sends another pulsing wave of burning need through me. I need to be wherever she is.

Garrick rises level with us on his dragon, and whatever he sees in my eyes has him trying to close the last few feet separating us. Chradh rears back a little in the air, unwilling to get too close to Sgaeyl and risk her wrath when she's clearly in the same sorry state as me.

"Xaden—" he shouts, concern evident in his voice even with the winds whipping all around us.

"Take the wing," I shout back, before I even know what I'm saying.

"What?" He yells like he didn't hear me, his brows furrowing tight in confusion.

“Take the fucking wing.” I shout again and squeeze my thighs tight around Sgaeyl. I don’t wait for his agreement, sending Sgaeyl into a nose-dive through the centre of the spiralling third-years and race towards the ground.

Just making the decision to go to them seems to ease the fire slightly, the flames licking softly at my consciousness rather than burning through every nerve ending.

“We should at least get your pack first,” she says to me. She sounds so infuriatingly calm now that she knows I’m giving in and taking her to Tairn, I can’t help wondering if any rider has ever survived the death of their own dragon.

She snorts, levelling us out as we descend on the flight field. I jump off her back and am running for my room before her talons touch the ground.

“Bring the shipment too,” she orders, as I enter the third-year corridor and race towards my room. *“Save me a repeat of this behaviour in a few weeks’ time.”*

Save *her*? I’m the one that’s being dragged halfway across the kingdom because she can’t survive longer than a few days without Tairn. I shove whatever I can find in thirty seconds into my pack, the anxiety to get back in the air and flying towards Montserrat starting to rekindle that fire deep in my chest.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night, Wingleader,” she says in a saccharine tone.

I’m halfway towards the tunnel to grab the weapons, when I realise what she means.

This is going to be a long fucking flight.

“Tell me about it,” Sgaeyl sighs.

Montserrat

I have been annoyingly aware of Violet ever since I arrived. On the flight around Montserrat this morning, she consumed every thought. I'd see a dart of movement in the forest beneath us and wonder if she'd seen it too. I'd hold my breath as Tairn nose-dived, wondering if he was using magic to keep her in her seat or if she was finally holding herself in place. Even though I'm near her, I can't get her out of my head.

I enter the briefing room, without taking in the panoramic views of the mountains all around us. All I see is her. I take a seat next to her, her sister, Mira, standing at the head of the table, palms outstretched.

"Consider this your Battle Brief," Mira begins and I tune out. This exercise is for the squad, not for me. I've had enough taste of reality to need to work through a bunch of hypotheticals. All I can think about is Violet. I assumed the intensity of my feelings for her was stemming from Sgaeyl yearning for Tairn, but now that I'm here, it's becoming increasingly clear that it had absolutely nothing to do with it. It was *me* that was missing *her*. *Me* that couldn't even go three days without her.

It's only when Aetos suddenly sits up straight and says, "Then I'm in command," that I realise I should probably pay some more attention.

"Our *wingleader* is here," Liam argues. I see it land on Aetos's face like a blow and resist a smirk. It's been a pissing contest all morning.

"We can pretend I'm not here, just for the sake of the exercise." Where he sat up straighter, I lean back just to eat at him. But I look straight at him as I drape an arm across the back of Violet's chair and add, "Give Aetos here the position we all know he craves."

"Don't be a dick," I hear Violet say under her breath.

I'm so done with all the pretending. I'm over Violet cutting Aetos all the slack and holding me to higher standards. We *mean* something to each other, I'm sure of it. And though nothing can happen, not until she knows the whole truth, I am done pretending there aren't more than secrets tying us to each other.

I picture myself outside Aretia on the hillside, turning to the crackling fire that sparks between the trees that represents her in my mind and say just for us, "*You haven't even seen me start to be a dick.*"

I see her head whip towards me in the periphery of my vision, careful to delay my own reaction to keep this secret mode of communication between us. I slowly turn to face her, finding her open-mouthed and gawking at me.

"*You're staring,*" I say into her mind, with a chuckle. "*It's going to get awkward in about thirty seconds if you don't stop.*"

"How?" she says to me through gritted teeth.

"*The same way you talk to Sgaeyl. We're all gloriously, annoyingly linked. This is just one of the perks. Though I'm starting to wish I'd tried it sooner. The look on your face is priceless.*" I wink at her and turn back to the group, but I can still feel her eyes wide and burning into the side of my head.

“You’re. The. Wingleader.” Aetos bites out across the table. It’s almost as satisfying to watch as Violet’s adorable gawk just seconds prior.

“I’m not even supposed to be here.” I shrug. “But if it makes you feel better, for the purpose of War Games, you’d be getting your orders from your section leader, Garrick Tavis, which he’d get from me.” I let the hierarchy drag out, reminding him and the room exactly how far I out-rank him. “You’ll be carrying out your manoeuvres as a squad for the good of the wing. Just pretend I’m another member of your squad and use me as you wish, Aetos.”

“Why are you even here?” he demands. “No offense, *sir*, but we weren’t exactly expecting senior leadership on this trip.”

He doesn’t care that he’s exposing Violet’s limitations to the room, not just mine. “You’re more than aware that Sgaeyl and Tairn are mated,” I say, trying to keep the fury out of my voice.

“Three days?” Scepticism lines every feature of his face. “You couldn’t make it three days?”

You, not them. He knows exactly what brought me here.

Violet interrupts before I can put him in his place. “It has nothing to do with him. That’s up to Tairn and Sgaeyl.”

“You’ve never considered that it was you that I couldn’t stay away from?”

The truth dangles between us – only the way I say it keeping it casual and light, and not a deep, heavy admission of exactly how I feel.

Violet jabs me with her elbow but doesn’t say anything. It’s the easiest conversation I’ve had with her in months.

“Now, now, you’ll give our little communication secret away if you can’t keep from being so... violent.” I try and hold back a smile, almost feeling her mind whirring as she tries to figure out a way to fire something back at me.

“Of course you rush to defend him.” Aetos turns his glare on her. “Though how you can forget that this guy wanted to kill you six months ago is beyond me.”

I expect Violet to react, but she doesn’t give him the satisfaction, barely blinking as she says, coolly, “I can’t believe you went there.”

“Good job remaining professional, Aetos.” I scratch at the rebellion relic on my neck, drawing the eyes of every rider at this table away from Violet. They’ll remember the murderous traitor’s son in this little scene, not the young rider who’s too close to her superiors. “Really shows those leadership qualities to their best advantage.”

Aetos looks like he wants to strangle me, as one of the Montserrat riders whistles low down the table. “Do you boys just want to whip it out and measure? It would be faster.”

My eyes catch on Liam, as he tries to cover up a laugh.

“Enough!” Mira slams her hands on the table, and turns the room’s attention back to the exercise. I sit back in my chair quietly, enjoying Violet eviscerating Aetos with one sweet smile and a venomous little jab to prompt him to take charge, *if he’s so important.*

I watch the dynamics of the group with interest, noting who interjects with ideas, who thinks

beyond their own limitations, how well they know each other's abilities. Mine are deliberately overlooked until Violet lifts up the model of my dragon and shoves it angrily into the model keep. "You stop ignoring that you have an incredibly powerful shadow wielder at your disposal and ask him to black out the area, so no one sees you land."

Her words send a secret thrill through my stomach.

"She's not wrong," Mira bites out.

"You can do that?" Aetos says, looking at me for the first time in ten minutes.

"Are you seriously asking?" I fire back.

"Just wasn't sure you could cover an area that--"

Before he can finish his thought, I lift a hand above the table and push the shadows from underneath it outwards. They flow like water under our seats, then rise, flooding the entire room in pitch black darkness. I watch Aetos's eyes flare in panic as it drags him into its depths.

"Ooh how dramatic, Wingleader," Sgaeyl quips and I smile.

I could have moved the shadows quicker, made it seem instantaneous but it's so much more fun this way. This sort of darkness is disorientating and terrifying, and the power pulses at me like it's begging me to unleash it further.

Violet tenses next to me, and I say into her mind, "*Relax, it's just me.*" A shadow strokes gently down her cheek, promising her without words: *you're safe with me.*

"Fuck me," someone says into the darkness.

"I can surround this entire outpost, but I think that might freak some people out." I release it and the shadows snap back under the table in a blink.

It's always interesting to see the reactions of people when they realise the extent of the power I channel from Sgaeyl. I look up the table towards the Montserrat riders and my eyes catch on Mira, who's staring at me like she should pull a dagger on me. I seem to have that effect on Sorrengails.

I have no doubt that Violet sees Mira's venomous expression too. My stomach knots with anxiety; I don't want her sister to hate me or fear me. I don't need her approval, but Violet loves her and I don't want her poisoning her against me anymore than the rest of her world tries to already. I can't give Violet any more reasons not to trust me.

I try to recapture the lightness between us, teasing her through the bond, "*I hope you didn't get any ideas while we were in the dark there.*"

She doesn't look at me as she raises one finger.

After we finish the operation, Mira addresses Aetos, Violet and me. "I want to see you in the hallway. The rest of you are dismissed."

I feel like an errant kid, as I traipse after them into the hall, taking up a position a few steps down on the stairs for them to have it out, content to watch Aetos have his ass handed to him.

"Sound shield," says Aetos, sucking up on instinct. "Nice."

"Shut up." Mira turns on him, and I immediately see the family resemblance between the two

sisters when she's angry. "I don't know what bug has crawled up your ass, Dain Aetos, but have you forgotten that you're a squad leader? That you have a very real chance of becoming a wingleader next year?"

Over my dead body.

"Mira-“ Aetos starts, and I grimace, knowing immediately that it will rile her.

"Lieutenant Sorrengail," she corrects on cue. "You're blowing it, Dain. I know how badly you want his job next year." She points at me. "Don't forget that we've grown up about ten feet apart. And you are *blowing* it, because what? You're pissed that Violet bonded his dragon's mate?"

"He is the worst possible thing for her!" Aetos flings it back at her, but it punches me in the stomach instead. I think that about myself constantly. It's the best hit he's landed all day and he's too fucking stupid to realise.

"Oh I'm not arguing that. But there's nothing anyone can do about the choices of dragons. They don't bother with the opinions of mere humans, do they? But whatever is going on between the two of you is fucking up your squad."

I watch her land every jab, enjoying the look on Aetos's face far too much when she doesn't let up.

"You two have been best friends since you were five years old. Figure your shit out." She says it like an order, before motioning Aetos through the door and turning all that rage on me. Shit.

"And as for you," she says, glaring at me. "Is this what she can expect next year?"

I try my best deflection technique that's never worked on any Sorrengail in history. "Aetos being an asshole? Probably."

Her eyes narrow. Guess it doesn't work on Mira either. "Mated dragons typically bond riders in the same year for a reason. You cannot expect your assigned wing or her instructors to let you both fly off every three days."

After spending every day for the past few months with her, I'm not sure that I could even wait *that* long. "Wasn't my choice," I say with a shrug.

"What are we supposed to do? Tell the giant, flame-throwing dragons how it's going to be?" Violet interjects.

"Yes!" Mira shouts, turning the full force of that rage onto her sister. "Because you can't live this way, Violet. You'll be the one who ends up missing the training you need, because he's the more powerful of the two of you right now. But if you don't get to focus on your training, then that's how it will always be. You won't ever become who Tairn can push you to be. Is that what you're after, Riorson?"

I open my mouth to list everything I've done to make sure she reaches her potential, furious that she's hurling that accusation at me and not Aetos who's done everything in his power to squash it.

Violet beats me to it, her voice almost breaking. "Mira, you're wrong about him."

But Mira's not letting up, grabbing Violet by the shoulders. "Listen to me. He might wield shadows, Violet, but give him his way, and you'll become one."

"That won't happen," Violet says.

“It will if he has anything to say about it. Killing someone isn’t the only way to destroy them. Keeping you from reaching your potential seems like a great path to the retribution he swore against our mother. Think long and hard. How well do you even really know him?”

It’s the best possible question she could ask to undermine everything I’ve done, and I hate her for it.

“That’s what I thought,” she says, pity leeching into her tone as she sees Violet’s resolve cracking. “Do you even know why he hates our mother so much? Why the kids like him are put on the para-“

My blood boils. I can’t believe she’s using *that* against me. To take something that was done *to me* and try to use it as evidence of my character. I never wanted this. That deal was supposed to be the end of it, not held up like proof of my deep-rooted vengeance. I was a *kid*, trying to do the right thing and survive... to help others survive.

“I’m right here,” I interrupt. “In case you didn’t notice.”

“You’re kind of hard to miss,” she flings back.

“You’re not listening.” I’m so angry, my tone is lethal. “I. Am. Here. Tairn didn’t drag her back to Basgiath. He didn’t break through her shields and pour his emotions into her. He didn’t demand she fly across the fucking kingdom. Your sister is still right here. I’m the one who left *my* post, *my* position and *my* executive officer in charge of *my* wing. She’s not missing out on *shit*.”

But just like Violet, challenging Mira only makes her fury intensify. “And next year? When you’re a brand-new lieutenant? What *shit* is she going to miss out on then?” She almost spits it in my face.

The accusation is so unfair, my shadows pulsate under my feet, and I tense trying to keep them under control. After everything I’ve done to keep her sister safe, to protect her against all the odds... Why can no one see beyond their own prejudices and just see me?

Violet grabs Mira’s hand, squeezing tight. “We’ll figure it out.”

Violet sees me. And that’s all that matters.

“Mira, he’s taken every spare minute he has to train me on the mat for challenges or take me flying in the hopes I’ll finally figure out how to keep my damned seat without Tairn holding me in place. He’s-“

Mira physically flinches. “You can’t keep your seat?”

It’s loaded with so much pity and disbelief that I want to physically step in between them and take the hit myself, but I stay where I am, feeling the torture of Violet’s embarrassed whisper deep in my chest.

But Mira doesn’t let up. “How the hell can you *not*?”

“Because I’m not you!” Violet shouts back at Mira.

Mira drops Violet’s hands like she’s burned her. “But you... you look so much stronger now.”

“My joints and muscles are stronger because Imogen makes me lift those horrible weights, but that doesn’t... fix me.”

My hand is inches from Violet's, and I desperately want to reach out and squeeze it tight. She doesn't need fixing. She is so much better and so much stronger than every single one of us.

Mira tries to backtrack. "No. I didn't mean it like that, Vi. You're not anything that needs to be fixed. I just didn't know you couldn't hold your seat. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because there's nothing you can do about it." She reaches her hands back out to grab Mira's. "There's nothing *anyone* can do about the way I'm made."

The silence that follows feels so loaded with tension that I decide I should be the one who breaks it. Give the Sorrengail sisters a chance to direct all that heat and anger at someone else.

"She's getting better. The first few weeks were... disastrous."

Violet takes the bait. "Hey, he caught me before I hit the ground."

"Barely," I say, rolling my eyes, but the unbearable tension has melted away. I need Mira to know that I am not who she thinks I am, that I would put Violet before anyone and anything, even my own safety or happiness.

The revelation hits me like a brick. At some point Violet has stopped being someone to protect for me. She's not another life I must carry on my back. She means more than that to me; I would sacrifice everything for her.

I turn back to Mira. "You don't have to trust me – "

But she interrupts. "Good, because I don't. All of that power in the hands of someone with your history is bad enough, but to know your dragons are so tangled up that you can't be more than three days from Violet is unacceptable in every possible way I can think-"

I sense Violet tense next to me as Tairn roars through our shared bond: "*There's a drift of gryphons headed this way!*"

My stomach drops. The drift from this morning. How were they stupid enough to get so close? Imogen said she told them we had extended the area of the patrols.

"*One of the Montserrat patrols spotted them flying along the border,*" Sgaeyl supplies just to me, as chaos ensues all around us, the sound of scraping chairs and boots from the briefing room as they all rally at once.

"*But the weapons-* "

"*Safe,*" Sgaeyl says, without supplying further detail.

Riders pour out of the door above us, and I push Violet back against the edge to let them stream past.

"*Why are they engaging?*" I ask Sgaeyl.

"*Out of options. If they flee -* "

"*- it invites more questions,*" I finish her thought. "*Fuck.*"

"*Exactly. We're doing what we can.*"

Mira turns to me. "Get her out of here."

But I need to stay. The shadows could create confusion, give the fliers time to disengage without raising suspicion.

“Even if you don’t trust me, I’m the best weapon you have,” I argue.

“If what you say is true, then you’re the best weapon *she* has.” I don’t hear the rest of it. She’s right. I need to get Violet out. She cannot get caught up in this. It feels like we are one wrong decision away from having everything exposed and I will not risk her taking the fall with me.

I grab Violet around the waist as she tries to race after Mira on the stairs. She struggles against me, screaming after her sister, who turns to face me at the top of the stairs.

“You want me to trust you, Riorson? Get her the fuck out of here and find a way for her to keep her seat. We both know she’s dead if she doesn’t.” Her pointed stare mirrors all the fear I feel already coursing through me as the deadline of War Games looms. I nod, keeping Violet locked tight against me.

“Mira!” Violet’s scream breaks my heart, but I’ve got to get her out of here. We are not getting caught up in this. She fights as I half carry, half drag her down the stairs.

“I love you!” she shouts to Mira up the empty turret, before her eyes meet mine with fiery defiance.

I grab her arm and pull her towards the barracks. “Can I trust you to get your own pack? Or am I going to have to carry you out of here without whatever you brought?”

“I’ll get it myself.” She shoves at me, with surprising force.

It takes me seconds to grab my own pack, with all the contents already handed over by Imogen this morning. Safe and stashed gods know where while the fliers battle it out. I feel unease wrapping like a noose around my neck.

Violet storms out of her door, carrying two backpacks and without even looking at me, furiously storms off... the wrong way down the hallway.

I chase after her and grab her elbow, pushing her back the other direction. “Nope. It’s too dangerous to leave the fortress walls. We’re going up.” I wrap my arm around her waist and push her through the nearest turret, where the rest of our squad are already ascending. “Climb.”

“This is bullshit!” She yells at me, stopping on the first step to shove me off her. It echoes around the stone walls of the spiral staircase. “Tairn could help them!”

“Your sister is right. You have to make it out, so we’re leaving. Now fucking *climb*.” I gesture over her shoulder and my eyes lock with Aetos, a few steps above her. My jaw tightens and I nod once. Get her out, I say wordlessly.

“Dain – “ Violet starts.

But Aetos grabs one of Violet’s packs and says, “For once, Riorson and I agree. It’s not just you we have to get out, Violet. Think of every other first-year.” I push slightly against Violet and she starts to move.

Aetos continues as they climb. “Are you going to sentence an entire untrained squad to death? Because I’ll make it. Cianna, Emery and Heaton will, too. And we all fucking know Riorson will.” I hate how well he knows her. That she listens to him but fights so hard against me. “But what about Rhiannon? Ridoc? Sawyer? You want their deaths on your hands?”

The light is blinding on the roof, as we reach the top and I spot Emery mounting his dragon. I quickly assess the ramparts and realise there's no way for Violet to mount Tairn at this angle.

"In-air mount," I relay to Tairn.

"I don't take orders from you, boy."

I feel a burst of fury from Sgaeyl down the bond and then –

"Copy that," he says, resigned.

My eyes catch on Liam. "You're next!" I watch as Deigh lands and Liam runs down the walkway.

I turn to Aetos, "You next, Aetos."

"Vi –"

"That's an order." Cath touches down on the crumbling walls, like she heard it to. I recognise some of the panic in Aetos's eyes and add, softer, "I've got her. Go."

He stares at me, assessing then nods. "I'm trusting you to get her out."

"There's a lot of that going around today. Now get on your dragon so I can get her on hers." I'm still whipping around searching for a spot with enough air space for Tairn to get low enough, as Aetos mounts his dragon. The far corner is the most exposed. Short of pushing her off the wall and hoping he catches her, it will have to do. I pull her towards it, but she whirls on me.

"I can't do this. The others are gone. Call it the favour you owe me, I don't care." She's looking up at me wide-eyed, pleading, almost in tears. "We can stay. I can't just leave her here. It's wrong, and it's something she'd never do to me." Her voice breaks and my heart *aches*. "I have to stay for her. I just have to."

She would sacrifice everything for the ones she loves too.

Before I can think better of it, I'm kissing her. This is nothing like the night outside the citadel. There's no heat burning in me, no insistent pounding need of release. This kiss feels important, urgent, like the world is watching. She kisses me back and I wonder if she feels it too. That everything has changed today. And that there is no going back from this.

Fuck, I need to get her out of here.

I pull back from her, my forehead resting on hers and try to make her realise how much she matters. "Leave for *me*, Violet."

"Almost there," Tairn says and Violet tenses against me.

She pulls back, hurt sweeping across her face, even worse than the first time and I realise she thinks that I've played her. "I will hate you for this."

My jaw clenches. I am out of time to correct her. "Yeah." I need to get her out of here. "I can live with that."

I let go of her face, reaching for her arms to lift her up. "Arms up. Hold tight."

"Fuck. You." Each word lands like a brick in my stomach.

Tairn's shadow sweeps over us and I let go, using the shadows to keep her airborne for the fraction of a second he needs to scoop her up in his claws. I watch him throw her onto his back as Sgaeyl sweeps past. I dive off the wall, using my shadows to swing me onto her back.

"No need for dramatics, Wingleader," she says. "She's not even looking."

I hear the sound of wings and claws mix with the roars of dragons and steel behind me, and see Violet's horrified gaze sweep back and past my shoulder.

All that pointless death and destruction, and all I can think is whether she will ever forgive me for this.

War Games

It's been two days since Montserrat. Two days of Violet not speaking to me. Two days of replaying that kiss on the rooftop that I still can't bring myself to think of as a mistake. Even after her reaction, and all its misunderstandings, I'm not sure that I would take it back.

Either way, I can't sleep. It's only when the darkest shadows start to shift slightly in my room that I realise it's nearly dawn once again.

"She's not sleeping either, Wingleader," Sgaeyl says, in a grumbly tone that tells me she's pissed at Tairn for waking her up early too.

"Where is she?" I ask, knowing she's unlikely to divulge it beyond their mating bond.

There's a long pause and I wonder if she's asking Tairn anyway. Then... *"You know where."*

Waiting for news. Exactly where I'd be if Liam or Garrick were caught up in an attack.

Ten minutes later, I find Violet leaning against the walls outside Markham's office. She looks exhausted, her eyes deep-set and dark with worry.

"Still hate me?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

She glares at me. *"Absolutely."*

"Figured you'd already be waiting." I hand her one of the cups I'm holding like a peace offering. *"It's coffee. Sgaeyl says you haven't slept."*

"It's none of Sgaeyl's business if I'm sleeping." Gods, she's deliciously angry in the mornings.

"But thanks." She reaches for the cup and takes a tentative sip. It feels a little like forgiveness, until she adds, *"I bet you're sleeping like a baby."*

I lean back against the wall opposite her. Mira was right. She really knows so little about me. All this time, I've been desperate to know what she's thinking, but maybe she keeps her feelings hidden because I've wrapped myself up so tight in my own shadows. She can't know everything, not yet. But for her to realise things have changed between us, maybe I need to change too.

It feels like torture to offer up one of my secrets, to cast my mind back to moments that are personal and painful, but I find myself saying, *"I haven't slept well since the night my father left Aretia to declare the secession."* I begged him not to go, determined we should continue fighting even if it cost us everything. It wasn't just to save him from his fate. It was *wrong*. By giving in, we betrayed all the people of Poromiel who had put their faith in us to save them.

"That was more than six years ago," Violet says quietly. I don't look at her, lost in the memory of the last time I saw my father alive. *"You were... I don't even know how old you are now,"* she adds, and her cheeks flush pink.

"Twenty-three," I say. *"My birthday was in March."* I risk a glimpse at her, and she looks at me curiously, like she's surprised I have something as ordinary as a birthday.

"Mine is in--"

"July. I know." I smile at her tightly. And decide that if we're letting each other in on secrets this

morning, I may as well tell her, “I made it my business to know everything there was to know about you the second I saw you on the parapet.”

“Because that’s not creepy.” She stares at her coffee like it has all the answers.

I shrug slightly. “Can’t know how to ruin someone without understanding them first.”

Mira’s accusation of my motives has never been true, not really. When I looked into Violet’s past, I was trying to get a grasp on her, who she is and what she believes in, in order to understand her own motivations in all this. The idea that I didn’t trust her implicitly right from the start sits oddly now.

She raises her eyes to meet mine. “And is that still your plan?”

I flinch. She still has no idea how I feel about her. I’m desperate to look away and rebuild the walls that stop anyone from getting too close. But I force myself to hold her gaze and say, “No.”

“What changed?” She asks, “When exactly did you decide *not* to ruin me?”

The truth is right there, hanging in between us. And for once, I find enough strength to be brave.

“Maybe it was when I saw Oren holding a knife to your throat. Or maybe it was when I realised the bruises on your neck were fingerprints and wanted to kill them all over again just so I could do it slowly.”

I take a deep breath. There’s no going back now. “Maybe it was the first time I recklessly kissed you or when I realised I’m fucked because I can’t stop thinking about doing *more* than just kissing you.”

Her breath seems to catch in her throat and I rest my head back against the wall, unable to look at her. I have no idea how she feels. So I say through the bond what I can’t say out loud, “*Does it even matter when, as long as it changed between us?*”

“Don’t do that,” she whispers, and I lift my head to see her staring at me, my heartbeat thundering through my chest.

“*Don’t do what? Tell you I can’t get you out of my head? Or speak directly into yours?*”

“Either.”

I can’t bear the depth of this feeling, can’t bear the idea that she doesn’t feel the same.

“*You could learn to do it, too. Come on, give it a try.*” Come play with me. Distract me. Be with me.

I’m focused on her so intently I only hear the footsteps when she does. *Aetos.*

“Guess you two had the same idea,” he says, walking over to stand next to Violet. I track his every step with my eyes. “How long have you been waiting?”

“Not long,” I say, at the same time as Violet says, “Hours.”

“Damn, Violet. Are you hungry? Do you want to get breakfast?” It’s such a stupid question, when she’s been waiting *hours* for any news on her sister that I can’t help but say down the bond, “*No, dumbass, she doesn’t, obviously.*”

“Knock that the fuck off,” Violet fires back and my heart swells.

“Look who figured it out.” I give her a secret smile as she declines Aetos’s invitation with far more civility than he deserves.

More footsteps. Markham. He pauses when he sees us, and I can almost see his mind whirring as he pieces together what brought the three of us here together and deflects, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Violet steps into the hall, like she’ll block the door to his office. “Just tell me if she’s dead.”

His eyes flare. “You know I can’t give out classified information. If there’s anything to be discussed, we’ll do it in Battle Brief.” Markham says it like that’s the end of it, but he doesn’t know Violet well enough if he thinks she’s walking out of here without getting what she wants.

“We were there,” she counters. “If it’s classified, then we already know about it.” I take the mug that’s trembling in her hands from her, not sure if it’s from fear of whatever truth he’s keeping from her or if she’s about to throw it in a rage at his head.

“It’s hardly appropriate for me to – “

“She’s my sister,” Violet pleads. “I deserve to know if she’s alive and I deserve *not* to hear about it in a room full of riders.”

I’m certain he won’t budge but then Markham’s jaw tightens, and he says, “There was considerable damage to the outpost, but we lost no riders at Montserrat.” His eyes dart to mine for a split second and my pulse spikes, wondering what he’s not saying, what else he knows.

The relief makes Violet physically sag backwards and Aetos catches her before I can. His hands run up her back, tucking her head in against his neck so he can lean down and whisper into her hair. I stand uselessly at the side holding the two untouched cups of coffee, not knowing where to look.

After everything I just admitted to her, I can’t bear Aetos’s smug expression a moment longer and I walk down the hallway before she can notice I’m gone.

Over the next few days, Violet tests the strength of our mental bond and the extent of my patience with an incessant barrage of random, and increasingly personal questions.

When she asks out of nowhere if I have any siblings, I wonder if she’s thinking about Mira or Brennan. But halfway during Battle Brief, she interrupts my concentration to ask what my favourite food is. If I was ever doubtful about her motives, now I know; these are not the questions of a Command-trained interrogator.

I love the easiness of this intimacy between us. But I’m also terrified that she’s going to ask me a question that I can’t answer truthfully.

We’re resting on Tairn and Sgaeyl’s backs on top of one of my favourite mountains within easy distance of Basgiath, the treetops covered in thick clumps of snow, when she asks out of nowhere how I know Liam.

I know she knows how. Liam told me he shared our history with her. Which means she's testing me.

"We were fostered together. What is it with all the questions lately?"

"I barely know you." But I don't think that's it.

"You know me well enough." I want to know her so much better than this, can barely think through the need to bring down every physical wall between us, desperate to kiss her, desperate to feel her come undone beneath me. But this can't go any further until she knows everything.

"Hardly. Tell me something real."

Fear sticks in my throat, but I make myself turn and look at her across the clearing. *"Like what?"*

"Something like what those silver scars on your back are from."

It's not the worst question she could have asked me, but it still makes me feel far too exposed. She saw those scars on my back months ago, and she's carried that around with her ever since? I tense, not sure how to answer.

"Why do you want to know?" If this means something to her, if it's important, I'll tell her.

"Why don't you want to tell me?" she evades.

Fuck that, I'm not playing this game. *"Let's go,"* I say to Sgaeyl and she launches into the air instantly.

"She's asking to know you, Xaden," Sgaeyl says, as she turns into a vertical dive into the valley beneath us.

"The hell she is," I say, taking a deep breath of the cool mountain air. *"She's testing me. And I'm going to fail."*

"Maybe." Two huge beats of her wings have us turned back towards Basgiath. *"But you won't know, unless you try."*

Today is the first battle of War Games, a milestone I've been dreading for weeks. In Basgiath's history, no rider has made it past this point without a signet and lived to see graduation. The handful on record were all dead within a week, their raw, untrainable power burning them up from the inside.

It's a precedent I am not prepared to challenge.

Somehow Violet has no idea. It's the kind of information she would have been able to reel off in an instant in the Scribe Quarter, but she's more rider than scribe these days. So, she is blissfully unaware of this looming deadline, while I frantically try anything I can think of in an attempt to save her.

Which is what brought me to the flight field this morning, trying to fit a saddle on a fucking dragon.

Tairn's roar of pain has me looking around for what shot him.

"What now?" I yell at him from Sgaeyl's back, where I'm stretched at an unnatural angle to reach the straps across his front. There's not exactly an instruction manual for this.

"You pinched my chest scales," Tairn roars it at me, shooting a burst of fire across the field in a long, thin scorch line.

"Talk about overreacting," Sgaeyl snorts and I smother a laugh.

"Not helping," I fling at her.

She nuzzles up to him, her neck rubbing along his side and affectionately nudges his chin. He makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a purr.

"Try again, boy." He twists his neck to the side to allow me clearer access.

"This would be a lot easier on top of your back," I say under my breath, as I lean forward to pull the strap across, using a shadow to lift it clear of his chest.

Sgaeyl lets out a huff of steam. *"Don't push it."*

"I won't mention the test ride again then," I say just to her, as I get the final loop secured.

Sgaeyl backs up a few steps so we can take a better look.

"How is it?" Tairn asks, turning slightly so we can see it from different angles.

"Very dashing," I say, struggling not to laugh at the biggest dragon in the quadrant preening nervously from side to side.

"Now it just needs to work," Sgaeyl says.

"It'll work," I say with a confidence I don't feel. "Her power is so close to the surface, I know it. She's just caught up in her own head and too focused on staying seated."

"Agreed," Tairn says, his eyes flaring. *"This will unleash her power upon the world."*

A few hours later, I'm standing at the front of formation with nerves knotting my stomach. Each instruction I issue to the squad leaders feels like a series of tiny decisions that are affecting not just the outcome of this battle, but whether Violet lives or dies.

I'm hyper aware of her several rows back in formation, even with my back turned to her, so it's not a surprise when she brushes against the bond in our mind. *"Are we on offense or defense?"* she asks.

"Little busy now," I send back.

"Oh no, am I distracting you?" She's flirting with me, her mood so at odds with the desperation I feel.

"Yes."

Garrick reiterates the decoy to the squad leaders in his section.

"Come on. You're taking forever over there. Give a girl a hint." I am completely incapable of

playing this game with her today.

“Both.”

Aetos is questioning the tactics that put so much emphasis on the skill of each individual rider and signet in his squad. Garrick looks at me to confirm.

“This is not up for discussion, Squad Leader.” I cross my arms. “The flag passes between all of you, no exceptions. Figure it the *fuck* out.” I need her in the action; it’s the only chance she has.

