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I stare at the rippling water Shellsea leaves behind. “Tambrynn, what was that? What just happened?” Lucas asks over my shoulder.

I take a deep breath and ignore the threats the mergirl left behind. “I don’t know. I had an impulse to take her hand. Then I saw into her memories. I think she relived it as I watched.” I don’t tell him about her desire to kill me and feast on my power.

Chilled, I rub my arms. “She wouldn’t have been so agreeable otherwise. She and some of her merfolk were unrestrained until Siltworth stopped them. But he was savage in his rule. Neither one is better than the other.”

“Maybe you’re maturing into your firebird abilities?” He reaches for me.

I lean into his warm body, drinking it in like a sponge. His solid form eases my jittery nerves. “Do you think she’s telling the truth about Siltworth?” A shudder slides down my spine. Anavrin is brighter and more beautiful than Tenebris, but the danger here is more intense as well.

“I don’t know. And half of what she said is no easier to figure out than a befuddled riddle. She could be infirm, you know.” He moves me an arm’s length away so he can look at me directly. “But you’re growing stronger every day. And we have your grandfather to help us. Whatever happens, we’re going to be okay.”

I’m sure my half-smile isn’t as convincing as I wish it were. I want to believe him. If only danger didn’t lurk behind every corner, every branch, every stream we come upon. “Let’s go back to the campsite.”

He kisses me softly at first, and then deeper. I run my fingers through his silky hair, relishing it. My heartbeat races harder than when Shellsea startled me. I lean into him, my arms around his waist. His heartbeat is as errant as mine.

Memories of him shirtless in the passageway have teased my dreams and chased away nightmares that have tried to steal what little rest we’ve managed to get. He tastes like wind and the mint we chewed before we left camp this morning. My roving hand accidentally slips inside the back of his shirt, and I’m startled enough to pull away. We both laugh shyly, breathlessly.

I squeeze him and step back, knowing the heated moment is over. “I’ve wanted to do that since I broke your spell,” I admit.

A blush colors Lucas’s pale face. “Kind of hard with your grandfather inches away from us for days on end.” His smile is impish. “And propriety, of course.”

My hand covers the snicker that leaks from me. “Of course.”

He glances at the sky. “It is getting late. We probably should head back. But, maybe not so terribly quickly?”

I giggle. “Fine with me.”

A last, lonely cloud moves across the sun, covering us in a

shadow, and chilling me. My necklace, which lays against my chest warms again. I grab Lucas's arm and stop. Blue energy wavers over my hands.

"What is it?" he whispers.

A shriek blasts in the sky. I slap my hands to my ears.

A squirrel darts away, with its tail nervously bobbing. It chitters loudly as it jumps from limb to limb in the opposite direction from the noise.

A shadow, possibly a cloud blocking the sun, passes over us. I glance upwards.

The only clouds in the sky are spread out thin and nowhere near the sun. There's no reason for the shadow.

Lucas and I stand back-to-back, scanning the area. My ability thrums beneath my skin in time to my furious heartbeat and I'm ready to change back and take flight. "What do you think that was?"

"Whatever it is, it's big." Lucas's voice quivers.

My necklace agrees as it lies heated against my chest.

Shuffling noises sound in the trees to my left. Usually, my father's beasts announce themselves with howls, not shrieks. And they don't darken the skies.

I'm tense, waiting. An instant before I would change, Arrin, the nomad woman, trudges out of the thick undergrowth of the timber that runs along the swollen stream.

She's soaked up to her flowered dress's chest. "Heh, Tambrynn! Thought that noise was ye. I see ye are none the worse for wear. Belated thanks, by the way, for freeing me from them abominations." When she steps out of the tree's shade, I see her face is bruised, but her stick is held firm in her hand. Bandages are wrapped around both feet and I have to wonder at her trek home from the froggen castle.

I'm relieved it's her and not some other creature. But surely my tingling-warm necklace wasn't sensing Arrin as a threat? I

glance upwards again. Nothing there except a mostly blue sky. “It’s good to see you. But that wasn’t me shrieking.” Did I really sound that loud?

More shuffling noises. Nobbert steps out of the bushes, followed by several other nomads. He wears his usual puckered look. “Ugh. It’s you. Should’ve known. Wherever there’s trouble ...” His voice drifts as he glances over my shoulder. “And I see you have your beau with you. Oi, and in his djinn form, too. Must be my lucky day. *Again.*”

I ignore his less-than-friendly greeting and focus on Arrin. “So, this is where you all are. What are you doing here so far away from your mountain fortress?”

Before Arrin can speak, Nobbert steps menacingly toward me. “Trying to find Colly and a group of others that self-appointed nincompoo of an eldrin took this morning.” He hammers his finger in my direction as if it were my fault they were missing.

Well, Colly was partly my fault. But the others weren’t. “If you recall, I left so you’d be safe. I can’t help it if the eldrin came back. How many did Nyle take this time?”

“Ten women. It might not have happened had I been there. The rain and my injured feet held me up. I returned shortly after the Councilmaster took them. Someone needs to take those blasted necklaces away from them. Things were more peaceful before.” Arrin swipes a hand across her nose and swallows hard.

