

# CHAOS & FLAME

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Dedication



CHAOS  
&  
FLAME



CHAOS

The first time the scion of House Dragon painted the eyeless girl, he was only six years old. She was nothing but a face shaped with finger smears of brown, a darker crooked line that might've been a sad smile, and huge, swirling black holes where her eyes should be.

"I don't know how to save her," he said to his mother when he presented the art to her.

His mother accepted the soft parchment, doing her best to hide the horror she felt at the red-rimmed, furious eyeholes in her son's painting. Casually, she asked, "Why is she in danger?"

"I don't know."

"What happened to her eyes?"

"Nothing yet." The little boy shrugged.

Though the Dragon consort asked a few more delicate questions, he could give her no answers. But he drew the eyeless girl again and again, and told his nurse about her, and his aunt, and his father eventually. That was a mistake, because he was far too old for imaginary friends, his father growled. The consort promised her husband, the Dragon regent, it was only childish play, and their son would grow out of it.

Better an imaginary friend, she thought, than the truth she suspected deep in her heart: her son had been gifted with a boon, but it was a prophetic one, and prophecy always, always drove the wielder mad.

The people of Pyrlanum would never accept a regent with such a wild boon, and to shield her eldest son, the consort extracted a promise from him to stop talking about the girl, and certainly to stop painting her. He must never paint anything from a dream or vision. It was dangerous. The young scion agreed, thrilled to have such an illicit thing binding him with his mother.



And he kept his promise for two entire years, until his mother was murdered.

The day she died, the consort and the scion were pruning in their private garden. She injured herself on a few reckless roses, and when she gasped, the scion saw a flash of vision, in strokes of vivid paint: a fan of dark blue skirts against the harsh black-and-white checkered floor of his mother's solar, golden sunlight smeared in streaks, and a kiss of crimson splattered at her mouth and in her hair. A spilled cup near her hand, leaking sickly green.

It would have been a beautiful painting, had he been allowed to create it.

But the scion had learned his lesson well. His boon was a curse and he did not say or do anything.

Later, when his mother lay dead on the marble floor, the boy realized this was not a game, not a thrilling secret: it was a matter of life and death. Had he been braver, he might have saved his mother from the poison in that cup.

He wailed and clawed at his hair until his aunt, his mother's sister, gathered him up in her arms. "What happened, little dragon, who did this?"

The scion hugged her neck so tightly. "Don't tell anyone," he begged. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I couldn't save her, I didn't even try! I'm sorry! Please."

"Hush, hush, it's all right."

"I didn't save her," he whispered, sobbing. "I have to save her."

"It's too late, little dragon," his aunt murmured.

"No," he said again and again. He threw himself away from his aunt and ran to his rooms. Found chalk and old cracked paint pots and ripped paper out of books in a tantrum. The scion drew and

drew, scrawling images of that eyeless girl. He refused food, he refused his father and his baby brother, he refused everything but paint, and finally locked the door, screaming to be left alone unless anybody was going to help.

When his aunt had the door kicked in, the scion's room was a disaster of paintings and spilled color. Wasted effort, childish, ugly pictures. Blurs and shapes that looked like nothing but the impressions of landscapes or people, castles and gardens and ships and massive, ancient creatures the houses called their empyreals. A figure of fire, broad winged and gorgeous. The eyeless girl. His aunt recognized the monsters, if not the girl. Dragon, gryphon, barghest, sphinx, cockatrice, kraken. And the First Phoenix.

But the scion tore the phoenix painting down the middle and threw a heavy book at his aunt. "Bring me a master, to show me how it's done," he cried. "I have to find her. It's soon."

"What is soon?" asked his aunt. She put her arm around him. "Who is she?"

"You'll see," the young scion said, pulling away.



While the young scion lost himself in painting dreams, Pyrlanum descended into violence. House Dragon accused House Sphinx of murdering their beloved consort. The grief-stricken Dragon regent demanded retribution, forcing all the great Houses to choose sides, and reviving the House Wars after more than twenty years of peace.

Bloodshed consumed the land, and the young scion found he could not save the eyeless girl.

"It's too late," he whispered to the disaster of art surrounding

him, the night his father—leagues away—massacred the entire family line of House Sphinx.



The new House War raged on for years, and instead of the eyeless girl, the scion painted darkness. Thick black streaks, chunky peaks of gray and angry blue, the underlying red-red-red, heartbeat red, of sunlit memories behind tight-shut eyes. A bruise of purple over green-black, ocean-black, midnight, moonless black.

When his baby brother asked what he painted, the scion only hissed at him, chasing him from the room.

House Dragon took more and more of the country, forcing the other Houses into submission. Finally House Dragon captured Phoenix Crest, the ancient home of the Phoenix, those keepers of peace that had vanished during the first House Wars more than a hundred years ago. The Dragon regent declared himself High Prince Regent over all Pyrlanum.

His family left their northern mountains to occupy the fortress, and there the Dragon scion's aunt was left in charge of the boy and his small brother while their father continued his war. Though House Cockatrice fled Pyrlanum entirely, she managed to hire artists to tutor the scion—Cockatrice had been the house of her birth, after all, and that of her sister. She bought the scion paint and paper, canvas and ink and charcoal. He grew as his skills did, becoming taller and stronger but still very pretty, with a constant flush of fever in his sharp white cheeks, a ghostly gleam in his pale green eyes. He was prone to fits of laughter or staring at nothing, sure signs of madness, the court gossiped. At his aunt's prodding,

the Dragon scion learned to be charming, too, and concealed the wildness he felt. He studied language and policy and economics. He flirted and argued and led council meetings during his father's frequent absences. Soon everyone believed his disposition to be merely long-running grief. After all, his mother, the late Dragon consort, had been glorious and special, hadn't she? So her glorious and special son would survive; he would lead them well. Chaos willed it, no matter that his painting boon would be useless in a leader.

But his aunt—she knew the truth of his boon. She whispered to him that she had always had gently prophetic dreams. They ran in their family. Her grandmother had been a brilliant prophet, too. His aunt offered to take the secrets he painted and use them for House Dragon on his behalf. The young scion agreed.

She studied every painting for clues, and when she discovered them, told the High Prince Regent unknowable things: where the last remnants of House Sphinx hid, the location of an ambush, the look of a spy. The High Prince Regent gave her the title of Dragon Seer, and the young scion was glad to have his secret kept so well, as his mother had wished.



Time passed. The scion painted. He dreamed of the eyeless girl but kept her to himself. He had not saved her from the darkness, just like he had not saved his mother. They haunted him, left him wracked with grief some days.

On the morning news reached the fortress that the High Prince Regent had been murdered by House Kraken, the scion woke up

laughing. He laughed and laughed, caught in visions of silver swirls of light, hot light, bright light—sunlight!—on the eyeless girl's face. She had survived.

But the scion had not even dreamed of his own father's death.

That very day, ten years after the first time he'd clumsily painted her, the scion sketched the true shape of the girl's cheeks and chin and nose, the wide, eager smile, and bright tilted eyes perfectly shaped, perfectly beautiful, except inside they were churning spirals of darkness. He mixed new colors, thrilled and focused, painting her in long strokes, against the entire southeast wall of his bedchamber, directly onto the stone, from crown to chin as tall as the prince was. Her hair curled out into the shadows of the room like a god of storms, and in her pupils dotted tiny explosions of fire.