Garrick lets out a long breath, before turning to the rest of them. “Dismissed.”

I’m already halfway to the flight field when Garrick catches up with me, grabbing my shoulder. “Xaden, what the fuck – “

I whirl on him and shove him up against the wall in the tunnel, my forearm under his neck. It feels good to channel this helplessness into something as recognisable as rage.

His eyes soften. “She’s not going to die,” he says calmly.

“You don’t know that,” I choke out, my jaw clenched.

He gives me a tight smile, patting my arm and I release him, stepping back a few paces. “Yeah, I do,” he says. “None of this makes any sense if she dies.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“She needs to survive, because *you* need to survive,” he says with a shrug.

I search his eyes, wishing I had his confidence.

He swings a companionable arm over my shoulder and says, “Come on, let’s go. I know you want to see her face when she sees it.”

As predicted, her reaction as she takes in Tairn wearing the saddle is priceless, even from halfway across the flight field. She stares at him, jaw dropped, shaking her head. Completely speechless for once.

I hear him in my head as I get closer. “*Just because your body is built differently than the others doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to keep your seat. It takes more than a few strips of leather and a pommel to define a rider.*”

“He’s right, you know,” I say.

“No one asked you,” she fires over her shoulder, but she pauses before turning back to look at Tairn and I see her eyes trail down me. I raise an eyebrow as I return the look, appreciating the sight of her in her flight leathers. There’s a crackling fire in her eyes that seems to match the strength and tone of her muscles rippling along her arms that weren’t there a few months ago. She looks *strong*. And dangerous. She can do this.

I stand at her side and look up at Tairn to admire the saddle again. “If you don’t use it, I’ll take personal offense,” I say. “Considering I had it made for you and just about got myself burned alive in the process of trying to get it on him. Even though he helped design it, I might add.”

“*The first models were unacceptable, and you had the gall to pinch my chest scales when clumsily assembling it this morning.*” His eyes shoot daggers at me.

“How was I to know the leather from the prototype would burn so easily? And it’s not like there are a lot of manuals on fitting a saddle to a *dragon*.”

“It doesn’t matter because I can’t use it,” Violet interjects, turning to look at me. “It’s beautiful, a marvel of engineering...”

“And?”

“And everyone here will know I can’t keep my seat without it.” She flushes bright red.

“Hate to break it to you, Violence, but everyone already knows that. That right there is the most practical way for you to ride. It has straps across your thighs to buckle yourself in once you’re up, and theoretically, you should be able to change positions on long flights without unbuckling, since we built in a lap built too.”

“Theoretically?” she asks, nervously.

“He wasn’t amenable to me giving it a test flight.” That’s an understatement.

“You can ride me when the flesh rots off my bones, Wingleader.”

I need her to do this, though I’ll never tell her why. But I need to know I did whatever it takes to keep her alive. I pour that desperation into my next words, “Look, there’s no rule against it. I checked. And if anything, you’ll be doing Tairn a favour by freeing all his power and taking the weight of worry off his mind. Mine too, if that helps matters.”

It’s as close to the truth as I dare to get. *Do it for us, Violet. Do it for me.*

She stares at me, not wanting to back down, desperate to be like everybody else. I can almost see the different parts of her warring in her eyes. Wanting to remove the burden on Tairn. Desperate to achieve the same things as her peers.

I do the only thing I can think of to lower her walls. I lower mine, and say into her mind, *“Fuck, that stubborn, feisty look always makes me want to kiss you.”*

I half expect her to tell me to go to hell. The Violet from a few months ago would have done. But instead, she says, *“And you say this now, where people will see if you actually do.”*

My heart skips a beat, not prepared for the implication in those words and I smile. She wants me to kiss her. Gods, I’d give anything to kiss her. But not here.

“When did I ever give you the impression that I give a fuck what people think about me? I only care what they think about you.”

The burning heat in her eyes seems to crackle and spark. We’ve been staring at each other wordlessly for far too long, people will get suspicious.

“Mount up, Sorrengail,” I say. “We have a battle to win.”

She smiles then and says, “It’s beautiful. Thank you, Xaden.”

The sincerity and acceptance in these words make my heart clench. “You’re welcome,” I say, leaning down to whisper in her ear, my lips so close I know she’ll feel it like a caress. “Consider my favour fulfilled.”

“Is that a saddle?” Aetos demands and Violet jumps back from me like I’ve burned her. Tairn

snaps his teeth at him, causing Aetos to back up a few steps.

“Yes, have a problem with it?” I dare him to quote the Codex at me.

But he doesn’t fall into my trap. Instead, he frowns at me like I’m totally unreasonable so I look like the only asshole here. “No,” he says. “Why would I have an issue with it? I’m fine with whatever keeps Violet safe, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Good.” I turn away from him back to Violet, hoping he’ll get the hint and leave. *Discussion over. You can go now, Aetos.* But he hovers uncomfortably behind us.

“Bet it would be even more awkward if I kissed you now, huh?” I say just to her.

“The next time we kiss had better not be just to piss off Dain.”

“The next time, huh?” All I can think about is her hands in my hair, her legs wrapped around my waist and her mouth pressing on my mine. I glance at her lips again.

She gestures me away, but she’s smiling, “Go lead your wing – or do whatever it is you do.”

I grin back at her. “I’ll be stealing an egg.”

I’ve done everything I can, the rest is up to her.

I turn to Aetos and remind him what’s at stake. “Keep our flag out of First Wing’s hands.”

I’m certain that Violet’s life depends on it.

Lightning

We've been in the air for hours, and I'm completely drained. Though my body still clings tightly to Sgaeyl's pommel, twisting through spiralling dives that would unseat other riders, my shadows are frantically searching for updates on Violet and it's growing increasingly hard to concentrate. A feeling of uneasiness prickles under my skin.

"*Nothing?*" I say to Sgaeyl for the fifth time since we took to the skies this afternoon.

The pause gets longer every time.

"*No.*"

I know she feels this crackling tension too, like the world is waiting with its breath held tight.

"XADEN!"

Instantly, Sgaeyl dives into a looping corkscrew roll to avoid a blast of fire from Septon's Red Daggertail. Shadows teem up from the treeline to form a wall of darkness behind me, smothering the intensity out of the blaze before it can roast the riders at our rear. I twist back to see Garrick dipping beneath to avoid the worst of it. Chradh's golden eye clocks us from twenty feet below with a look that seems to scream: *get your head in the fucking game.*

But I couldn't give a shit about this game. I'm just buying Violet as much time as I can. The longer we drag this out, the longer her signet has to manifest. This isn't over until I decide there's no hope left.

Together, Garrick's section has pulled thirty riders from Second Wing nearly to the perimeter. Bodhi is locked in a tight aerial combat over fifty miles away across the course. The tactics are questionable at best. We're spread thin, too thin. But I'm determined to give her everything – space, time, focus, whatever she needs – if it keeps her alive.

Violet's voice suddenly rings through our bond, "*Xaden! The egg is here!*" She sounds lit up with excitement and even from here I can sense her exhilaration, the sheer freedom she now feels in the skies. The little flicker of hope in my chest feels like it's lodged in the back of my throat.

Of course, I've known the location of the egg since the First Wing squad leaders agreed where to hide it on their way to the flight field this morning, shadows tucking away any secrets they were stupid enough to say out loud. But if Violet knows this too, it means she's close to their defence perimeter. And I need her in the action.

"On my way. I'm 20 miles out," I send back, but I can't keep the strain out of my voice. I want to tell her what I've sent her into, scream at her to turn back. She's going in to battle a section with powerful defensive signets and some of the most competitive, ruthless riders in this quadrant.

"*Let's move,*" I say to Sgaeyl who lets out a loud roar to alert the nearby dragons, pivoting into a thermal stream to our left.

The mountain pass is narrow here and we fly in single-file, shifting from side to side with the undulating curves of the mountains. Hundreds of feet below us, a river rages through the ravine, the sound of rushing water filling my ears even from here. Ahead of us the sun glints ominously from the icy peaks, and I thicken the shadows around our group as we spill out over the treetops, lending a tiny bit of cover from whomever might be watching.

“Liam is hurt,” Sgaeyl interjects. Sensing my question before I can ask it, she adds, *“He lives, but is badly injured.”*

My stomach drops and a wave of guilt rushes over me. I’ve been so single-mindedly focused on Violet that I was completely oblivious to the threat beyond her. This isn’t a game, and yet I am gambling with people’s lives. Lives of people who I care deeply about, people who matter.

Despite the churning guilt, I can’t help my next question. *“Is Violet with-“*

“Yes.”

Sgaeyl’s wings beat faster as if hearing my own heartbeat pick up its pace. We can only be two miles away now. I throw my shadows out around me, send each racing forwards as if they can reach Violet and Liam before I can. Shadows rush through the tree line, darting up and down and my eyes rake over the battlefield, catching on dragons shooting into my field of vision before dismissing them instantly. It’s not Tairn. So, it’s not Violet.

Out of nowhere, the skies darken and huge, pulsing clouds rush across the horizon to converge at one point, swirling around each other in a building, teeming mass of energy. Garrick and his squad arrow beneath me, seeking the cover of the trees as we draw closer to where the egg is contained. But I rear back with Sgaeyl and watch as the world slows down and waits.

We hover in the air, Sgaeyl’s huge, beating wings forcing the treetops to bow backwards, keeping us suspended for one beat, two, three. And then the sky cracks apart.

A giant split of white bright light tears from the darkest point of the cloud storm, crackling veins of energy spilling out behind it and illuminating the shape of each cloud, each shadow. And like it’s been yanked from the depths of the sky, lightning shoots for the ground at an unnatural angle, snapping and pulling back on itself, fighting to strike true. It cracks into one of the practice towers, blowing up the bricks and cliff-face on impact, incinerating the trees lining it on every side.

The intensity of the strike leaves me breathless. This isn’t some first-year signet revealing itself; this is raw power unlike anything I’ve ever seen. It feels like the answer to a question I never dared to ask.

Violet. I need to get to Violet.

Sgaeyl is diving for the ground before I can say a word.

There are too many voices for my shadows to pick out more than snippets, impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. *Barlowe dead. Mairi dead. Sorrengail injured.* There’s so much fucking noise I can’t sieve through it.

“Deigh says Liam’s okay, injured but okay,” Sgaeyl reports and relief washes through me. But I don’t answer, desperately trying to pick up on what’s going on in the field below me.

Just impossibly fast. Her signet backlashed. Lightning. Heard he pulled her off her dragon. They’re not going to make it.

Riders are running everywhere in the aftermath, captured flags waving like banners, dragons

landing in all corners of the flight field. It's chaos.

"Where the fuck are they?" I roar at Sgaeyl as we bank low over the field, circling and searching, my head scanning in every direction for Tairn's wings and Andarna's unmissable golden feathers.

"I... I don't know."

"Well, find him!" I shout.

"He's not answering."

My world falls out from under me. *"Is she – ?"*

"They're alive, Xaden. I'm certain. He's just... not answering."

We bank back along the hillside, returning to loop back over the flight field. An entire strip of forest is covered in rubble, smoke still rising from scorched trees that didn't succumb to the avalanche.

"There!" I shout, spotting a flash of gold wings rising from the melee of riders and dragons on the far corner of the field. Andarna.

Sgaeyl banks hard to make a sharp landing, roaring at a Green Clubtail who had the nerve to be where she suddenly needed to be. Her wings splay out wide to steady us, one taloned foot clawing along the grass to adjust the angle. Before she's fully on the ground, I jump from her back and run towards Tairn, keeping my eyes locked on his leathery black wings as if would be possible to lose him in the crowd. I need to get to Violet.

I almost run headfirst into an enormous Blue Swordtail, then dodge round a group of riders from Claw Section. Tairn is faced away from the main field, his wings splayed out to form a leathery shield and his tail whips from side to side like an obstacle to keep people away. I dodge it and circle him, but Aetos has beaten me to her. He's holding Violet tight against his chest, his hands stroking up and down her back. I've stumbled on something so intimate that it makes me pause.

"I know, I know," he repeats over and over, shushing.

His eyes catch mine as he leans down and kisses the top of her head gently, like he has the right to it. "And if you don't want to use that kind of power again, you don't have to – "

Fuck this guy.

"Get the fuck away from her with that nonsense." I stride over to them in seconds, shoving Aetos off her. I wrap my arms around her shoulders, turning her around to face me.

The sheer horror in her face takes my breath away. She's pale and shaking, her eyes unfocused like she's seeing something else. The beads of sweat on her forehead and the tangy, acidic smell of vomit tell me she's emptied her stomach.

I feel the truth of the shadows' earlier reports settle between my shoulders. "You killed Barlowe." It's not a question. She's never killed anyone before, and it shows.

She nods between tiny, shaking breaths.

"Lightning. Your signet is lightning, isn't it?" I know it already, but I want to hear her say it.

"Yes," she whispers.

Weeks of worry that her signet would backlash, that she'd die not because I failed to protect her, but from sheer dumb luck falls away from me. I feel like I can breathe again. My jaw flexes with everything I want to say to her, but I nod once. "I thought so, but I wasn't sure until I saw you take that tower down."

She stares at me blankly, like she's not even heard me. She's lost in the kill, no doubt replaying what she could have done differently, how she might have avoided it even now. The strength of her feeling is at complete odds with the strength of her power. She is *incredible*. I want to pull her against me and never let go, want to take this weight from her and carry it myself.

But she needs to know that this power is not a curse. This power is vital. It's so important that a power like this is in *her* hands, not somebody who would abuse it. And while killing never gets easier, this is a tally for good, not bad.

"Listen to me, Sorrengail," I say, as softly as I can. Her hair is plastered with sweat, and I reach out to smooth it back behind her ear. "The world is a better place without Barlowe in it. We both know that. Do I wish I'd been the one to end his miserable life? Absolutely. But what you did will save countless others. He was nothing more than a bully and was only going to get worse as he grew more powerful. I'm glad he's dead. I am glad you killed him."

"I didn't mean to," she whispers so quietly, I barely catch it.

She takes a deep breath, shaking at the top of the inhale. "I was just so fucking mad, and we'd just caught Liam. I thought my relic was backlashing finally." And even though she's safe, even though she's here, the fear I've kept secret for weeks reverberates through me at her words. "It was close Xaden. It was *too* close. I had to... do something."

I read the loaded meaning in her eyes. Liam. She stopped time to save Liam. This *woman*... My heart clenches. Gods, I wish we were anywhere but here. I can feel Aetos's eyes burning into us. And I can't say anything that's nearly enough for what she's done for me, what she keeps doing for me.

"Whatever you did is what kept him alive," I say, like it's unimportant. Her face is in my hands, and I run my fingers along her hairline, my thumbs skimming circles around her cheeks. I can't believe that she trusts me with her secrets, that I'm allowed to touch her like this.

Gods, I don't deserve her.

"I don't want this," she blurts out, and I take my hands off her instantly. She looks around wildly. "Rhiannon can move objects through space, and Dain has retrocognition –"

"Hey –" Aetos protests.

"You think I didn't know that already?" I throw at him. What a fucking idiot.

"Kaori can bring his imagination to life, and Sawyer can bend metal. Mira can extend the wards. Everyone has a signet that isn't just useful for battle. They're tools for good in the world. And what the hell am I, Xaden? I'm a fucking *weapon*."

From that very first moment I thought her signet might be lightning, I've never once thought of her as a weapon. She is no one's weapon. She is... hope.

"You don't have to use your power, Vi," Aetos chimes in.

"Stop. Fucking. Coddling. Her." I glare at Aetos, my jaw clenched in fury. None of us get a choice

in this. Gods, I wish we had been able to keep her signet a secret like some of the others, but with a power this raw, there was zero chance of that. Command collects our abilities like they are medals on their uniform, as if somehow our signets are proof of their own power. Each new addition reassures them that they are on the right side of history and that when the wards fall, there will be something strong enough to stand in the way of what's coming next.

"She is not a child. She's a full-grown woman. A rider. Start treating her like one and at least have the decency to give her the truth. You think Melgren or any other general – to include her own mother – is going to let her sit on a power like this? It's not like she can hide it, not the way she just *demolished* one of the practice forts."

"You just want her to be like you," Aetos fires back at me. "A cold-blooded killer. Soon you'll be telling her that it's all right, you get used to the killing."

This asshole has absolutely no idea what's coming for him. I glare at him over Violet's shoulder, my hands returning to stroke gently down her arms.

"The blood in my veins is as warm as yours, Aetos, and if it's my job you want next year, then you'd better start understanding that you *never* get used to killing, but you do understand that it's necessary." Aetos's lip curls up. I turn to look back at Violet, who's staring up at me like I have all the answers.

"This isn't primary school. This is war – and you heard me say it once before, but the ugly truth those not on the front lines choose to forget is there are *always* body bags in war." She shakes her head, still battling against what her signet means for her. "You might not like it, might even loathe it, but it's power like yours that saves lives."

"By killing people?" She's so close to tears, it would be easy to stop, easy to tell her it's all going to be alright. But the earlier she gets some perspective on her signet, the better. A signet like this is no use if you fear it.

"By defeating invading armies before they get the chance to hurt civilians. You want to keep Rhiannon's nephew alive in that little border village? This is how. You want to keep Mira alive when she's behind enemy lines? This. Is. How. You are not just *a* weapon, Sorrengail. You are *the* weapon. You train this ability, own it, and you'll have the power to defend an entire *kingdom*."

I stroke wisps of hair from her face, tilting her chin up to look at me. She is salvation. She is hope.

I look at her, willing the strength of my conviction into my eyes. Finally, she relaxes a little, like a huge weight has been lifted from her chest. Though her eyes dart about in a way that tells me she is still processing, still over-thinking, I know I have brought her back from an edge.

I desperately need to go check on Liam and I don't want to ask Violet to traipse around the healer's tents with me like this. But there's no way that I'm leaving her here for Aetos to whisper more babble into her ears when she has a weak moment.

Shit. Liam. Aetos. Was Aetos touching Violet's face when I arrived? But he was comforting her, she was hurt. There's no way he would betray her trust like that. My stomach twists anyway. What if he did? He could know about the ability Violet is channelling from Andarna. Fuck, I need to find Imogen too and fast.

I look over my shoulder and see the rest of Violet's friends gathered a few paces back behind Aetos. "Rhiannon," I call out, "can you get her back to the citadel?"

“Absolutely.” She runs past Aetos to take Violet’s arm. Aetos is fuming with the oversight and scoffs at me in disgust, walking off into the field of riders. Shadows snake out to track his steps.

“The saddle –“ Violet says, gesturing like she needs my help.

“Tairn can get it off himself. It was one of his many design stipulations.” I turn to leave but realise with Aetos finally out of earshot, there’s one more thing that needs to be said.

“Thank you for saving Liam. He’s important to me.”

I leave before she can convince me to stay.

Target

I'm sat by Liam's bedside in the infirmary when Imogen enters and moves to check behind the curtains separating each bed. She's heading to the second bed when I throw up a wall of shadows and push her slowly back towards where I'm sat, surrounding the three of us in the darkness.

She snorts, leaning back against the shadow shield and crosses her arms. "I always forget you can do that."

"Kind of ironic for a woman who wipes memories, no?" I arch a brow at her.

She smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes.

"Did he-?" I can't bring myself to finish the question. I picture Aetos standing in the flight field with Violet, his hands stroking her hair.

She looks at the floor, unwilling to meet my eyes. "Yeah."

I want to fucking kill him. The shadows surrounding us pulse, as my hand squeezes involuntarily around the dagger sheathed at my side. This is why we kill inntinnsics on sight. They get everywhere, see everything. And they help themselves to the private memories of women they claim are their best friends.

Imogen watches me nervously out of the corner of her eye, like she's ready to grab me should I make any sudden moves.

"I took care of it, Xaden," she says, trying to talk me down.

I nod, my jaw clenched.

"How much did he know?" I ask it causally, but we both know it's loaded. How much do *you* know, Imogen?

"He knew she was channelling *something* from the golden dragon. But there was so much raw emotion tied up in Sorrengail's memory of it, it was hard to untangle. The timeline seemed off, a lot of it was blurry or just still frames." She looks at me, waiting to see if I will fill in the blanks. When I don't, she adds, "Either way, he doesn't know anything about it anymore. He'll just remember comforting her in the field and then you showing up like an over-protective asshole." She smirks at me.

"Sounds about right," I say with a wry smile. And even though I know she would never, I add, "Imogen, don't –"

"– mention this to anyone. I know." She rolls her eyes, pushing off the shadows to come stand by Liam. "Anyway, whatever it is – and no, I'm not asking – that, *plus* lightning? Sorrengail's kind of a badass."

I can't help my smile from spreading, the sheer awe I have for Violet feels like it's filling up my chest. Every time someone tells her she can't, she seems to double down on exactly how much she can. I think of her face, the quiet joy that danced in her eyes when she first learned to shield. I didn't have the words for her then, and I am completely out of words for her now.

Imogen looks at me curiously, tilting her head to one side and then laughs, "Oh, you are so

screwed.”

“What?” I say, schooling my face back into expressionless lines.

“Your face when someone says her name. You’re so into her.” She shakes her head, still laughing. “Brennan is going to *kill* you.”

I scoff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But I know my performance is fooling nobody, least of all her.

I wonder where Violet is now, how she’s feeling and whether she’s starting to process all this. Gods, I hope Rhiannon is still with her. I don’t want her to be on her own tonight.

“Go find her. I’ll look after Liam.”

I reach over to her hand on Liam’s, squeezing tight then head to the door.

“Xaden—” Imogen says and the urgency in her tone spins me around to find her eyes looking me up and down. “Maybe a bath first?”

I look down at myself, still wearing my flight leathers, covered in sweat and ash.

“Yeah. Good plan.”

An hour later, I’m stood five paces from Violet’s door, staring at it. The whole walk here I wondered if she would be in there or out celebrating with her friends. Or worse, working off the adrenaline with some other rider. But now I’m here, I’m certain she’s behind the door. She would want to be alone. She will be desperately trying to process all this, wrapping her head around her first kill and the intensity of her power.

The five steps to her door feel like crossing a very dangerous line.

But I am desperate that she should not face this on her own. She needs someone. And I’m selfish enough that I want that someone to be me.

I knock softly on the door, taking a steadying breath.

“Come in,” she says.

I open it and see a dagger sail past me to lodge itself in the wooden target on the other side of the room. I close the door behind me and lean back against it, glancing at the target. The dagger is lodged dead centre.

“Imagining that’s me?” I ask, turning to look at her.

Fuck, she’s wearing hardly anything. Thin black straps are all that’s holding her nightdress in place, a stark contrast to the paleness of her skin. There’s so much skin on show I don’t know where to look first, or if I should even look at all. My gaze rakes over her arms, shoulders, chest. I want to close the distance between us and kiss her everywhere, desperate to know what every bit of her skin feels like under my lips.

She grabs another dagger off her dresser, her hair down her back in a long braid. Keeping her hair long is a giant fuck you to all the people that thought she would die in this place. It seems even more poignant today, the streaks of silver like lightning through the dark. Gods, what I wouldn't do to rake my fingers through it, to see it loose and wild around her face.

"No. But it was you about twenty minutes ago."

My eyebrows raise. "Who is it now?"

"No one you know." She flings another blade at the target. "Why are you here? Let me guess. Since Liam is out of commission, it's your duty to lecture me about sleeping in plain cotton."

Lecturing her is the last thing on my mind. The plain cotton is clinging to every curve of her body and leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination. It feels like the only wall left between us and I am desperate to run my hands all over it and feel every single inch of her body.

"I didn't come to lecture you," I say softly. I swallow hard. "But I can definitely see that you're not wearing your armour."

"No one is going to be ridiculous enough to attack me now." She takes another dagger from the dresser, the hem of her dress hitching as she leans forward and exposes even more of her thigh. I tear my eyes away from that torturous extra inch of skin, looking anywhere else. "Not when I can kill them from fifty yards away."

She turns back to me, holding the dagger and for a split second I wonder if she's going to throw it at me. "Do you think it works inside? I mean, how does someone wield lightning if there's no sky?" She keeps her eyes locked on mine, flinging the dagger at the target without ever turning towards it.

The crunching sound of metal on wood makes my jaw clench. This woman...

"Fuck, that's hotter than it should be." I take a deep breath. *Concentrate*. I'm supposed to be comforting her, not fantasising about her. "I think that's something you'll have to figure out."

But I can't keep my eyes off her. Can't stop thinking about the gap between us, the crackling tension that feels like it's seconds away from engulfing the whole room.

"You're not going to step in and say you can train me? You can save me?" She arches a brow at me. She looks so fucking beautiful, all fire and challenge. "How very un-Xaden of you."

"I have no clue how to train a lightning wielder, and from what I witnessed today, you don't need saving."

She mutters something I don't hear and then her eyes lock with mine. "So why are you here, Xaden?"

I thought I knew why. But every logical reason for this visit has vanished from my head. There is only one thing I want to do now that I'm here and I refuse to act on it before she knows the truth.

So I give her the closest thing to the truth that I can.

"Because I can't seem to stay away."

"Shouldn't you be out there celebrating?" She gestures to the door, and one tendril of hair breaks free from her braid, falling along her bare shoulder. It dangles tantalisingly close to her skin,

seeming to stroke along it.

“We won a battle, not a war,” I say, pushing off the door to close the gap between us. I gaze down at her, our faces inches apart and can’t stop myself from rubbing my thumb along the long strands of her braid, tracing the streaks of silver that look like her power brought to life. “And I figured you might still be upset,” I say.

“You told me to get over myself, remember? So why the fuck would you care if I’m upset?” She folds her arms across her chest like she’s putting a physical barrier between us.

I drop her braid, trying to give her back some distance. “I told you that you’d have to develop a stomach for killing. I never said you’d get over it.”

“I should, though, right?” My heart squeezes as she moves away from me, and I’m desperate to reach out and grab her hand to keep her close to me. “We spend three years here learning how to become killers, promoting and praising those who do it best.”

She’s not wrong and I don’t have any argument to the contrary. I watch her calmly as she works through it, trying to give her the space to process. *This* is why I’m here. So she can say these things into the world, rather than letting her guilt eat her up from the inside.

“I’m not mad that Jack is dead. We both know he’s wanted to kill me since Parapet, and eventually he would have. I’m mad that him dying changes *me*.” She hits her hand into her chest, just above her heart. “Dain told me that this place strips away the niceties to reveal who someone really is.”

I hate hearing her say his name. “Not going to argue there,” I say, watching as she starts pacing the room.

“And I just keep thinking that when I was younger, I asked my dad what would happen if I wanted to be a rider like Mom or Brennan, and he told me that I wasn’t like them. That my path was different, except this place has peeled away my civility, my niceties, and it turns out my power is more destructive than *any* of theirs.” She stops right in front of me, and it takes every inch of self-control to not reach out and pull her into my chest. But I know it’s not what she needs. I wait for her to continue, giving her space.

“And it’s not like I can blame this power on Tairn, not that I would. Signets are based on the rider, just fuelled by the dragon, which means this has always been there under the surface, just waiting to be unleashed.”

I would give anything to unleash her on me, on the world.

“And to think, all this time, I had this tiny, driving hope that I would be like Brennan. And *that* would be the twist in my little fable. That my signet would be mending, and I could put all the broken things back together. But instead, I’m made to split them apart. How many people will I kill with this?”

She still has no idea who she really is. She would be *wasted* as a mender. She was never meant to be soft or pliable, she’s the strongest person I know. It makes complete sense to me that her power is lightning, I couldn’t imagine a better signet for her if I tried.

“As many as you choose,” I say. “Just because you gained power today doesn’t mean you lost agency.”

“What is wrong with me?” Her eyes plead with me and her hands bunch into fists like she’s struggling to contain the strength of her emotion. “Any other rider would be thrilled.”

“You’ve never been like any other rider.” That’s exactly why she should be trusted with this.
“Probably because you never wanted to be here.”

Her eyes flare, her rage so intense, I feel like it could burn me if I closed the final few inches between us. “None of *you* wanted to be here. You’re all doing just fine.”

But this isn’t about us. Her path is her own. It’s suddenly so vital to me that she knows I understand her. That I see who she really is. That I care for her even with all the civilities and niceties stripped away.

“Most of us would burn this place to the ground if we had the option, but every marked one *wants* to be here because it’s our only path for survival. It’s not the same for you.” I think back to the stories Brennan would tell about her, a version of a girl that I never got to meet. “You wanted a quiet life full of books and facts. You wanted to record the battles, not be in them. There is nothing *wrong* with you. You get to be angry that you killed a man today. You get to be angry that man tried to kill your friend. You get to feel however you want within these walls.”

“But not outside them,” she says.

“We’re riders,” I say with a slight shrug of my shoulders. I reach for her hands and hold them together tight at my chest. “So do whatever you need to get it out. You want to yell? Yell at me. You want to hit something? Hit me. I can take it.” I can be anything she needs.

My gaze is locked with hers, our faces inches apart. Her eyes seem to crackle with lightning, the tension between us sparking.

“Come on,” I whisper, desperate for her to let it out. “Show me what you’ve got.”

And then she kisses me.

Strike

I tense up against her. It feels like it's the very first time her lips are on mine. This is nothing like outside the citadel or on the rooftop of Montserrat. This is *her* kissing me and I don't want it to ever stop.

But I don't want to make the same mistakes again. She's upset, angry... and that's fuelling this fire, nothing more. She doesn't want this. Not really. Not the way I want her.

I spin her into the door, pushing her back against the frame and catch her wrists in one hand, pinning them above her head. Her hot rapid breaths dance across my lips less than an inch away.

"Violet," I groan. "This isn't what you want."

"It's exactly what I want. You said to do whatever I need." She rises up to try and kiss me, and I can feel the soft push of her breasts against me. Fuck, what I wouldn't do to have her underneath me like this.

But she deserves better than me. She deserves someone who can give her everything, not half-truths and secrets.

"And I'm telling you that I'm the last thing you need." I try to force finality into my tone, but it comes out all wrong. It sounds like a dare, a challenge. One that she looks absolutely determined to win.

"Are you suggesting someone else?"

"Fuck no." It's out of my mouth before I can stop it. She deserves better than me, yes. But the idea of anyone else touching her makes me feel feral.

"Good," she says, and she kisses me, drawing my bottom lip into her mouth and gently grazes it with her teeth. She pulls back, her eyes locking on mine. "Because I only want you, Xaden."

The words crack through my self-control. My name on her lips. The knowledge that she wants me, in spite of everything.

Our mouths collide and I kiss her hard and fast, my hands reaching down to grip her ass and lift her up against me. I want to replace the memory outside the citadel with this one, feel her thighs wrapped around my waist, kissing me, *knowing* she wants me.

Her nightdress has hitched up her thighs and my heart pounds with the knowledge of how close to naked she is. I press her against the doorframe, her legs locked around me so I can run my hands all over her, memorising the softness of her skin, every curve of her body. She feels like silk under my hands and the sheer intimacy of touching her like this takes my breath away. I kiss her like she's my only source of oxygen.

Blood pounds through me so hard, I can hear my pulse thundering in my ears. My mouth slides down her neck and a breathless moan escapes her as she arches her back into me. I am rock-hard against her. I can't get enough of her.

"Gods," I say, grabbing her ass and swinging us around so that I can press her against the desk. Her eyes are wild, her lips parted. She looks so fucking beautiful gazing up at me that my heart quickens. My hands thread through the hair gathered at the back of her neck and pull her mouth

onto mine, my tongue recklessly exploring every bit of her. She steadies herself underneath me and pushes up into the kiss like she wants me as much as I want her.

This is too much. I should stop. This isn't fair to her. But I can't stop. I'm addicted to the feel of her and the tiny little moans she's making against my mouth.

"You'll hate me in the morning," I say, moving to kiss along her jaw. "You. Don't. Really. Want. This." Each word lands a kiss that betrays all my best intentions. My lips trace a line to her ear, and she sags against me as I take her lobe into my mouth, biting gently.

"Stop telling me what I want." Her hands fist in my hair, and she tilts her head so I can kiss down her neck, trailing my lips and tongue across her collarbone. It takes far too much self-control to not slip down the strap of her nightdress and lose the final barrier separating us. I want my mouth *everywhere*, drunk on the taste of her and the way she moves against me.

This is madness. I can't do this. She doesn't know the truth. I still against her, searching for any part of me strong enough to pull away.

"Unless *you* don't want *me*," she breathes.

Fuck. She still has no idea how much I want her. I am desperate for her, burning with needing her.

"Does this feel like I don't want you?" I take her hand and slide it between us so she can feel how hard I am through my leathers. Her body trembles against me, and every muscle tenses.

