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I t's dark by the time we gather all the ingredients for the healing paste. Thankfully, the trellers haven't returned, though I'm sure they're watching us. I have other things, bigger things, to worry about, however.

Grandfather grinds the fire rock, or lava, as Rekspire calls it, with a mortar and pestle. It leaves behind an ashy powder that reminds me of the soot I used to rub into my silver hair to hide it.

Lucas gathers sticks for a fire as I set the last stone in place to seal our campsite from sight. "*Nineno, arodente, ebargofiant.*" The displacement spell snaps into place around a large area, leaving us in a quiet bubble.

"You're getting better each time you work the spells. Stronger." Grandfather's smile is genuine, and I warm at his praise.

"Thank you." I move to sit back on the tree stump at the center of our camp. "What does the fire rock do, exactly?"

"It removes impurities from wounds, draws infections

out.” He moves on to the leaves and scrapes them, the oil dripping into the ashy-looking rock powder. A sweet perfume fills the air.

The scent is invigorating and pleasant. “I see what you mean by the perfume of these.” I take one of the used leaves and rub it on my skin.

Next in is the blood-red sap he and Lucas gathered from an already scarred tree. I’m excited about trying the mixture. The color reminds me of Audhild’s skin when she’s in her woman form.

“Now, you’ll have to use this before the sap solidifies and becomes impossible to spread.” Grandfather stirs it round and round, scrapes his flat metal utensil on the bowl’s side, then stirs it again. He dips his finger in and rubs it into his coarse skin. “That should do it.”

The sudden realization that I now must undress to use the paste momentarily makes my heart skip a beat. “Where—”

“This way, youngling.” Audhild, who had been leaning against a pine tree, takes the mortar and strides off past our protective barrier. She stops to glance back at me. “I won’t forget where we are. I found a stream when we were searching for the fire rock. There were no fishkin anywhere in sight. You’ll be perfectly safe. Come along.”

I’m unsure if I want to be alone with the fire dragon, but I also don’t want to be alone on the outside of our site, either. I follow her as quickly as my aching body allows. It’s not far, but I’m exhausted by the time we reach the stream. The dark water glitters under a partial moon, which doesn’t ease my anxiety.

“Wash in the water first. A clean wound will help the lotion do its job.” She must notice my reluctance, for she huffs and turns toward me. “There’s no danger here.”

“I’m no longer afraid of water, thanks to your swim outfit.” I hug my arms to my chest.

"Then what is your reluctance?" Her voice has turned sharp, putting me on edge.

"I'm unused to anyone seeing me—"

Her groan cuts me off. "Modesty. I should've known."

"It's not only that." I stand awkwardly on a rocky beach, unsure how to proceed. After a few moments of deliberation, I realize I can't hide it any longer. I peel off the slick eldrin pants, extra careful around where the skin is open and weeping in the center, which sticks to the cloth. It stings and the cool evening air sends zings of torture throughout the festering wound. I slip out of the shoes and stand, feeling more vulnerable than I have since I'd faced the swamp witch.

I squeal just enough to catch Audhild's attention. Her too-keen eyes gaze at my side even as I limp into the water. "You didn't tell us how bad it is. Do you not trust us after all the time we've been together?"

"It's not about trust. I didn't want to worry anyone." I cup water in my palm and gently wash out the middle, gritting my teeth against the agony. My hands shake, and I bend over and weep. I can't help it. There's no stopping the tears.

Cool hands grip my shoulders. "You should've said something. Rekspire could've tried to fly you here."

I shake my head. "He's not strong enough to bring me this far."

"No, but he could've taken you part of the way, eased your burden by some measure." She makes a deep, throaty clicking sound. "No one expects you to be indestructible. Even dragons have their limits, Tambrynn, as I've proven. Let us help you so you're strong enough to face your father."

Guilt weighs heavily on my chest. "After you suffered my father's curse, I saw how much it affected Grandfather. Rekspire too. And after the battle with the Hulda and then the

fight with the eel, I couldn't make Lucas worry more about me than he already does."

"Ah, but you see, we *are* going to worry about you, because we care. How are we to help you when you aren't honest? Have you not heard that a shared burden is lighter than one you keep to yourself, youngling? Come. Sit on this boulder so I can minister to you." Her thin face is grim, though her eyes glow with emotion. Or is it tears? Do dragons cry?

Before I can inquire, heat sings my right side, flying across my body in a heartbeat. I gasp, clench my fists against the sensation, and am relieved when it leaves me. The warmth is gone as fast as it sprung up, leaving me limp.

Audhild helps me out of the cold water and back onto the shore, barefooted, where I stumble over the uneven rocks to sit on a somewhat flat slab of stone near the edge. I tremble from the chill but do not call upon my fire to warm myself lest it lead to another flare.

"I've never seen a fire creature's inner fire act this erratically. At least we are getting it tended to. Now, let me try to sanitize the area with fire." She holds her hand up as I open my mouth to protest. "Just enough to burn off anything that shouldn't be there. Your fire might not be doing what it should at this point."