When his serious little brother ventured up to the scion's tower, he frowned at the overwhelming sun on her face, finding the art too intense, too real, and he looked at the scion like he'd never seen him before. "What's wrong with you?" the younger boy asked, knowing nothing of prophecy and its curses.

The scion laughed, determined to keep his brother innocent of his secrets. "I'm only tired, dragonlet," he said. "Leave me to my dreams."

In the wake of their father's death, the scion was made not only the regent of House Dragon, but High Prince Regent, ruler of all Pyrlanum.

Freed by a crown on his head, the High Prince Regent let his generals take over the war, while he took over the tallest tower in Phoenix Crest to paint his eyeless girl again and again. Sometimes he vanished into his tower for days, long enough and sudden enough to foster again those rumors of madness, rumors of a

wild spirit or a curse. Each time he emerged, a new painting leaned against the tower walls: the girl in full sunlight, arms crossed defensively, curls flared in a gust of wind and a mask across her eyes. The girl with a sword in hand, strange goggles making her eyes like those of a bumblebee. The girl, older, standing at the top of a cliff, peering over ruins, eyes covered by small masks, one that laughed and one that screamed. The girl in a library beside a hearth as big as a giant's mouth, holding a dagger made of a curving gryphon talon, and her eyes full moons. The girl in the Phoenix Crest ballroom wearing a cream gown, holding the empty air like she was dancing with a ghost, with eyes made of massive black pearls.



The High Prince Regent was eighteen years old when he painted the girl engulfed in flames. The House Wars his father had reignited had raged for an entire decade.

He barely remembered mixing the colors of fire, or throwing his brushes in the corner. With his hands he drew flames like ivy growing up her body, twisting and burning, but feeding her power. He felt it, too, hot and hungry, the promise of melting in such an inferno. The fire licked up the edges of the canvas and up his wrists, twining his forearms with pain.

The High Prince Regent screamed through his teeth, refusing to stop, as smoke burned tears down his cheeks and his hands shook. He closed his eyes, blocking it out, the fear and heat and pain: it hurt so much, the memory of this future pyre.

He woke up alone in his tower room, nostrils filled with the tinge of old smoke, but there was nothing around him except

splatters of paint and every image of the eyeless girl, surrounding him, watching him with her pits of eyes, her bumblebee eyes, her full-moon eyes, sea-glass eyes, ghostly fish-bitten dead eyes, and eyes of pearls. Most of all a new painting on a messy unframed canvas: the girl made of flames, her eyes like twin suns.

There had never been a fire eating him whole.

But there would be.

In four years: a high rampart, a bright blue sky, warships on the brilliant horizon, something sticky in his hand, an awful taste on his tongue. And the eyeless girl, standing before him, her lips on his lips. For the first time he could see her eyes not as furious wells of power, but gentle brown with flecks of gold. Then the fire. It would happen. It must.

Alone in his tower room, the High Prince Regent waited for the sun to rise over his land, torn apart by constant war, then he carefully rent the fiery painting into strips and set them alight.





ENEMIES



# DARLING

I had a dream about the dark.

Not the night, which has stars and the moon to cast shadows, but an all-consuming dark, one that devoured and twisted and changed a girl into something else, something defiant and monstrous. She scrabbled in the abyss with the other women of her house: sisters and mothers and cousins and friends, each of them dwindling away until she was the only one left. When it finally came to pass that she was liberated from that hole, her eyes had learned to live without the light, to love the cool comfort of the shadows. And so she wept in the arms of her liberators, not because she was sad, but because her poor damaged eyes had no idea what to do with sunshine.

I dream of my childhood every night before a battle, which is a lot, considering Pyrlanum has been at this worthless war since before I can remember. Fighting might be a rite of passage, one that feels less triumphant the longer we're in combat, but my dreams are so familiar they've become equal parts comforting and distressing. Lucky me, I learned to make peace with fear long ago.

"Darling, heads up!"

A knife flies past my face, close enough to slice a line across the deep brown skin of my cheek and take a chunk from my ear. A curl that has managed to escape from the twin buns at the nape of my neck falls to the ground. I don't swear at the sudden blossom of

pain, just turn to wait for the next blade, ready to deflect it with one of my long knives.

“Really, Adelaide? This close to a battle?” I say, swallowing a sigh.

Adelaide Seabreak, second scion of House Kraken and my adopted sister, grins at me from across the deck of the *Barbed Tentacle*, flagship of the Kraken navy. The wind whips her long brown hair around her face, and even though her skin is tanned, it is nowhere near as dark a brown as mine. They say that all the members of House Sphinx had skin as brown as the leather of their beloved treatises, but there is no one else to verify this. I am the only one left.

“How else am I supposed to make sure you don’t get bogged down in melancholy?” She stands in a ready position, legs shoulder width apart and feet firmly planted on the deck of the ship. In her cursed left hand she holds another throwing knife, her posture all arrogance and well-earned bravado. She should one day become regent of her house, taking the role of her father, but being left-hand dominant ended that dream before it could even begin. “Chaos touched,” the old gossips still whisper when Adelaide is near. The old superstitions of Pyrlanum control the futures of one and all—even within House Kraken.

At least Adelaide has a house to call her own.

“Not now. And don’t you have a battle plan to review?” I’m in no mood for her good humor, and I push off from the pile of rope I recline against. I wanted a quick nap, a brief respite in a day too heavy with emotion, not an impromptu knife fight.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Really, Darling, it isn’t like you’d have to worry anyway. Look! Your boon has already made you beautiful once more.”

I touch my cheek subconsciously. The cut is gone, nothing but a line of scab in its place. My ability to heal had made me a legend among the House Kraken Barbs from the moment of discovery and prompted just as much speculation as it had admiration.

After all, how was it the girl with the healing boon had such damaged eyes? Even now I have to wear my smoked-glass goggles, the setting sun still too high in the sky for me to remove them just yet.

My light sensitive eyes are a visible sign that my gifts have limits. I am not invincible.

I stand and walk to the prow of the ship, ignoring Adelaide's platitudes and half apologies. I love my sister, even if we are not of the same blood. I was adopted into House Kraken after Leonetti Seabreak, Kraken regent, saved me from the dark of the Nakumba sewers seven years ago when I was ten. And calling Leonetti my father has been one of the bright spots in my life. But Adelaide likes to push and push until she finds a breaking point. It is just her nature: like water, she flows in and around a person until she finds their weak spot.

The problem is that long before I reveal my weaknesses, I will strike out, and killing Adelaide is not an option even if I wanted to. So, like I have for many years, I find it better to distance myself from her prodding rather than engage her.

"Ignore her, she's feeling the pressure of tonight's mission." Gavin Swiftblade sidles up to me with a grin. The wind tousles his sandy hair, and he absentmindedly pushes it out of his bright blue eyes. The sun has burned freckles into his pale cheeks, giving him a cherubic air. It's a lie, though. I have watched Gavin slide a knife between a man's ribs without the barest flicker of remorse. It's to

be expected: the Swiftblades were respected assassins before they turned their backs on House Dragon, defying the High Prince Regent to fight alongside House Kraken.

“Chaos give me strength, are you making excuses for her? We are all feeling the pressure, Gav. That doesn’t mean she gets liberty to be an ass,” I say.

“I heard that, Darling,” Adelaide calls, even though she keeps her distance. She knows better than to provoke me when I’m in a mood, and memory tugs at me a little too hard this evening for me to smile at her gentle mockery.