"I always fucking want you." She squeezes me, and I groan at the feel of it. "You walk into a room, and I can't look away. I get anywhere near you, and this is what happens. Instantly hard." My hips rock into her hand. This is *so* far from distance. "Fucking hell, I can barely *think* when you're around. Wanting you is not the problem here."

"Then what is?"

"I'm trying to do the honorable thing and not take advantage of you after you've had a shit day." It sounds ridiculous with her legs splayed open on the desk underneath me.

But she smiles and softly kisses my cheek. It's a sweet peck of a kiss, not all lust and heat and it makes my heart skip a beat. "It's always a shit day around here. And it's not taking advantage when I'm asking—" her teeth nip at my lips — "correction, *begging* you to make my day better."

"Violet," I say, trying to explain but I don't have the words. I can't tell her why I need to stop this without telling her everything. Her hand is still threaded in my hair, holding me in place just inches above her.

"I don't want to think, Xaden." She looks straight at me in a challenge, her eyes sparking. "I just want to feel." She releases me and undoes her hair, raking her fingers through so the silvery strands tumble around her face. She looks at me like she trusts me, stripping away the last wall between us. It breaks something in me.

"Fuck me, this hair," I say, moving my mouth back over hers. "And this *mouth*. All I ever want to do is kiss you, even when you piss me off."

"So kiss me."

She says it like it's simple, arching into me and kissing me like she never wants it to stop. With my mouth on hers, her tongue exploring every inch of mine, it all feels simple. I can't remember why

we shouldn't be doing this. I want every part of her she's willing to give me.

"Tell me to stop," I whisper, my hand stroking up her inner thigh. But I already know she won't.

"Don't stop."

The two words fuel the fire burning in my veins.

"Fuck, Violet," I groan, the admission of how much she wants this raging through me, and I finally let myself touch her. My fingers stroke across the fabric of her underwear, and her back arches so intensely at that first delicate little touch that it takes an iron grip on my self-control to not immediately splay her out on the desk and see how she moves under my tongue.

She's burning up with this tiny bit of contact, and I can't tell if it's with pleasure or power. I move back to kiss her again, our tongues sliding together as I stroke her through the fabric. I don't dare go further, this thin scrap of cotton the only thing that's stopping us from devouring each other completely.

"Touch me," she says, her nails digging into my neck like the sharp press of her blades.

I'm nearly out of words to fight against this. "If I get my hands on you, really, honestly get my hands on you, I don't know if I'll be able to stop."

She draws back a little then, her fingers still laced around the back of my neck. She looks at me like she's searching for something.

"Stop being so fucking *honorable* and fuck me, Xaden."

Weeks of not knowing how she felt, and whether this unbearable tension was all in my head, just disappears. She wants me. She wants this. It wipes away that look in her eyes after we first kissed outside the citadel. I forget the hurt on her face when she drew back from me at Montserrat. She's staring at me like she needs me.

And gods, do I need her.

I kiss her like she's the only thing worth living for, and she slackens against me as I toy with the edge of her underwear, wrestling with my self-control for one last, final heartbeat. There's no going back from this. And then my hands are on her, stroking her. She's so soft and wet. My cock pulses in anticipation, her words still echoing in my mind. *Fuck me, Xaden.*

"So damned soft," I whisper in between kisses, my tongue stroking into her mouth in time to my fingers making tight circles around her clit. Her back arches and she digs her nails into me harder as I ride that delicious edge between pleasure and pain. "I bet you taste as good as you feel."

Her eyes go wild, seeming to crackle and spark as she stares up at me.

"More," she exhales the word, barely a whisper. And I kiss her again as I slide one finger inside her, then another, feeling the muscles clench around them, squeezing tight.

"You're so fucking hot." I draw out the words, savouring the way her eyes spark with each one, like just hearing me say it gets her off. "It might damn us both, but I can't wait to feel you come around my cock."

"Oh *gods*." She throws her hands out, bracing herself against the wall behind her. There's a loud crash to our left, but all I can see is her, all I can feel is her pushing back against my fingers as I

stroke inside her. The way she responds to every move I make has me intoxicated.

She cries out and I cover her mouth with mine, wanting to feel every bit of her pleasure against me. She's burning up underneath me, getting hotter and hotter with each circle I make around her clit. The space between us feels like it's crackling with energy, as if I just looked hard enough, I would see the sparks shooting from her skin.

"Look at you. You're fucking beautiful, Violet." I say into her mind, my tongue sliding against hers, desperate to feel her come undone beneath my lips. *"Let go for me."*

And finally, she does. I swallow her cry of pleasure, sweeping an arm around her back as she arches upwards and hold her tight against me, feeling every tiny movement as the orgasm flares through her. Lightning flashes in a blinding white light outside the window, illuminating the entire room. *Fuck*, this woman. I can't get enough. I keep touching her, desperate to make her come undone again. She tenses, her hands clawing at my shoulders like I'm the only thing keeping her from falling. Lightning flashes and she softens against me, my name a breath on her lips.

"Xaden."

She's never said my name like that before; it feels like silk running along my skin. Fuck, I would do anything for her to say my name like that again. But she reaches for me, tearing at my shirt. I pull through the buttons and her hands are on my chest before the shirt even hits the floor. Everywhere she touches, it seems to spark, a trail of heat and fire following her fingers.

"I need you *now*," she gasps as she reaches for the buttons on my pants.

It's the only invitation I need to get them off. "You know what you're saying?" I'm already helping her undo them.

She pushes the pants down my hips and reaches for my cock. Her hands run all over the length of me, stroking and squeezing. Fuck, I could come just from her touching me like this.

"I'm asking you to fuck me," she says, arching up to kiss me.

I groan against her lips, the urgent need in her voice fuelling my burning need to be inside her. I pull her towards me, until her hips are near the edge of the desk and work her underwear down her legs.

"I take the fertility suppressant," she blurts out. I wasn't even thinking about it. That she managed to think the sensible thing makes me wonder if she's really come undone yet at all.

"Same," I say breathlessly. I lift her hips slightly but she's so wet and the angle is wrong, all I do is slide up across her clit. She gasps from the contact, and I find myself staring into her eyes. Every bit of need I feel is mirrored right back at me in her gaze. She reaches between us to guide my cock inside her, but we can't find the angle that works.

"Fucking desk," I mutter and then I lift her up and carry her, trying to find a wall. Her hands fist into my hair and she brings her mouth back down on mine, our tongues sliding together in a ravenous kiss. I can't see shit, but I wouldn't stop kissing her if the world was on fire. Her back hits something. The armoire. Fuck, not exactly what I had in mind.

"Shit. Are you all right?" I ask, pulling back from the kiss to search her eyes.

"I'm fine. You won't break me."

She pulls my mouth back onto hers in an urgent, reckless kiss that feels all-consuming. I can barely think past the need to be inside her. She shifts slightly, helping me to find the angle and I push into her. It already feels too much as she squeezes, hot and tight around the tip of my cock.

Fuck, she is incredible. She gasps against my mouth, and it feels like kindling between us, the first sparks of a fire that is going to rage and burn.

“More. I need all of you.”

“You’re going to be the death of me, Violet.” I slide all the way inside, feeling every inch of her wrapping around my cock. She moans into the kiss in a way that makes me lose my mind. This is no time for slow and sweet, but I pause a beat just to make sure.

“Tell me you’re all right.” I draw back slightly.

“I’m perfect.”

I thrust back into her perfect body, finally letting go. *Fuck*, she is everything I ever wanted. She’s perfect. We’re perfect. I can’t get enough of her, even feeling her wrapped around me in every possible way, my cock moving into her over and over, it’s not enough.

My blood is pounding in my ears, a steady pulsing that is broken only by the sounds of the wood creaking with every thrust and Violet’s breathy little moans against my mouth. I’m obsessed with the way her breath catches as I push inside her.

“Fuck, I’m never going to get enough of you, am I?”

“Shut up and fuck me, Riorson.”

She moves her arms then, grabbing the door and changing the angle so she can take me deeper. It takes me less than a second to slide a strap from her shoulder, exposing her breast. I lean forward to take her nipple into my mouth, my tongue flicking and coiling around it.

The armoire door groans and breaks under the strain of us, and my shadows whip out to form a shield around Violet, as I move us away from it. We find another wall, our lips and tongues sliding over each other, and I push back into her, harder and faster than before. I can feel her burning up underneath me, feel the incendiary sparks of her power starting to crackle through our bond.

“Xaden –“ Her voice is breathless and she clings to my shoulders like I’m the only thing keeping her here.

“I’ve got you, Violet.” I breathe against her lips, my pulse racing with the need to make her come again. “Let it out.”

The room flashes so brightly as she falls apart that I shut my eyes tight against it, thunder shaking the walls around us. I cover the room in darkness, smothering the flames that lick along the curtain just above us. Gods, I love that she trusts me enough to lose control with me.

“Shit,” I bite out, as I move Violet away from the falling curtain, the scorch mark slicing right through it.

I sink onto my knees and shift forwards to lay her down underneath me. *This* is how I want her, pinned beneath me like every time we’ve sparred on the challenge mat, her thighs gripped tight around my hips. I can’t take my eyes off her, her beautiful hair splayed out around her head, so different from the tight braid she wears most days. She trusts me. And right now, she’s all mine.

Her hands reach up to lock around my neck, and she draws herself up from the ground to kiss my face. “*So. Very. Beautiful,*” she says into my mind between each one.

I’m completely out of words for how she makes me feel. So I lean down and kiss her, trying to tell her wordlessly how much she means to me.

I brace myself above her, finally able to have her how I’ve always imagined, feeling her hips rock up to meet every thrust, my tongue pushing inside her mouth with each move I make. The way she needs me has me on the edge, makes me feel like I won’t last one more stroke.

“I need... I need...” She’s right there with me, her eyes searching mine. It sends a smug wave of pride sparking through me that I can have her like this. That I’m the one that gets to take her back to the edge of freefall over and over.

“I know.” I kiss her and move my hand between us, stroking her clit to push her into another orgasm. I’m ready for it this time and when lightning strikes, my darkness seeks out the flames before they can take hold. Her hands cling on to my shoulders, before she collapses back onto the floor underneath me, her eyes wild and crackling with power.

“Beautiful,” I whisper.

I move her knee up towards her chest so I can push deeper inside her. She pulses against me, squeezing hot and tight on every thrust. And still she moves with me, not done yet. Gods, the way she wants me. She lifts her hips up to meet me, swirling round so I feel every part of her. Fuck, I could live in this moment forever. I don’t want it to stop. But the sensation overwhelms me and I lose myself inside her, feeling every bit of the tension between us shatter as pleasure rips through me. I’m vaguely aware of my shadows snapping away from me at the same time, and it’s only instinct that gives me the sense of mind to bring up another wave of darkness to shield us from the violent splintering of her wooden target in the corner.

I collapse on top of her, one arm propping up my weight as I struggle to get my breath back. Inches separate us and we stare at each other, a mixture of shock and rapture at the sheer intensity of what just happened on both our faces. Fuck, this feels so right.

“I’ve never lost control like that,” I say, not sure if I’m saying it for her or myself. Either way this is different, this *matters*. I untangle myself from her and prop myself up on one elbow, a hand reaching out to brush Violet’s hair back from her face, my fingers lingering in the silvery strands. I think of all the times that I’ve wanted to do that small, little thing, finally allowing myself that intimacy with her.

“Me neither,” she says, smiling and my heart bursts at the blissful joy on her face. “Not that I’ve ever had the power to lose control of before.”

I laugh, pulling her close and rolling us so she’s resting her head on my arm. My hand strokes gently across her skin, barely touching.

I smell the smoke at the same time she does. She raises up a little, looking around the room and says, “Did I –”

“– set the curtains on fire? Yes.”

“Oh.” She lays back, resting her head on my shoulder, face tilted up to look at me. Her fingers reach out and graze the stubble on my face. “And you put it out.”

“Yes. Right before I destroyed your throwing target.” I don’t dare move and break this spell that’s

on us, my shadows assessing the damage and reporting back. It doesn't look good. I grimace. "I'll get you a new one."

Her head swivels to look at the armoire. "And we..."

"Yep." This game could keep us occupied for hours. I decide to save us some time. "And I'm pretty sure you need a new chair, too."

"That was..."

"Frighteningly perfect." I'm not sure I will ever recover from this; it feels like she's seen all the shadows inside of me and filled them up with her light. I cup her face gently. "We should get you cleaned up and to sleep. We can worry about... your room tomorrow. Ironically, your bed is the only thing we didn't wreck."

She leans up to assess the room, so I do too, not willing to let her go just yet. But then her hands reach out, her fingers tracing along the lines of Sgaeyl's relic on my shoulder, following it around my back. She pauses, her fingers touching each of the scars there in turn. I tense up under her but don't stop it, willing to let her have this piece of the truth if she needs it tonight.

"What happened?" she whispers.

Whatever spell we had cast in this room breaks, and all the secrets between us come flooding back. I can feel them clogging up the air around me, choking out the oxygen one by one.

"You really don't want to know," I say, trying to cling on to the magic a tiny bit longer.

"I do." The anger in those two little words makes me turn to look at her. Her eyes are burning with rage as she drags her fingers down my spine and murmurs, "There's a lot of them."

"A hundred and seven," I say, unable to look at her face as she unravels the truth of this.

It doesn't take her long. "That's how many kids under the age of majority carry the rebellion relic."

"Yeah."

I still can't bring myself to look at her, but she shifts her neck, leaning forwards so she can see me. "What happened, Xaden?"

The kindness in her eyes breaks something inside of me. I reach back to her and brush her hair away from her face, and finally offer up a little piece of myself, something real. "I saw the opportunity to make a deal. And I took it."

"What kind of deal leaves you with scars like that?"

Gods, I don't want to tell her. I don't want to be the one that rips the fabric of her world away.

I sigh. "The kind where I take personal responsibility for the loyalty of the hundred and seven kids the rebellion's leaders left behind, and in return, we're allowed to fight for our lives in the Riders Quadrant instead of being put to death like our parents." It comes out in a rush, and I look away. "I chose the chance of death over the certainty."

She reaches out to touch my cheek and guides my gaze back to hers. "So if any of them betray Navarre..."

The question hangs in the air. "Then my life is forfeit. The scars are a reminder."

She looks like she's fighting back tears. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

The acceptance in those words settles deep in my chest. No one has ever said that to me before. The rebellion kids see it as something I did *for* them. Command sees it as something I will use *against* them. No one has ever acknowledged that this was something that happened *to me*. That I never wanted any of this. Gods, this *woman*. She is kind and good and so, so much more than I deserve.

"You have nothing to apologise for." I move to get up, but she grabs my hand.

"Stay."

"I shouldn't." There are so many more reasons to go than there are to stay. "People will talk." That's just one of them.

"When did I ever give you the impression that I give a fuck what people think?" She uses my earlier words against me, her hand coming behind my neck as if she can hold me in place. "Stay with me, Xaden. Don't make me beg."

"We both know this is a bad idea."

"Then it's *our* bad idea."

Except it isn't. This is all on me. I am the one clutching all the secrets tight to my chest. She doesn't even know that I have anything to hide. But I can't think of a way to tell her any of that without ruining all of this.

It's only once we're in bed a few minutes later, my hand sliding around her to pull her into me, that I think to add, "Only within these walls." This can only be a physical thing until she knows everything.

"Only within these walls," she agrees. "We're riders, after all..."

Fuck, I wasn't even thinking about that. I tense against her, not quite sure what to say. And then I think of the judgemental looks, the comments, the people who will claim she has an easier life when it's anything but and realise there's more at stake here.

"I just don't trust my temper if anyone says –"

She turns her head back towards me, brushing her lips against mine to silence that thought. "I know what you're saying. It's... sweet."

"I'm not sweet. Please don't mistake any part of me for soft and kind. That will only get you hurt, and whatever you do..." I bury my face in her neck, breathing in the scent of her, trying to commit this moment to memory before it all falls apart. "Don't fall for me."

Her hand strokes up and down my arm but she doesn't answer.

"Violence?"

I raise up to see if she's fallen asleep but she's staring out of her window. I lay back down and follow her gaze. Her voice is tired and heavy as she says, "Why did you guess I could wield lightning?"

I tuck her head under my chin, willing her to sleep. "I thought you did it the first night Tairn

channelled power to you, but I wasn't sure, so I didn't say anything."

"Really? When?" But I can tell she's already on the edge of sleep.

I tuck her in closer to me, clinging onto this last bit of our perfect bubble and whisper, "The first time you kissed me."

I lay there for hours, holding her and breathing her in. Each time she stirs a little, I pull her closer against me, kissing a small little peck on her cheek and feel her drift back off.

But I can't sleep.

This feels so right being here with her, but I know that I have crossed a line there is no coming back from for me. This isn't just sex, no matter what I tell her. There is nothing easy or physical about this.

This is everything I've wanted for months. But every time I dared to let myself imagine this moment, it was with no secrets between us. I think back to her unravelling beneath me, lightning flashing through the room and wonder if she will ever forgive me for ruining this first time, like I ruined all the others.

Because I still have all my walls up, determined to keep her from knowing everything. Some of these secrets aren't mine to share. But some I am just too fucking selfish to tell her, not wanting to be the one that exposes all the lies she's been told all her life, not wanting to be the one that drags her screaming into a war she was never supposed to fight.

Out of her window, the sky starts to lighten, clouds shifting in soft pinks and yellows. I should leave now. I can't face looking in her eyes when she wakes up and feels how much everything has changed from when she closed them. This was such a fucking stupid mistake.

I slip away from her, pulling on whatever clothes I can find strewn around the room and shift the debris from the armoire and chair to one corner, floating every piece on shadows so as not to wake her. I turn back to look at her from the doorway, her arm flung over her face, her beautiful silvery hair spread out on the pillow.

My secrets feel like they are choking up into my throat. I leave before I tell her everything.

I can't breathe. I need air.

My shadows push open the double doors to the courtyard and I stride across it, not caring who sees. I don't even know where I'm going, let my feet carry me wherever, as the shadows start to thin out where the morning sunlight spills onto the grounds. I wind down the spiral staircase and find myself at the walls outside the citadel, my gaze snagging on the spot where we first kissed all those months ago.

Even then, it was inevitably going to lead to this. Gods, I tried everything to stay away from her. But I don't want to stay away from her.

I keep walking, heading past the river and out into the forest, stopping only when I reach the oak trees. I rest my back against the gnarled bark, feeling its roughness dig into me through my shirt.

Then I sink down and clutch my knees into me, leaning my forehead on my arms and struggle to draw in a breath, each attempt choking at the back of my throat.

“Xaden.” Sgaeyl’s voice is soft, barely a whisper.

But I can’t answer her, can’t even think.

“Xaden, my boy, you carry too much,” she says, gently. *“Let her share this with you.”*

I lift my head up a fraction, staring out at the sky that blurs at the edges. My voice doesn’t sound like me as I say, “I don’t want to drag her down with me.”

“*I know, I know,*” she soothes in a tone I have never heard from her.

“*I shouldn’t have* – “ I admit down the bond linking us, but she cuts me off.

“*Stop being so strong all the time. You deserve happiness as much as anyone.*”

I shake my head, not able to summon the strength to argue. But finally, I manage to take a proper breath. I climb to my feet with one hand holding on the tree trunk for support. And there, looking back into the forest, I see a wave of colour. The entire floor is awash in tiny purple flowers, the early morning sun streaming between the trees to dapple and dance across them. In all my years here, I’ve never seen anything like it. It feels like hope.

I stride into the forest, and pluck one flower at a time, studying the purple petals on each one as I gather them in a bunch in my hand. It’s suddenly so important to me that she doesn’t wake up all alone.

“Sgaeyl,” I say, a plan to sneak the flowers through her open window forming in my mind.

“*Already on my way.*”

Mistake

I stand in Panchek's office two hours later with the other wingleaders, as we debrief on the outcome from War Games. Markham sits in the corner, one foot propped on his opposite knee.

Behind Panchek's desk, there's a mass of parchment pieces pinned to the wall. Each represents a rider, their name listed alongside their bonded dragon and signet. There is one bonded first-year rider left on the wall with no signet. Panchek tears it off the pin and drops it in the wastebasket at his feet. Markham sighs but doesn't protest; they might not be dead yet, but hundreds of years of precedent means they will be by the end of the week.

Violet has already been moved into the overall quadrant formation, one of just a handful in the extreme offensive front lines. Her name looks stark and exposed, and the only way I can keep my pulse from racing is to slide my gaze a few along to my own. I'm right there with her too.

Panchek has his back to us as he studies the formation. "Markham," he snaps. "When was the last lightning wielder?"

It's not just me that can't stop thinking about Violet.

Markham leafs through the book open on his lap, scanning each page quickly with a finger. "They became non-operational ninety-two years ago."

Panchek nods, his hands rising to rest on his hips. When he doesn't ask the obvious follow-up question, I ask it for him. "And how long were they in active service, sir?"

Panchek pivots to look at me and Markham glances at him, waiting for an objection. He turns back a couple more pages. "Just over four years. Not uncommon for this sort of ability."

My stomach clenches. Dragon riders never live long, but *four years*. It's not enough. But I know more than anyone how a signet like this cuts you from every angle. The more power you control, the more you're a target. The less you control, the more likely your power consumes you.

"Sorrenghail's seems particularly raw," Panchek comments, and I don't know if that means her odds are better or worse. "We've had water wielders out all morning trying to limit the damage from several impressive strikes during the night."

Sgaeyl's snort bursts through my mind so loudly that I almost jump.

"We'll need a handle on her abilities quicker than most then," says Markham.

"Carr is testing her now."

My heart jumps into my throat at his name. Violet's with *him*? Where?

"*Sgaeyl, is Tairn* –"

"*Yes, Wingleader,*" she replies, with enough boredom in her tone that I can almost feel her rolling her eyes.

I feel Violet then through our mental bond, the crackling fire and sparks that dance between the trees where I'm grounding seeming to intensify and burn brighter.

"*Problems?*" I ask her, ignoring the way my pulse leaps as I realise how far away she is from

Basgiath. *“And what are you doing so far away?”* I try to make it sound casual, to belie the ashy taste of fear in my mouth at the idea of her all alone with Carr.

“Training with Carr,” she replies, and her voice feels like a caress. *“And how do you know how far away I am?”*

“Get stronger in wielding, and you’ll be able to do it, too. There’s nowhere in existence you could go that I wouldn’t find you, Violence.”

“Right now, I’d settle for wielding some lightning. Carr is staring at me, and it’s about to get really fucking awkward if I can’t figure out how –“

Well, I know one way that worked pretty fucking well last night. And even though I’m in the middle of a leadership meeting, my mind starts to recall every incredible moment before I can think better of it. I lower my shields and let her feel *everything*.

I take her back to last night, let her feel just how much I want her, how my body aches with the need to touch her, to bury myself inside her. I picture her on the desk, her back arching in pleasure, the soft little cries of need as I push my fingers inside her, determined to give her everything she needs to take her to that edge. Her nails bite into my skin as she pulls me closer, and I feel it *everywhere*, riding that razor-thin edge between pain and pleasure. Fuck, the way I need her...

Heat burns through the bond between us, and I feel the same flash and burn as last night, a huge building up of energy and power that releases itself on the world.

Her voice is breathless as she says, *“I can’t believe you just did that.”*

I can’t help the grin from spreading over my face. *“You’re welcome,”* I send back.

“Riorson!”

My head swings to the sound of the voice, where Nyra is staring at me with narrowed, angry eyes when I’m still smiling like an idiot. “The Commandant asked you a question. Could you join us in the room and give him an answer?”

The shadows slink back into the walls as I reach for them; guess they were distracted too.

“Commandant?” I say, only to be met with a furious glare from across the desk.

“I need you on Sorrengail,” he says, through gritted teeth and I shift uncomfortably at his words. “This isn’t a signet for her squad leader to handle. It’s dangerous.”

“But Carr –“

“Carr can only do so much. She will need to practice on her own and I want her nowhere near this building while she does it.” I nod once in understanding.

“What a difficult posting for you this will be, Wingleader,” Sgaeyl teases through the bond.

I don’t even make it a full day before I find myself drawn back to her bedroom door. It feels physically dangerous at this point for me to be here, my heart is beating so hard in my chest.

Circumstances mean I am going to have to deal with being close to her. The world seems to be conspiring to push us closer and closer together. But at least I've told her to keep her heart safe, who gives a fuck if mine gets broken in the process.

I brace myself, taking a deep breath and knock.

"Come in," she calls out, and I walk through, feeling the slight tug and release of the wards as they recognise me.

"I just wanted –" But then I catch a glimpse of the disaster that is her room. "Somehow I'd convinced myself today that we hadn't done that much damage, but..."

"Yeah, it's..." Her gaze finds mine and we both crack a smile.

"Look, this doesn't have to be awkward or anything," Violet says with a shrug. "We're both adults."

But the way she's looking at me tells me she sees the same things in the room that I do. The desk where she came undone under my fingers. The armoire where I had her for the first time. The floor where I lost control with her in a way I've experienced with no one else.

I arch a brow at her and say, "Good, because I wasn't going to make it that way. But the least I can do is help you clean up." In the far corner, the armoire has lost a door and the other is hanging off by its hinges. I wince. "I swear it didn't look quite that ruined in the darkness when I left this morning."

And then, because I'm desperate for her not to ask me what time I left or where I went or how I found the flowers, I ramble on. "Turns out you set more than a few trees on fire last night too. Took two water wielders to get them out."

She flushes so pink it makes me grin.

"You took off early," she says casually, but I know she's probing.

"I had a leadership meeting and needed to get an early start." I lean down to help her pick up the books from the floor where they landed last night. The tiny brush of her arm on mine feels far more intimate than it should.

"Oh. That makes perfect sense. So, it wasn't because I snore or anything."

I've never seen her so sweet and shy.

"No," I reassure her, but I can't resist a tiny smile. It's such an innocent conversation, the kind of intimacy you only get between... shit. I need to move us back onto much more solid ground.

"How did training with Carr go?" I ask, changing the subject abruptly.

"I can wield, but I can't aim, and it's completely exhausting." Sounds about right, it took me months to get my shadows to move in even the right semblance of a direction.

"You know, you were kind of an asshole on the flight field yesterday." She changes the subject too, glaring at me. I wondered when that was going to come back and bite me on the ass.

"Yes," I admit, my grip tightening on the book in my hands. "I told you what I thought you needed to hear to get through the moment. I know you don't like other people to see you vulnerable, and

you...”

“Were vulnerable,” she finishes when I trail off.

I nod. “If it makes you feel better, I couldn’t keep anything down the first time I killed anyone, either. I don’t think less of you for having a reaction like that. Just means you still have your humanity.”

“So do you,” she says, taking the book from my hands.

I lost my humanity a long time ago, have been forced to kill too brutally and too frequently to feel anything at all.

“That’s debatable.”

“It’s not. Not to me.” Her stare is so intense that I look away. For a long time, I could remember every face, finding a way to justify why it was necessary. But after a while, there’s too many and the reasons start to sound like excuses.

“Tell me something real,” she says, and her voice is so soft and sweet that it draws my gaze back to hers, interrupting my thoughts.

“Like what?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. I’ve already given her every secret I’m prepared to part with at this point.

“Like... like where you went the night I found you in the courtyard.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. “You’re going to have to be more specific than that. Third-years get sent away all the time.”

“You had Bodhi with you. It was right before the Gauntlet.”

“Oh.” The time I ran into her after the weapons run. I bend down to pick up another book from the floor, my mind racing. Should I tell her? If I’m ever going to tell her, surely this is the moment. But the words stick in my throat. There are still so many reasons why I shouldn’t.

“I would never tell anyone anything you tell me. I hope you know that,” she says, like she can hear my thoughts whirring.

“I know. You never told a soul about what you saw under the tree last fall.” I trust her completely. But the second I tell her this, I can’t take it back. And I’m not ready to risk the safety of everyone I love just to give her this comfort. So, I give her a piece of the truth instead. “Athebyne. You can’t know why or ask anything else, but that’s where we were.”

“Oh.” She stares at me curiously, like she’s wondering what the big deal was. “Thank you for telling me.”

She mutters something under her breath, looking at the book I passed to her, turning it over in her hands to inspect the inside cover. A piece of parchment peeks out.

“What is that?” I ask, looking over her shoulder and my pulse jumps into my throat as I recognise the cover.

“Not sure.” She turns away from me slightly and brings her hand to her chest as she studies whatever is written there, before wordlessly passing it to me.

My Violet,

By the time you find this, you'll most likely be in the Scribe Quadrant. Remember that folklore is passed from one generation to the next to teach us about our past. If we lose it, we lose the links to our past. It only takes one desperate generation to change history – even erase it.

I know you'll make the right choice when the time comes. You have always been the best of your mother and me.

Love,

Dad

I can't look up from the parchment in my hand, my eyes rescanning every word. He knew about the venom. Brennan had always wondered. And her Dad wanted Violet to know it too. I risk a glance at her. She's flipping through the book like it has all the answers.

"That's cryptic," I say. She's holding the truth right there in her hands.

Violet smiles sadly. "He got a little... cryptic in the years after Brennan died. Losing my brother made my father even more reclusive. I only really got to spend time with him because I was always in the Archives, studying to be a scribe."

"What do you think he was trying to tell you?" I can feel my heart thudding in my chest, and I don't know whether it's from fear that she finally learns this secret, or because I'm dying for her to know everything to bring down the final wall that separates us.

"I don't know. Every fable in this book is about how too much power corrupts, so maybe he felt someone in leadership was corrupt. I certainly wouldn't be surprised if General Melgren ripped a mask off one day and revealed he was a terrifying venom. That man has always given me the creeps."

Hearing her say the word spikes my heart rate. I don't want her to know. I don't want her caught up in this with me. And before I can stop myself, like the secrets have become as natural as breathing, I cover it up.

"Well, let's hope not that. My dad used to say venom were biding their time in the Barrens and one day were coming to get us – if we didn't eat our vegetables. He said one day there would be no magic left in the kingdom if we weren't careful."

"I'm sorry –" Violet says, reaching for me but I tense, unsure if all the walls will crumble at her touch.

I owe her more than this. She deserves a few more years of peace before she finds herself in a war she never knew was coming. I can give that to her. I just need to compartmentalise.

There is Violet, Brennan's sister, who wields lightning and will undoubtedly fight in this war at some point in the distant future.

And then there is this Violet, here. The Violet I can't stop thinking about. The Violet who kissed me. The Violet who makes me want to get on my knees and worship her.

I can keep them separate.

"So which mess should we tackle first?" she asks, and we both look around the room. My gaze

catches on all the places from last night and my mind races with all the things still left to explore.

The heaviness of our previous conversation falls away. "I have a better idea of how to spend our night," I say.

"Oh?" She backs up a step, and I wonder if I have monumentally misjudged the mood of the room from when I entered. "You said not to fall for you. Did you change your mind?"

The two versions of Violet start to blend together again at her words. "Absolutely not," I say.

"Right. Here's the thing. I don't think I can separate sex from emotion when it comes to you. We're already too close for that, and if we hook up again, I'm going to eventually fall for you."

Her words wrap around my heart, squeezing tight. "You won't." It comes out like an order, and I hate the way it sounds. "You don't really know me. Not at my core."

I can't let her get any closer, can't let the two versions of us get any more confusing and entangled. This is just sex. We're burning off this sizzling tension between us, nothing more.

"I know enough," she says softly. "And we'd have all the time in the world to figure it out if you'd stop acting like such an emotional chickenshit and just admit that you're going to fall for me, too, if we keep this up."

"I have absolutely no intention of falling for you, Sorrengail." I use her last name like a shield, desperate to keep her from seeing how far I've already fallen.

"Ouch." She winces. "Well, it's apparent that you're not ready to admit where this is going. So yeah, I think it's best we agree that this was just a onetime thing." She shrugs. "We both needed to blow off some steam, and we did, right?"

"Right," I agree, but the look on her face doesn't match her words. I can't tell if she wants to throw me out or kiss me.

"So the next time I see you, I'll act just as cool as you are right now and pretend that I'm not remembering what it feels like to have you sliding inside me."

She still wants me. I feel the relief of it like a physical thing. Her words are all challenge, and this feels like solid ground to me. I smirk, walking towards her, ready to play out this little game if that's what she needs.

"And I'll just pretend that I'm not remembering the feel of your soft thighs around my hips or those breathy little sounds you make right before you come." I'm only inches away from her.