She summons a ball of orange flames in her hand. She rubs her palms together, dispersing the fire, and then places them on my side.

At first, it burns, but the sensation changes to a manageable sting.

"There. That should do it. Now hold still while I apply the lotion." Instead of using her clawed hands, she produces a flexible wooden spatula wrapped in a thick chunk of moss. She dips it into the dark paste and swipes a generous amount

across the edge. "Moss has many useful benefits in healing. Fingernails hold many bacteria and other unseen particles that are unsafe."

"I don't know what bacteria are," I mutter as she makes the first sweep of paste across my skin. Stabs of pain assault my nerves in a rush, and I struggle to stay sitting on the stone.

"Bacteria are what's making this injury infected. I could've treated the wound with something had I known about it," Audhild murmurs as she coats my side well beyond the jagged abscess. She unwraps the moss from the utensil and places it over the lotion, tying it off with thin scraps of white cloth. Around that, she weaves in some leaves, sealing the dressings into place.

"You seem to be quite prepared." I redress, slipping my pants over the bandaged area as painlessly as possible. Luckily, the fabric stretches to fit without restricting me.

"I have not lived hundreds of years to not understand how to tend to injuries." She wraps up the extra leaves into a rolled ball, putting them back in a pocket in her outer jacket. "And I figured you would not want a man touching you in that area. Was I wrong?"

My face heats as I think of Lucas doing what she just did. I cross my arms and glance away from her. "No."

Her chuckle reveals she guessed my thoughts. "I once was a young dragon besmirched with all the hormones and feelings that come with lust and love. Or did you think you are the only one?"

My cheeks flush as I put my slippers back on. "I didn't think any such thing. Grandfather loved Grandmother. I've seen people in love. It's just nothing I've ever experienced before."

Audhild joins me and we make our way back to the

campsite. “So, you are in love with Lucas, not just bonded with him?”

Was I? Wasn't I? “Of course, I love Lucas.”

“Tell him, then. After your father killed Halvar, my mate, I had no chance to tell him how I felt. Dragons don't rely on feelings after all. And most mates only join for biological reasons to keep our species alive. But it was more for us. We had a deeper connection. In all the years we were together, I never said I love you.” She shrugs her thin shoulders and turns to me. “I will regret that until my death.”

We're silent until we reach our camp. Thankfully, Audhild leads the way or I might not have found it in the dark.

“Well?” Grandfather asks. He sits on a log that Lucas dragged past the barrier to sit on. Rekspire sits to his right and Lucas to his left. There's another log on the other side of the fire pit.

“Well, what, old man?” Audhild remains stoic, but I can tell she likes to tease my grandfather. “It will be some time before we see results. It was a curse, after all.”

I'm grateful she doesn't tell everyone about how bad my side has become.

Lucas strides over to me. He takes my hand in his and leads me to the empty place and thoughtfully sits on my uninjured side. “We saved you some food.” He hands me a plate.

“Thank you.” The fire is warm, as is the food which Lucas secured from an old half-djinn lady in a small village we skirted a day and a half ago. We traded some berries and mushrooms for a container of beans and rice with shredded venison and a thick gravy. It is delicious and filling, even though we've been rationing it.

I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be than right here at this moment, despite the pain. I reassure myself it is almost over. The Guardian's cure is in place. I just have to wait for it to

heal now. I drink in the contentment of being among those I care the most about.

Suddenly, my necklace heats, warning me of danger.

Howls break the stillness. My father's beasts have found us.

I jerk my head toward the sound. It isn't far. How did we not notice them until now?

Audhild and Grandfather both drop to the ground, thrashing and moaning. Only my father has this kind of effect on them, from the *Mortuus Irrepto* hex, which turns anyone he uses it on into his undead slave-beast.

Seconds later, the sloughs arrive, sniffing and circling the trees. Lucas's arm tightens around me.

"Oh, darling daughter of mine." Thoron steps out from behind two large, hulking animals. They're more beastly than any I've witnessed before. Thoron's image wavers beneath a shimmering haze, not unlike an illusion, but it's more material than supernatural. He holds the glowing Eye of Fate, the stolen gauntlet on his hand. "I know you're here, and I know why you're here. I also know your little hidey trick."

The scepter emits a menacing hum. He raises it, and a crackling energy snaps from the stones. "Come out, and I won't hurt anyone else."

"Don't believe him, my lady." Lucas stands stiffly beside me.

"Tambrynn, the stones. Stronger." Grandfather's voice is growly, his body jerking.

I move around the perimeter and, instead of stating the obfuscation spell, I *command* the words. However, I'm unsure if it's working since both Audhild and Grandfather change—their faces contorting and disfiguring. I move faster, yelling the spell. Lucas joins me from the other side while Rekspire watches over Audhild and Grandfather.

DAWN FORD

I'm exhausted when I rejoin Lucas at my starting point. A loud pop resounds, and we're knocked to the ground.

I land on my right side. A scorching flash engulfs me, as does pain. I shriek as fear blinds me.

I'm burning alive.