Even though we have anchored a few miles off the coast of Lastrium, there’s not much to be seen of the coastline. It’s an unremarkable port city with very little strategic value, but House Kraken spies indicate that somewhere in the governor’s mansion Leonetti is being held captive. Sometime last week while my Barbs and I were razing Dragon settlements along the eastern coast, our regent was kidnapped, forcing us to sail around the southern wastes and here to the western coast of the country. It was a hard trip, but the *Barbed Tentacle* was fast, built for smuggling more than fighting, and combined with Adelaide’s fair-wind boon we had made the trip in days instead of a couple of weeks. Now we would have to get to Leonetti before the bastard Dragons moved him.

I do not have much hope of seeing my adoptive father alive again. This thrice-cursed war has a way of taking everything one loves and turning it to ash.

For a moment I am trapped again in the garden of my childhood, my mother screaming as one of the Dragon’s Teeth, elite soldiers that serve much the same purpose as House Kraken’s Barbs, separates my mother’s head from the rest of her body. The crimson arc

of her blood splattering her everblooms is the last memory I have before a nursemaid scooped me up and pushed me through a passageway into the tunnels of Nakumba. There had been over a hundred women and children living in the compound of my childhood.

“So, we gonna skin some Dragons or what?” Alvin Kelpline says, spitting over the side as he leans against the deck railing with Gavin and me.

Alvin is a deckhand and all of thirteen summers old, far too young to be a Barb just yet, but so close to being old enough to draw blood of his own. His mop of dark curls and buck teeth always make me smile. He has the same olive complexion as the rest of House Kraken, pointing to the shared ancestral bloodline that long ago united Kraken and Sphinx.

“You are going nowhere, fry,” I say with a grin, ignoring the fear that rises up when I think of innocents like Alvin taking up arms with the rest of us. But the chances are that, like so many other little ones, he will be forced into battle before he is ready. I’ll do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen. “Show me your stance.”

Alvin takes up a ready position, feet too close together and his shoulders sloped. I adjust his body to fix his form and run him through a couple of drills while Gavin offers the boy helpful tips. It’s enough to push away the remaining storm clouds of memory, the movements easy and familiar, and I half wonder if Adelaide sent the boy over. She’s always been good at reading my moods.

My smile fades as I imagine Alvin fighting. I was his age when I begged Leonetti to let me pick up my first sword. And two years later I was in my first skirmish when the country estate where we were staying was overrun by House Barghest. Leonetti tossed me a blade and demanded I defend myself.

“Darling Seabreak, if you would be of my House, you will fight like a Kraken,” he said with a crooked grin, his weather-beaten skin and tousled salt-and-pepper hair making him seem less like the ruler of a prosperous House and more like a rakish pirate.

On that day I killed my first man, and too many since.

“I miss him, too.”

Miranda, Adelaide’s older, more earnest sister, stands nearby, her long dark hair braided and her tan skin already darkened with oily soot. Even though the girls share a mother, Miranda has no idea who her biological father is. But she is the spitting image of Adelaide, just without the recklessness. Miranda offers me the inky soot pot, but I shake my head. My skin is naturally dark enough that I do not have to worry about blending into the shadows.

“I think you and Adelaide must have cast some forbidden blood spell to read my moods,” I say, changing the subject as I begin to ready myself for the night ahead. I do not want to talk about Leonetti, about how we were not there to keep him from being kidnapped. Instead I wrap a dark scarf around my hair, tucking it tight around the tops of my ears.

“Blood magic? Even with your smoked lenses you have no game face, Darling. Why is it you think you lose all of the time?” Miranda asks with a laugh.

I grin. “Because all of you Seabreaks cheat.”

She shrugs. “But your moods are also as easy to read as a Gryphon manuscript. You should work on that.”

“It’s never a problem in the dark.”

Miranda shrugs. “Only you would think spending life in the gloom was the solution to a simple annoyance.” She says it without any heat, but the words sting anyway. My instinct has always been

to hide in the shadows when things go wrong. Perhaps that is why I was glad to join the Barbs when Leonetti asked me last year. They get praise for skulking about in the dark, not censure.

But after tonight, no more. I've sworn I'm finished with all of the treachery: the assassinations, the hostage taking that never quite goes as expected, the sabotage. All of it ends tonight, after we've freed my foster father. I have played my role in this endless war. Now I will step aside and let someone else take the stage. Someone like Gavin, whose appetite for violence sometimes seems unquenchable.

"We'll set out as soon as the light dies," Miranda says, cutting through my thoughts. "You and Gavin will be going all the way into the governor's mansion. I'll be remaining on the beach to make sure our exit is flawless."

"Are you certain?" Despite my weariness of killing and treachery, there are few things that bring me more joy than being lead on a mission. I like doing a good job, even if it creates far too many sleepless nights.

"Of course I am. He's got invisibility, and you've got the healing. My poison boon won't do much on a rescue mission, and I've sent the rest to see to the warehouses along the wharf. It's just the three of us. I'll be waiting with the boat so we can make a quick getaway." She lays a cool hand on my bare arm. "I want you to be careful, though. I will *not* lose another family member tonight."

Gavin pops into existence next to us, grinning as we both startle. "Are you kidding? If anyone gets in our way, Darling will slice them to pieces. They'll be dead before they even realize they've lost their heads." He's also foregone the soot, for obvious reasons. He winks at me before disappearing once more, and I roll my eyes at the way



he shows off his boon. Maybe if my gift didn't require a measure of pain, I would be more inclined to show off as well.

As Miranda goes over the parameters of the operation one last time, I let my mind wander. The sun hangs low in the sky, fat and round, seeming to quiver with the way the light ripples off the sea. That might just be the smoky goggles that I wear. Either way, the daylight is not long for this world, and I am anxious for us to weigh anchor and be off. In a short while I'll be able to remove my goggles and stride through the dark, where I will be the one with the advantage.

Tonight, I will kill anyone who gets between me and my father. And then I will lay down my arms once and for all.

# TALON

I hate city fighting. There's even less I can control than usual: no high ground, too many people, too little maneuverability, dead ends, unbelievable amounts of flammable materials. And usually screaming. My whole life has been this House War, and there are plenty of shades to everything I hate about it, but urban battle is the worst.

I don't hide my dismay from the captains and officials facing me over the long table. Until two days ago this building was a herd-drake stable, and it smells like sour char and musty shed scales. But even war drakes are useless in city fighting, so we commandeered the stables for temporary barracks and sent these plodding beasts to the countryside.

Governor Tillus argued to meet in his mansion, where there is plentiful wine and pasta, and half my field council agrees, but I don't care: this is war, and I won't let them forget that. They already like to talk around me and pretend I'm not the Dragon scion, not my brother's War Prince, because I'm only eighteen, and compared to Caspian I'm forgettable. But I've been leading soldiers and killing the enemies of the High Prince Regent for years. If Tillus came face-to-face with one of these insurgents, he'd probably kneel to beg before he even thought to draw a blade. He's just annoyed the first thing I did when I arrived yesterday was to send his shiny new prisoner away.

We shouldn't even be here. Lastrium is a port town only because

they built a decent pier, not because it's strategically useful. Jagged cliffs hem it in, while the city of Sartoria, a day's ride up the coast, has a river and was the old seat of the Kraken regent for centuries, before the fall of the Last Phoenix and the first House War. Sartoria is much more tactically relevant, even though we've had it locked down since my father rekindled the House Wars after Mother died, fourteen years ago. If the Kraken are determined to restart their guerrilla tactics here on the west coast, Lastrium is more suited to a practice run than the real thing. Not worth sending their navy. But Aunt Aurora sent a prophecy that the Kraken navy pulled up anchor and will be here, in Lastrium, in three days.