"And I'll ignore the memory of your hands biting into my hips, pinning me to the armoire so you could take me deeper, and your mouth on my throat. Easy." She steps back a little, and I follow her until she's pushed up against the wall. Her lips have parted and I'm so close to her I can feel her breaths against my mouth.

"Then I guess I'll ignore the memory of how hot and slick you feel around my cock, and how you cry out for more until all I can think about is how to push every physical limit to be exactly what you need." I smirk as she flushes a little, already imagining all the limits I can take her to with the whole night ahead of us.

But she reaches out and pushes a hand on my chest. "You want me. And I know that scares you even though I want you just as badly." I tense against her, ready to argue. "But here's the thing.

You don't get to dictate how I feel. You might give the orders out there, but not in here. You don't get to tell me we can fuck but I can't fall for you. That's not fair. You can only respect what I choose to do. So we're not doing this again until I *want* to risk my heart. And if I fall, then that's my problem, not yours. You're not responsible for my choices."

She's saying no. My jaw clenches at the effort to backtrack my thoughts. I push off from the wall, retreating a few steps to give us both some space.

"I think that's for the best, and who knows where I'll end up. Besides you and I are chained together because of Sgaeyl and Tairn, which complicates... everything," I say.

Her eyes narrow at me a little. If she doesn't want this, then neither do I. I can compartmentalise even harder if I need to. This can be a newer version of us, the friends who slept together once but know it was a mistake. But the idea of never being with her again makes my chest *ache*.

"Besides with all that *pretending*, I'm sure we'll eventually forget last night ever happened." The words come out with more bitterness than I intend.

"I never figured you for a liar, Xaden," she says, turning away from me to pick up the target dummy I broke into pieces last night and shoves it at me. I take it off her wordlessly, not sure how to react. "You can get me a new one when you're ready to come to your senses. Then we'll blow off some steam."

She opens the door and I walk out in a daze, unable to pinpoint where it all went wrong.

Shields

I'm not sure exactly what part of what I said was enough to get me kicked out of her room, but I'm prepared to knock on her door and take *all* of it back if she'll have me. But with the broken halves of the target I destroyed clutched to my chest, all I can do is stare at her closed door, open-mouthed and blinking like an idiot.

Which, of course, is exactly how Liam finds me half a second later as he strolls out of his room, bottle of wine in hand.

"Xaden?" His brows furrow for a moment, looking me up and down. Then he purses his lips as he tries to hold in a laugh and holds his door open for me. "You'd better come in."

I don't argue, just walk shell-shocked into his room and sit down at the foot of his bed, still holding the stupid target dummy. Liam pries it out of my hands, setting it on the floor.

He walks over to his desk, shifting the books and little wooden figurines scattered all over it before searching through the drawers.

"Oh for fuck's sake, *here*." He pulls the cork out of the wine bottle and hands me the entire thing, sitting down on the chair to face me. I take a swig and move to hand it back to him. "No, you keep it, brother. Looks like you need it more than me."

"Violet kicked me out," I explain.

He frowns. "What did you do?"

I take another gulp of the wine, larger and longer this time. Fuck, it tastes like vinegar. "Thank Amari I was here to save whatever woman you planned to share this with tonight."

Liam laughs a little, but presses, "Seriously. What did you do?"

I smile tightly, bracing myself for another taste. "We slept together last night," I admit.

Liam snorts. "No shit."

I stare at him, confused. "How did you—"

He gestures around the room. "We share a wall. Besides the lightning show was pretty fucking hard to miss."

"Shit," I mutter, rubbing my fingers over my temple and take another long swig of wine. I gesture the bottle at him again, and this time he takes it off me to take a sip.

"Fuck, that really is terrible," he says, grimacing and sets the bottle on the desk.

I raise my eyebrows. "Told you."

"So, Violet was in an extremely good mood last night. You want to tell me how tonight you ended up with a door in your face instead?"

"I'm not sure exactly where I royally fucked it, but it *might* have been when I told her I had absolutely no intention of falling for her."

Liam sucks in a breath and grimaces. “And why exactly did you tell her that?”

“Because I really, *really* don’t want her to fall for me.”

“Xaden – “ Liam’s eyes soften. “I think you might have passed that point a little way back.”

“She doesn’t *know* me, Liam.” This conversation feels horrendously similar to the one just now.

“She knows you, brother.” He moves to sit by my side on the bed. “She knows all the things that matter about a person. She just doesn’t know the things *you* know.”

“They’re huge fucking things.” I stare ahead, not looking at him.

“Never said they weren’t.” He throws an arm around my shoulder. “And I get why you won’t tell her yet –“

“Can’t,” I say, shrugging him off me. “Can’t tell her, not won’t. Fuck, I would love to tell her everything.”

Liam’s nose wrinkles. “So why don’t you?”

“Aetos is –“ I start.

But he interrupts me, pushing my shoulder back so I’m looking at him. “Aetos is an asshole, yes. We can all agree on that. But Violet learned to shield from Tairn in what... five minutes? It literally took me five weeks. Shields aren’t the problem here.”

My jaw clenches. Liam has always been able to see straight through me.

I get to my feet, turning to face him. “People are relying on me. *You’re* all relying on me.” I gesture wildly at him and the room. “These are secrets some of us have died to protect, Liam. I can’t just start spilling them to whatever girl I’m fucking.”

He flinches, his gaze dropping towards the ground for a second. But then he stands up too, so we’re face-to-face.

“No. You don’t get to pretend you don’t care,” he says, glaring at me. “You care about her. We care about you. This isn’t some girl you’re *fucking*.” He throws my words back at me. “This is Brennan’s sister. She saved my fucking life. You’re clearly...” He trails off.

“Clearly what, Liam?” My voice is quiet but shaking with anger.

“In love with her,” he finishes, almost a whisper.

“That’s fucking ridiculous,” I say, already anticipating the retort from Sgaeyl in my mind, but there’s just damning silence. Somehow that’s worse.

“Ok, let’s pretend you’re not in love with her. She’s still Brennan’s sister. She can wield lightning, for fuck’s sake. Sooner or later, we’re going to need her.”

“I don’t want her involved in this!” I run my hands through my hair. “Ok? There, I’ve said it. If I could spare any of you from being involved in this... fuck, I would do it in a heartbeat. It’s too late for us. But I can spare her.”

“You don’t get to decide that –“

“I’m not telling her, Liam. I can’t.” I lean down to pick up the target pieces, my shadows moving ahead to twist open the handle at Liam’s door.

“I’ll need your help in a few days to move a new armoire into her room. The last one... well, it didn’t make it.” I try to lighten the mood between us, but he doesn’t take the bait.

“Whatever you want, Xaden.” Liam doesn’t look at me as I leave, busying himself tidying the wooden carvings scattered all over the desk.

The door slams behind me with a little more force than I expect. And I find myself back in the damned first-year hallway, exactly where I started.

Somehow, I manage to make it through an entire month without breaking down and telling Violet everything just for the chance to be allowed back into her bed again. It has been a remarkable exercise in self-control and shielding. I ignore the way my pulse races every time she heads off into the mountains with Carr. I keep my shields up tight as we practice new flight manoeuvres, trying not to feel her emotions as they soar over her shields.

Sparring is the hardest test of my self-restraint. Here, it’s not just Violet I’m squaring off against, it’s two parts of myself. The logical, rational part that says she needs every minute in this gym to prepare her for what will undoubtedly be coming next. And the illogical, emotional part that wants to thread my fingers through her hair and kiss her, promising her that I’ll keep her safe.

Imogen noticed something had changed between us on day one. A few days later, Garrick twigged what was going on when Liam *insisted* that we needed a third person to move in the new armoire, and that person *had* to be Garrick. He has been trying carefully but unsubtly to chip away at my restraint ever since.

This morning in the mess hall, he tries the same ridiculous tactic again.

“Are you going to share that or keep it all to yourself?” Garrick gestures at the two slices of meat on my plate, his eyes innocent but twinkling with how amused he is at himself.

I ignore him. He’s made a version of this joke every few days for the past three weeks.

“I’m just saying, Xaden. Some things are better off shared.”

I roll my eyes, even with Sgaeyl snorting through the bond.

I can feel Violet’s eyes on me from across the hall. Her gaze feels so intense, like stepping out from the shadows into the beating heat of the midday sun. Even before my shadows slip out to confirm it, I can conjure her face, her lips parted, her eyes heavy-lidded with crackling fire behind them.

“*Don’t look at me like that.*” I take another bite of my breakfast, staring at the grain of the wood on the table in front of me. I’m trying desperately not to remember the look in her eyes last night in the sparring gym, the way her legs felt wrapped around my waist as I pinned her to the ground.

“*Like what?*”

My gaze locks with hers. “*Like you’re thinking about the sparring gym last night.*”

“Well, now that you mention it.” Her tongue flicks across her lower lip and all I can think about is what it would feel like to have that tongue all over me. My cock stirs at the idea of it, and I tighten my grip around my fork, trying to concentrate on anything else.

“Seriously, I can’t think when you look at me like that.”

Garrick is saying something to me, and I can tell from his expression that he’s already repeated it once. He raises a questioning eyebrow at me.

“Sorry, got distracted,” I mutter. Garrick’s lips twitch with the effort not to laugh. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying –“

But Violet’s voice dances through my mind again. *“You’re the one with the ridiculous rule about not falling for each other.”*

I risk a glance at her, but her thoughts are still all over her face, and I immediately look back at my plate. *“You’re still looking.”*

“You make it hard to look away.” The teasing, flirtatious lilt from her voice has slipped a little, and the absence of it makes my stomach twist. I’d rather horrendous sexual tension than... well, *that*.

“I’m over here keeping my hands and memories to myself because you asked me to, and you’re fucking me with your eyes. That’s not playing fair.”

The clatter of her fork on the table turns my head back to her. Everyone else is looking straight at her too and she shifts a little in her chair, her cheeks flushing slightly. I catch Liam flicking his gaze between the two of us with a wry smile. Guess, I won that round.

“Told you to stop staring.” I say, struggling with the effort not to laugh and give away our little communication secret to the rest of the hall.

I turn back to listen to Garrick with a small smile, taking a sip of water.

“If you’d just man up and admit there’s something between us, I would strip down to my skin so you could see every single inch of me. And once I had you begging, I’d drop down to my knees, undo those flight leathers you’re wearing, and wrap my lips around –“

I choke, spurring water out of my mouth and nose. Garrick jumps to his feet and pounds on my back, creating such a scene that every rider in the fucking hall turns to look at me. I wave him off, refusing to look at her and take a small, careful sip of water.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” I say.

But fuck, what a way to go.

Today is Reunification Day and the whole citadel is abuzz with preparations for tonight’s party. I file in a little late to Battle Brief, still processing Panchek’s request to ensure *every* rider is in attendance at the big event. A *request* that was very much an order, and an order which I have absolutely zero intention of following.

The blank faces of the rebellion kids in the room tell me this day is hard enough already for them. I'm not about to make the anniversary of their parents' deaths any worse by forcing them to mingle with the very people that ordered their executions.

I spot Violet's hair several rows ahead of me. I wonder if she'll wear it differently tonight, whether there's some different hairstyle to mark this fucking day. Deep down, I know this burning rage I feel isn't really fair to her, that she will also be struggling to make it through with the memory of Brennan's death. Except he's not really dead, is he? It's not the same for the rest of us. Our families aren't safe in Aretia. They're not coming back. Nothing about this day is fair.

I'm not really listening to Devera prattle about the wards either, but Violet's voice still startles me as she blurts through the bond, *"Take me to bed."*

It's so unexpected and so at odds with my own mood, it takes me a few seconds to react. *"It might be awkward in front of all these people."*

"Might be worth it," she says, her voice all challenge.

Fuck, what I wouldn't do to be welcome in her bed again, to feel her come undone beneath me. I am desperate for any piece of her. I stare at the back of her head, my eyes tracing the silver strands through her braid, wishing I could see what she was really thinking. Her words from the argument in her bedroom echo through me: *If we hook up again, I'm going to fall for you.*

And I know I'm still not prepared to risk it.

"I haven't changed my mind, Violence. There's no future for us."

"Graduation is ten days away." I am acutely aware of that fact, and no closer to figuring out what this will mean for us next year. It's not even Sgaeyl and Tairn I'm worried about; I don't know how I am going to be able to bear living with just tiny scraps of her presence whenever Command deems it permissible.

"Don't remind me."

There's a long pause, and I wonder if she's finally had mercy on me.

"Are you seriously going to leave Basgiath without..." She trails off.

My mind swims with all the things I would love to do with her, all the many ways I could have her in the next ten days. My jaw clenches with the effort to control my racing thoughts.

"Yes."

I sense her flicker of disappointment through the bond, but then it warms, seeming to catch and spark.

"Whatever you're thinking can wait until there's not a room of people between us," I warn, feeling the heat of her thoughts burn through my own veins.

And then suddenly, the fire stills, snuffing out.

"Is there someone else?"

What the actual fuck. In what world, have I given her any suggestion that I want anyone but her. The idea that she could even think that of me, let alone ask it, twists in my gut. Does she really not

know me at all?

"I'm not having this conversation with you right now. Pay attention."

It's the first time I tune into the conversation happening around us, hearing the words float back into my consciousness even as I stare unmoving at the back of Violet's head.

"That's a good idea, too, Aetos," Devera says. "A very wingleader answer, if I might say so."

I roll my eyes. There is no fucking way I'm leaving Basgiath with Wingleader Aetos as my successor.

"Is it Imogen?" Violet's voice whispers into my mind.

Is it Imogen? *Imogen?* Imogen who I threatened to kill if she so much as looked at you the wrong way again? Imogen who has been obsessively in love with my best friend for *years*?

I put my hand to my mouth, pulling my bottom lip between my fingers just to keep from yelling at her. *"For fuck's sake, Violence."*

But she won't fucking stop. Why is she doing this today of all days?

"Is it? I know we said we weren't going there again, but –"

Of course, there's no one else. All I can think about is her. The daughter of the woman who ordered my father's execution.

"At least tell me," she pleads.

"Sorrengail." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, laced with fury.

Every head swivels to where Violet sits. Fuck.

"Yes, Riorson?" Devera asks.

I clear my throat, trying to buy some time. *Mira*. "If reinforcements were unavailable, I would have asked for Mira Sorrengail to temporarily transfer. The wards are strong at Montserrat, and with her signet, she could reinforce the weaknesses until other riders could arrive to strengthen those wards."

"Good idea." Devera nods, and I take a deep breath. "And what riders are the most logical choice to help rebuild the wards in this particular mountain pass?"

"Third-years," Violet says, and I roll my eyes, exasperated.

"Go on," Devera says.

"Third-years are taught to build wards, and at this point in the year, they're leaving anyway." She fucking *shrugs*. "May as well send them early so they can be of use."

"Point fucking made." I block her before she can reply.

On The Edge

I walk straight from Battle Brief to the flight field, tension radiating through every muscle in my body. Sgaeyl must sense my mood because she doesn't waste the time landing, flying low and parallel to the ground so I can manipulate the shadows into lifting me onto her back.

We fly for hours in complete silence, though the bond between us is wide open. Whenever the anger at everything that's been taken from me boils up, she dives low and fast, letting the wind wash it all away. When she senses I'm close to breaking, eaten up by everything I've lost and still stand to lose, she steadies her wings, slowing so it's just the slipstreams in the skies that keep us afloat.

I watch the sun make its descent towards the valley, see the last of its rays wink out on the horizon and flood the clouds in the deepest shades of pink. Any other day, it would be beautiful. Today, it looks like blood.

I force myself to look, staring at the skies until the colour seeps into the shadows and darkness finally falls. By this time, six years ago, my father was already dead. Executed for trying to do the right thing and branded a traitor by history. The pain of what the world thinks of him cuts deeper tonight than the pain of losing him. He was prepared to die for what he believed in. But I can't bear that they took his bravery and warped it so he's the villain in their story.

The skies are endless shadows, the land beneath us awash in inky black darkness. It's only when I see the twinkling lights of Basgiath in the distance that I realise Sgaeyl is steering us back to the citadel.

"I can't," I breathe out as we draw closer, hearing the rumble of voices and distant music.

"I know," she soothes. "Garrick and Bodhi are waiting."

She sweeps down towards the flight field, where the two of them stand in the darkness, looking up at the sky. I dismount Sgaeyl and turn back, resting a hand on the scales at her chest.

"You're welcome, Wingleader," she replies, before I can say a word. She launches skyward, flying fast for the Vale and I remember that I'm not the only one who lost everything on this day all those years ago. Tairn did too.

Garrick and Bodhi are both in their dress uniforms, looking entirely out of place on this patchy field of churned up mud and dirt. They watch me with nervous eyes, and I nod once in reassurance, walking past them back towards the citadel and gesture for them to follow.

"Where are you?" Violet's voice rings through the silence and I pour shadows into the bond. I can't think about her right now, it will break me. I'm barely keeping it together as it is.

"Why are you wearing those?" I ask as we reach the bottom of the staircase and start walking along the cliff path. I know none of the rebellion kids will go to this *celebration* tonight, least of all Garrick. Only Liam was brave enough to face it for Violet, refusing every objection I made on his behalf.

Garrick shrugs. It's Bodhi that says, "Just invites less questions. Most people will start slipping away from the main event soon, we'll blend right in."

I'd forgotten that people enjoy this day, that it's supposed to be a moment to celebrate life and love

and unity. There will be couples in little trysts all over the quadrant.

“I want to be alone.” The words sound more brutal than I intend. Garrick’s arm stretches across Bodhi, and they hang back, letting me keep walking. The sounds of their footsteps on the path behind me is comforting just the same.

We reach the gate to the courtyard, the party just inside almost deafening in the darkness. The sound of the strings, the rhythmic tapping of feet on the ground and the happy little peals of laughter feel like torture.

I can think of only one place where no one will be.

I drop down onto the wall once the last echoes from the courtyard fade away, feeling the rough masonry crumble beneath my fingers. One look at Garrick was all it took for him to take back his tentative step onto the parapet as he went to follow me. But I know they’ll still be hovering at the entrance out of some misguided worry.

The shadows thicken around me, cocooning me in their swirling darkness as if they can block out any thought. But the silence just seems to make my thoughts come faster.

War is coming. I can see it in the eyes of the fliers, the desperation that laces their pleas for help. They are bearing the brunt of this war for now. But it’s coming. The wards are falling. Fewer dragons are bonding. We are losing on all fronts, and don’t even know it.

And in a few days, I’ll get to walk out of this hellhole. I’ll be placed on the front lines, finally able to do some good if they’d let me. The deadline of graduation has been the only thing I could work towards for years, but now it looms larger than ever in front of me. It won’t be any different out there than it is inside Basgiath’s walls. I won’t be fighting the venom; I’ll be aimed at the very people I have risked everything to protect.

In a strange way these past three years have been some of the best since my father died. The constant presence of death burns steady and keeps you focused, distracting you from everything else. And rather than being surrounded by my enemies, I’ve found myself thrust together with friends. Three years with Garrick, working out how to survive in this place. Two years with Bodhi and Imogen, passing down hard-earned knowledge the best we can. And another precious year with Liam, watching him achieve everything I always knew he could.

In ten days, that will all be over. I’m not naïve enough to think any marked ones will end up in the same outpost. It will be months, if not years, before I see my friends again.

And then there’s Violet.

It’s the first time I’ve allowed myself to think of her since Battle Brief this morning. I take a deep steadying breath, my heel digging into the wall underfoot to jimmy free a loose piece of mortar. I float it out from under me on the shadows, watch the jagged piece of brick hang in the night, suspended. Then I let it fall.

I am running out of time to tell her everything, I can feel it. I don’t think I can survive her much longer.

I know that she deserves to know. I am sure that I can trust her with this secret like I have all the others. The risk in telling her about the real threat beyond our borders is so much smaller than the risk most of us take to steal the weapons or run them to the fliers.

If she knew the truth, she would fight by our side. I'm certain of it. And the idea of giving her that knowledge, terrifies me more than anything else. If she dies because I told her this... I've killed her.

But she's too smart to not figure this out soon. She will see through the cracks and glimpse the truth. And as sure as I am that she would fight by our side, I am equally certain that she will never forgive me for hiding this from her.

I'm not sure when I should have told her, but I can feel in my gut that it's already too late. My father's words go sour: the truth is only good as the moment you choose to tell it.

The tiniest hint of motion in my periphery makes me turn my head to the left, ready to tell Bodhi or Garrick or whoever else thinks they can reach me to turn back.

But it's not them. It's *her*.

"Violence?" I squint at her in the darkness. Surely, she wouldn't be so stupid to walk out on the parapet to reach me. But she takes another tentative step towards me, her arms held out wide for balance. Her dress flutters furiously in the wind as she steps past the relative shelter of the outcropping.

I am on my feet in less than a second, striding towards her with a speed that is only matched by the intensity of my fury. "Turn around right now!" I shout. My shadows are already racing towards her, abandoning me completely to catch her should she fall.

"Come with me," she calls out, lifting her hand towards me, her feet shuffling forwards a couple more inches, as her dress wraps around her legs.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I ask. It's supposed to sound angry, but it comes out all breathless and fearful. My hands wrap around her waist, holding her in place.

She stares up at me. "I could ask you the same thing."

"You could have fallen and died!" My shadows pulsate around us, swirling beneath our feet as my heart beats furiously against my chest.

"I could say the same thing," she says, with a small smile.

Gods, this woman has no self-preservation at all.

"And did you stop to think that if you fall and die, then I can die?"

"Again," she says softly. She reaches out to put her hand on my chest. "I could say the same thing."

The shadows flare out around us, wrapping us up in their darkness to block out the moonlight.

"You're forgetting that I wield shadows, Violence. I'm just as safe out here as I am in the courtyard. Are you going to wield lightning to break your fall?"

She gawks at me, and if I wasn't so desperate to be alone it would be adorable. "I... perhaps did not think that part through as thoroughly as you," she admits.

“You’re seriously going to be the death of me. Go back.” But my fingers flex involuntarily around her waist, as I let the shadows fall away.

Tiny tendrils of hair have broken free from her braid and whip around her face in the wind. She looks so devastatingly beautiful; it takes my breath away. She stares back at me with eyes that seem to see right through me.

“Only if you do. I want to be wherever you are.”

Her words chink the walls I’ve spent all day hiding behind and weeks reinforcing. I can’t do this. “Violence…”

“I know why you say you don’t see a future for us,” she says in a rush.

“Do you?” She has no idea.

“You want me,” she says, staring up at me. I open my mouth to argue but she cuts me off. “And no, I’m not just talking about in bed. You. Want. Me, Xaden Riorson. You might not say it, but you do one better and *show* it. You show it every time you choose to trust me, every time your eyes linger on mine. You show it with every sparring lesson you don’t have time for and every flight lesson that pulls you away from your own studies. You show it when you refuse to touch me because you’re worried that I don’t really want you, then show it again when you take time to hunt down violets before a leadership meeting so I don’t wake up feeling alone. You show it in a million different ways. Please don’t deny it.”

Each little truth cracks against the walls, a tiny chink widening. I can’t fight her on any of it; she’s right. I’m out of words to argue back.

“You think we don’t have a future because you’re scared that I won’t like who you really are behind those walls you keep,” she says, her palm still resting firmly against my chest. It feels like she’s reached through me and has her hand clamped tight around my heart. “And I’m scared, too. I can admit it. You’re graduating. I’m not. You’ll be gone in a matter of weeks, and we’re probably setting ourselves up for heartbreak. But if we let fear kill whatever this is between us, then we don’t deserve it.” Her hand slides up my chest and wraps around the nape of my neck, pulling me closer to her so we’re just inches apart. “I told you that I was the one who would decide when I’m ready to risk my heart, and I’m saying it.”

The way she looks at me, the sparkling trust in her eyes, devastates me. I want more than anything to be with her. We could do this. The most important things in life are worth risking everything for.

“You don’t mean that,” I say, shaking my head but my pulse is racing. *We could do this.*

“I mean it.” She squeezes gently around my neck.

“If this is about the Imogen thing –”

“It’s not.” She shakes her head. “I know there’s no one else. I wouldn’t be walking the parapet in the middle of the night if I thought you were playing me.”

I pull her closer against me, my arms wrapping around her waist. I can’t see her face from this angle, but I can feel her heart racing against my chest.

“Then what made you even think that?” I say into the darkness. “Have to admit, it pissed me off. I’ve given you exactly zero reasons to think I’m in anyone else’s bed.”

“My own insecurities and the way she looked at you and Garrick sparring,” she mumbles against my chest. “You might not have a thing for her, but she definitely has a thing for you.” She pulls back from me a little, looking up at me. “I know that look. It’s the same look I have when I’m watching you.”

Her cheeks flush a little and I try to stop myself from smiling. “You’re jealous.”

“Maybe. Fine. Yes. She’s strong and fierce and has that same ruthless streak you do. I’ve always thought she was a much better match for you.”

“I know the feeling well.” I shake my head, wondering how we both could have read each other so wrong. “And you are strong and fierce and have a ruthless streak, too. Not to mention you’re the smartest person I’ve ever met. That mind of yours is sexy as hell. Imogen and I are just friends. Trust me, she wasn’t looking at me, and even if she were...” I take a deep breath, one hand slipping up her back to cradle her head and draw her close to me again. “Gods help me, I’m only looking at you.”

All the little truths float around us, twinkling like stars in the night sky. But I’ve still not given her the one that really matters. The words are right there, so tantalisingly close, just out of my grasp.

She pulls back from me a little, her brows furrowed and asks, “She wasn’t looking at you?”

And I let the moment slip away.

“No. Rethink what you just said but take me out of the equation.” I push the heaviness of reality away and cling on to all the bits that are easy and light between us, waiting for her to put it together.

“But on the sparring mat...” Her eyes widen as she figures it out. “She has a thing for Garrick.”

Thing might be an understatement. “Catching on fast, aren’t you?”

“I am. Are you done pushing me away?”

I draw back and study her face. We were always going to end up here. We feel inevitable. And I’m done fighting it.

“You done putting yourself in harm’s way to get your point across?”

“Probably not.” She grins up at me.

I sigh heavily. “There’s only you, Violence. Is that what you needed to hear?”

She nods.

“Even when I’m not with you, there’s only you.” She consumes every thought. She is the focus of every decision, even when it defies all logic. “Next time, just ask. You’ve never had a problem being bluntly honest with me. As I remember, you’ve even thrown daggers at my head, which I greatly prefer over watching you get tangled up in your thoughts. If we’re going to do this, then we have to trust each other.”

I hope she can trust that I’ll tell her everything when the time is right.

“And you want to do this?”

I sigh long and hard, and it feels like some unbearable weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

“Yes.” My hand slides up to stroke her cheek. “I can’t make you any promises, Violence. But I’m tired of fighting it.”

“What do you mean you know the feeling of jealousy well?”

I always knew she could see right through me. I look away, not wanting to share this vulnerability with her.

“Oh no, if I have to trust you and tell you what I’m thinking, then I expect the same from you.” She guides my face back and I lift my gaze to meet hers.

“I saw Aetos kissing you after Threshing and nearly lost my shit.”

Her head cocks to one side. “You wanted me then?”

“I’ve wanted you from the first second I saw you, Violence.” It feels so freeing to finally say it. “And if I was short with you today... well, it’s just a shit day.”

The acceptance shining in her eyes melts something inside of me. “I understand. And you know Dain and I are just friends, right?”

I think back to Aetos on the flight field after she killed Barlowe, unknowingly taking that memory from her while she was falling apart. He’s not her friend. But I can’t be the one that tells her that.

“I know that’s how you feel, though I wasn’t sure back then.” I run my thumb over her bottom lip, luxuriating in the feeling of being able to touch her. “Now get your ass back on solid ground.” I gesture with my chin back the way she came.

“Come with me,” she says, her fingers flexing into my flight jacket.

I shake my head and look away from the burning need in her eyes. “I’m not in a place to take care of anyone tonight. And yes, I know that’s a shitty thing to say, since it’s the anniversary of losing Brennan –”

“I know.” Her hands slide over my arms, gripping my biceps tightly. “Come with me, Xaden.”

“Vi...”

“Trust me,” she says, stepping back and taking both my hands. “Come on.”

No one else can reach me on this day. Only her. I nod once, closing the gap between us to hold her steady while she turns around.

“I’m much better at this than I was last July,” she says.

“So I see.” I’m right behind her, one hand on her waist and my shadows edge along beside every step she takes. “In a fucking dress.”

“It’s a skirt actually,” she flings back at me over one shoulder.

“Eyes forward!” Gods, I need this woman back on solid ground immediately.

The second we reach the outcropping, the 200-foot fall safely at our backs, I tug her back against me, holding her tight as I whisper in her ear, “Don’t every put your life at risk over something as trivial as talking to me again.”

“Next year is going to be so much fun,” she teases, reaching back to link her fingers with mine.

I roll my eyes. “Liam will be here next year to make sure you’re not doing asinine things.” Though I notice he’s nowhere to be found on the night she chose to walk across the fucking parapet. We’re going to need to have another little talk.

“You’re going to *love* getting his letters.” She jumps off the final part of the parapet to land in the courtyard below, looking around her. “Huh. Garrick and Bodhi were just here.”

That little talk can extend to Bodhi too. “They probably know I’m going to kill them for letting you out there. A dress, Sorrengail? Really?”

She reaches out for my hand again and pulls me across the courtyard. “Where are we going?”

“You’re taking me to your room,” she says, a secret, knowing smile on her face.

“I’m what?”

“You’re taking me to your room,” she repeats.

“Someone will see,” I argue. There are people everywhere tonight, it will be almost impossible to get her in and out without someone spotting her. “It’s not my reputation I’m worried about Sorrengail. You’re a first year and I’m your wingleader –“

“Pretty sure everyone already knows – we set half the forest on fire that night.” She climbs the staircase just ahead of me, and I can’t take my eyes off her, mesmerised by the way the dress clings to every curve. “Did you know the first time I climbed these steps with Dain, I was horrified that there wasn’t a handrail?”

The flare of jealousy that she was in his room burns hot and fast, sending my shadows pulsing along the walls. I know there’s nothing between them now, but I can’t bear to think of her with him. “Did you know I can’t stand to hear his name on your lips while you’re leading the way to *my* room?”

“Point is, and now look at me.” She turns back to grin at me as she reaches the top. “All but dancing on the parapet in a dress.”

“Probably not a good time to remind me.” My shadows slip down the hall in front of us, checking the rooms. Most are still empty, their occupants out celebrating someplace else.

“Which one is yours?”

“I should make you guess,” I say, but tighten my grip on her hand to keep her with me. We reach my door, the final room at the end of the hall.

“Fourth Wing,” she scoffs. “Always has to go the farthest.”

I wave my hand over the wards, unlocking them so she can walk through first. I’m not nervous about her seeing my room, but the intimacy and easiness of it makes my heart clench. This is all going to disappear in less than a fortnight. We’ve wasted so much time. “I’m going to have to either ward your new door before I go or teach you how in the next ten days.”

She doesn’t answer, clearly not prepared to think about that impending deadline either. Her head swivels as she takes in all the details of her room, focusing on the table in the corner.

“We do leadership meetings for the sections in here sometimes,” I say from the doorway. Or we plan the next weapons run. Or write letters to Brennan. Fuck, what am I doing bringing her here?

Her fingers graze over the pile of daggers on the sword rack. “How many challenges have you won anyway?”

But I love that she’s seeing these parts of me. It’s not the whole truth, not yet. But maybe for now, it’s enough. I come all the way in, closing the door behind me. “The better question is how many have I lost.”

“There’s the ego I know and love so much,” she mutters, rolling her eyes. She makes her way over to the bed, gazing down at it then looks back at me. The silver strands of her hair seem to glint in the darkness.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?” Her lips twitch at the compliment. “If not, I’m a fool, because you are magnificently beautiful.”

She smiles, her cheeks flushing and pats the edge of my bed. “Thank you. Now sit.”

“What?”

“Sit,” she says again, staring at me.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I can’t talk about my father with anyone, least of all today.

“I never said you had to.”

She’s never not pushed me before, always determined to win every point. I sit down on the bed, my legs stretched out in front of me. “Now what?” My heart pounds.

She gestures with her foot for me to move my legs apart and steps in between my thighs, threading her fingers through my hair. Her face is just above mine and I close my eyes, drinking in the feel of her.

“Now I take care of you,” she says, and my eyes fly open, studying every inch of her face.

She sinks to her knees on the ground and my pulse leaps, anticipating what she’s going to do next. The idea of her mouth wrapped around my cock has me instantly hard. But I don’t want to do this tonight, can’t bear the idea of ruining this first time with the memory of this shitty day.