She continues after composing herself. “They were doing the wash. As ye recall, the wash area is outside the perimeter of the kinstone. One of the men tasked with guarding our entry saw one of the women, Aella, run from the trees in a panic. He wasn’t fast enough to stop the enforcer before they vanished with her. When he checked, they were all gone.”

“At this rate, we’ll all get picked off within a week, or we’ll

starve hiding in the mountains. Them eldrin need to be stopped!” Nobbert stomps past me, his boots sucking into the soggy ground. The nomad men with him don’t so much as glance my way.

A flash of my life on Tenebris crosses my mind’s eye. I know what it is like to invite the wrath of those in charge. Tears prick behind my eyes, but I hold them back. Nobbert wouldn’t thank me for being weepy.

“And how are you going to stop them?” Lucas asks quietly.

I sense his unease, but I also know how unreasonable the male nomad is.

Nobbert hustles back straight for Lucas, the other nomads splitting to let him pass.

I step in his path. “What he’s asking is, do you have more of your shackles? Is there some weapon you have that will disable them? Surely, you’re not thinking of confronting them without a plan?”

Red-faced, Nobbert turns to glower at me. “It’s all your fault. If you hadn’t returned here, this wouldn’t be happening.”

Lucas pushes me aside, anger stiffening his stance. “So, the eldrin weren’t taking your kin before we got here? You were best friends with the Councilmaster? Is that what you’re saying? I might not remember everything, but I do remember you saying Colly wasn’t the first. Blaming Tambrynn might be an easy way to focus your anger, but let’s be honest. Magic aside, your inability to keep your clan safe is not our fault.”

I’m glad for Lucas’s quick ability to reason out a situation. However, guilt gnaws at my gut. “I take some responsibility for Colly’s abduction. I also offered to help look for her. You said you knew where she was and that you’d go get her later. Besides having more women taken, what’s changed?”

Arrin tsks. “No one’s left to cook for them. They *can’t eat* my cooking. Said it’s like eating charred wood.”

I would've laughed at Arrin's animated mocking of the men's taste in her cooking had I not been so dumbfounded at the incredible folly of their situation. "That's it? You can't cook for yourselves? Not even a little?"

Nobbert's face turns so red that I think it might melt off his broad shoulders. "We have a system and a way things work that you wouldn't understand. You and your woo-hoo magic." He flings his sausage-thick fingers around. "Not everyone can change to a bird and feast on worms to get by."

"We don't eat worms to survive," I snap back at him.

I glance at Arrin, who purses her lips, no doubt recalling when Lucas ate a bug after one of my father's hexes hit him. He'd been a bit dazed and lost to his bird self. I'm thankful for her silence.

Lucas puffs out his chest in a magpie manner. "And truly, what's to understand about a system where only one or two of you know how to do something, but no one else has a clue? Wouldn't it make more sense to share responsibilities so you don't starve? Or is that beyond your comprehension?" His words, though sensible, are not received well.

Indignant at being corrected in any manner, the nomad men shout and spit, cursing Lucas and all of *his* kind. I'm thankful I don't understand half of what they're saying. It seems, however, Lucas does as he turns still and stony-faced.

My head hurts. "Stop!" I demand, infusing my words with my ability. Fire creeps over my fingers, and I sense its desire to be used. "*Touch them. Set fire to them all.*" I close my eyes tight to hold back the foreign longing. It's too much like the mergirl's cravings, and I reject it. The voice disappears, replaced by a cool calmness. I breathe out my relief and open my eyes.

Everyone is frozen in place, except Lucas, who I hadn't focused my energy on.

He leans into my ear. “Are you okay, my lady?”

“I will be.” I step toward Nobbert, asserting as much control as I can. “What Lucas is saying is practical. However, that doesn’t change what is happening to you at the moment. I can help you if you’re willing to aid us.” I let go of my ability, leaving the bunch heaving and sputtering.

“I don’t like it when you do that,” Hard consonants grind out of Nobbert’s mouth.

“Then don’t require it.” I shrug, tired of his theatrics. “We need to find a certain ring and the bag with the maps Arrin gave me before I left your mountain. Help us, and I can take you somewhere safe for the night with someone who knows how to cook,” I add pointedly. “You can trust us.”

Nobbert grunts. “Lost something else besides the Eye of Fate, have you?” His chuckle is grating. “I haven’t seen anything of yours.” The men behind him say nothing.

I eye him skeptically. He’s holding something back. Maybe if he stayed with us long enough, we’d be able to wheedle it out of him.

Arrin steps forward. “Oh, ye old coot! We found yer bag, Tambrynn, along the bank upstream. It was empty. And, thank ye. We’ll take ye up on yer offer.” She glares at the men. “We can help look for the rest of yer things.”

“Now hold on, old woman.” Nobbert gets nose-to-nose with Arrin. “You don’t answer for us.”

I bite back a laugh as both of their bulbous snouts bump.

The group behind him mutters in agreement.

“You’re not the oracle you think you are.” A vein on the male nomad’s neck bulges and thrums.

Arrin’s hand on her walking stick turns white, her fingers rasping against the smoothed wood. “And ye are? Who was the one that found our mountain and the kinstone? Was it ye—”

DAWN FORD

A shadow snakes over us. I ignore their heated exchange and look up, scouring the skies. And then I see it.

A dragon. Black as the deepest part of the night.

And it's coming straight down. Crackling energy flashes, zigging toward us.

No, toward me.