It has to be a feint. The only thing of use in Lastrium are reserves of fossilized venom we use to make dragonfire. But the Kraken have to expect if they laid any kind of siege to the city and we thought we'd lose it, we'd blow up the warehouse before allowing them to have it.

I wonder if I should just do that now and get back to the Crest. Caspian won't expect me, and maybe I can surprise him in his tower before he forbids me to visit. I've been in Barghest lands leading our combined forces for the last eighteen months, and every time I suggest I come home to meet with my war council in person, I'm commanded to remain away. I have got to get to my brother soon. I'm worried about him, especially given the growing rumors of his madness.

But Aurora's prophecies are never wrong. The Kraken are coming here. So instead of Phoenix Crest, I'm in damned Lastrium.

Captain Firesmith points to the map of the city spread on the worn wooden table. "They can't set fire to the cliffs, so they'll focus on the pier. We should send the remaining ships up to Sartoria."

"All that's left are some cutters fast enough to send messages," one of the city officials, Mara Stormswell, reminds Firesmith.

I say nothing, tracing the defenses of the city with my gaze. They're not good, but they've never had to be. This place is just cliffs, beach, residences, and a few scattered markets and warehouses. Leonetti Seabreak was here for a minute, but they can't have known that. I grind my teeth thinking they might have known that. It doesn't matter now he's gone. But I don't want their spies to be better than mine.

"—their ships can easily keep out of range," Finn Sharpsscale says, and I assume he means the limited dragonfire cannons we have. I appointed Finn commander of the Dragon's Teeth less than an hour after Caspian appointed me to the title because I'd rather be free to fight where I'm needed, not tied down to a certain company. One of the only things I've learned about leadership from my wild older brother is that sometimes it helps if you surprise people with a sudden left turn. If they can't predict you, they pay closer attention. Of course, Caspian takes that to every extreme. I need to be more reliable. Certain. Respected.

Governor Tillus snorts. "Fool Kraken. Naval warfare is useless here." His beard twists as he either smiles or grimaces.

"They aren't fools," I say quietly. They think they can take something from us here, either Leonetti or some kind of retaliation for his capture.

The governor looks like he wants to call us all fools and go home to wrap up in the silks Dragons won for him, under the roof Dragons provide. His family might have sworn to the High Prince Regent, but a mere five years ago they were Kraken. They haven't taken to heart yet what it means to be Dragon.

I stand up. I'm not tall enough to loom like Caspian, but I'm broad and have perfected the way I show my teeth when I smile. It's just like the toothy draconic grin of my helmet when I wear full armor. I want to remind Tillus that no matter who he used to be, no matter what lands these were, it's all a part of the High Prince Regent's hoard now. We must defend it and die for it in a reign of fire, because that is who Dragons are. Not fools.

At my side, Finn stands, too. He is huge, with a scar on the left side of his face that hooks his lips into a permanent sneer. I didn't make him commander of the Teeth only for his skill with an ax, or his loyalty to me.

"We have three days until their navy arrives," I say to Governor Tillus, then skewer each other official and captain with a gaze I know is an unwavering vivid green. The color runs in the family. "I want a complete inventory of everything in the city, Tillus, no matter how small. And I want cannons set up along the cliffs to at least make the Kraken marines' lives harder, if we can't reach the ships. Everybody bring me an idea for additional defenses tomorrow. Be creative. Pretend this city is made of your own precious hoard. We must be ready in two days."

With that, I turn sharply and go.

Finn will give me enough time for my exit to make its point, then follow me to the narrow hostler's office I took for my own.

I move quickly across the cobbles of the inner courtyard from the stable's training arena, where we'd set up the council table and cots for most of the foot soldiers. Everything in a drake stable is made of stone or plaster, because drakes of all varieties tend to have fiery accidents. We have the seven war drakes attached to the Teeth harnessed together with iron gear in the corner farthest from the

gates. They're leaning their bodies against each other, twining sinuous scaled necks. Crests of feathers shade their slit-pupiled eyes, but most are looking at me. I stare at them, catching the eye of my primary mount, to remind her who's the boss. She stares back for a long moment, then flicks the row of long spine feathers. I smile and pause to scratch under her scaly chin. She makes a sound almost like a purr.

I glance up at the last streaks of orange sunset. The moon will rise shortly, almost full. Good visibility on the seas tonight, nothing to slow that navy down. I'll eat a quick dinner, wait for Finn, and then go down to the pier myself. We'll check the warehouse. Most of the Dragon's Teeth we have with us are on night patrol, but the few off duty might let me spar with them.

Obviously they'll do whatever I command, but it's better when they want to include me.

Just before I push through the door into the stable building, I feel the distracting pulse at my wrist: Aurora's summons tingling in the bracelet pressed to my skin by my leather bracer. She wants to talk five days before our scheduled meeting, which is unusual. We limit our regular communications to necessity because such distant far-seeing taxes the strength of Aurora's attendant.

I quicken my pace past the stalls where higher ranking soldiers have doubled up to the hostler's office. Most of the stalls are empty at the moment, as it's near change of watch, but two soldiers lean against their open doors and salute. I put my fist to my chest in response.

Inside the dim office are my own cot, weapons, and armor, plus a field communication kit with the necessary bowl and cleansing glass. I light the oil lamp and pull closed the shutter on the round

window that overlooks the courtyard I just passed through. Firelight dances on the three chunks of dragonglass settled in the bottom of the shallow stone bowl. I take one in my hand and drag it softly sunwise in a spiral up to the edge of the bowl and balance it there. The second I drag in a counter-sunwise spiral and balance it at an angle from the first. The third I use to draw a six-pointed star across the entirety of the bowl before placing it along the rim. A slight tingle tickles my spine, so I know the cleansing worked—Aunt Aurora says I only feel it because my boon is related to far sight, and if I were a true seer, there would be a thin line of power visible everywhere I'd traced the stones. I trust her word on that and go get some water from the pump just outside the office.

Then I wait.

The water shivers as it settles into the bowl. In an emergency we can connect through rippling water, but this must not be one. I fit my body into a core stance, feet apart and fists together over my stomach so my elbows and arms make a strength triangle. I focus on breathing and settling my blood as the water settles. Aurora can always tell when I'm upset, thanks to the way heat from any emotion makes pink blotches high on my cheeks, and I don't want her to worry about taking care of me tonight. I'm an adult; I can take care of myself. I can control my feelings. *Dragons don't need to hide their emotions*, she soothed me once, when I was nine and angrily stomping around wearing a too-large helmet with full faceplate. *Let your fury and joy and grief show; that's where your power is, dragonlet.* Maybe that was true for a little boy, or maybe it's true for a High Prince Regent. It can't be true for me. I'm not powerful enough for people to respect displays of emotions. Not unless they're calculated displays.

Besides, Caspian's reputation is wild enough without having a scion always too near to exploding.

"Talon," Aurora says, and I glance down at the bowl. Her face shimmers colorlessly against the water, peaceful and lovely . . . except there's a tightness I can see at the corner of her lips. Tension that would be hidden to most, but I know to look for it.

"What did he do?" I demand.

My aunt puts her betraying lips into a thin line and says, "It's been a very bad week."

I clench my jaw and slowly nod. "I can leave now—"

"No, Talon, he wants you there. He said that specifically. But . . . he also said, 'Talon must save her.'"

"Save who?"