“Violet –” I try to stop her.

But she smirks at me. “I’m just taking off your boots.”

Blood still pounds through me as she unlaces them slowly. She rises to carry the boots to the armoire but I can’t bear the sight of her walking away.

“You can just leave them there,” I blurt out.

She puts them on the floor and turns back to me, rolling her eyes with a smile. “I wasn’t going to go snooping through your clothes, and it’s not like I haven’t seen them all anyway.”

I’ve been so mesmerised by the expression on her face all evening, it’s like I’m seeing her for the first time as she walks back to me. The slit on her dress is tantalisingly high, the beautiful length of her leg visible with every step, and a glint of steel strapped across her thigh. She looks deadly... and hot as fuck.

“You’ve been wearing that all night?” I say, unable to take my eyes off her legs as she saunters back to me.

“That’s what you get for walking behind me,” she teases, standing back in between my thighs.

“I can’t really argue about the view from the back, either.”

“Be quiet and let me get this off you.” Her fingers fly over the buttons on the jacket, and I shrug it off. “Were you flying tonight?”

“It usually helps.” I think back to the colours of the sky as the sun set and swallow past the lump in my throat. “This day is always...”

“I’m sorry,” she says, our gaze locking for a second before she tugs on my shirt.

“I’m sorry, too,” I reply, breaking our eye contact only as she lifts the shirt over my head.

“You have nothing to be sorry about.”

But I do. I owe her so many more apologies than she does to me.

Her fingers trace the lines of my face, running along the scar that bisects my eyebrow.

“Challenge?”

“Sgaeyl.” I shrug. “Threshing.”

“Most dragons scar their riders, but Tairn and Andarna have never hurt me,” she says, one hand slipping down my neck.

“Or maybe they knew you already carried a scar.” I trail my fingers down the long silver scar on her arm, and even though every single one of them responsible for it is dead, the pain of watching her helpless and alone against them still feels raw. “I wanted to fucking kill them. And instead, I had to stand there and watch them go at you three-on-one. I was at the edge of my control and ready to step in when Tairn landed.”

“It was only two-on-one once Jack ran. And you couldn’t have interfered. It’s against the rules, remember?”

She didn’t need me anyway. It was all her. I smile at her, remembering how fucking hot and lethal she looked in that clearing.

“At the end of the day, you walked away with two dragons.” Gods, if this is her in less than a year here, I can’t wait to see what she’ll be like after two more. But I won’t be here to see it. “Two weeks from now, I won’t even be here to watch when you’re challenged, let alone do anything about it.”

“I’ll be fine,” she says. “Whomever I can’t beat in a challenge, I’ll just poison.”

I can’t tell if she’s joking.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.” She leans in and kisses the scar on my eyebrow. “It will be tomorrow when you wake up.”

I pull her closer to me, not ready to let her go just yet. “I don’t deserve you,” I say against her neck. “But I’m going to keep you all the same.”

“Good.” She leans in and kisses me, a tiny little brush of her lips against mine. “Because I think I’m in love with you.”

The words kindle something deep in my chest. I tighten my arms around her, unable to look away. “You think? Or you know?”

“I know. I’m so wildly in love with you that I can’t imagine what my life would even look like without you in it.” That tiny flicker of hope sparks, a warm glow that catches through my whole body and burns through all the fear, all the reasons not to do this. “And I probably shouldn’t have said that, but if we’re doing this, then we’re starting from a place of complete honesty.”

Every secret threatens to come spilling out of my lips. She deserves to know. She *has* to know. But not now, not today. I do the only thing I can think of to stop myself from telling her everything; I kiss her, pulling her down into my lap so she’s straddling me, my hands reaching up to hold her face on mine. I’m kissing her even as my hands run all over her, taking off any clothes I can find without breaking that kiss.

“Stand,” I say, determined to feel her skin against mine. She *loves* me. I don’t have the words to say it back with all the secrets still between us. So, all I can do is *show* her how much she means to me.

“Xaden.”

“I fucking *need* you, Violet. Right now. And I don’t need *anyone*, so I’m not quite sure how to handle this feeling, but I’m giving it my best. And if you don’t want this tonight, that’s fine, but I’m going to need you to walk out that door right now, because if you don’t, I’m going to have you naked on your back in the next two minutes.”

I stare at her from inches away, her hands still in my hair. *Don’t leave. Stay with me.*

“Walk away or stay, but either way, I need you to stand up,” I whisper against her lips.

She leans back a little, glancing down at her armoured vest. “I think two minutes might be overestimating your skills with a corset.”

I grin, setting her on the floor between my thighs.

“I’m timing you,” she says.

“Is that –”

But she’s already holding up her fingers. “One. Two. Three.”

I jump to my feet, reclaiming her mouth as I reach for the buttons that are keeping her beautiful body from mine. Her skirt hits the floor and she kicks off her shoes. My fingers fly over her back, loosening the laces of her corset. This isn’t like all the other times. She *loves* me.

My hands skim her body, searching for the buckles of every sheath and then reach for my own. They drop to the floor one after the other, and still I’m kissing her, relishing the feel of every bit of her.

I move my hands into her hair, seeking out the pins and pull gently until her hair falls down her back. I pull back from her, my hands still threaded in her hair and allow myself a long, luxurious stare down her naked body. “So fucking beautiful.”

“I think that might have been a little longer than two –” Violet starts to say, but I grab her thighs and lift her up and onto the bed.

“Still counting?” I say, dropping to my knees in the same spot she knelt just minutes before. I reach out and lock my hands behind her knees, dragging her to the edge of the bed. I have spent weeks imagining this moment, wondering what she tastes like ever since I felt how wet she was the first night in her room.

“Do you need me to keep score?” She teases, tilting her head up to look at me.

I grin, knowing I’ll win this challenge just like all the others. I keep my eyes on her as I move my mouth between her thighs. Her head throws back and her back arches, and I close my eyes, gripping her thighs tight. I run my tongue over her gently, a little tease of a taste that slides up and brushes lightly against her clit.

“Oh *gods*,” she exhales.

I pull back a little, gazing up her body. “Which one are you calling out for? Because it’s just you and me in this room, Vi, and I don’t share.”

“You.” Her fingers grip my hair, drawing me back to her. “I’m calling out for you.”

“I appreciate the elevation to deity, but my name will do.” I slide my tongue across her, exploring every bit of her and then swirl it around her clit, sucking gently. She moans in response, and I lift my head up a fraction to take in the sight of her, her back arched in pleasure.

“Fuck, you taste good,” I say, and lift her thighs onto my shoulders so I can feel every move she makes underneath me and learn exactly how she likes it. My cock pulses with the need to be inside her, but I can’t think of anything else except the need to make her come.

I lose all track of time as I swirl my tongue against her clit and push two fingers inside her, stroking in time with my mouth. I’m intoxicated by the taste of her, the way she moves underneath me, her hands gripping in my hair. Her thighs lock against my neck, trembling right on the edge.

Her skin burns with pleasure and power, and I feel it spark against me wherever I’m touching her. And then her thighs squeeze tight as she screams my name and lightning flashes, an immediate boom of thunder shaking the window of my room. Her legs relax completely, softening away from me as she breathes out my name again in a shaky exhale.

“That’s one,” I say, kissing up her body. “Though I do think we’re going to have to work on the fireworks show or people are always going to know what we’re doing.”

“Your mouth is...” She shakes her head and I grin, sliding my hands under her to shift us up the bed. “There are no words for that.”

“Delicious,” I whisper against the tight lines of her stomach, skimming my lips over the softest bit of skin between her hips. “You are absolutely delicious. I never should have waited this long to get my mouth on you.”

I trail kisses up to her breast, drawing her nipple into my mouth and suck gently, swirling my tongue around the peak. My fingers trace up her skin on the other side, squeezing her other nipple in my fingers. Her back arches, and she pushes herself towards me like she can’t get enough.

Her hands seek out every part of me, trying to pull me closer to her. I bring my body up over hers, kissing up towards her neck and she softens against me, tiny little moans escaping from her lips. I

cover her lips with mine, drinking in every sound she makes and kiss her deeply.

Her legs wrap around my hips, pulling me closer to her.

“Violet.” Her name spills out of my lips involuntarily.

“I don’t get equal time to play?” she teases, but she lifts up her hips to slide herself against my cock. Fuck.

I nip at her lower lip. “You can play all you want later if I can have you right now.”

“You already have me.” Her eyes spark and I lose myself in them, bracing myself above her.

“You have everything I have to give.” The words don’t feel like enough.

She nods and arches her hips up again. Our eyes lock and I push into her, feeling every inch of her squeeze around my cock. She feels like silk against me.

“You feel so damn good,” she breathes.

“I could say the same thing about you.” I smile, using her words from earlier in an entirely more enjoyable context. I start to move above her, taking her deep and slow, and she pushes back against me, rocking her hips to meet me at the top of every thrust.

We find a rhythm together and the motion shifts us up the bed. Violet throws her arms out to brace herself against the headboard, pushing back against me even harder. Her eyes are wild, lost in the feel of it and she urges me to move faster. I grin at her, setting a quicker pace that makes her whimper my name over and over.

I can’t get enough of her, but I’m so close to the edge and desperate to take her with me. “I want this to last. I *need* this to last.”

“But I’m...” Her skin feels static, like little sparks are jumping from nerve to nerve everywhere I touch her.

“I know.” I push into her again, lost in how fucking good she feels. She *loves* me. “Just stay with me.” I want her with me always.

I shift back slightly, desperate for her to come with me, angling myself so I brush against her clit with every thrust.

“I’m not going to survive this. I’m going to die right here in this bed.” Whatever last walls were between us come down, her thoughts flooding across the bond to blur into one stream of consciousness with my own.

“Then I’m going to die with you,” I promise, kissing her.

“More. I need more.” Her thighs squeeze tight around me, pulling me in against her. I can feel the pulsing spark and burn of her power intensifying through the bond.

“You’re almost there. Fuck, you feel so damn good around me. I’m never going to get enough of this, enough of you.”

“I love you.”

The three words break the last grip on my self-control and I pound into her, losing myself in her

completely. Her back arches and her head throws back as she comes with me, her power shooting out from her inside the room. The light is so intense, the heat of it so overwhelming that my shadows flare out from me forming a shield of darkness all around us. The window above us shatters, glass raining down onto us and I shift myself to bear the brunt of it, though it turns to sand as it passes through the darkness.

I breathe heavily into her neck, savouring the smoky scent of her hair and the frantic gasps for air that match my own. We stay wrapped in each other for minutes, both struggling to take a steady breath until I finally find the strength to prop myself up.

“You all right?” I ask, brushing her hair back from her face to check none of the glass reached her.

“I’m great,” she breathes out in a rush. “You’re great. That was...” She looks around like she’s trying to find the word.

“Great?” I suggest.

“Exactly.”

“I was going to use the word ‘explosive’, but I think ‘great’ covers it.” I tangle my fingers in her hair, right where the strands shift from darkness to silver. “I fucking love your hair. If you ever want to bring me to my knees or win an argument, just let it down. I’ll get the point.”

She smiles at me, but then pushes up onto her elbow to look past me and my hand falls away. “Oh no, no, no.” Her hand covers her mouth. “I’m pretty sure I blew your window out.”

Her reaction is so innocent, I bite my lips together to keep from laughing. “Unless there’s someone else throwing lightning around then yeah, that was you.” Her eyes widen, cheeks flushing pink. I laugh. “See what I mean? Explosive.”

“I’m so sorry.” She leans over me, trying to assess the extent of the damage. “I’m going to have to get that under control.”

“I threw up a shield. Don’t worry about it.” I lace my hand back behind her neck, pulling her lips onto mine for a kiss.

“What are we going to do?”

Well, I’m not leaving this room to go and replace a fucking window that’s for sure. I don’t think I could leave this bed with her if the world was on fire.

“Right now?” I stroke her hair back from her face. “That was two, if we’re still counting, and I say we clean up, get the sand out of the bed, and get you to three, maybe four if you’re still awake.”

Her jaw drops. “After I just shattered your window?”

I smile, shrugging. “I’ve got us covered just in case you decide to take out the dresser next.” I’m not sure anyone else could survive this woman. And I am more than happy to step up to the task.

Her gaze rakes down my body and her eyes heat. “Yeah, let’s go for three.”

By the time we get to five, Violet insists on climbing on top of me. I have my back to the wall and her hips in my hands as she slowly rides me. She sinks down leisurely onto my cock, letting me feel every inch of her and then rises back up, swirling her hips over and over in a punishing rhythm. Gods, she’s intoxicating. And she loves me. I can’t get her enough of her.

Her fingers trail a path across the lines of the rebellion relic on my neck. “It really is beautiful,” she says, and I feel the truth in her words.

My hands flex at her hips, lifting her up and down on me. “I used to think of it as a curse, but now I realise it’s a gift.” When she reaches the base of me, I arch my hips up, pushing even further into her and make her gasp.

“A gift?” she breathes out, rising up on me.

Someone pounds on the door.

“Go the fuck away!” I yell, my hands snaking up Violet’s back to keep her with me and pull her back down on my next thrust. She falls forward, her nipples brushing against my chest and tries to stifle a moan against my neck.

“I really wish I could.” Garrick. *Un-fucking-believable.*

“Someone better be dead if I get out of this bed, Garrick.” I shout back at the closed door, convinced if I pull away from her, it will all prove to be a dream somehow.

“I think there’re *a lot* of people dead, which is why they’re calling the full quadrant to formation, jackass!” Garrick retorts.

The words make us freeze, my eyes finding Violet’s and see all the shock I feel mirrored back on her face. She lifts off of me, and I cover her with a blanket, before shoving on some pants and striding for the door.

I pull it open a crack, squinting at the light of the hall spilling through. Garrick’s face is unreadable. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Grab your flight leathers, and you’d better bring Sorrengail with you, too,” he says. “We’re under attack.”

Orders

I can hardly breathe past the lump in my throat. I thought we'd have more time. But the world has stolen the next ten days from us too.

If the wards have been breached, countless people are about to die. The Poromish couldn't do this, they don't have the means or the numbers. Which means there's magic involved. I can't sort through my thoughts fast enough, pulling on my boots and stride to the weapons rack in the corner.

"What time is it?" Violet asks breathlessly, as she pulls back on her dress uniform. Fuck, she's not even in her flight leathers. That dress is going to do nothing against the cold.

"Four fifteen," I say, bending down to lace up my boots. "You're going to freeze out there."

"I'll be fine." She dismisses me, shaking her hand and dropping to the ground to search under the bed. She grabs one of her daggers by the strap on its sheath.

"Here." I throw one of my flight jackets over her shoulders, her unbound hair disappearing under the collar. Seeing her hair loose and down her back feels so intimate to me now, I can't imagine anyone else seeing it. "If Garrick's right and we're under attack then my guess is they'll order the older years to staff the mid-guard posts, so you shouldn't be out in formation too long. I can't stand the thought of you being cold."

She shoves her arms through the jacket sleeves, starting to stuff her daggers and sheaths into the deep pockets. I can't help the tiny smile that curves my lips. She looks like she's mine.

Her eyes are filled with worry, and my chest aches at how quickly the glowing happiness from the past few hours has slipped from her. I swallow past the fear that's bubbling up in me too, trying to be strong for both of us.

I stride over to her and fasten the buttons. "We have to get to formation." I say it firmly, like an order, but cradle her face in my hands, tilting her gaze up to mine. "And if I have to go, then don't worry, I'm sure Sgaeyl will drag me back in a few days." I lean in and kiss her, so she can't see the panic flaring in my eyes. "Wanting you will be the death of me. Let's go."

I pull on her hand, leading her out into the hallway and then gesture her to walk just ahead of me. The corridor leading to the stairs is chaos, riders in various states of undress pulling on weapons, shoes and jackets, doors slamming left and right. The stairs from the dorm rooms are packed with people and I stride forward to her side, my fingers reaching out to brush with hers as we reach the courtyard.

Command stands on the dais, a row of solemn faces. Fuck, even Colonel Aetos is here. This is bad, really bad.

I take my position at the front of the leadership formation, meeting Garrick's worried gaze for a second, before standing in front of him next to Lamani. My eyes flick between the faces of Command, trying to read the expression on their faces as they wait for the final few section leaders to join us.

Gods, how many innocent people are dead already? If the venin have found a way to breach the wards, every lie Command has told to keep their secret is about to come crumbling down around them.

As the last remaining section leader reaches the dais, I realise Command looks entirely too calm.

Commandant Panchek pulls out a stopwatch from his jacket pocket. “Twelve and a half minutes,” he says, shaking his head. “You can tell your successors that next year, I expect under ten.”

Next year? What the fuck. This is a fucking *exercise*. Fury radiates through me, and my gaze seeks out Violet in the crowd for a second. “*Fucking War Games*,” I tell her.

“*You’re kidding me.*”

“*Nope.*” I school my expression as Panchek’s gaze rakes over us, taking in the messy, incomplete uniforms of half the leadership. His silence is as damning as a reprimand.

He walks to the podium with Colonel Aetos, and the rest of us adjust our position, pivoting to face them from the far side of the dais.

“Riders Quadrant!” Panchek shouts, addressing the formation of riders who straighten to attention. “Welcome to the last event of this year’s War Games.”

The murmurs that break out through the crowd are not nearly furious enough to match my mood. I got hauled out of bed and pulled away from Violet, for *this*?

“The alert that was sounded is similar to what it would have been if this were a real-life attack – to see how fast you would muster – and we will continue this exercise as if it is. Were the borders to be simultaneously attacked, and the wards faltering, you would all be called into service to reinforce the wings. Colonel Aetos, would you do us the honour of reading the scenario?”

Colonel Aetos steps forward and starts to read from the scroll in his hand. The idea that I ever thought Command would expose their lies strikes me as extremely naïve right now. Was I really expecting them to reveal they’ve been involved in a cover-up for generations? That they executed entire bloodlines of their own people to keep that secret safe?

“As we would if you were a battle-ready force, we are sending your wings in every direction,” Colonel Aetos continues, giving directions to each wing. “Fourth Wing to the southeast. Each squad will pick which outpost they will reinforce within that region. Choices are first come, first served. Wingleaders, however, will be assigned to theirs for the purposes of determining a headquarters for this exercise.”

He turns to us, instructing each of the wingleaders before coming to stand in front of me. There’s an undercurrent of something in his eyes that makes my stomach twist. I can’t read it, but he glances for a second towards Violet.

“Riorson, you’ll establish your headquarters for Fourth Wing at Athebyne.” A venomous little smile twists his lips.

Every last bit of air squeezes out my chest at his words. Athebyne is beyond the wards, at least half a day’s flight from any of the other south-eastern outposts. They’re trying to separate us and make us easier targets.

Colonel Aetos steps back a little to address the four of us, projecting his voice so it carries across the formation. “Wingleaders, assemble your headquarters squads at your own discretion, pulling from any and all riders within your wings. Consider this a test of leadership, as there are no limitations in a real-world scenario. You will receive the updated orders once you reach your selected outposts for this five-day exercise.”

I stare at the Colonel like I can read his thoughts. He's giving us permission to take any rider we want with us. My mind whirs, trying to figure out what they expect me to do. Are they trying to separate us? Or push us together so we can be taken out in one direct hit?

Or does this have nothing to do with Violet and me at all? Am I just being fucking paranoid? He looked at her though, just for a second, but I saw it. And I'm certain he doesn't intend for her to make it out of this alive. That they think she is the easiest way to get rid of *me* before I can make it onto their front lines.

Formation breaks and I grab Garrick's arm, steering him out of the path of hundreds of riders all headed towards the dorm rooms, pulling him towards the courtyard walls until we're hidden by the shadows.

His eyes search mine. "Do you think they know about the weapons?"

I shake my head. "We'd already be dead." It's a coincidence, unlikely but not impossible. Our guilt primes us to suspect Command's motivations, but Athebyne is still one of the most strategic garrisons in the south-east.

His jaw clenches, considering, before he nods once.

"They clearly have a game plan," I say, my hand gripping tighter around his arm. "But I don't know what they're expecting me to do. It feels like a trap, but I can't work out which bait they want me to pick."

"You're not going to Athebyne alone, Xaden. Whatever they have planned for you there, you need back up."

"I should leave Violet—" but my voice trails off. Something deep in my chest tells me that *she* is their target. Her mother doesn't care if she lives or dies. And Command was expecting me to die in this place too. They only have ten days left to finish the job and they will use every weapon in their arsenal to make that happen.

It doesn't matter what I do, they'll be gunning for her. And she'll be a fuck of a lot safer with me.

"Wear every single dagger you own," I demand through the bond.

"I'm already wearing twelve." Even her thoughts seem breathless, a frantic energy pulsing through them.

"Good."

"I'll see you on the flight field, right?"

"Yes."

"Violet comes with us too," I say. Garrick nods at the order, not questioning the sudden change of heart. The faces of everyone else I care about swim through my head. "Every one of us in your Section. Bodhi, Ciaran and Soleil too."

Garrick blanches. "But the Codex—"

"—has been superseded by Colonel Aetos's own orders. My squad is at my discretion. And there's safety in numbers, brother."

He nods and glances towards the door to the dorm rooms. It's only then that I realise he's not wearing a shirt under his flight jacket. "Go," I say.

He gives me an apologetic grin and rushes towards his room. I head to the tunnel to grab the stash of weapons we've collected over the past few weeks, my heart pounding against my chest.

Every decision I make feels like the wrong one.

I don't dare exit through the tunnel to the flight field with so many riders and dragons already assembled, so it takes me far too long to loop back out and round. My eyes scan the field, searching for Tairn's hulking shape but it's Andarna's golden feathers that catch my eye first.

As I draw closer to them, I can hear Aetos calling out instructions to his squad, drunk on the authority and power. His eyes meet mine over Violet's shoulder. "Wingleader?"

She pivots to face me too, her eyes shining as Aetos straightens to attention. "How can I help you?" he bites out.

"I need you," I say to Violet. My tone is professional, but the three little words make my heart beat faster.

"I'm sorry?" Aetos's brows shoot skywards.

"Relax, he just wants to say goodbye," she says, resting a hand on his arm.

"If you're saying goodbye, it's to him." Jealousy makes my words come out harsh and unyielding. "I'm constructing my headquarters squad and you're coming with me. So are Liam and Imogen." The two of them, who had already been watching the interaction between us carefully, straighten up and nod. Imogen's gaze sweeps out into the crowd to find Garrick.

"The fuck you are," Aetos says, stepping forward like he's prepared to physically stop me from reaching for Violet. "She's a first-year, and Athebyne is beyond the wards."

I blink at his words, wondering for the first time if he knows more about the dangers beyond the wards than he's let on. He's Colonel Aetos's son. Maybe he knows and is happy to turn a blind eye just like his father.

"I don't hear you giving me the same argument about Mairi."

Violet's gaze swivels behind her to look at Liam, then turns back to look between Aetos and me. "*What is going on?*" she asks me through the bond.

"Liam is the best cadet among the first-years, even with you assigning him guard duty over Violet." Aetos folds his arms across his chest, like that's the end of the conversation.

"And Sorrengail wields lightning." I take a step closer to Violet, my arm brushing against her shoulder. "And not that I owe you an explanation, *second-year*, because I don't, but Sgaeyl and Tairn can't be separated for longer than a few days –"

He must know it's bullshit or is just done caring. "That you know of!" he shouts, completely losing any pretence at professionalism. "Or can you honestly tell me Sgaeyl was at her wit's end when you showed up at Montserrat? You've never fully tested how long they can be apart."

"*My previous offer still stands, Wingleader,*" Sgaeyl says, already pacing forwards to stand at my back.

I arch a brow at Aetos. "Feel like asking her yourself?"

She growls menacingly low, staring at Aetos like he's dinner.

Aetos warily drags his gaze from her back to me. "Don't do this. Riders are known to die during War Games, and she's safer with me," he argues. The idea that he thinks he could protect her better than I can makes my jaw clench, as I struggle to keep the hot flare of anger from spilling out of me. "Anything could happen once we're away from Basgiath, let alone taking her beyond the wards."

That's exactly what scares me.

"I'm not dignifying that with a response. This is an order." I bite out through gritted teeth.

His gaze narrows, like he's finally seen through me. "Or has this been your plan all along? To separate her from her squad so you can use her to get your need for revenge on her mother?"

I stare back at him, unmoving, as the words land in the crowd of riders watching us out of the corners of their eyes.

"Dain!" Violet emphatically shakes her head. "You know that's not going to happen."

"Do I?" He says it with such loathing that she shrinks back like he's hit her. "He's made a big deal out of the whole if-she-dies-I-die thing, but do you know it for a fact? Do you know Tairn won't survive your death? Or has it all been a ploy to earn your trust, Violet?"

Says the man who took her trust and used it to gain access to her memories without her knowledge.

Violet sucks in a breath. "You need to stop right now."

"Please, do quit while you're behind, Aetos," I say. I am done playing by the rules. "You want the truth? She's a fuck of a lot safer with me beyond the wards than she is with you within them. We both know it." He's so het up on his own righteousness, I want to reach out with my shadows and strangle it out of him.

"Stop." Violet puts a steadying hand on my arm. "Xaden, stop. If you want me to go with you. I'll go. It's that simple."

I look at her, all the fear that she would somehow be taken from me draining away. She's coming with me. I can keep her safe.

"No fucking way," Aetos whispers, and Violet's hand falls. His eyes flick between the two of us.

"Dain..." Violet says.

"Him?" He goes bright red. "You and... him? People talk, and I thought that's all it was, but you..." He's shaking his head vehemently like he's trying to stop picturing it. "Don't go, Violet. Please. He's going to get you killed."

Sgaeyl growls again at the insult.

"Easy," I say. *"I'd rather not explain why you incinerated the Colonel's son before War Games even began."*

She exhales a long stream of hot air.

"I know you think Xaden has ulterior motives, but I trust him," Violet says, moving towards Aetos.

“He’s had every opportunity and has *never* hurt me. At some point, you have to let this go.”

Something passes over his face, but he masks it. “If he’s what you choose...” he sighs, but there’s the same undercurrent of hatred that I saw in his father’s eyes earlier today. “Then I guess that has to be enough for me, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” says Violet, nodding as she reaches out to touch his arm.

He leans in and says something to her I can’t hear. I’m desperate to know what it was, but the edge of sadness in Violet’s eyes as she reaches me stops me from asking.

“Thank you for trusting me,” I say.

“Always.”

Gods, I don’t deserve her.

“We have to ride,” I say. I want to ask her if she’s ok. I want to tell her the truth of what lies beyond the wards. I want to tell her that I trust her too.

But I don’t have the words for any of it. I turn away, heading back to Sgaeyl.

“It has to be soon, Xaden,” she says.

“Soon,” I agree.

And for the very first time, I mean it.

Early

I spend every minute of the eleven-hour flight wondering how it's even possible to start the conversation. I run lines over and over in my head, each one sounding more ridiculous than the last and a growing ball of anxiety in my stomach makes me feel increasingly nauseous. As the riot passes through the pinching pull-and-snap of the wards, Sgaeyl lets out a long, exasperated exhale. I must be driving her fucking crazy.

"That would be an understatement, Wingleader," she seethes.

We start to descend into our usual meeting spot just outside of Athebyne for the dragons to drink deeply from the freshwater lake. It's strange to look over and see Violet on Tairn's back in a place I have done everything to keep secret from her. It feels like two parts of myself melding into one.

Once every dragon has landed and their riders are on the ground, I call out, "We're twenty minutes out from Athebyne, so hydrate! We have no idea what kind of scenario is waiting for us."

Garrick strolls over, squatting on the ground to open his pack. He wordlessly passes me a canteen of water, before drinking deeply from his own.

I unscrew the lid and arch a brow at him. He wipes the water from his lips with his forearm and grins at me. "I figured you had more important things on your mind than packing food and water."

I scoff. "Thank you, brother." I tip my head back to drink, then pass the canteen back to him.

Garrick puts his arm on my shoulder, guiding me so that our backs are turned away from the rest of the group. "Did you tell her?" he asks, his voice low.

My stomach twists. I shake my head.

"Xaden—" he starts.

"I'm going to," I interrupt, before he can tell me what a huge fucking mistake I've made. I am well aware that I have already missed my moment. "I just... I'm struggling to find the words."

He nods. "I get it. And I know this must be a million times harder for you after everything that happened with you dad but —"

I tense. "What?"

His brows furrow. "Your dad," he repeats. "You saw what happened when he tried to tell the others, the lengths they would go to avoid the truth." He shakes his head, like he's trying to clear the memory. "But that's not what this is."

I frown at him. "I just don't want her caught up in this, Garrick."

"She's already here." He shrugs. "We'll keep her safe for you."

I glance over at Violet, but she's already staring right at us. Our eyes lock, and the heat in her gaze is nothing compared to the crackling fire that catches and sparks through our bond.

After nearly a full day of flying and ahead of five days of what will surely be some of the most brutal aerial fighting, this woman still finds the energy to stare at me like that. Gods, I don't deserve her.

I turn back to Garrick, but say to Violet through the bond, *“Keep looking at me like that and we’ll be stopped for longer than half an hour.”*

“Promise?”

Her tone makes my head whip towards her again, and I can’t help the smile that curves my lips. She makes me feel lighter, like she’s chased all the shadows away.

Garrick’s eyes flick between us, but his face is all worry and concern. I reach out and squeeze his shoulder. *“I will tell her,”* I say.

He gives me a tight smile, but the worry doesn’t fade from his eyes as he bends down to shift over the extra dried food sachets into my near-empty pack. He rolls it shut and rises, shoving it into my chest.

“I’ll tell her.” I repeat, a little more firmly.

“Yeah.” His gaze catches on Imogen over at the lake, and he sighs.

I roll my eyes. *“We’re as bad as each other.”*

I glance over at Violet, where she’s talking to Liam near the edge of the forest. She drops her pack on the ground and raises her hand to the shoulder Imogen broke all those months ago, rolling it out.

“You feeling all right?”

“Fine. Just a little sore.”

“Any idea what’s going to be waiting for us at Athebyne?” Garrick brings my attention back to him, firmly changing the topic now that it’s his decisions – or lack thereof – that are under interrogation.

A frustrated exhale escapes me as I look up towards the sky. *“Same shit as last year? You know, there was a minute earlier where I thought this was it. The wards had fallen, and all their lies were just going to be right there for everyone to see.”*

Garrick stares back at me. *“I don’t think that’s how this ends, brother,”* he says, his voice low.

I swallow and give him a tight, sad smile. *“Me neither.”*

I look back at Violet but she’s disappeared into the forest; Liam stands with his arms crossed, back to the treeline.

“I don’t know what she’s going to do with the truth, Garrick.” I say, without turning back to look at him.

He comes to stand at my side, his arm brushing against mine. *“Yeah, you do. Or you wouldn’t be telling her.”*

“It puts everything at risk,” I say, as I see Violet emerging from the trees, snorting at Liam’s terrible bodyguard impression. But I’m already walking towards her.

She’s worth risking everything for.

I stretch out my hand towards her as I reach her, which earns me an incredulous look. For a second, I think she’s not going to take it, but she still laces her fingers through mine and I pull her a little

closer towards me. She glances pointedly towards the others, her hand tightening in mine like a warning.

“None of them is going to say a single word about you – or us,” I say. “I trust every single person here with my life.”

I tug her with me then, leading her past the boulders that line the lake to seek us out a tiny bit of privacy.

“People talk. Let them,” she says.

“You say that now.” I realise she’s left her pack with Liam. “Did you get enough to drink? Or eat?”

“I brought everything I needed in my pack,” she says, her tone light and teasing. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Worrying about you is ninety-nine percent of what I do.” My thumb strokes absent-mindedly over her hand, luxuriating in the easy intimacy of touching her. I still can’t quite get used to the idea.

“When we make it to the outpost, I want you to rest after we get our scenario objective. Liam will stay while I most likely take the third-years out to patrol.”

Her hand pulls against mine a little. “I want to help,” she says, a tiny flare of anger in her voice.

“You can, after you rest up.” I squeeze her hand. I’m not trying to stifle her; I need her *blazing*.

“You have to be at full strength to wield that signet of yours, or you’ll risk burning out. Tairn is too powerful.”

When I’m confident we’re far enough away from even Liam’s far-sight, I back her up against the smooth, contoured stone of the boulders and crouch down in front of her.

“What are you doing?” She asks with a smile that says she already has an idea, running her fingers through my hair.

I look up at her with wide, innocent eyes. “Your legs are stiff.”

