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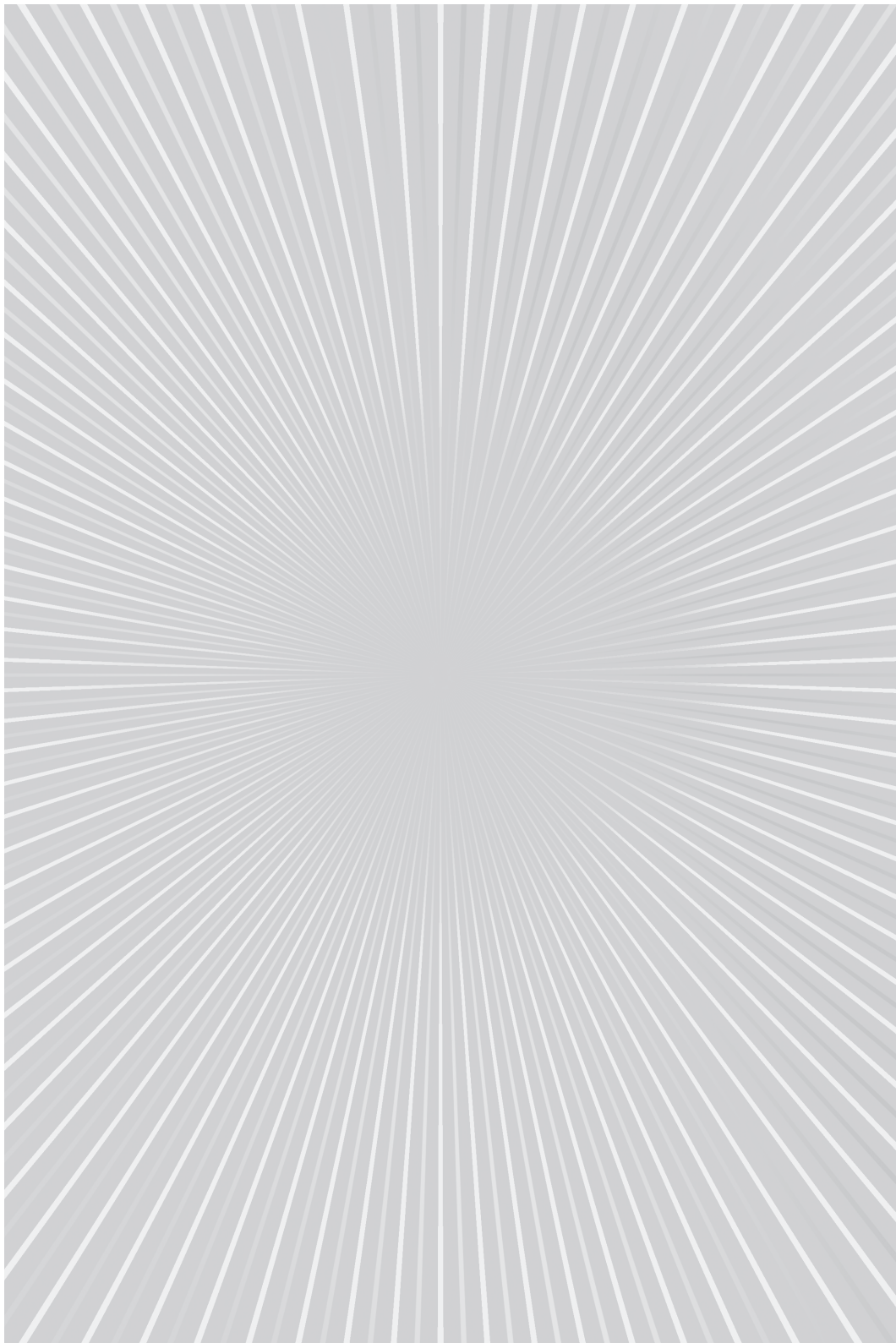
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FIREBORNE



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ROSARIA MUNDA

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PROLOGUE

Later, he would be known as the First Protector, and under his vision the city would transform. Serfs would be freed, schools would be built, and dragons would, for the first time, be ridden by commoners.