Aurora's lashes flutter, and she lowers her gaze in sorrow. "There's only one *her* Caspian has ever concerned himself with since my sister died."

The eyeless girl. His imaginary friend, or whatever she is, a figment of his madness. His muse. The only thing he cares to paint. Even Aurora, whose boon is prophecy, cannot see her. But Caspian has been obsessed with her for my entire life. Aurora believes he must have known the girl as a child; perhaps something happened as his painting boon took root. Either that, or she's a piece of his nightmares, a Chaos-induced hallucination. There are old stories of Chaos speaking to all of us through dreams, but not since the Last Phoenix died a hundred years ago. All our boons are weaker now than they were then, if we have them at all. "What does he want me to save her from?" I ask.

"I don't know," Aurora admits. "He was even more distressed than usual."



“Distressed?” Anger makes my voice low. I hate being far away from them, where I can’t do anything at all to help. “That’s no excuse for treating you poorly.”

“Oh, Talon.” She sets her jaw just like I do, and in the water I can’t tell if she has tears in her eyes or not. “You need to come home when you finish there, prepared to take over.”

“Aunt,” I begin, because she’s said this before, and I can’t. I won’t unseat my own brother.

But Aurora cuts me off. “I am holding the council together, Talon, but at *best* they say Caspian is too distracted to rule. At worst, there are the whispers of madness, still, again. We’ve worked hard to keep his tendencies private, but he doesn’t care if people notice he vanishes for days and days, he rarely comes to meetings anymore, and when he shows himself at court, it’s impossible to predict if he’ll be lucid or wild. The Gryphon physician you arranged for does little to—”

A knock on my office door grabs my attention. I hold up my hand so Aurora stops talking, and I call, “Finn?”

“Scion,” he responds through the thin door. “Hungry?”

“Hold a moment.” I turn back to Aurora. She’s watching calmly, not a hair out of place, elegant and pristine as a portrait—though not like the art of our mad High Prince Regent. I’m told she looks like our mother, but I don’t remember. They were both of House Cockatrice, beauties traded by their father to mine in an attempt to allay the spite of House Dragon garnered nearly forty years ago during the previous House Wars. I doubt the bad cross of madness and artistry born in my brother had been the intended outcome of the alliance. “Aunt,” I say, “you know my answer. But I will come home after this battle, strong in glory and heart. We will *help* him,

somehow, not take his throne. I have to be able to do that. I'm his brother."

For a moment, Aurora's expression stills as if she means to argue, but then she lowers her gaze in acknowledgement. "As you say, scion. But please, be careful. We need you."

"If it were my day to die, you would know it through your own boon, Aurora," I answer warmly, and touch the water to disrupt her seeing. I miss her, but I can't let myself succumb to homesickness.

"Finn," I call, and just as he turns the handle, the nape of my neck tingles. I can't react at all before I hear a massive boom.

Finn throws the door open, ax in hand, but I push past him out into the stable. I run, because I know that sound: an explosion.

Behind me Finn yells orders for everyone to arms. I skid to a stop and look up. The night sky blazes with stars, and the moon is too low—there in the southwest is a ferocious orange glow. Fire.

I run toward the inn across the way from the drake stable. It's four stories, the tallest nearby building. I barge in, ignoring cries of alarm and people pushing to get out. They'll see nothing useful on the street. I need to get high.

Up and up the stairs I run, Finn's footsteps echoing at my heel, until I reach the top floor and blow through into a private room, to the south window. I shove open the shutters and lean out.

From my dragon's-eye view I can see exactly how far it is to the flicker of red-hot flames. The billowing smoke, spreading lazily across the sky, blots out stars. Half a mile, toward the sea, but still south. I know what that is.

The fossilized-venom stores. Somebody blew up the warehouse.

I stare for a long moment, mind racing. There must be Kraken insurgents already in the city, a forward brigade of their own, before

the navy. Barbs. That's what they call their spies and sneaks. They must be preparing for the navy to arrive somehow, but why warn us? Why not wait until the navy is right here instead of setting the city on fire?

Below me the streets are filling with people. Chaos. Disorder. It will be harder to get my soldiers anywhere now. That's plenty good reason to blow the warehouse—when the navy arrives. Not now.

I pull myself back inside and tell Finn, "They blew the venom stores. That fire won't go out for hours, even if we can get people with fire and water boons set up to contain it. I'll send Captains Firesmith and Peak to the warehouses for crowd assistance and to catch any of the insurgents, while Wingry and Fallfar go to the cliffs and pier. Get the Teeth seer looking for anything, but keep your people with me."

We start back to the barracks. Finn says, "What are we going to do?"

"Get our weapons. There's only one good reason for them to do this now, days before their navy is here." I spare a reluctant thought for better spies.

"Distraction," he says, baring his teeth eagerly. With his scar, he looks truly gleeful. "They think Leonetti is still here."

I nod and pause at the front of the stable courtyard, snagging one of the toothlings assigned to me. I send the young girl to relay my orders to the various captains. She's shaking with a heady combination of fear and excitement to see action, bouncing on her toes and fingering the hilt of her smallsword as she repeats my orders before dashing off.

Finn claps his hand on my shoulder. "Let's go drown some squids, Talon."

# DARLING

The explosion from the fossilized-venom warehouse is visible from the sea. Miranda, Gavin, Alvin, and I all gasp when we see it from where we bob in a small boat less than a nautical mile from the coast. We've been waiting half a turn for the first warehouse to go, for people to crowd the streets and distract the occupying Dragons enough to let us slip into the smugglers' tunnels under Lastrium.

"Oh wow. That's so cool," Alvin breathes, his eyes wide in his soot-blackened face. He's right. It's a beauty of an explosion, all orange and red and smoke, and so bright that my eyes are dazzled for a second. They water profusely, and I dash away the tears as I blink to clear the afterimage of fire and carnage.

"We managed to get everyone out before it went, right?" I ask. The fire is so bright that I debate putting my smoked glasses back on, even going so far as to dig them out of the pocket of my tunic before the flames die down enough and my vision clears so that I can see the cliffs, waves, and my boat companions.

"Darling, always worried about the casualty rate," Gavin says with a sigh.

Miranda shoots him a sharp look. "Yes. Lastrium was one of our cities, and it still is. House Kraken isn't like Dragon. We inspire loyalty. We don't force it."

I nod and pick up my oar. "Great, so let's see how loyal this governor is to the Dragons who hold his leash."

Gavin laughs. "I love it when you talk torture."

Miranda, Gavin, and Alvin each grab an oar, and we make our quiet way to the cave at the base of the cliff. The Dragons may suspect the existence of the smugglers' tunnels that wend their way through the cliffs, but even if so, the way is death for anyone not familiar with the routes. Luckily, we've been using these tunnels to supply Kraken loyalists within the city for nearly a fortnight. With my uncanny sight, Gavin and I will make our way to the governor's mansion quickly by way of the tunnels, returning just as the second warehouse goes, long before they'll manage to put out the first warehouse fire. It's a simple plan, but that's the beauty of it.

The Dragons will never know what hit them.

The boat dips and bobs as we reach the shallows. Even though the coast is rocky, there is a small beach that leads to the entrance to the tunnels, and wordlessly we paddle the boat to it.

We maneuver the small craft toward the shore, and I leap out of the boat and begin to pull it onto the sand. There's enough moon that it seems almost daytime bright to me, and I'm faster than the others. Once we've gotten the boat out of the water, Gavin and I do a quick weapons check, before saying goodbye to Miranda.