I run my hands over her calves, kneading gently to work out the knots in the muscles. They’re stiff and tense, but I feel her lean into the boulder with the motion. The fact that I get to touch her like this still takes my breath away.

“I guess we can’t really leave until the dragons are ready anyway, right?” Her voice is languid.

“Right. We have another ten minutes or so.” I grin up at her, to find her watching me with eyes that match her voice, full of heat and promise. My mind whirs with all the things we could accomplish in that time. Ten minutes alone with her after spending the early hours of the morning thinking we would be separated for almost a week feels downright decadent.

She groans as my fingers find a particularly tense bit of muscle, sagging against the boulder at my touch. “That hurts so wonderfully. Thank you.”

I laugh, shifting my hands up to her thighs. “Trust me, my motives aren’t altruistic, Violence. I’ll take any excuse I can get to put my hands on you.”

Her hands slide over my cheeks, tilting my chin up to look at her for a second. “The feeling is more than mutual.” She gives me a small smile, before they slide back to the nape of my neck.

My kneading fingers reach the top of her thighs, but my mind has already closed the final few inches, remembering their grip this morning as I had her spread beneath me, her back arching and hips shifting as I explored every bit of her.

“I’m sorry about this morning,” I say.

“What?”

I look up at her with an arched brow. “We were in the middle of something, if you don’t remember.”

A slow smile spreads over her face as she realises where my mind has wandered. “Oh, I remember.” She grabs a hold of my flight jacket, pulling me up to stand. “Is it wrong to wish we’d had time to finish?” Her heated eyes bore into mine.

“Not sure I’ll ever be *finished*.” My hands wander up over her hips, curving around her waist and up her back. Fuck, I need her again. Right here. “I’m way too fucking greedy when it comes to you.”

She closes the few inches between us, kissing me slowly and deeply. I kiss her back like there’s all the time in the world, like this is the only moment that matters. There’s nowhere else to be. Just here. Together.

The kiss changes and becomes more urgent. My hands run all over her, stroking her back and pull her in closer to me. Her head leans back a little and I move down to her throat, kissing along her neck and breathing in the scent of her. She melts into me as I slide one hand down to her ass and pull her against me.

I groan at the feel of her. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Her arms wind around my neck as she says, “I was thinking you are exactly as I predicted the first time you took me in my room.”

“Oh yeah?” I draw back a little, desperate to see her face. “And what exactly was that?”

“A very dangerous addiction.” She gazes back at me like she’s memorising every part of my face. “Impossible to sate.”

Blood pounds through me at her words. I lift my hands to her face, tucking a strand of hair behind her hair and look into her eyes. “I’m going to keep you,” I repeat my words from earlier, only this time they mean so much more. She loves me. I can’t imagine my life without her in it. “You’re mine, Violet.”

She lifts her chin a little, so reminiscent of every time on the sparring mat. “Only if you’re mine.”

“I’ve been yours for longer than you could ever imagine.” I lean in and kiss her again, losing myself in the feel of her.

Shadows race from the treeline, slamming into me with such intensity that I break the kiss with a gasp. But the darkness is laced with such terror that I can’t make sense of it, the shadows seem to slip through me as I try to grab for each one. And then finally, I hear it.

The shadows track every step of the gryphons and their fliers as they make their way towards us. Fuck. My heart leaps into my throat.

“What’s wrong?” Violet’s eyes search mine, concern etching her face.

“Shit.” I stare back at her, out of time and out of words. “Violet, I’m so sorry –”

“Is this seriously how you dragon riders spend your time?” I hear Syrena say behind me.

Violet’s head shifts towards the voice. And I do the only thing I can think of, wrapping my shadows around her so she disappears into the darkness.

“Xaden!” Garrick clears the corner of the boulders and runs towards me, but he’s too late.

I turn to face Syrena, who’s with a man I don’t recognise. He looks much younger than Nyal, but just as battle-weary. Their gryphons loom large behind them. How the fuck did they know we were here?

“Silly to hide what’s already been seen.” Syrena tilts her head to one side, her gaze flicking to the shadows. “And if rumours are true, there’s only one silver-haired rider in your death factory of a college, which means that’s General Sorrengail’s youngest.” Her mouth lifts in a sneer.

I am out of options. “Fuck,” I say involuntarily.

Violet is a furious fire raging through the bond, sparks shooting out in all directions. “*I need you to stay calm, Violence.*” There’s a tiny pause as she hears me, the flames lessening in intensity. She trusts me.

I don’t deserve it.

I let the shadows fall away behind me. And can’t bring myself to look at Violet as she takes it all in.

“A fucking Sorrengail.” Syrena’s eyes rake over Violet with brutal disdain.

I still can’t look at Violet. I can barely breathe.

The air shifts as dragons land all around us, the sudden rush of air sending huge ripples over the lake and the pine trees that surround us bow backwards under the weight of it.

Imogen. Liam. Bodhi. They dismount before their dragons even reach the ground, hands on their weapons and scanning for the threat. Liam’s face falls as he takes in the scene, his eyes pained as he looks towards Violet.

I see the flare of panic in his face at the same time as lightning crackles through the sky above us. “No!” I shout and turn, hauling Violet against my chest to pin her arms to her sides.

“What are you doing?” She struggles against me, trying to find the leverage to wield.

Fuck, how did I let it come to this?

The sound of Tairn landing echoes like thunder through the clearing. He casts a huge shadow over the water, blocking out the moonlight glinting off its surface.

“Holy shit, that one is *huge*,” Syrena says, fear lacing her voice as she takes him in. They both back up a few steps, straining up to look at Tairn.

I turn my face back to Violet, looking at her from inches away. I keep one arm wrapped around her to keep her arms pinned, but lift my free hand to the nape of her neck, raising her head to look at

me.

“If you have ever trusted me, Violet, I need you to do it now.” All I can hope is that whatever she feels for me is strong enough to let her see past this. But even as I search her eyes, a deep, tearing pain in my chest makes me certain she will never forgive me.

Please trust me, I plead with my eyes. “Just stay here. Stay calm.” *Fuck, please forgive me.*

Liam reaches us and I pass her to him, making sure he has her arms pinned before I let go.

I can hear him apologising as she struggles against him, but I stride across the clearing to the fliers, fear pounding through me with every step. Garrick races to catch up with me.

Tairn’s ear-splitting roar shakes the branches of the trees closest to us. The fire that is Violet through the bond is *everywhere*, the heat of her emotions burning through us both.

I reach Syrena and the other flier, and it’s only Garrick’s arm that sweeps out to hold me back that does anything to contain my fury.

“You’re fucking *early*,” I say. “What happened to meeting tomorrow? We don’t have a full shipment.”

The raging fire in my mind flickers uncertainly, and then snuffs out, dissipating like it was never there. The absence of it shivers down my spine.

“The shipment isn’t the issue,” says Syrena, shaking her head.

“So you were waiting nearby on the off chance that we’d fly by a full day early?” I ask, my voice low. Rage is pulsing through me. What the fuck was important enough that it was worth risking *everything*?

“We were patrolling from Draithus yesterday – it’s about an hour southeast from here –”

“I know where Draithus is,” I snap.

“Never know, you Navarrians act like nothing exists beyond your borders,” says Syrena’s companion, crossing his arms at his chest. He turns to look at her, shaking his head, “I don’t know why we’re bothering to warn them.”

“Warn us?”

“We lost a village in the vicinity to a horde of venin two days ago,” Syrena explains. I tense at the word, knowing that’s all Violet will need to hear to learn the truth. My fists clench against the need to go back to her, to beg her to understand why I had to keep this from her.

Syrena’s voice is somewhere else as she says, “They decimated everything.”

“Venin never come this far west,” Imogen says from behind me.

“Until now,” Syrena says, turning back to look at me. “They were unmistakably venin and had one of their –”

“Don’t say anything else.” I hold up a hand. “You know that none of us can know the details or we put everything at risk. All it takes is *one* of us being interrogated.”

“Details or not, it looks like the horde is heading north,” the man says. “Straight towards our

trading post on the border across from your garrison at Athebyne. Are you armed?"

"We're armed." We all know too much to pass the wards without weapons capable of fighting venom.

"Then our job here is done. You've been warned," he says. "Now we have to go defend our people. As it is, this side trip only gives us about an hour to reach them in time."

I look back at Violet, bracing myself for whatever emotion I will find on her face. But her face is blank, her expression unreadable. The distance between us feels like miles.

I turn back to the fliers as the man says, "If you think you'll ever convince a Sorrengail to risk their neck for anyone outside their own borders, then you're a fool." He sneers and then leans over my shoulder to look her up and down. Every muscle tenses at the expression on his face. "I wonder what your king would be willing to pay in order to get back the daughter of his most illustrious general. I'm willing to bet your ransom would be worth enough weaponry to defend all of Draithus for a decade."

Lightning splits the sky, bright white light illuminating our surroundings. But I don't take my eyes off him. Shadows race from the treeline to encircle the fliers an inch from their feet.

"You take a step towards *that* Sorrengail and you'll be dead before you can even shift your weight." Allies or not, I would kill them without a thought. "She's not up for discussion."

Syrena glances at the shadows and sighs. "We'll be there with the rest of our drift. Just signal if you can get anyway from the disbelievers."

I give them the space to mount the gryphons but don't take my eyes from them until they launch for the skies and clear the treeline. My heart is pounding, fury and fear swirling in my bloodstream. I close my eyes and take a deep, steady breath.

I turn and look at Violet, still unable to read the expression on her face. All her walls are up. And where there should be crackling fire and energy through our bond, there's just black, scorched earth and silence.

"Good luck, Riorson," Imogen says, turning with the others to give us some space.

Somehow, I don't think luck is going to be enough.

The Truth

Violet looks anywhere but at me, her gaze flicking too fast between every rider with us. I stare at her, panic fluttering in my chest.

Liam hovers close to her, like he can't decide whether to go to her or stay exactly where he is. Bodhi and Garrick both watch her like she's about to implode. Everyone else has moved several paces away, the same somber, pitying expressions lining every face.

Silence drags around us. Violet finally turns her gaze to mine. I can't read her, can't even think about how I should react. How do you tell the woman you'd do *anything* for that you couldn't do the one thing they needed? Do I go to her? Do I give her space?

Will she ever forgive me?

But she doesn't say anything, doesn't move. It's only when Tairn shifts his focus towards me that I realise they must be talking. His lip snarls, a hint of teeth visible for a second as I catch his eye.

Violet takes a deep, shaky inhale. Her shoulders sag as the exhale catches in her throat and I know she's realised just how far this betrayal reaches. It's not only me that kept this from her, it's her dragons. I'm walking towards her before I can register my feet are moving.

Her eyes pivot in every direction, like she's looking for an escape route and her chest rises frantically as she takes in tiny sips of air. I'm desperate to comfort her, to pull her into my arms and tell her everything is going to be okay. But I'm the one that did this to her. And I don't know how to make it better.

Maybe if I could tell her the whole story... maybe she could find a way to forgive me. But then her gaze locks on me and narrows. Her eyes are cold, burning with a hatred more intense than the first time we met on the parapet all those months ago. The look eviscerates me. I stop moving. I don't know what to do. I don't know what she needs.

"Were we ever really friends?" She whispers it, still looking at me for a moment but then turns to Liam at her side.

"We are friends, Violet, but I owe him everything," Liam says, his voice laced with the same panic I can feel coursing through me. "We all do. And once you give him a chance to explain –"

A blast of crackling heat blazes through my mind as she finds her anger, and I pour shadows into the bond, trying to rebuild the mental walls between us.

"You watched me train with him!" She shoves at Liam so hard he stumbles backwards. "You stood by and watched me fall for him!"

"Oh shit." Bodhi laces his hands behind his neck, glancing warily up at the sky.

Even behind my shadows I can feel the intensity of her, unsure if it's fuelled by rage or by pain. Either way, I deserve to bear the brunt of this, not Liam. Fuck, he begged me to tell her weeks ago.

If she's going to lose it, I need her focus trained on me.

"Violence, let me explain," I say, earning the full force of her gaze. I'm five paces from her, can make out every tight line of her face, see her muscles tense with the power she's holding.

"If you even think about touching me, I swear I'll fucking kill you." The sky responds to her words, lightning cracking across the sky, jumping from cloud to cloud.

"I think she means it," Liam warns.

"I know she does." My own power flares in response to hers, desperate to shield against the threat. I hold her gaze. "Everybody, go back to the shore. Now."

I edge closer to her, shortening my steps. Her eyes follow my every move.

"I know what you're thinking," I say.

"You have no idea what I'm thinking." But I do. She's so angry, it blares through the bond between us as clearly as if she'd yelled it in my face. *Fucking. Traitor.*

"You're thinking I've betrayed our kingdom."

"Logical guess. Good for you." The hatred in her eyes spreads across her face. Lightning breaks high up in the clouds above her. "You're working with gryphon riders? Gods, you are such a cliché, Xaden. You're a villain hiding in plain fucking sight."

I wince at the hatred on her face, the venom in her words. And decide the only way she will ever be able to understand is if I give her the truth. Her words from last night come back to me with utter clarity: if we're doing this, we're starting from a place of complete honesty.

I'm done waiting for the right moment, realising far too late that there was never going to be one. There's only now.

"Actually, they're called fliers," I say softly. "And I might be the villain to some, but not you."

The look she gives me makes me wither. "I'm sorry? Are we seriously arguing the semantics of your treason?"

"Dragons have riders, and gryphons have *fliers*." It's suddenly so important to me that she accepts this. If she accepts this, then maybe she'll accept the rest of the truth too.

"Which you know because you're in league with them." She backs up a few steps as I draw closer to her, keeping the distance between us. I stop moving. "You're working with our enemy."

"Did you ever once stop to think that sometimes you can start out on the right side of a war and end up on the wrong one?"

"In this particular case? No." She points to the place where the fliers stood. "I was trained as a scribe, remember? All we've done is defend our borders for six hundred years. They're the ones who won't accept peace as a solution. What shipments have you been giving them?"

I want to explain how everything she believes is a lie. But I've kept this from her for so long, I no longer have the right to choose how to tell this story. She gets to ask the questions. And I will tell her whatever she wants to know.

"Weapons."

She braces, pain racing over her features. "That they use to kill dragon riders?" Her voice is heartbreakingly quiet.

"No." I shake my head. *Never.* "These weapons are only to fight venom."

Her jaw drops. “Venin are the stuff of fables. Like the book my father –”

She trails off and I see her make the connection, her eyes flickering as she puts together the pieces.

“They’re real,” I say softly, edging a tiny bit closer to her. Please, Violet. *Please*.

“You’re saying people who can somehow tap into the source of magic without a dragon or gryphon to channel, corrupting their power beyond all salvation, actually exist.” The words sound wrong on her lips. I never wanted her to have to know any of this. “They’re not just part of the creation fable.”

“Yes. They drained all the magic out of the Barrens and then spread like an infestation.”

“Well, at least that’s in keeping with folklore.” She folds her arms across her chest. “What was the fable again? One brother bonded to gryphon, one to dragon, and when the third grew jealous, he drew directly from the source, losing his soul and waging war on the other two.”

“Yes.” I sigh. Gods, I can’t believe how badly I have fucked this up. Her world isn’t shaken. She didn’t know one minute, and then accepted it the next. She showed me over and over that she could be trusted with this, but I never found the moment to let her in.

“This was not how I wanted to tell you,” I say.

“Assuming you were *ever* going to tell me!” She turns to Tairn. “Care to add to the discussion?”

Whatever he says to her only seems to make her more furious. She turns back to me. “Fine. Were I to believe venin exist and roam the Continent wielding dark magic, then I’d also have to believe they never attack Navarre because...” Her eyes widen. “Because our wards make all non-dragon magic impossible.”

She works it out so quickly that I wonder how I ever thought I could keep this secret hidden from her.

“Yes. They’d be powerless the second they cross into Navarre.”

Her jaw clenches. “Which means I would have to believe that we have no clue that Poromiel is being relentlessly, viciously attacked by dark wielders just beyond our borders.” Her brow furrows.

I look away for a second, steeling myself with a deep breath. I turn back to her and say, “Or you have to believe that we know and choose to do nothing about it.”

She doesn’t believe me. “Why the hell would we choose to do *nothing* about people being slaughtered? It goes against everything we stand for.”

I don’t want to be the one that rips what she believes about the world away. My voice is small and quiet as I say, “Because the only thing that kills venin is the very thing powering our wards.”

She doesn’t answer. The truth hangs in the air between us, the only sound the water lapping against the shore.

“Is this why there have been raids along our borders?” she asks. “They’re looking for the material we use to power our wards?”

I nod. “The material is forged into weapons to fight the venin. Here, take this.” I take the dagger from the sheath at my side and hold it out to her, slowly taking the final few steps that separate us.

I try to ignore the feeling of her fingers brushing my palm as she lifts the blade from my hand. She turns it over and gasps, her gaze jumping to mine. “You took this from my mother’s desk?”

“No. Your mother probably has one for the same reason you should.” The look in her eyes breaks my heart. “To defend against venom.”

“But you told me there was no chance we could be fighting something like this,” she whispers.

“No.” I move closer to her, my hand reaching out to wrap around her shoulders and comfort her. Fuck. No. She asked me not to touch her. My hand drops back to my side. “I told you I would hope that if this threat was out there, our leadership would tell us.”

Her hand tightens around the blade. “You twisted the truth to suit your needs.”

I hear her again through the bond, her emotions so raw they break through every shield I’ve thrown up between us to give her space. *Venim. Are. Real.*

“Yes. And I could lie to you, Violence, but I’m not. No matter what you think right now, I have *never* lied to you.”

“And how do I know this is the truth?”

“Because it hurts to think we’re the kind of kingdom that would do this. It hurts to rearrange everything you think you know. Lies are comforting. Truth is painful.” The sheer agony of sharing this truth with her is proof of that.

She glares at me. “You could have told me at any time, but instead you hid *everything* from me.”

The anger in her tone lances my gut, but I desperately need her to understand why I had to keep this from her. “Yes. I should have told you months ago, but I couldn’t. I’m risking *everything* by telling you now –”

“Because you have to, not because you want –”

“Because if your *best friend* sees this memory, everything is lost.” The words come out so much more viciously than I intend.

She gasps. “You don’t know that –”

“Dain wouldn’t break a rule to *save your life*, Violet. What do you think he’d do if he had this knowledge?”

“I have to believe he would not put the Codex above people suffering beyond our borders.” I open my mouth to argue, but she pins me with a glare, her voice rising. “Or maybe I could have built shields that would have kept Dain from prying. Or maybe he would continue to respect my boundaries and never look in the first place.” He already *fucking* did. I want to scream it at her. How does she still have so much faith in him, but so little in me?

“But we’ll never know, will we? Because you didn’t trust me to know the right thing to do, Xaden, did you?”

My jaw clenches with all the words I wish I could say. But under all my anger at Aetos, I know she’s right. She has always been able to see straight through me. This was never really about him. She learned to shield against Tairn in minutes. She could have learned to shield against Aetos in seconds. I didn’t tell her because... I was trying to keep her safe.

I throw my hands out wide in frustration, so much angrier with myself than anyone else. “This is bigger than you and me, Violence. And leadership will stop at nothing to sit behind their wards and keep the venom secret.” The furious fire raging through our bond wavers, lessening in intensity. I lean towards her, desperate for her to tell me it’s okay, that she understands why I couldn’t tell her this. “I watched my own father executed trying to help these people. I couldn’t risk you too.” My voice breaks on the words, and her eyes soften just inches from mine.

I stare back at her, willing her to hear me. That tiny flicker of hope in my chest tells me she’s going to forgive me for this. It reminds me that she’s kind and generous and good. And so much more than I deserve. She will understand that I kept this from her only because I couldn’t bear to be the one that dragged her into a war none of us should have to fight.

I cling on to the unspoken truth between us. “You love me, and –”

“Loved.” The word strikes me in the chest as she sidesteps past me.

“Love!” I shout after her, and the word echoes all around us, shocking me with its intensity. She pauses with her back to me. “You *love* me.”

Somehow, I’ve never been more certain. I’m still the same person I was this morning. So is she. I know deep in my soul, that I love her more than I ever imagined I could love a person. And she loves me. No matter what she says.

She turns back to face me, her eyes bright and shining. “Everything I feel –” she swallows. “*Felt* for you was based on secrets and deception.”

The hurt flickers in her eyes, but she’s still Violet. She still loves me. I’m sure of it. I shake my head refusing to accept that we don’t belong to each other.

“Everything between us is real, Violence.” I spent months wondering how she felt about me, months trying to stay away from her, months deciphering her every look, every kiss, every moment. But at some point, she reached me through all my walls and made me see: this is *real*, this *matters*. “The rest I can explain with enough time. But before we get to our assigned outpost, I need to know if you believe me.”

“Yes,” she says, handing the dagger back to me. “I believe you. That doesn’t mean I trust you anymore.”

Relief floods through me. She believes us. And trust can be rebuilt with time. I can earn her trust every fucking day if that’s what she needs from me.

“Keep it,” I say, my eyes locked on hers, ignoring the blade between us.

She sheathes it at her thigh. “You’re giving me a weapon after just telling me that you’ve been deceiving me for months, Riorson?”

I try to hide the wince as she uses my last name. “Absolutely. I have another, and if what the fliers say is true, and venom are headed north, then you might need it. I never lied when I said I can’t live without you, Violence.” I back away slowly and try to regain some of the lightness between us. “And defenseless women have never been my type, remember?”

But she doesn’t smile. “Let’s just get to Athebyne.”

I nod, turning away from the pain that’s still swirling in her eyes. Liam offers me a small, supportive smile as I head towards Sgaeyl and within minutes, the entire riot takes to the sky.

We fly in silence, Sgaeyl leading the way along the border, following the mountain range that leads to the outpost. I face forwards the entire time, unable to look back but knowing Violet's there. She *knows* and she believes us. And even with all the hurt and pain between us right now, I find myself feeling strangely at peace.

It feels... right for her to know. Like there was never any other possibility.

Sgaeyl snorts softly. *"Hindsight is a wonderful thing, Wingleader."*

We bank around the last peak, the beat of Sgaeyl's wings turning us into a smooth downward curve towards the outpost.

"There was a moment back there when I thought Tairn was actually going to roast you," she says. *"So it could have been worse."*

"When should I have told her, Sgaeyl?"

"I don't think turning to your dragon for relationship advice is a good sign, Wingleader."

As we descend towards the flight field, a long strip of battered land that runs along the cliff edge, I sort through every memory I have with her, searching for the moment. When she killed Barlowe? After that first night together? When she found the letter from her father? On the parapet? When she told me she loved me? Nothing feels right. There was always too much at stake.

But I should have taught her to shield.

The truth of that thought settles along my skin, the weight of it bearing down on me. I kept her defenseless so I could keep the truth from her. No, worse than that. I kept her defenseless so I could keep her out of this war and keep her safe.

And that makes me just as bad as the rest of them. All the people that think she's weak, that she can't do this, that she isn't strong enough. As Sgaeyl rears back a little, her wings flapping to bring us down onto the ground, I make a promise to myself to never repeat that same mistake again.

I dismount smoothly, heading towards the outpost before the others have even landed, unable to look any of them in the eye. Garrick races after me, matching his strides with mine, the others following a few paces behind.

"We need to think about how to play this," he says, glancing at me nervously.

I glare back at him. "Do you seriously think I give a fuck about winning War Games right now?"

"Of course not. But if Syrena's right and the venin are headed to their garrison –"

Shit. How did that detail slip past me earlier? My gaze lands on Violet in answer.

"If there's a real attack nearby, they won't want us anywhere near it, Garrick," I say dismissively, walking beneath the open portcullis and into the outpost.

"What the hell?" Garrick strides into the courtyard, looking all around him.

It's empty.

"Stop," I order, sending my shadows scattering and scanning the walls that rise around us. But there's nothing. It's eerie in its emptiness; all the sounds that usually fade into background noise starkly lacking. The shadows find nothing either. "There's no one here. Divide and search." I

glance at Violet, as fear begins to creep through my veins. “You don’t leave my side. I don’t think this is a War Game.”

“Awesome,” she says, and I choose to ignore the blatant sarcasm in her tone.

“This way,” I say, heading for the southwest tower. Liam comes with us too, climbing four flights of stairs until we reach the open-air observation point that overlooks the valley.

Violet walks to the edge, looking out at the valley and then back along the rampart walls, her eyes tracing the empty castellations where riders should be standing. “This is one of the most strategic garrisons we man. There’s no way they’d abandon it for War Games.”

But there’s a sense of stillness here, a desolate heaviness in the air that tells me it’s been empty for a while. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

Even in the open air, I feel like the walls are closing in all around us. We need more information. “Liam.” Before I can even gesture in the direction of the garrison, he’s heading to the walls. “On it.”

Fear twists tighter as I sort through the memories of what led us here. Colonel Aetos giving me the order, the look in his eyes that didn’t sit quite right. And then his son in the flight field, desperate for Violet to not go with me...

“What did Dain say to you before we left?” I ask. “He leaned in and whispered something.”

She blinks. “He said something like...” Violet’s eyes flicker as she tries to remember the words. “I’ll miss you, Violet.”

I tense, the interaction between them taking on a whole new meaning in this context. “And he said I was going to get you killed.”

“Yes, but he always says that,” she says with a shrug. “What would Dain have to do with emptying an entire outpost?”

“I have something!” Garrick calls from the southeast tower. He holds an envelope gripped tight in his hand, and him and Imogen cross the rampart towards us.

A sickening sense of dread threatens to overwhelm me. I know Violet would never betray me, but maybe she didn’t realise the significance of us coming here. Maybe she let it slip.

“Did you tell him about my trips here?” I demand, hating how it sounds.

“No!” She shakes her head emphatically. “Unlike some people, I never hid *anything* from you.”

Then what? How could they possibly have known? Unless...

“Violence,” I say softly, already feeling the truth of my realisation settle over me. “Did Aetos touch you after I told you about Athebyne?” The idea of him violating her mind and sifting through the memories of us together makes my stomach twist.

“What?” Her brow furrows, and she shoves an errant strand of hair out of her face as the wind whips all around us.

“Like this.” I raise my hand to her cheek. “His power requires touching someone’s face. Did he touch you like this?”

“Yes, but that’s how he always touches me. He would n-never...” Her voice breaks, her eyes searching for any piece of the friend she once knew. “I would know if he read my memories.”

I move my hand from her cheek, letting it slip down to cradle the back of her neck. She doesn’t know he’s done it before, but I can’t bring myself to tell her like this. “No, Violence. Trust me, you wouldn’t.”

“He wouldn’t.” She shakes her head, but I can see in her eyes that she doesn’t believe it, that she can feel the pain of this truth like all the others. This is my fault too. I should never have told her without giving her the ability to defend herself.

“It’s addressed to you,” Garrick says, handing me the envelope.

Violet peers at it. “That’s from Colonel Aetos,” she says.

“What does it say?” Garrick asks, folding his arms across his chest. “What’s out assignment?”

My fingers tremble as I tear it open. The scrap of paper feels like lead in my hands. I so badly want this not to be true, so badly want to be told that I’ve misjudged this situation, that I can hardly see the words on the page.

And then they settle, each letter in stark black ink.

“Guys, I see something just past the trading post.” Liam’s voice sounds like it’s miles away; I can barely hear it through the pounding of my pulse in my ears. “Oh shit.”

I read the missive and feel the world fall out from under me. My fist clenches, crumpling the paper with the motion. I did this. I brought them here. And none of us are going to make it home.

I look at Violet, a wave of guilt washing over me as I say, “It says our mission is to survive if we can.”

“That’s not...” Garrick trails off, shaking his head.

“Guys, this is bad.” Fear lances through Liam’s voice so hard that Imogen races to his side.

I can’t take my eyes off Violet, feeling the realisation and guilt swim up in her vision to meet mine. “This isn’t your fault,” I say. I did this. I brought her here.

I turn to the others who are running down the ramparts to join us. “We’ve been sent here to die.”

Choices

I hand Garrick the missive, as the others rush for the battlements to join Imogen and Liam. I watch his face as he reads it, see it drain of all colour. This isn't just about survival; it's a test.

Command *knows*.

"I can't see shit down there," I hear Bodhi say.

"Well, I can," Liam replies, "and if those are what I think they are, we're fucked."

"Don't tell me what you think they are – tell me what you're sure of," I order, shedding the guilt and panic for leadership and control in an instant. I can still feel fear pulsing under my skin, but I yank up my walls against it, drawing on years of training and compartmentalisation.

I don't get to be scared. I did this. It's my job to get us out of this alive.

"The letter says this is a test of your command," Garrick says, scanning the letter again like it will have somehow changed its meaning. "You have the choice of abandoning the village of our enemy or abandoning command of your wing."

"What the hell does that mean?" Bodhi reaches back and takes the letter, one hand still clinging to the battlement.

"They're testing our loyalty without actually saying it." I cross my arms, trying to find some strength. "According to the missive, if we leave now, we'll make it to the new location of headquarters for Fourth Wing at Eltuval in time to carry out our orders for War Games, but if we leave, the trading post of Resson and its occupants will be destroyed."

"By what?" Imogen asks.

"Venin," says Liam.

"You're positive?" I ask, clinging onto the tiny chance that I have monumentally misjudged this.

But he nods. "As sure as I can be without having actually seen them before. Four of them. Purple robes. Distended red veins spidering all around bright red eyes. Creepy as shit."

"Sounds about right," I say.

"I liked it better when we just delivered the weapons," Bodhi mutters.

"Oh, and one guy with a giant-ass staff," Liam says. "And I swear to Dunne, one second the plain was clear and the next they were just... there, walking towards the gates."

"Red veins?" Imogen asks.

Somehow it's Violet that answers. Violet who didn't even know that venin were real an hour ago. "Because magic corrupts their blood as they lose their souls," she murmurs, looking at me. "Nature likes everything in balance." Andarna's words come back to me with haunting clarity.

"If the fables are true, at least," she says, and her eyes dart about like she's lost in a memory.

"*Seven gryphons have arrived, Wingleader,*" Sgaeyl tells me. Everyone else stiffens as they

receive the same message from their dragon.

“The guy with the staff just –” Liam starts.

A huge explosion rocks the air and a plume of blue smoke floats upwards from the valley.

“Those were the gates,” he finishes.

“How many people live in Resson?” Bodhi asks, and I know he’s already made up his mind. He has been desperate to help these people for months, to do something that wasn’t standing idly by while innocent people die.

“More than three hundred,” Imogen says, as another explosion ripples through the valley below us. “That’s the post they do the yearly trades at.”

“Then let’s get down there,” Bodhi says, turning and I step into his path, holding out a hand to stop him. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“We have no idea what we’re walking into.” I’m not prepared to barrel into this without any thought for the consequences. Because there will be consequences whichever decision we make.

“So we should just stand here while civilians die?” Bodhi asks, and everyone stiffens at his words.

“That’s not what I’m saying.” I shake my head, knowing that the outcome of this choice, like all the others, is going to rest with me. “This isn’t a fucking training exercise, Bodhi. Some – if not all – of us are going to die if we go down there. If we’d been assigned to an active wing, there would be far older, more experienced leadership making this decision, but there aren’t. If we weren’t marked with rebellion relics, if we hadn’t been aiding the enemy” – I can’t stop my eyes from seeking out Violet’s – “we wouldn’t even be here with this choice. So, all command structure aside, what are your thoughts?”

I look around the group.

“We have the numbers,” Soleil says, staring out into the valley and tapping her fingernails on the castellation. “And air superiority.”

“At least they aren’t any wyvern,” Violet says, her eyes scanning the skies in all directions.

“Uh. What?” Bodhi looks at her like she’s lost her mind.

“Wyvern. Fables say venin created them to compete with dragons and, instead of channelling *from* them, channel power *into* them.”

The words sound wrong in her voice, and I glance at her, a new wave of fear breaching the walls I’ve built up. I study the sky nervously, as I say, “Yeah, let’s not borrow tomorrow’s trouble.”

“There are four venin and ten of us,” Garrick says.

“We have the weapons to kill them,” Liam says, dragging his gaze away from the valley. “And Deigh told me seven gryphon fliers –”

“We’re here,” Syrena says, as she strides towards us down the battlement. “I left the rest of the drift outside once we noticed that your outpost seems to be... abandoned.” She looks out towards the valley, tracking the plume of smoke that is making its way across the sky. Her shoulders sag. “I’m not going to ask you to fight with us.”