"Fair winds and following seas," she says as she hugs me tightly, the common farewell of House Kraken. It is both good luck and a deeper emotional parting, the kind of thing sailors say to their families before they leave for sea duty. It's a reminder that we might not all make it.

I hug her silently before doing the same to Alvin. I didn't want

the boy to come along at all, but if Gavin and I don't make it back, Miranda will need a second to help her return to the *Barbed Tentacle*. He practically vibrates at being allowed to accompany us, and I can't bear to look at his happy hopeful expression as Gavin and I leave them behind.

I send a prayer out to Chaos that our mission tonight is successful and the boy never sees true war.

Darkness swallows us quickly once we enter the smugglers' route. Gavin walks with his hand on my shoulder as we make our way through the damp tunnels. There are places in the walls for torches, but I can see just fine even in the belly of the cliffs, where there is little ambient light. One of the House Kraken physicians theorized that my vision was somehow augmented by more than just physical adaptation, and that there was a bit of Chaos at work, since my eyes can sense far more than they should in the dark. It made a bit of sense, since boons are the result of Chaos in the blood, but I've never thought much more beyond that. Philosophy is for House Gryphon and their talented minds. Maybe I'd have cared if House Sphinx still existed, but I'm a Kraken now; all I care for is action and result.

My boots are wet from jumping into the shallows, and the puddles in the tunnel don't help, but the mesh and leather are designed for just such a landing, and after only a short ways into the tunnel the material begins to dry. I mark time by the upward slope of the floor and Gavin's breathing, close to my ear but as steady and rhythmic as the sea on a calm day. Even if I'd never been in these tunnels before I still wouldn't be lost. The walls point me in the right direction. Marks carved by smugglers of long ago look like nonsense, arrows and stars and crescent moons that would lead

anyone unfamiliar with the Kraken House code astray, but which clearly direct me where I want to go: inland and toward the outskirts of Lastrium.

The close press of the walls might make others hesitate, but for me it's strange, almost like coming home. I spent so much of my life hunting and scavenging in the tunnels under Nakumba that the damp walls and stale air are more relaxing than alarming. Of course, these smugglers' tunnels smell a far cry better than the sewers of Nakumba, but still. I'm fairly buzzing with anticipation by the time I've led us through the majority of it, Gavin's hand on my shoulder as I walk the only reminder I have that I'm not alone in the pitch black.

I stop, and Gavin stumbles a bit before he manages to catch himself. "We're at the crossroads that points to the graveyard," I say, unsheathing my long knives and rolling my shoulders to loosen them up. Gavin pulls out his small throwing knives, quickly placing them between his fingers even in the dark. Barbs deal in stealth and speed, and our weapons are the same. No flashy swords for us, thanks.

Gavin places his hand, now full of tiny poisoned knives, back on my shoulder, and I am careful to tilt my head to the right so I don't accidentally get nicked by one of the blades. We've only gone a few steps before his hand falls away as the tunnel lightens considerably, moonlight filtering in from the opening ahead. I take a deep breath and let it out.

We are so close, and my heart beats triple time at being able to soon see my father again.

The tunnel is mostly blocked by thick rumbleberry canes. This early in the season they are all thorns and new leaves, and Gavin

and I carefully move them to the side with our blades as we sneak out. The tunnel empties into a graveyard on the edge of town, but the governor's mansion is not far from the cemetery, for good reasons. Smuggling is as much a part of House Kraken as fishing and expedition. It is rumored that the First Kraken had been a pirate, a woman who declared she would not marry the man her family betrothed her to and instead took to the sea. When her family chased her down and demanded she wed, she said she would marry the briny deep. Chaos had granted her wish by twisting her form so that she could forever live in her beloved sea, pulling down ships until she regained her human form and returned to lead her House.

I don't know if it's true, but I love the idea of Chaos granting a wish in such a backhanded manner.

"What are you smiling about?" Gavin whispers as we run to a stand of live oaks on the outskirts of the governor's garden and duck down. There are no guards about, and the curtains to the wide windows of the formal dining room are drawn back so that the household is revealed for all to see. The doors to the garden have been propped open to let in a breeze. It's almost too perfect a scene, like something out of an old House Cockatrice farce. There is a Dragon captain, grizzled and gray in his distinctive forest-green uniform; the governor, a small man with far too much facial hair and a penchant for paisley; and a few others that I don't know. A nearby maid pours more honey wine, even though it's clear the assemblage has already had enough, their voices loud and uncontrolled. The governor bounces a laughing girl much too young for him on his knee while the men make lewd jokes. The girl laughs along with their crass humor. I hope she's being well compensated.



"These fools," Gavin mutters. "Don't they know there is a war happening?"

"Bryanne Seabreak," I say.

Gavin startles. "What?"

"You asked what I was smiling about, and I was smiling about Bryanne Seabreak. Have you heard that story?" I whisper back.

"No, but this might not be the time," Gavin says, pointing to the heavily armed riders storming up the drive. They ride war drakes, large and barely feathered, their scales dull and their forearms thickly taloned. I have never seen such vicious-looking creatures. The drakes in House Kraken tended to be the smaller kind, to fit on ships, their plumage grand and their talons nearly nonexistent. No wonder some of the more grizzled veterans tell horror stories of the House Dragon cavalry. I cannot imagine seeing a unit of those monstrous lizards bearing down upon me on a battlefield.

"Chaos take me," Gavin swears. "Look."

I frown at him and turn back to the company of riders disembarking from the drakes. They wear skirmish armor, leather plating and gauntlets but no helms. They stride into the mansion like they're going to a fire, which is where they're supposed to be, attending to the warehouse fire near the pier, not here.

"What am I supposed to be seeing?" I ask.

"Did you see who that was?" Gavin asks. At my head shake he sighs. "That is Talon Goldhoard. The War Prince himself, scion to House Dragon. His dad is the one who ordered your House murdered."

"My House is Kraken," I murmur absentmindedly, making the old argument without even realizing what I'm saying. The riders

appear in the dining room scene, and there seems to be some yelling, with the governor making the appropriate bows and scrapes and the rest of his guests looking somewhere between chagrined and annoyed at the arrival of their unexpected guests.

“Leonetti has to be here if the War Prince is here,” Gavin says. He’s right. Why else would a battlefield commander bother himself with a worthless town like Lastrium? The fossilized-venom stores are tactically relevant, but this town is nowhere near as important as a few other locations on the coast.

“Okay, change of plan,” I say. I strip off all my armor but keep a bandolier of throwing knives and the sheathes for my long knives before picking up my weapons once more.

I wiggle and rotate my arms, enjoying being much lighter. This is a perfect end to my war. A perfect vengeance. “We’re going to kill us a prince, first.”

Gavin grins, but it’s more like a snarl. “Okay, what are you thinking?”

“I need those lights to go out. While I’m working, you search the residence for Leonetti. Let’s show these overgrown lizards what a little Kraken blue steel can do,” I say.

Gavin nods, disappearing before sprinting across the garden.

I lean back and wait, watching the newly arrived Dragon soldiers. Unlike the regular troops they don’t wear green. Instead, they wear tunics of blood red under their armor plates, their trousers a snowy white.

Dragon’s Teeth.

These are no regular soldiers, these are the High Prince Regent’s deadliest, most bloodthirsty troops. Once, their job was to watch

over and protect House Dragon's regent, just the same as the Barbs were assigned to Leonetti. But that was before a century of endless wars and Dragons who wanted to add the whole of Pyrlanum to their hoard.

One of the soldiers, a nasty piece of work who looms over the rest, begins yanking the curtains closed. He's just reached the open double doors when the tableau before me dims. There's a shout, and then the boonlamps in the dining room begin to go out one by one. It's a relief to my eyes, and just in time. It's incredibly difficult to sneak in through a closed window.

The moon is plenty bright, its light cool and bathing the world in silver, so I'm careful to skirt around the edges of the garden as I run toward the still-open double doors, blades in hand. I'll only have a few minutes before they figure out how to restart the lines that Gavin cut.

"Someone must have cut the main line to the boonlights." The War Prince stands near the back wall, farthest from the doors. As one of his Teeth heads out to fix the lights, I slip around the door-jamb, trying to seem like just another shadow, but the War Prince tenses.

"Someone just entered," he says calmly, drawing his sword with a soft *schnick*. The rest of his soldiers do the same, but in the dark they cannot see the threat. Despite my caution the scion sensed me, so I give up the pretense of stealth and get to work.

The room might be dark, but I can see everything. I take out the grizzled old war general first, my blade easily parting his throat. He hits the floor with a loud thump, but I've already moved on to the governor, sliding my blade into his heart from behind. He makes a

choked gurgle, and as he falls to the floor, his hired company lets out a scream. I push her toward the double doors, and she takes the hint, running out into the garden.

"After her!" one of the soldiers calls, giving chase even as the War Prince snaps at her to hold fast.

The soldier runs right into my blade. It slides into her throat so easily, and then I am spinning to the side so that her body takes the brunt of the ax that comes crashing toward me.

"Show yourself," the brute yells, his face twisted by a scar. I answer him by sliding my knife into his side, letting the poison in the blade do as much of the work as the edge. He grunts, and I dance away before he can bring his ax crashing down upon my skull. Instead, he catches another one of his comrades in the face, felling the man.

I'm beginning to think that it's going to work, that maybe I will get to slide my blade into the heart of the Dragon scion, when the lights come back on, blinding me for a precious heartbeat. I fumble for my glasses, getting them on just as the brute with the ax comes back around, crashing toward me like a drunken man. I dive under the dining room table, somersaulting out the other side and leaping to my feet. There are still four Teeth remaining, including the brute and the War Prince, and I grin at them as I take up a ready position with my knives.

*Always fight with a smile, my girl.* Leonetti's voice echoes to me across the years, and something hitches painfully in my chest.

Suddenly everything in my soul screams at me to run, to flee. But Gavin is still upstairs somewhere in the house, hopefully with Leonetti. I owe the salty codger my life. So I take a deep breath and decide that this is where my journey will end. It looks like I will die at the hands of Dragons as I was long ago supposed to.

Chaos always has a way of exacting its price.

The brute falls to his knees, the Kraken's Sting on my blades having finally taken effect, and the man and woman who stalk toward me look to the War Prince for guidance. I glance at him, trying to judge whether or not I could get a clear shot with a throwing knife, but he stares at me with a mixture of both wonder and terror. It's a look I've seen before when people see the strangeness of my smoked glasses, and I snarl at him in response.

But then the Teeth are upon me, and I have no other thought than survival.

# TALON

The first time I remember seeing her I was eleven and my father had just died.

Caspian painted her, life-sized, against the curving stone wall of his bedchamber. She was made of fire and darkness, coming out of the shadows—out of the constant, violent, streaking darkness that had been the only thing Caspian painted for years before that day. A girl with a grin on her face. Luminous brown skin lit with sunlight—firelight—moonlight—every kind of light he could shine on her with strokes of paint. In one hand she held a curving knife. In the other, a quill. But her eyes were swirling wells of black. As if those dark years stormed inside her, made her as wild and mad as Caspian.

My brother's nightmare stands before me, flesh and blood and poison steel. Just as fiery and beautiful as he draws her, with a smile on her face to tear through anything. And her eyes are huge circles of reflective black, like a pit viper or butterfly.

She is made of Chaos.

Finn grunts as he falls to one knee, wide hand pressed to his side. Blood trickles between leather plates, not enough to have felled him, but Kraken Barbs put poison on their knives. They think we're the treacherous ones.

Salva and Eovan glance at me, and I manage a tight nod: we're plenty to take her down now that we can see. Her advantage is gone.

She has a long knife against all our swords. But I look back at the eyeless girl, and it's another gut punch just to know she is so completely, vividly alive. *Talon has to save her*, Caspian said to Aurora.

My hesitation costs Eovan his life.

The girl throws two small knives from a bandolier I hadn't even seen, and they hit Eovan: one in the neck, one low on his hip. He keeps toward her at Salva's side, but the girl moves with astonishing speed, ducking under Salva's sword, tuning on her knees as Eovan slices where her throat had been, and instead of stabbing Eovan again she grabs the knife in his hip and tears it higher. Eovan cries out, and the girl barely dodges away.

I move around them, giving her no room to back off. She must remain engaged. But they're fighting too close for Salva's sword, and the young Tooth leaps at the girl, grabbing her arm to twist her into a pin. The girl, as if she'd expected it, uses Salva's strength to fling herself around and kick Eovan in the gut so that he stumbles and falls. Blood gushes at his neck from her very first knife. She drops again, forcing Salva to release her, and Salva strikes, missing the girl with her blade, but as the girl twists out of range, Salva manages to hit her across the chin with her gauntleted hand.

It doesn't matter. The girl never stops moving; one step moves into the next turn, her footwork swift and dazzling. She flicks her wrists and thrusts her long knife back into Salva; it glances off Salva's armor, but when the girl rolls to her feet again, she holds a long knife in each hand. A grin still splashes across her bloodied mouth, and those strange black goggles glint in the boonlight.

There's two arm-spans between them. I say, "Salva, back off," my gaze on the girl.

She is exactly as she was when Caspian painted her. Fire and

shadow. She walked into this room from pitch darkness and destroyed half the Dragon's Teeth, and now it will be just the two of us.

Perhaps it is not madness that touches my brother's mind. Perhaps Chaos claims him more deeply than any of us had known.

"Tell me your name," I command.

The girl spits blood onto the floor, presumably staring right back at me. But I can't see her eyes at all. No matter. Finn breathes hard in the corner of my vision, on his knees, but alive and waiting.

I draw a deep breath and flex my hand around the grip of my falchion. The blade curves slightly and is only a hand longer than her knives, made for swift death and elegance. I like it because I can outmaneuver most swords no matter the skill of the wielder, and I've got my own strength, so I don't need as much weight in the blade. I don't have a buckler or gauche dagger to meet her double blades, but I reach for the claws hooked to my belt in the small of my back and slide my fingers in. It's a modified fingerless gauntlet with short claws in the knuckles that can be used for cutting or blocking, and it will do.

When I face her fully armed, her head tilts and her smile shifts a little so she seems eager and amused. I wonder if it's a mask or she's really so ready to die.

"I am Talon Goldhoard," I say, "First Scion of House Dragon. Who are you?"

The girl's only answer is to attack.

I meet her blades with mine and push her back. She turns and whips a knife at me; I deflect and turn with her, never pausing. I can move the way she does—with her—because I'm not trying to kill



her. I don't want her dead. We need her—for what I don't have the slightest idea. But I believe it in my gut.

On defense, I can react, and we're a little too well matched. She's smaller than me, but so fast, and strong. She knows exactly how to use her speed to keep me chasing, but I know exactly how to angle to drive her slowly in the direction I want. We battle carefully, avoiding the sprawled legs of my dead Teeth and old Captain Ignatius.