"You're not?" Garrick can't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"No." She smiles at him sadly. "Four of them is tantamount to a death sentence. The rest of my drift is making peace with our gods." She turns to me then, an expression on her face that I've never seen. "I came to tell you to leave. You have no clue what they're capable of wielding. It only took two of them to bring down an *entire* city last month. *Two. Of. Them.* We lost two drifts trying to stop them. If there're four down there..." She shakes her head. "They're after something, and they're going to kill every single person in Resson to get it. Take your riot and go home while you can."

I can't speak, feeling all the probabilities of survival slipping away at her words. We don't have the numbers.

"We have dragons," Imogen says. "Surely that has to count for something. We're not afraid to fight."

"Are you afraid to die? Have any of you seen combat?" The silent, somber faces are all the answer she needs. "Thought not. Your dragons do count for something. They can fly you far and fast. Dragon fire won't kill them. Only the daggers you've been bringing, and we have those."

She turns back to me. There's no fear edging her features, her face is set in calm lines like she's resigned to her fate. "Thank you for everything you've done. You've kept us alive these last couple of years and given us a fighting chance."

"You're going down there to die," I say. It's not a question.

"Yes," she nods, not reacting as another explosion sounds behind us. "Get your riot out of here. Fast." She strides back down the rampart before any of us can object, disappearing into the tower at the opposite end.

I am desperate to help them. And I am desperate to save every single person that still stands on this battlement with me. My jaw clenches with the knowledge that I can't have both. If we go down there, some of us aren't coming back.

I think of my father and everything he risked to protect people that couldn't defend themselves. And even knowing everything he lost in the process, I know he would do it all again. That it's the job of the strongest and most powerful to defend the innocent, that it's why we are given so much power in the first place. To do something. To *matter*.

"Sgaeyl?" I say, making up my mind.

"*I have never run from a fight, Wingleader. Today is no different,*" she says. "*I'm with you. Always.*"

But I can't ask everyone to do the same. It's my actions that brought them here, not just today but six years ago.

"Sgaeyl says she has never run from a fight, and today will not be the first. And I'm not going to stand by while innocent people are dying, either." I shake my head. "But I'm not going to order any of you to join me. I'm responsible for *all* of you. None of you crossed that parapet because you *wanted* to. None of you. You crossed it because I made a deal. I'm the one who forced you into the quadrant, so I won't think less of anyone who wants to fly for Eltuval instead. Make your choice." And then I say just to Violet, "*I don't want you in harm's way.*"

"*If the others get to make a choice, then so do I.*"

For a few seconds, there's only the sound of the wind all around us.

"We're riders," Imogen says, as another explosion goes off in the distance. "We defend the defenseless. That's what we do."

"You saved every single one of us here, cousin," Bodhi says. "And we're thankful. Now I'd like to do what we've trained for, and if it means I don't go home, then I guess my soul will be commended to Malek. I wouldn't mind seeing my mother anyway."

"I'll tell you the same thing I did after Threshing our first year when we decided to start smuggling weaponry out," Garrick says. "You kept us alive all these years; we get to decide how we die. I'm with you." His words lodge tight in my chest.

"Exactly!" Soleil says, her fingertips toying with the dagger sheathed at her thigh. "I'm in."

Liam steps forward next to Violet, his eyes locked on mine. "We watched as our parents were executed because they had the courage to do the right thing. I'd like to think my death would be just as honorable." While the thought of losing him breaks my heart, pride soars through me at his words.

"Agreed." Imogen says, and everyone nods. Everyone except Violet.

I look at Violet, trying to convey without words how much I need her to survive. And even though I already know what her answer will be, I beg her just the same. *Please, Violet. Leave for me.*

"I've been defenseless," she says, lifting her chin and my chest tightens. "And now I'm a rider. Riders fight."

A thousand emotions flood through me all at once. I'm so scared for her and I'm so proud of her. I'm desperate to keep her out of this and certain that we have no chance if she leaves. I've known since she first turned her burning eyes on me under the oak trees that we would need her. I've wondered ever since she first wielded lightning if she could be the edge we need in this war.

As much as I might need her to survive this, maybe the world needs her more.

Somehow, I keep it together and manage a nod. I walk towards the battlements before everything else I want to say falls out of my mouth. "Liam. Give me a report."

Liam comes to stand next to me, his pupils whiting out as he looks into the distance. "The fliers are engaged, all seven – six of them. Looks like they're trying to draw fire away from civilians, but damn, the venin are wielding a kind of fire I've never seen among riders. Three surround the city, and one is making its way toward a structure in the middle. A clock tower."

I map it out in my mind as he speaks, trying to consider the best approach. I feel like a kid playing pretend war, too young and untested to be entrusted with these kinds of decisions. Any order I give could be a death sentence.

"It will be simpler once we're down there, Wingleader," Sgaeyl says, trying to keep my rising panic under control.

She's right. Even with Liam's far-sight, we don't know what we're walking into. All we can do is set some basic parameters and objectives, and try our best to keep our focus when the chaos of battle rips all the plans to shit anyway.

I divide up the group, putting Garrick and Soleil on reconnaissance, while the rest of us attack the

venin from all sides. Whatever they want is in that clock tower, so we do whatever we have to do to slow that approach. “The only way to take them out is by dagger,” I say, already picturing the terrifying risks to get close to them that will entail.

“That means we’ll have to dismount and fight once we get the townspeople to whatever safety we can find,” Garrick says. He’s always been so much better at this stuff than me. Clearer. Able to see past the emotion of it all to say what needs to be done. “Don’t throw your only weapons unless you’re certain of your aim.”

I nod. “Save as many people as you can. Let’s go.”

I head for the courtyard, feeling like I’m leading each of them to their deaths. Our dragons perch on the edge of the ridgeline, agitated and raring to fight. I glance behind me as the riders peel off to their separate dragons, wondering if I’ll see them again. Violet walks past me directly between Tairn and Sgaeyl, Liam coming to stand at my side.

I can’t bring myself to leave just yet; I watch her approach the dragons, strands of her silver hair whipping out from her braid in the wind.

All these years of wanting to fight... now it seems like a feeling that belonged to somebody else. I don’t recognise that man as me anymore. That man had nothing to lose. And I have... *her*.

I turn away, looking out towards the valley as my footsteps crunch along the loose gravel on the cliff edge. Liam stares in the same direction, seeing further and his face falls.

I grab his arm, steadying him. “We make it through this,” I say, recalling the words I said to him when we were reunited all those months ago. “None of us are dying down there.”

“It’s bad, Xaden.” His pupils return, his gaze settling on mine.

An ear-splitting screech rends the air, and I twist to see a giant grey dragon heading towards Resson from the south. My heart jumps into my throat.

“Do we have a riot nearby?” Liam asks.

“No,” I say, remembering Violet’s earlier words. The dragon screeches again and spews a streak of bright blue fire into the valley as it approaches the outpost.

“Wyvern.” Violet says. “Xaden, it has two legs, not four. It’s not a dragon. It’s a wyvern.”

Every other rider stands on the ridgeline, watching.

“Well, there went our air superiority,” Imogen says, then shrugs. “Fuck ‘em. They can die, too.” I wish I had her confidence.

“Guess we know all the details now,” Liam says.

“Anyone want to change their minds?” I look down the line, already knowing the answer and am met with a row of silent faces. “No? Then mount up.”

I stride over to Violet, who’s already reaching for Tairn. “Turn around, Violence.”

She pivots, looking up at me, her eyes crackling with resolve. She’s unmovable. Just as always.

I unsheathe one of my daggers and slide it into an empty sheath at her ribs. “Now you have two.”

It's all I can think of to say to tell her what she means to me, the only declaration I think she would be willing to accept.

"You're not going to lecture me about staying safe in the outpost?" Her brow arches, but her eyes burn into mine. I can't tell what she's thinking. My heart pounds being this close to her.

"If I asked you to stay behind, would you?"

"No."

"Exactly. I try not to pick fights I know I can't win." I smile tightly at her, wishing I could reach out and touch her.

Her eyes flare at my words. "Speaking of knowing you'll win fights, General Melgren will know what's happened here. He'll be able to see the outcome of the battle even now."

She still doesn't know. I shake my head, pointing to the rebellion relic at my neck. "Do you remember how I told you I realized it was a gift, not a curse?"

"Yes."

"Just trust me – because of this, Melgren can't see a fucking thing."

Her lips part. "Any other secrets you're keeping from me?"

My pulse picks up. "Yes," I say.

When she doesn't respond, I let my hand reach out to cup her neck and lean into her, bringing my forehead to rest against hers. She doesn't stop me, and that tiny flicker of hope rekindles deep in my chest. "Stay alive, and I promise I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

She takes a shaky inhale and sighs, her breath dancing over my lips. "I need you to survive this, even if I hate that I still love you."

She *loves* me. I want to tell her that I love her too, the truth so much closer to escaping than all the times before.

But it feels too much like goodbye.

"I can live with that," I say, the smallest hint of a smile on my lips. She *loves* me.

I walk away towards Sgaeyl, and we launch into the sky.

Brother

The sun sinks behind the cliffs as we approach, casting the valley in warm, golden light. The post is nestled in a sea of rolling hills, and it looks strangely beautiful, so at odds with the death and destruction that grows louder with every beat of Sgaeyl's wings. Another huge explosion goes off, so close to us now that my ears ring with it.

I scan the skies for the wyvern from earlier, but there's nothing. Where the fuck did it go? We need to try and regain the aerial advantage and I need that threat gone first. Too many civilians are grouped together, they could be taken out in one shot.

"Get us on the other side of that tower," I say to Sgaeyl and she banks away from the rest of the riot, towards the stone walls on the far side. A venin stands at the top of the clock tower, throwing blue flames at the townspeople who are already trying to retreat. This isn't a battle, it's a massacre. Whatever the venin want, they don't intend for anyone to survive to tell the tale.

"Can you see anything?" I say to Sgaeyl as another explosion goes off, the skies filling with hazy smoke that limits our field of view.

"Nothing," she replies, shifting us upwards and over the post for a better vantage point.

A huge burst of dragonfire beneath us incinerates the clock tower, the entire building collapsing in on itself. Surely the venin couldn't survive that. But another part of me tells me that would be too easy – if the dragons were the edge we needed in this war, we'd have quashed the threat from the venin years ago.

"Fuil says there's a mine on the far side. It's sealed, but Soleil thinks she can reopen it to give the townspeople somewhere to hide," relays Sgaeyl.

"I don't think herding them all together is a good idea." The rubble from the clock tower still smokes underneath us.

"What other options do we have?"

She's right. The main buildings are being blown to pieces. We can't fly each of them to safety. We need somewhere we can gather and defend, while the rest of us take out the threat.

"Tell Deigh to help her," I say, as we bank back around the city. Liam will be able to see further out and give us an earlier warning if they need back-up.

"Xaden, there's more than one wyvern." Violet's voice is panicked through our bond.

Where? The smoke is making it impossible to see fucking anything. And then bright blue fire shoots across the city in a stream. Suddenly I can make out the shape of its wings, its grey body blending in with the haziness of the surroundings. The light is fading and the visibility is horrendous; it's the exact sort of environment where we could all get separated and they could take us out one by one.

Another wyvern shoots across from the far side, lighting up the buildings in its path. Fuck, how many more are out there?

"If you get separated from Tairn, call out, then fight until I get there," I order, trying to keep my growing desperation under control.

It's Tairn's voice that growls back. *"No chance of that happening. I'm not letting her off my back, wingleader."*

"Soleil found a sealed entrance to what looks to be a mine," I tell them. *"I need you to see if you can put down some cover so Garrick and Bodhi can get the townspeople evacuated. Liam is on his way."*

"On it."

Fear slides like a bead of sweat along my spine, reminding me that every direction I give could be the difference between life and death. All that training, all those times Command have made us confront our humanity: it was to prepare me for this moment, to allow me to see the people that matter to me as nothing more than a name pinned in a formation. But still my breath quickens and shakes, panic rising up in my chest.

"Just focus on what we should do next, Xaden," Sgaeyl says, a steadying voice of calm through the bond.

I nod, my eyes scanning the buildings below us. *"Get Garrick and Bodhi to pull the civilians out."*

"Yes, Wingleader," she says, and I cling a little tighter to her neck.

I spot a wyvern circling back towards a one-storey building in the centre of the city. There are kids running for cover and I realise with horror that it must be a school or a nursery, colourful drawings etched on the walls and ground.

"I see it," Sgaeyl says, drawing in her wings to shoot down towards the ground and intercept. But it's moving so fast, so much faster than should be possible. Its head spins to one side as we approach, spotting us in the distance but we're not going to reach the school before it does.

I do the only thing I can think of, pulling shadows up in all directions around it, sending them racing after its direction of travel to disorientate it in the darkness. Sgaeyl dives down into a looping corkscrew roll, following the darkness as it threshes against the wyvern trying to shed the shadows, to approach on the opposite side.

She shoots into the center of the swirling shadows and I pull back on the power, the darkness clearing instantly for Sgaeyl to close her jaws right around the wyvern's neck, tearing its head from its body with a keening screech.

"There's no rider," I say, as she throws its head towards the outskirts, its body falling to the ground underneath us.

"Maybe they're like us and communicating through bonds with the ones already in the city."

I nod, but my head whips in every direction, trying to assess how many of them there are. Fuck, we need to get the civilians out of here, it's too exposed. *"Tell Bodhi to get over here, I need him to get the kids out."*

"They're already on their way." She pulls back into a hover, her wings beating to keep us steady as Bodhi approaches on his dragon, dipping down beneath us to land on the ground.

A prickling sensation tingles over my skin, and I narrow my eyes at the haze, trying to make out what I can already feel heading in my direction.

"Do you feel that too?" Sgaeyl says, setting us down on the rooftop of the closest building, her

neck undulating in every direction to assess for the threat.

And then lightning cracks through the air, bolt after bolt raining down on the hillside. *Violet.*

The darkening sky lights up impossibly fast, crackling veins of energy shooting out in all directions. The sheer strength of her power makes my heart beat faster. Any hope that she could be enough to defeat them is strangled out by fear. She's a target. They'll be gunning for her.

"Bodhi has them," Sgaeyl says, and I drag my eyes away from the lightning in the distance to see Bodhi gathering a group of twenty or so civilians – nearly all of them children – in the shadows I've thickened around the building.

"He can't get that many out in one go."

"Should I –"

"No. We're his air cover." Two wyvern are still circling the city, bright blue fire streaming at every angle. *"If we both go to ground, we're targets."*

A gryphon pelts for us, its wings flapping frantically. Syrena. For a second I think she's heard us and come to help but there's a wyvern close on her tail.

"Fuck." But Sgaeyl takes to the air, shooting up and past them to dive back around from behind. The venin on its back swivels to look at us, its eyes locked on mine, just as Sgaeyl lets out a stream of fire straight at them. The venin smiles, its lips curling up at the sides for a moment before it disappears. The wyvern crashes into the market, thrashing about on the ground as it burns.

Where the fuck did the venin go? It was right there –

"Fuil is dead," Sgaeyl tells me, only for Violet's voice to ring through my head a beat later, *"We lost Soleil."*

A wave of sadness rises up in me, but I lock it down. I can't process it right now. I need to concentrate on keeping everyone else alive. But fear and guilt leak through whatever barrier I've thrown up. What if this is just the beginning?

I look back and see two gryphons and their fliers hoisting the kids onto their backs. Bodhi's dragon carefully scoops up the last of them in his talons and takes to the skies, flying low along the city walls.

"Cover them," I order and Sgaeyl pivots, flying back past them for me to throw shadows up in a shield. A huge explosion throws us off-course in the air, the heat of it knocking us sideways. Sgaeyl banks back around and we see Bodhi and the gryphons set down the kids away from the main fighting in the distance and launch back into the sky.

"We need to draw them away from the city," Violet says, and somehow my eyes find her in the chaos of the sky, Tairn's huge black wings circling the remnants of the clock tower.

"Whatever they want must be there," says Tairn, and I see what they're seeing: the wyvern are slowing above the rubble too. Liam said earlier that's where they were focused.

"Agreed on both counts. Do what you can to give the rest time to evacuate. We're clearing the edge of town now." My heart spikes as I think of Violet's power. *"Try not to die."*

"Working on it."

A young woman and a boy stumble out onto the street just below us, falling to their knees and struggling to breathe as smoke billows from the door – no, window – they’ve just come from. We dive for them, my shadows wrapping around them both and pull them up towards Sgaeyl, following the same path as Bodhi and the fliers from earlier.

Lightning flares as we set them down, already heading back towards the city walls. But this time it doesn’t stop, huge branches of bright white light are being pulled from the sky before the other bolt has even reached its target.

A blare of power roils through me, huge incendiary sparks of energy building and crackling along our bond. I pour my shadows into it, trying to keep it under control but it’s *everywhere*, burning hotter and hotter. The bond is too open between us, I can’t tell where her power ends and mine starts. Flames lick along the edges of my mind, catching on my consciousness, flaring –

“*Shield, Xaden!*” I hear Sgaeyl scream as the heat tears through me.

It takes far more strength than it should to heave up a wall between us, cutting Violet off. I draw in a huge gasp of air, like I’ve been starved of oxygen for minutes. The sky splits apart as a huge crack of lightning bursts from its depths, hitting a wyvern dead-centre and it crashes into the hillside.

Fuck, what a shot. She can do this. *We* can do this.

Sgaeyl banks hard, turning us back towards the southern side, where families are still running from their homes. But it’s a warzone, a crumpled mess of rubble and fire. My shadows seek out each blaze as we fly past, smothering it but can do nothing for the panic among the civilians to find them a safe route out of the chaos. There’s still so many people; we can’t get them out fast enough.

My eyes pick out Garrick in the crowd wielding magic to shift the rubble and clear a path for the civilians. But he’s totally exposed down there. I swing my head in every direction and see a wyvern heading straight for us.

“*Draw it out,*” I order and Sgaeyl dives left, speeding towards the city walls. It follows us, spewing blue fire along the ground in our wake, setting the buildings one street along from the civilians ablaze.

And even with Sgaeyl’s insane speed, it’s gaining on us, impossibly fast. I see Ciaran below us, running along the battlements to remount his dragon. Fuck, if they spot him, he’s dead.

“*Cutback,*” I say to Sgaeyl and she pivots into a half turn, using our own forward momentum to pull us back on ourselves, straight into the oncoming wyvern’s path. Shadows shoot out, grabbing it round the throat and pull it out from under the venin before they can expect it. The weight of the wyvern’s struggle pulls Sgaeyl and I with it, but I keep my shadows gripped tight, choking off its air until it goes limp and I release it, letting it fall to the ground.

I swivel back, looking for its rider.

“*There!*” Sgaeyl says and my head swings towards the battlements where Ciaran has turned, running back towards the venin and hurling spears of ice straight for her. His dragon is airborne, raining fire down on the venin in between each throw but she walks through it like it’s nothing.

“He won’t get close enough!” I shout. “They’re too fast.”

The venin dodges every spear, seeming to know at what angle they’ll come from before they’ve even left Ciaran’s hand. She edges closer to him, drawing him in towards her, her hands tightening

at her sides like she's preparing to wield.

"Get him out!"

"*On it,*" Sgaeyl says, relaying the message to Ciaran's dragon who shoots back towards the city walls, grabbing him in one talon and throws him onto his back. The wall disintegrates where he was stood, just a pile of smoking black ash.

Fear lances through me. We are brutally outmatched here, not just in numbers but magic too.

A tower blows up right behind us, the force of the explosion rolling us in the air, the sound ringing through my ears. Sgaeyl rights us, swinging back to assess the damage. But there's no plume of blue smoke. It's lightning.

The sky flashes as Violet brings strike after strike down on the town. But for every wyvern she hits, two more seem to appear out of nowhere. Half of her strikes hit nothing, blowing up the very place we're supposed to be defending. My shadows whip out trying to smother the fires that blaze on the ground wherever she misses. It's fucking chaos, but she's the best weapon we have, the only one that can destroy them without getting too close.

"*Bodhi needs you,*" Sgaeyl says, already turning us towards the west side of the city, shooting towards the ground at breakneck speed. My heart lurches into my throat, as I see him off his dragon on the ground, shepherding a family towards the only accessible route left to the relative safety of the mines. His dragon is already a tangle of teeth and claws with a wyvern in the air above them. But another is heading straight for Bodhi and the others on the ground.

Before I can think better of it, I'm on my feet and run backwards along Sgaeyl's spine, jumping into the crowd below as she passes them, cloaking them in shadows to avoid the jaws of the wyvern heading straight at them.

"*Another on your left,*" Sgaeyl bites out. "*Run.*"

I don't waste a second looking, just run in the opposite direction, throwing out my shadows in a rope high above the buildings to lasso around Sgaeyl's neck as she flies back for me.

"*XADEN!*" Violet's scream of fear blasts through the bond, and my heart skips a beat. I'm scanning the skies even as the world inverts and the shadows pull me up and around, back into position on Sgaeyl's pommel.

Tairn climbs higher and higher, but the wyvern that's on their tail is faster, gaining on them with every beat of Tairn's wings. Sgaeyl speeds towards them, but the wyvern opens its jaws. We can't get there in time.

"*Violence!*" I scream back. "*Beneath you!*"

A wave of terror washes over me, and I can't separate her fear from my own as blue fire shoots out from the wyvern's mouth. Tairn banks, and the flames miss them by inches. The wyvern rears back, pulling to hover in the air, its head snapping in all directions. It locks its predatory gaze on Tairn again and shoots straight for them.

But while I've been frozen in place, unable to do anything except watch in horror, Sgaeyl has moved. She intercepts, clamping down onto its outstretched neck and throws it up into the air to rip into its side. Blood and gore rains down on me, as she tears through the wyvern, before her daggertail flicks its mutilated body sailing hundreds of feet across the city, crashing into the mountainside.

She brings us right alongside Tairn, her wing gliding under his in an affectionate caress. I stare at Violet as we pass them, wanting to reach out to her too. It was close.

"It was too close." Sgaeyl snaps angrily, diving back towards the city.

A gryphon lifts three people from the ground, a group of ten or more civilians still seeking cover under a shredded awning, barely a scrap of fabric left in the wooden frame. A venin appears from nowhere onto the battlement walls and hurls a blue fireball at the gryphon as it takes to the skies. It crashes back down into the streets still aflame, its wings thrashing, and I send up a wave of shadows to smother the blaze.

The venin turns in all directions hunting the source of the power, its red eyes centering on me. A wyvern changes course mid-air as if it was summoned, shooting straight for us.

"I see it," says Sgaeyl, twisting up and around as it spews flames across the city. I hurl up another wall of shadows trying to smother the fire before it reaches us.

But another wyvern screeches from our right.

Chradh intercepts, talons raking up and through the wyvern's wings, shredding them to pieces. It doesn't kill it but the wyvern drops in the sky, struggling to remain airborne and retreats towards the valley. Sgaeyl arrows for the remaining wyvern, and I loop a shadow around its neck, pulling it taut for her as she arcs upwards, her daggertail slicing through its jugular.

My head whips back to find the venin stood in the same place as before with preternatural stillness, its eyes still locked on us. It tilts its head, daring me to get closer.

But neither Sgaeyl or I are stupid enough to take the bait, her wings flaring up and out to bring us to a hover as we assess the best approach. The venin lifts its staff and brings it down onto the battlement with a huge bang that echoes far louder than it should. The wall shatters in one direction down the street, huge splinters shooting out at every angle before the bricks fall in an avalanche. A massive cloud of dust plumes upwards. It's blocked the only route of escape.

"Fuck." The civilians huddle closer together under the awning, no more than twenty feet away from the venin on the walls above them. It tilts its head again.

"Move!" Sgaeyl and Chradh shoot for the venin, and I throw out shadows to wrap around the staff as the venin goes to bring the wall down on the other side. But the shadows can't hold it, whatever power contained within the staff slips straight through mine.

"Get over here!" Violet screams it at me, as the venin's staff hits the ground and the wall falls. I pull my shadows up from the ground, holding the entire weight of the collapsing wall as Chradh dives down underneath it, scooping up the kids that the parents push out into the open towards the dragon. Sgaeyl flares back, trying to give me time to concentrate, as she roars fire at the venin – but it's gone.

"I'm hunting the venin at the walls!" I shout, my voice strained with the effort of holding the shadows in place as I glance in every direction looking for where the venin disappeared. Two gryphons dive down underneath the shadow shield to grab more of the civilians, and I spot Imogen's dragon in the distance, shooting towards us too.

"Deigh is fighting for his life!" Her voice breaks through the bond.

Liam. Terror spikes my heart, fear clamping my chest like a vice. *"If I leave, these civilians are all dead!"*

She can do this.

“How many left?” I say to Sgaeyl, the weight of the wall feeling heavier every second.

“Two.”

“I can’t hold it much longer,” I bite out. Imogen’s dragon dives for the ground, grabbing the last of the civilians.

“Let it go, Xaden.” Panic laces Sgaeyl’s tone.

“You’re sure?”

“Now!” The shadows snap back into me, but it feels different than before, like I’m missing the final few drops. Before the wall has hit the ground, Sgaeyl is shooting out away from the city.

I spot them then, Liam’s huge red dragon and a wyvern locked in a brutal battle over the hills at the far side. My heart leaps into my throat, as the two of them spiral towards the ground. There’s no way Liam could stay seated through it.

“Tairn has him.” But her voice sounds strained, and it’s dread, not relief, that floods through me. If Deigh dies... No. It’s not happening.

Tairn rips into another wyvern as it approaches, tearing into it and sending its body into freefall, before diving after Deigh.

“We’re on our way!” I say and we race towards them, Sgaeyl roaring fire at anything in our path.

All three of them barrel towards the ground, moving at logic-defying speed. The seconds seem to slow as we track their dive, waiting for the moment they pull up and out. But they miss each one, hurtling down, faster and further.

“Tairn!” Sgaeyl’s voice blasts through my head as she screams at her mate to pull up, every barrier between us shredded in the chaos.

We don’t hear the impact. Instead, the world goes silent as I feel Sgaeyl stutter, her wings missing a beat.

“DEIGH.” Tairn’s roar of grief blasts through all of us, an impossible weight bearing down through the bond.

No. No. No. We make it.

“Deigh’s gone.” Violet’s voice trembles, as the sound of the battle waging all around us restarts. A huge explosion goes off behind us. A wyvern screeches for us from above, its talons outstretched but Ciaran dives between us, intercepting. *“Liam is dying.”*

“No.” Not Liam. Please, not Liam. Agony rips through my chest, grief and terror and loss pulling me apart from the inside. The emotions blend together with Violet’s, a devastating mix of pain and rage, wrapping tight around my lungs and stealing all the air.

Sgaeyl dives past a stream of blue fire, shooting towards the ground but we’re not going to make it to them in time. A wordless scream chokes through me.

“We’ll make it,” she promises, finding a dangerous burst of speed as I cling to her. Not Liam. It can’t be Liam.

Each second feels like hours, every beat of Sgaeyl's wings feels like we're getting further and further away. She skids into the ground, raking her talons through the grit and rocks to slow her speed, and I jump from her back, closing the last few feet to reach Liam. His chest is pulled into Violet's lap and she cradles him against her, a few paces away from his dragon. There's no injury. He's not hurt. But he's dying just the same. The sharp cruelty of losing him like this slices through me.

"No, Liam." I choke out, crouching in front of them. I try to look strong for him but all I can see is how close he is to the edge, and a wave of loss threatens to steal these last seconds with him before he's even really gone.

"Deigh," Liam whispers, his eyes boring into mine asking me for this final act of brotherhood.

I can give him this. I am strong enough to give him this.

"I know, brother." My eyes find Violet's for a second, her eyes squeezing shut against the tears already streaking down her face. "I know." I lean forward and pull Liam into my arms, cradling him tight against me to stand. "I'll take you."

I carry him the final few steps to Deigh. He opens his mouth, trying to say something.

"Don't, brother. Don't try to speak." But he lifts the arm pressed up against me, moving in slow motion like the effort costs him everything, to rest his hand on my chest.

"This is not your fault," he says, his teeth gritted.

I lower him to Deigh, propping him up against his shoulder and kneel in front of him, nodding like I believe him. But it is. I brought him here. I did this.

"No," he bites out, his fingers digging into my chest to grip my flight jacket and pull me closer to him. "I would do it all again. Just like this."

I can't get any air, can't draw in a breath through the pain deep in my chest. I grab his hand, squeezing it tight between mine in a prayer and bow my head, my knuckles biting into my forehead. If I can hold on tight enough, I can keep him here.

"Tell Violet. Only two. Riders. With them," he gasps through the words, each one a struggle.

"I will, I will." I say, trying to keep him with me.

A wyvern's screech rends the air above us.

"Look up at the valley!" Violet's panic lances through me, and both of us turn to look. Hundreds of wyvern descend on us, a huge cloud of death beating its wings as one.

I bow my head back to our hands, praying to gods I've lost all faith in, to anyone that will listen, to keep him here with me. I lose a grip on everything else, shadows whipping out from me in all directions as I cling onto his hand.

But it slackens against mine. He's gone.

My mouth opens, a wordless, silent scream ripping through my whole body.

Liam is gone. My friend. My brother. Gone.

I can't look at him, can't bear to see the eyes that had always crinkled and gleamed with laughter,

blank and unseeing. I squeeze my eyes shut. I did this. I brought him here. And now he's gone.

I look back at the cloud of wyvern approaching, my vision blurred and all I can see is more death coming, this pain already tearing me apart multiplied ten-fold. And I cling on to the only thing strong enough to keep me going. That tiny flicker of hope burns through all the fear, all the unending sorrow at losing him, until only one thought remains.

I will lose no one else today.

She makes it.

I squeeze Liam's hand tight in mine once more and run for her, grasping her shoulders. "Violence! Liam told me to tell you that there are two riders with that horde."

"Why would he tell me and not —"

Because she can do this. I'm certain of it and Liam was too. I just need to give her as much time as I can.

"Because he knew I'd have to be the one who holds off the wyvern as long as possible." I can see the horde of wyvern descending through the skies and know the power I'll need to restrain them will undoubtedly kill me. But if it can give her a chance... some things are worth dying for.

I study her face, memorising every line of it. It's the only face I want to see at the end.

"And I'm the only one who can kill them all." Fear flickers in her eyes.

"You can kill them." I yank her into me, kissing her forehead. "There is no me without you," I say against her skin.

Before she can reply, I turn and lift my arms, throwing up a wall of shadow that spans the entire horde, a cloak of darkness that reaches from one hillside to the other. *"Go! I'll give you as much time as I can!"*

In less than a second, I can feel the strain of it, the angry push against the barrier holding them back. My arms shake with holding it, feeling each creature trying to force their way through the shadows a hundred times over. The weight gets heavier as more hit the shield, like giant hail stones splitting on impact, the force of each one striking deep into my core, cutting deeper with every hit.

I can barely concentrate on anything else, already lost in a power so strong that it threatens to consume me. But then Violet's power rallies through our bond. It feels different this time, quieter and cold. This isn't hot, raw power; this feels like death.

I watch as lightning shoots from the sky and hits a wyvern on its first shot. A tiny, almost imperceptible weight lifts from me. She can do this.

Even if we take them out one by one. She can do this.

Hope blazes through my chest.

And then Tairn's roar of pain blasts back at me through the bond.

Falling

"What's happening?" I scream at Sgaeyl, my eyes glued to the shadows ahead of me, the power threshing and buckling under the weight of the force behind it.

But it's Violet's voice I hear, the bond between all of us tangled together so tightly that I can't pull apart the threads, can't tell my thoughts from hers. *"There's a venom on your back!"*

Sgaeyl hears it too, her neck straining upwards as Tairn ascends near-vertically, trying to throw the venom off. I risk a glance at them, but feel the shadows slacken the moment I split my focus.

"GO!" I order her, my teeth gritted.

"I'm not leaving you," she hisses back. *"You're a target on the ground."*

"Sgaeyl –"

"I said no, Xaden." Somehow, she doesn't sound afraid. *"She can do this."*

More wyvern slam into the shields and I lunge one leg back, leaning into the weight of the shadows, forcing more power into the wall. I know that somewhere in the skies high above me, Violet is facing the venom, but I can't reach out to her, can't see what's happening. She's on her own.

Excruciating pain in my forearm tells me Violet is hurt, and fear blasts in all directions, mine and hers. My heart spikes as hers does. And then pain flares hot and sharp in my side, followed by a wave of disbelief from Violet as we all realise when she does that she's been stabbed.

"Violet!" I scream, as Tairn's roar echoes all around us.

Her panic flares, and I feel every emotion like it's my own.

"She's too fast!"

I feel the wave of nausea as she lifts the only blade she has left. Her thoughts pelt at me. *I'm lethally outmatched.* The wound in her side burns, an agonising brand of fire. *I can barely keep track of which hand her blade is in.* Fear grips tight around her chest like a vice, squeezing so hard it's impossible to breathe.

"Level the playing field," I say, before I can consider the consequences, splitting my power to throw the world around Tairn into darkness. It feels like the bones in my arms are shattering in slow motion, the force of the wyvern against the shield doubling in intensity where I've split the power in half. But I will lose no one else today.

I hold it for as long as I can, unable to breathe, unable to think, feeling the power shred through me from the inside. And then –

"She's dead." Violet breathes through the bond.

Relief floods through me and the shadows snap back instantly, reinforcing the shields against the wall of descending wyvern in the valley. But it's even harder to hold than it was before, the chinks that had started to form in the shield begin to widen into cracks, thin slivers of light pouring through the shadows from the other side.

“Sgaeyl!” I order. *“Give me more!”*

“No, Xaden,” she cries. *“You’re too close to the edge. I’m not losing you.”*

My arms shake with the force of holding the shield, feeling the cracks splinter further across the shadows. *“Sgaeyl!”* I yell again.

“To the left!” Violet screams it at me, but I can’t turn, can’t do anything except watch death forcing itself closer and closer in front of me. If I take my eyes off the shadows, I know they won’t be standing when I look back.

I feel the hot blast of Sgaeyl’s fire next to me.

“He vanished,” she says.

Who vanished? To where? All I can feel is the shadows, can’t tell where the power starts or ends. The cracks widen, light yawing, only the thinnest of shadows keeping the wyvern behind the shield. I can make out the shapes of their wings beating behind the veil.

“I can’t hold them back much longer!”

“New plan,” Violet says, her voice steady and calm. *“I need you to let the shadows fall.”*

“WHAT?” My heart pounds in my chest at the thought of losing anyone else. I push more power into the shadows, but the connection feels taut with tension, stretched so far and so hard that I know another tiny pulse of magic will break it.

“Xaden, you have to drop the shadows. It’s the only way.”

“Tairn!” Sgaeyl shouts.

“Don’t ask that of me.” My voice shakes with the effort of holding the shield, terrified to pour more power into it, terrified to let go and watch everyone I love face what’s hovering just behind it.

“If you have ever trusted me, Xaden, I need you to do it now.”

She uses my words from earlier against me. I trust her. I trust her more than I have ever trusted anyone. She can do this.

And I let go.

“Fuck!” The wall of shadow falls and the wyvern shoot towards us with terrifying speed.

I reach for Sgaeyl blindly, hardly able to move through the sudden release of all that power. She lowers her leg to me, and I climb, dragging myself up and onto her back.

“Once I’ve taken the rider out, that only leaves one, Xaden. Just kill that one and the rest of the wyvern will fall.”

Tairn shoots past us overhead, on a collision course with hundreds of wyvern descending on the valley.

“I’m coming.” Sgaeyl launches skyward and we shoot after them.

“You saved us by holding them back this long.” Violet’s voice is full of sadness and resolve.

“Don’t you dare sacrifice yourself!” I scream after her, but she’s slammed her shields down tight. I don’t know if she’s heard me, don’t know if that’s her plan.

“No one else is dying,” Sgaeyl says, finding a burst of speed to race after Tairn and Violet.

Blue fire erupts from the horde heading straight for them and I pull on all the power I have left to bring up shadows on both sides, snuffing out the flame before it can incinerate everything in its path. I cling to Sgaeyl’s neck, no strength left to keep myself upright, pouring every bit of focus and energy into the shadows.

Lightning rains down on the horde, as Violet throws strike after strike at them. But though she hits wyvern, she can’t pick the rider out from the pack, an impossibly small target, moving impossibly fast towards us.

Every wyvern is focused on Violet, realising she’s the biggest threat and it takes every bit of strength to send shadows shooting out to smother their blue fire before they can hit their target. A shadow stutters and my heart leaps into my throat, but Tairn banks and dodges the flames. Sgaeyl gains on him with the movement, like an arrow flying just behind them, locked on its target.

And then the world stops moving.

Sgaeyl flares back as Tairn does, beating her wings into a hover and I swivel my head backwards. The edges of my vision glimmer and blur as time slows just beyond us. Garrick and Bodhi are right on our tail, but frozen mid-air. I turn back to the horde of wyvern, their wings dragging through the sky like it’s made of mud, fighting against the sheer impossibility of what can only be Andarna’s magic.

All we can do is watch as Violet’s power reaches for the sky, pulling down on one bolt of its power, forcing it down and across the sky towards the venin.

And though all her shields are up, I feel it. The raw heat of this power burning through the bond, white hot light disintegrating my tether to her, feel her slipping away into the power as it burns her up from the inside.

“VIOLET!” I *scream* it at her, begging her to stop, begging her to stay.

When time begins again, I find myself frozen. I can do nothing except watch her strike hit true, watch the venin topple from the wyvern and see half of them fall from the sky as if she had struck them all herself.

“On the left!” Sgaeyl shouts and I snap my head, seeing the only rider left barrelling towards Violet. Tairn turns sharply, shooting upwards into the sky. My shadows move on instinct, twisting in a rope around the rider’s neck to pull it from its wyvern, right into the dagger in my hand. Relief washes over me as every other wyvern drops towards the ground, a tidal wave of death breaking on the shore and disappearing into nothing.

She did it. We made it.

I look all around me, trying to find Violet and Tairn in the skies. But Tairn’s roar of panic fills my head as I see him high above us, twisting into a dive towards the ground. And my head snaps to Violet as she falls past us in the air, her hand still outstretched for her dragon far too high above her to catch her.

“VIOLET!”

I reach for her too, my hand straining for hers but she plummets past me. Sgaeyl turns and races after her, along with tattered slips of shadow snapping and straining against me, too depleted to grab hold.

We shoot down towards her, gaining on her every second, but the ground is racing up towards us far quicker. I reach blindly for her through the bond, but she's lost to me, only an aching absence where she once shone bright; now dark and still, like she was never there.

A flash of gold barrels upwards from the treeline. Andarna. My heart clenches tight, as I wonder if she has the strength to hold her. A wordless scream catches in my throat as Violet falls in between Andarna's outstretched wings, praying that she'll be able to bear the impact and fly her to the ground.

But she's not enough.

Instead, all the air leaves my lungs as Andarna's body takes the impact of Violet's freefall, plummeting back down with her towards the ground. Sgaeyl is diving after her, gaining an even more furious speed as a terrified scream lances through our bond.

Shimmering gold blares across my vision, different from before, like it's all around us, not just hovering at the edges. Time slows, but we do too and I fight against Andarna's magic to try to reach them, pushing everything I have into the shadows at the ground that's getting closer and closer, trying to force them up to break their fall.

Time loses all meaning. We jolt forwards in a rush, suddenly closer to them as Andarna's magic stutters and skips a beat, time slowing and stilling and rushing to catch up.

The only constant is Tairn's bellowing roar of panic, the embodiment of every bit of agonising terror I feel at the idea of losing Violet, of her saving us and not being able to save her.

The ground rushes up to meet us, Sgaeyl gaining on Andarna and Violet with every second but we're moving too fast, we're too vertical and I know she'll never be able to pull up in time. We're too close, the top of the trees inches away, the brutal impact of the ground just moments below.

I use the last bit of strength I have to spin scraps of shadows in all directions, trying to cushion the impact. They race up and out from the treeline, and I lose myself in the power, feeling the weight of the dragons' impact against the shield at the same time as I feel the darkness envelop us, until that's all there is.

Darkness. Nothing but darkness.

"Xaden." Sgaeyl's voice rings through my head. "Xaden!"

I am shadows. I am darkness. I ground desperately against the power, trying to center myself on the hillside at Aretia.

"XADEN!" Sgaeyl screams it at me.

And the shadows clear.

I'm on the ground staring up at the sky. A huge gust of wind blasts across my face from the right and my head rolls towards it, seeing Tairn land on the hillside, dust and grit pelting me under the beat of his wings.

There's no air. My chest is tight and heavy, like a huge weight is bearing down on me from above.

My head lolls back dead-centre, looking up at the sky as I try to remember how to breathe. Other dragons are still diving towards us. Only seconds have passed.

And then I remember. *Violet*.

I draw in a huge gasp of air, the oxygen burning through my throat and filling up my lungs with fire. Rolling to one side, I stagger to my feet, but my legs give out underneath me and I fall forwards onto my knees in the ground.

But I can see her.

Sgaeyl nudges at Andarna's head, trying to rouse her. I see one tiny golden eye blink open. Violet is sprawled across her back, her silver hair lost in Andarna's golden feathers.

I go to reach for her and my shadows move without me, slipping her from Andarna's back and float her across to me. I pull her into my arms, cradling her against my chest.

"Violet," I say, but she doesn't move. I can't feel her through the bond.

My eyes search for the wound, pulling back her flight jacket and vest to find the place where she was stabbed, still feeling the echo of it in my own side. Malignant spidery veins of black are spilling out across her skin in all directions from the wound, still leaking blood so dark it looks almost black.

"Fuck, it must be poison." I say to anyone that can hear me. I'm vaguely aware of other dragons landing around us, of someone saying my name from far away.

"You have to fight it," I beg her, saying it like she can hear me, even with the unbearable absence of her through the bond. "I'll take care of you. Just... just live. Please live."

I can't lose her, not like this. I cup her face in one hand, willing her to open her eyes. Her eyelids flutter and my heart clenches, as she blinks open her eyes to look up at me.

But it's not Violet's eyes that I see. It's only more blackness, her pupils blown out, the same spidery veins from the wound spilling out across the whites of her eyes.

Her mouth parts like she's going to say something, and then her head rolls to one side as she loses consciousness.

Blood

No. No. No. I only realise I'm saying the words out loud as Garrick kneels on the ground in front of me, blood coating one side of his face. A bloodied hand reaches out for Violet, his eyes meeting mine for permission to touch her. I nod frantically, desperate for someone that has any clue how to help her. He grabs her wrist, feeling for a pulse and then leans his ear over her mouth, carefully watching the rise and fall of her chest.

"She's breathing, Xaden. Her pulse is slow, but it's steady."

"Her eyes are black." Panic flares across his face and he carefully lifts one eyelid. I stare straight ahead, holding her tight to me, clinging onto the last memory I have of her face before we took to the skies. I did this. This is all my fault.

"No, they –"

My head snaps to her, as he gently moves her face back to look towards me. There's no blackness, no spidery veins of darkness. But her eyes, though her own, are devoid of all light, empty and unfocused.

"But I saw it." I look at Garrick, searching his face for answers.

"Xaden, you're exhausted and –"

"I saw it!" I shout, but my voice breaks on the words.

"Ok, ok. Do you know what happened to her?" Garrick tears off the edge of his shirt, bundling it into my hand that is still putting pressure on the wound at her side.

"A venom stabbed her with a dagger tipped in something. She felt the burn of it from the moment she was stabbed until she fell," Tairn supplies, filling in the blanks.

"Can you still feel her?" My gaze finds Tairn, hoping that somehow his bond to her will be greater than mine.

He doesn't answer for what feels like an eternity. *"There's nothing."*

Just the absence of her, an empty blank nothingness where Violet is supposed to be.

I relay the conversation to Garrick, trying to keep hold of the panic rising in my chest. I can't lose her.

"Maybe it isn't poison," Garrick says, his brow furrowing. "Maybe it's magic."

I'm vaguely aware of the others talking behind me, but my gaze rakes over Violet, as if the answer on how to save her will be right in front of me if I just look hard enough. Her forearm is bent in two places. She's covered in blood, so much blood. She was never supposed to be here. I did this. All of this is my fault.

Imogen kneels next to Garrick, pulling off her flight goggles and I ease the pressure off the wound at Violet's side to see if the blood has started to clot. But blood so dark it looks like ink still pulses from the wound and the spidery veins have started to snake across her stomach.

"Her blood is fucking *black*." I say to Garrick, putting pressure back against her side and pull

Violet in closer to me. I try to shift her so she's sitting upright against me, as if that will somehow keep the veins of blackness reaching her vital organs.

"It has to be poison," Imogen says, but her voice breaks on the words. Garrick turns to reach for her, but she pushes him away. "Look at it! We have to get her back to Basgiath. Nolan *might* be able to help."

But something deep in my chest tells me she won't survive that long.

"That's a twelve-hour flight," I say. "And I'm pretty sure her arm is broken." How would we get her there?

"We can get her anywhere you need, Xaden," Sgaeyl says, her tone calm and reassuring.

The closest outpost is Eltuval, but it's still hours and hours of flying and there's no guarantee they'll have the poison masters to –

Brennan. I need to get her to Brennan. He's the only one I trust to keep her alive.

"There's somewhere closer," I whisper, and my fingers reach out to stroke her cheek. Aretia is less than two hours from here.

"You can't be serious," says Ciaran, an undercurrent of anger already lacing his words.

"You'll put everything at risk," Garrick says, his eyes meeting mine over Violet.

Tairn's roar is so loud that the gravel on the floor shakes.

"I wouldn't say that again," Imogen mutters, stealing a glance at Garrick. "Or he'll probably eat you. And don't forget, if she dies, there's a damn good chance Xaden does too." She looks back at me, giving me the tiniest hint of a nod that says she's with me, whatever I decide.

"I'm not saying he shouldn't, just reminding him what the stakes are." Garrick offers me a small tight-lipped smile. He's with me too.

"If we're spotted, Xaden –" Ciaran starts to say.

"I don't give a fuck what happens to me!" I look up at the rest of them then for the first time, expecting to see Liam standing with them and a fresh wave of pain tears through me. I am not losing anyone else. "We are going and that's an order."

"No need for orders, man." Bodhi shakes his head. "We'll save her."

I brush a strand of hair out of Violet's face, tucking it back behind her ear. "Live up to your nickname and fight this, Violence," I whisper against her ear, praying she can hear me.

"We have to get her to him," I say, and struggle to my feet, my arms still gripped tight around Violet. "We ride." I go to walk towards Sgaeyl.

"No."

Tairn's voice booms through my head and I pause, ready to fight him on this. I'm not leaving Violet, not for a second.

"You ride with me," he says.

I blink, too taken aback to argue and head towards him instead, as a burst of pride from Sgaeyl flares through our bond.

I don't see the cliffs as we pass over them; all I see is Violet. She's buckled into the saddle on Tairn's back but I sit behind her, holding her against my chest, trying to keep her upright.

I alternate every minute between checking her pulse, the wound in her side and her eyes, my heart pounding for the entire sixty seconds I make myself count before I take another look. The minutes feel like hours, time dragging to a standstill like it's slowing with each of Violet's shaky, rasping breaths.

The insidious black veins from the wound snake around her waist, creeping up her torso. I don't voice it, terrified to make it more real, though I'm sure the riot starts to fly faster, as if Tairn and the rest of the dragons can feel my pulse racing in fear.

I have no idea how long we've been flying for when I see the first tendrils of blackness edging out from the top of her dragon scale vest, crawling inch by inch up her neck.

"It's spreading," I say, unable to keep the fear trapped in my chest any longer.

"We're almost there." Tairn's voice is strained inside my head.

I can't watch the tendrils any longer, can't bear to see them take her from me while I stare uselessly. I pull her against me and tell her a story. Our story. All the words I should have said and never found.

"Parapet. Last year. You traded a boot with someone you'd never met. That was it. That was when I fell for you," I whisper into her hair, cocooning us in shadows. "It was such a stupid thing to do, but fuck, you did it anyway. You didn't know her; she was no-one to you. And you did it anyway.

And Threshing. Gods, I was so angry with you. Risking yourself like that. But standing up for what was right, fuck the risk... you were one of us. Right then, I knew. And I couldn't tell you. I was so desperate to keep you out of all this. Away from me. I tried so hard to stay away from you, Violet. I never wanted you wrapped up in this. I was nobody to you, but you were already everything to me. Please fight, Vi. I can't lose you. You're everything to me. You're everything."

"Wingleader –" Tairn's voice startles me and the shadows clear. I see beyond Violet for the first time in hours, spotting the Temple of Amari in the distance, tucked within a sea of identical houses. Tairn curves up towards the stone buildings that line the hill on the far side, angling for the clearing that is as familiar to me as breathing. Home. Even in the near-darkness, I recognise every bit of it, every tree, every blade of grass. I keep Violet pulled tight against me with one arm around her chest, my hand already unbuckling the straps that hold her in place on Tairn's back. He lands smoothly, trying not to jostle her and risk causing her more pain.

My shadows help lift her up and out of the saddle, wrapping around her to support her head and cushion her broken arm. I jump from Tairn's back and the shadows place her back into my arms. I'm striding for the main building before the others are even off their dragons.

But Garrick and Imogen catch up to me, walking on either side and breathlessly match my pace.

“You’re sure about this?” Imogen asks, even though it’s far too late to change my mind.

“Stop fucking asking him that,” Garrick snaps at her across me. “He made his decision. Support him or get the fuck out, Imogen.”

“And it’s a bad one,” Ciaran mutters from just behind me, and my gut twists at his words. There’s so much at stake.

“When *you* have a hundred and seven scars on your back, then you get to make the fucking decisions, Ciaran.” Bodhi shoots back at him.

The guards at the entrance don’t question us. I don’t know if they recognise me or if they can tell from the pulsing fear in my eyes that they won’t be able to stop me from reaching the healer anyway. Mage lights hover inside the hallway, casting a soft, golden glow over us. I look down at Violet and feel fear clamp tight around my heart at the veins now crawling over her jawline and starting to edge across her face. What if I’m too late?

Tairn’s roar reaches us even from here, the others stiffening as his voice booms through my head.

“I hold you personally accountable for all of this, Wingleader. And I will flay the skin off your bones if you even think about the possibility of failure again. It is not an option. She lives.”

“What was that?” Garrick asks, fearful eyes going to Violet in my arms.

“He basically said that he’ll cook me alive if I fail,” I say, pulling her in closer to me. She’s not going to die. Tairn is right. I refuse to consider any other possibility.

We climb the stairwell and Garrick runs ahead, thumping his fist relentlessly on the door at the end of the corridor.

I kiss Violet’s forehead and whisper, “You have to fight, Vi. You can hate me all you want when you wake up. You can scream, hit, throw your fucking daggers at me for all I care, but you have to live. You can’t make me fall for you and then die. None of this is worth it without you.”

The door opens.

“Xaden?” Brennan looks at me like he’s seen a ghost.

“You have to save her.”

And then he realises who I’m holding in my arms, sees the sister I promised to protect.

Violet

My eyelids feel heavy, and the room is warm and fuzzy as I wake. Sunlight spills across the bed, shadows dancing, and a light breeze sways the thin gauzy drapes at the window. It feels like one of those perfect mornings where you have nowhere to be, all heavy and languid from hours of sleep. There is only one man who could possibly make me feel like this.

“You’re awake.”

There he is. Xaden’s deep, gravelly voice strokes over my skin. I turn my head to one side to find him already out of bed, standing above me. Sleep still paws at me, and I blink trying to focus on his face. His hair is messy and tousled and I smile at the sight of it.

“Can I check your side?” He lifts the blankets up and my heart skips. He’s coming back to bed. I stretch up, still so tired but in the most blissful way. Sleep hovers on the edge of my mind and my limbs feel like honey. I could just curl back up and spend all day in bed with him. Sleeping, and not sleeping.

His fingers skim featherlight over my waist, lifting up my nightdress and heat pools, pushing the tiredness away. Ok, not sleeping. Gods, the way he touches me feels like molten fire.

He strokes my skin, barely touching. “Miraculous.”

The word confuses me. “What’s miraculous?” But the words come out in a croak, scratching at my throat.

“Water,” he says, and I realise how thirsty I am. He pours me a glass from the pitcher on the bedside table. “You must be parched.”

Caring, sweet Xaden is my favourite Xaden. I push myself up in the bed, leaning back into the downy pillows. “Thanks,” I say, taking the glass from him and guzzle the whole thing in one.

“*You* are.” He sets the empty glass back down on the table. “You are miraculous,” he says in a whisper. “I was fucking terrified, Violet. There aren’t adequate words.”

His words tug at a memory, but I can’t find it. Fear flickers in his eyes and I reach out to comfort him, trying to take it away.

“I’m fine, Xaden,” I say softly, lifting my hand to his chest.

“I thought I was going to lose you.”

Lose me? I frown. He could never lose me. Ridiculous man. I have no idea why he’s going all mushy on me now, but the softness in his voice makes me smile. He leans forward and kisses my forehead, a gentle peck of a kiss that feels so sweet and loving that my heart clenches.

“You aren’t going to lose me.” I lean forward and kiss him, determined to show him how much I belong to him. He kisses me like he’s drowning, and I melt into his lips. Gods, the way this man kisses; it sparks through every nerve ending in my body.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he says, grabbing my hands between his. “I’m not saying we won’t fight or you won’t want to throw those daggers at me when I’m inevitably an ass, but I swear I will always strive to do better.”

“Make what up to me?” I ask, but I can’t keep the smile off my face. Whatever he’s done sounds like hours of delicious make-up sex of the most exquisite kind.

“How much do you remember? By the time we got you here, the poison spread to your brain and —”

Poison. Everything comes flooding back in a rush. I pull my hand out of his, scooting up the bed and away from him as panic soars in my chest. Falling. The burn of the wound in my side. Miraculous. What’s miraculous? My heart *breaking*. Fucking traitor. Lightning. Raw power searing through me. Liam. My heart shattering into a million pieces. My fault. It’s my fault.

There’s not enough air. I don’t know where to focus, my eyes scan the room suddenly lost.

“*Silver One.*” The familiar comfort of Tairn’s voice echoes through my mind, grounding me.

“*Are you okay?*” I ask them both, relief washing over me as I feel the steady presence of Tairn’s power and Andarna’s golden light in my Archives.

“*Of course!*” Andarna’s gentle, lilting voice makes my heart clench. She’s okay, she’s okay.

“*You saved me,*” I say, remembering her catching me, the shimmering gold of her magic all around us and a warm burst of pride flares through our bond.

“*You saved yourself, Silver One,*” says Tairn.

Xaden’s voice draws me back to him. “— isn’t quite the same, but she’s... her.” The panic on his face makes me want to reach out for him, but he looks like a different person from the one I woke up to. I remember all of it, all the things he never told me. The secrets he couldn’t trust me with when I trusted him with everything. “The healer told me he isn’t sure what lasting effects the poison might have, because it was something he’s never seen, and no one really knows how long it will take to get your memories back or if there’s any lasting damage, but I’ll tell you —”

I don’t want to hear this. I’m not ready to have this conversation. I throw up a hand and scramble out of bed on the other side, away from him. Pulling my robe around me, I stumble to the windows, realising for the first time that I have no idea where we are.

This isn’t Basgiath. It’s... impossible. A town is nestled in the valley beneath us, mountains framing the sky to the far side. It looks like a toy town, identical green roofs that glint in the sunlight. But it’s the temple they surround that makes me feel like reality is slipping away, its ornate columns found nowhere else in our kingdom. It can’t be.

“Violet?”

“Where are we?” I say, my gaze sweeping across the buildings that look so familiar. “And don’t you dare lie to me. Not again.”

“You remember.”

“I remember.” All the lies, all the secrets are right there. They dull every memory like a twisted poison spreading through our history together.

“Thank gods.”

If I hadn’t remembered, would he have told me? Or would he have used that little convenience to keep everything from me all over again?

“Where. Are. We?” I glare at him. “Say it.”

“The way you’re looking at me says you already know.” He gives me a small, sad smile.

“This looks like Aretia. There’s only one temple with those particular columns. I’ve seen the drawings.” It makes me feel crazy to say it.

“Yes.”

“Aretia was burned to the ground.” Everything I thought I knew about the world blurs. I can’t separate fact from fiction, all the truths and the lies bleed together. “I’ve seen *those* drawings, too, the ones the scribes brought back for the public notices. My mother told me she saw the embers with her own eyes, so where are we?”

“Aretia.”

“Rebuilt or never burned?” I turn my back on him to look out the window, noticing the charred trees and empty land to our far side. I already know the answer.

“In the process of rebuilding.” He moves to stand closer to me and follows my gaze. My traitorous heart pounds faster as he gets closer to me. No. I can’t do this now.

“Why haven’t I read about this?” He starts to say something but I hold up a hand, while I work through it. “Melgren can’t see the outcome when more than three of you are together. That’s why you’re not allowed to assemble.”

“That and we’re not big enough to warrant the attention of the scribes anymore. We’re not hidden. We’re just not... advertising our existence.” He turns from the window to look at me. “You can know whatever you want. Just ask.”

All the things I want to know disappear, drying up on my tongue before I can speak. “Tell me one thing right now.”

“Anything.”

“Is...” I choke on the question, like just saying it will make it more real. “Is Liam really dead?”

A heaviness weighs down in the room, the silence dragging out endlessly. He pulls a tiny wooden figure out of his pocket and tries to hand it to me.

My eyes fill with tears. I knew he was gone, already felt the pain of that truth wrapped around my heart along with all the others. “It’s my fault.”

“No, it’s mine,” he says sadly. “If I had just told you everything sooner, you would have been prepared. You probably would have schooled us all on how to kill them.” He sets the carving in my hand. My heart aches as I realise it’s Andarna. “I know I should have, but I couldn’t bear to burn it. We laid him to rest yesterday. Well, the others did. I haven’t left this room since we got here. I haven’t left you.”

Is that supposed to be enough to forgive him for all of this? Liam’s words come back to me with too much clarity. But I’m not ready to hear Xaden out yet. I need to think. I need time to process all this.

“Well, you do have a vested interest in my survival,” I say. “Give me a second to get dressed, and then we’ll talk.”

“Kicking me out of my own room.” He arches a brow at me, his lips curving up into a smile. “New one.”

I glare at him, fighting against the way my pulse races when he looks at me like that. “Now, Riorson.”

Something like pain flashes through his eyes, but he points to the door in the corner. “Bathing chamber is through there.”

The second the door closes behind him, I want to pull it back open and beg him to stay. But I am done being the stupid, naïve girl everyone thinks they can manipulate. I don’t need him. I don’t need his arms wrapped around me, telling me everything is going to be okay. Nothing is ever going to be okay again.

It’s only when I’m sat in the bath that I realise I have no idea how much time has passed.

“*Three days, Silver One.*” Tairn’s voice booms through my head.

“Right,” I say out loud. I’m not sure how to talk to him either, still nursing the quiet anger of them keeping these secrets from me. I can feel the burn of his guilt through our bond, but he doesn’t speak, doesn’t push.

I take a deep steadying breath and reach for the soap to wash my hair, trying to take stock of the memories from Athebyne. The raw grief of losing Liam tears through me in a choking sob. It doesn’t matter what Xaden says. Liam’s death is my fault. He was protecting me. It should have been me that died, not him.

I sit there until the heat drains away, and I realise I’m shivering in the freezing water. I wrap myself in a towel and stare at my reflection, my eyes empty and hollow as I comb through my hair. Each movement takes longer than it should, an unbearable weight pressing down on me. Tears threaten so frequently that I squeeze my eyes shut tight against them.

I wander back into the bedroom in search of clothes, finding my pack on a chair in the corner. I open it to find Xaden’s flight jacket. I feel like I’ve been stabbed, my stomach clenching tight from the agony of that memory in his room. *I think I’m in love with you. You think, or you know?* It feels like a lifetime ago that I packed this bag, like I was an entirely different person. Just a stupid girl who believed whatever lies I was told. Xaden. My mother. Fuck, does Mira know? No, surely she couldn’t know about this. And Dain... he was supposed to be my best friend. How could he –?

But somehow, it’s Xaden’s lies that hurt most of all. I thought under all his walls he loved me too. I stare out of the window, looking down on Aretia, trying to make sense of what’s real and not real. Liam’s words replay over and over in my head. *He needs you. Please hear him out.*

I take a deep breath and open the door to find Xaden leaning on the wall next to Bodhi. He grins at me. “Good to see you up and about, Sorrengail.”

I give him a tight smile and gesture Xaden inside. “Come back in,” I say, but the words sound forced and formal.

“As long as you’ve invited me.”

This is so weirdly awkward. I don’t even know how to talk to him, there’s so many conversations we need to have I’m not sure where to start.

“Is all this original?” I say, gesturing around the room at the fireplace and coving. Architecture...

really? I'm talking about the damned architecture?

But he doesn't so much as blink. "The majority of the fortress is stone." There's an awkward gap of nothing so he fills it. "Stone doesn't burn." His eyes are filled with so much pain and sincerity.

"Right," I say, looking away towards the window.

"I think after all you've seen, the question I have to ask you before I tell you everything is pretty simple. Are you in? Are you willing to fight with us?"

How could he even ask me that? After everything I did to try to save them all, almost tearing myself apart in the process... I look at him, but he feels like a stranger to me.

"I'm in." I nod. Of course, I'm in.

"I'm so sorry I had to keep..." The pain in his eyes slips into his voice, tugging at my heart and he reaches for me, like he can see my resolve cracking.

"Not happening." I step away from him. "Just because I believe you and am willing to fight with you doesn't mean I'll trust you with my heart again. And I can't be with someone I don't trust."

But the idea of never being with him again makes my heart pound painfully.

"I've never lied to you, Violet. Not once. I never will." The sincerity in his voice is heartbreaking. I walk over to the window, the broken pieces of my own stupid, foolish heart feel like shards of glass in my chest.

Slowly, I turn back to look at him. "It's not even that you kept this from me. I get it. It's the ease with which you did it. The ease with which I let you into my heart and didn't get the same in return." All those moments between us when he told me to walk away and I kept pushing and pushing, determined to make him see. But the whole time, he... I shake my head. Gods, I'm so fucking stupid. Just a stupid girl that wanted him to need me like I needed him.

"You're right. I keep secrets." Keep, not kept. He's still not telling me everything, even now. He walks towards me, pinning me up against the window, his hands resting on the glass on either side of me. "It took me a long time to trust you, a long time to realise I fell for you."

His words wrap around my heart, squeezing tight. Someone knocks, and my head turns to the door but Xaden ignores it. His face is just inches from mine, his eyes boring into me like he can see the thoughts in my head.

"Don't say that," I whisper, looking up into his onyx eyes, seeing every gold fleck I've memorised with him above me. I so desperately want to forgive him. It would be so easy to lean in and kiss him and say it's all going to be okay.

"I fell for you," he says it again, but this time I hear the words he's not saying. The three little words he's still so careful to avoid. "And you know what? You might not trust me anymore, but you still love me."

I feel heat rush into my cheeks as he brandishes all the stupid words I said to him that he still doesn't say to me.

"I gave you my trust for free once, and once is all you get," I say. I will not let myself be hurt by this man again. I'm not sure I could survive it.

“I fucked up by not telling you sooner, and I won’t even try to justify my reasons. But now I’m trusting you with my life – with *everyone’s* lives. I’ll tell you anything you want to know and everything you don’t. I’ll spend every single day of my life earning back your trust.”

“And if it’s not possible?”

“You still love me. It’s possible. I’m not afraid of hard work, especially not when I know just how sweet the rewards are. I would rather lose this entire war than live without you, and if that means I have to prove myself over and over, then I’ll do it. You gave me your heart, and I’m keeping it.”

Another knock at the door makes me jump.

“Fuck is he impatient. You have about twenty seconds to ask a question, if I know him.”

My mind swims with all the words I should say. Do you love me? Do you love me like I love you? I grab hold of the only safe question I can.

“I’m still hoping that missive at Athebyne was really about the War Games. Do you think there’s any chance we just happened to end up in the middle of a wyvern attack at that outpost?”

“That definitely wasn’t an accident, little sister,” someone says from the doorway, their voice scratching at a memory I can’t quite place.

I feel like I’m falling again, the entire world falling out from under me as I take in the man leaning on the doorframe, his sleeves rolled up and arms crossed over his chest. I’m vaguely aware of Xaden saying something far away, as my gaze scans over the brother who looks exactly like he did the last time I saw him over six years ago. The brother who I’ve missed every day since he died, standing right in front of me, just a few paces away.

“Brennan?” His name sounds wrong on my lips, like I’m slipping into insanity. Fear spikes my heart. Is this real or not real?

But he smiles, his eyes crinkling in the corners. He’s here, he’s alive.

“Welcome to the revolution, Violet.”

End Notes

Thank you thank you thank you to the wonderful Rebecca Yarros for creating this amazing world, characters and story. It made me fall back in love with writing again and has been the biggest confidence boost for me to write my own novel someday. Thank you for the inspiration!

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