The girl surprises me by turning fast and ducking under me. I swing but stumble and barely catch myself before she cuts my throat. I feel the wind of the blade and set my jaw as I turn my falchion so it lines up along my forearm and drive so close I can see myself in the black glass of her goggles. I lean in, and her long knife almost pricks the underside of my jaw, but my own blade presses across her unarmored stomach just under her breasts. She freezes, hissing in through her teeth, and I slowly press my falchion out, forcing her back as I do. The girl steps away then drops down, twisting, and I almost get stabbed with that poison knife in the same place Finn did.

Sweat slides in strings down my back. I blink droplets from my eyes. I force my breath slower again, staring at her, and she gets to her feet.

"You aren't trying to kill me," she accuses. Her first words to me.

"I don't want you dead."

"Your funeral, War Prince." The girl rolls one shoulder like it's sore, but I think that's a distraction.

"Tell me your name," I try again. "I'd like to know who wants to kill me."

She snorts. "It's a long list."

I let myself smile, too, slow and as dangerous as I can make it. "It's good to have enemies. That's how you know you're living your best life."

"Dragon propaganda." The girl doesn't even finish the word before throwing herself at me. I use the claw and manage finally to catch her left knife between the hooking blades. I twist my wrist harshly, and it turns her long knife so she's forced to release it. I fling it away and drive in before she can draw yet another knife. Her remaining long dagger blocks my falchion, but I step in close again, so we're locked together. The girl puts her free hand to her other, using all her weight to press her knife against my sword. I bend my elbows, letting her in, then with my entire body I throw her against the side of the table.

She grunts as she hits with her hip, winces, but instead of coming at me or folding, she hops and rolls over the table itself, landing on the other side next to the slumped governor, dead in a chair, blood down his brocade coat even messier than his beard was. It's a thought not worthy of my rank, but I'm glad he's dead.

Her shoulders are heaving now, too. I can feel the heat of battle in my face, my heart pumping as hard as dragon wings. I stare at her again, the gleam of sweat on her cheeks giving them shine, her lips, the hand loose at her side curved as if she's about to sprout talons. I could believe it. She's made of Chaos. I have to know her name.

"Leonetti's not here," I say, taunting now. I know that's why she came.

Though the girl's goggles make her eyes empty hellish pits, the skin of her forehead shifts like she's narrowed them, and she stops smiling. "Lies."

I shake my head. "He hasn't been in Lastrium since the day

before yesterday.” I walk to the table and put my claw against the wood, leaning toward her across broken glasses and spilled wine to emphasize my point. “I sent him away as soon as I got here.”

She bares her teeth again. “You gryphon shit son of an eel.”

“Are you his child? His lieutenant? A new, too-young wife?”

Her body goes rigid.

“He must not be proud of you.” I push where it would hurt me. “Or we’d have heard of a vicious, skilled assassin girl without any eyes.”

She refuses my bait. It’s irritatingly admirable.

I start around the table so she either has to run now through the open doors into the garden or let me drive her deeper into the room.

She doesn’t move. Waiting for me. Except she picks up a table knife to replace the one I forced her to drop. No hesitation as she settles it in her hand and the boonlight glints off its relatively dull blade.

Something heady speeds my pulse now. I barely remember she murdered four of my Teeth and another two might still die of their wounds, including Finn if I don’t shut this down soon.

I don’t glance at him to make sure he’s ready. I can sense his hulking shape right where we left him, on one knee, struggling not to fall until he’s done his last task.

“Very well, scion,” I say, because if she’s in Leonetti Seabreak’s family, she’s the child of a regent, and that makes her one of us. He has a daughter and son at least.

A slight shift of her weight makes me think she doesn’t like me calling her that, so she must be one of the Seabreak war orphans. Family, but not a scion by blood.

This time I attack, sudden and fast.

The girl jerks away, lashing out with her leg in the same motion. I expected something like it, so I let her kick my thigh, braced enough it only hurts like a stampeding drake, and wrap my claw around her calf, knocking her back.

We both fall away, and I press my advantage, turning again to drive her toward Finn. It's a dangerous risk, but I slow, as if I'm tired, and the girl gives me no leeway. I wish I could take a hit, but that cursed poison isn't worth it. So I attack again, slicing at her, and she dodges, as graceful as flickering flames and just as difficult to touch.

I hear others behind me: more soldiers, servants maybe. I don't know because I can't spare the focus. If I lose it for just a moment, she'll skewer me. And I'll never know her name.

It almost happens because I'm so caught up, breathless and fierce. I think maybe she's supposed to kill me; that's why Caspian painted her over and over and over again. Perhaps *he* was predicting my death, all this time. Not Aurora.

I falter and she leaps into the gap of my defense, and I desperately drop my falchion to catch her wrist. The long knife is a hand-span from my bare neck, her arm trembling with effort. I can feel her breath on my jaw—then I feel pain blossom in my shoulder in the space between my chest armor and the leather pauldron on my shield arm. The table knife.

Of all things, I laugh, low and painful. I shove my wounded shoulder toward her, pulling her wrist around with me, effectively flinging her toward Finn.

The girl remains on her feet, and she never lets go of her long knife. She lifts it, and this time, she'll stab it straight through my

throat. She lets herself grin again, in satisfaction, because my sword is on the floor and there's a table knife sticking out of my shoulder, rendering my claw useless.

But her smile falters. I wish I could see her eyes.

She sways, and against all logic I leap forward to catch her as she falls, unconscious, into my arms.

I lower to my knees right away, to the sound of my name called urgently as those soldiers and residents of the governor's household finally come forward, now the danger is past. The girl's head lolls against the handle of the table knife, knocking it and sending pain down my arm and across my chest.

As I carefully lay the eyeless girl down on the bloody floor, Finn growls, "What in the edge of Chaos is she?"

I remove my arm from under her neck, my jaw set against pain, and study her. Finn's quiet, often strategically useless boon is sleep—he can make anybody drop unconscious with only a touch. She discounted him because he was too poisoned to fight. But not to grab her and invoke his boon.

In sleep the girl seems younger, less like a Chaos monster, and a twinge of sympathy cools the fury in my heart. She's probably younger than me, but barely. At war her whole life, who knows what she's lost, who she made herself become.

I let myself skim my fingers against her cheek: her skin is hot.

With those reflective goggles, she could be staring at me still. Eyes like pits, whirlwinds of pain or violence or empty pearls or dead-fish eyes, all the things Caspian has painted.

"Talon," Finn says, drawing my attention to wounded Salva and the cluster of soldiers and civilians staring wide-eyed at me. At her.

"Finn, you get treatment for that poison, then you're in charge

here. Once the warehouse fire is out, secure the port against the Kraken navy. Keen,” I call to the older soldier propping Salva up. “I want this prisoner secured for travel. We leave as soon as possible. I’m taking her to the fortress at Phoenix Crest.”

Home, I think, to set her in the tower surrounded by Caspian’s art and finally understand what’s haunted my brother all his life.

“Scion,” Finn says, and I glance at his blotchy face. “You need treatment, too.”

I grimace at the table knife; then I slip my fingers under the strap of the girl’s goggles and strip them off her face.

They leave a gentle mark down her temples, almost like tear streaks.

But her eyes are closed, lashes tightly curled, and the lids shifting with dreams. I wonder, as pain makes me light-headed, if I’ll ever see what her eyes are truly made of.