Before that, he was the leader of the bloodiest revolution his people had ever seen.

He never doubted that he would create a just city. Nor did he doubt that the families of the old regime deserved to die. But he did, sometimes, regret the way it happened, the day the palace was finally overrun.

He remembered in particular one of the ruling families, their tormentors still at work when he found them. The dragonlord had been kept alive, to watch; his youngest son was the only child left. A boy of about seven or eight, his expression blank beneath a mask of blood. The remains of their family lay around them.

“Stop this foolishness at once,” the First Protector said, when he and his guard found them.

The revolutionaries let go of the boy, whom they had been

hurting, and began to protest: This man is Leon Stormscourge, don't you know what he's done—but they fell silent when the dragonlord spoke from his knees on the bloodstained carpet.

“My son,” he said, in the language he and the First Protector shared. “Please, Atreus.”

The First Protector took a half glance at the child. He said, “Leo will be looked after.”

He gave one of his guard a murmured order. The soldier started, hesitated, and then lifted the dragonlord's son in his arms. When the boy had been carried, limp and silent, from the room, the leader of the revolution knelt before the dragonlord.

“Those—animals—” the dragonlord rasped.

The First Protector did not disagree. Instead, he put a hand to the knife on his belt. When he met the dragonlord's gaze, it was in an unspoken question. The dragonlord closed his eyes and nodded.

Then, to the First Protector's surprise, he spoke.

“Your vision,” he said. “Do you think it will ever be worth this, Atreus?”

The First Protector drew his knife.

“Yes,” he said.

The dragonlord's question returned to him often in the years that followed. Even as many of the other details of the revolution began to fade from his memory, he remembered Leon Stormscourge.

Leon's son, on the other hand, was a detail he forgot.



1

MESSAGES FROM THE MINISTRY

Nine Years Later

LEE

Morning is our favorite time to fly. Today, even with the tournament looming and the empty arena below us a reminder that soon we'll be watched, for the first time, by thousands, it's still possible to savor the city sprawled beneath a dragon's wings. When we pull tight on a turn, I glimpse one of Pallor's black eyes, depthless, turned on me. The line between us, of shared emotions and thoughts that are usually latent in the saddle, goes taut. Yes. Today it begins. Today we'll rise.

But in order to do that, I'll need a clear head. I gently extricate myself from Pallor's simmering anticipation and refocus on the arena. Two other dragonriders fly with us, each riding one of the other two breeds: Crissa and her skyfish are in the air above us, while Cor and his stormscourge glide below, bellowing ash over the arena stands. We're on our last rehearsal, this time with just the squadron leaders.

I lift my voice over the wind. "You're taking her too low, Cor."

Cor grunts, frustrated, and urges his stormscourge higher. We've rehearsed the choreography of the tournament's opening



ceremony over and over with ministry officials, and every time the question of how to demonstrate the might of the stormscourge breed becomes tricky. Before the Revolution, the dragons of Stormscourge House—of my family—were known for terrorizing the countryside; but in even older days, they were our island’s greatest defense against aerial invasion.

“They told us to fire low,” says Cor.

“Not *that* low. It’s risky for the audience.”

Our dragons are immature, barely horse-size, and can’t yet breathe fire. But the smoke they produce can still burn.

Crissa and her skyfish, long, slender, and pale enough blue to blend with the morning sky, circle above us. “You want to impress the people,” she calls down to Cor. “Not roast them.”

Cor waves a hand. “All right, all right . . .”

Our fleet is still in training, dragons and riders both. Known now as Guardians, the new regime’s dragonriders are low-born, commoners, even former serfs. No longer the sons of dragonlords.

Except for me, though I’m the only one who knows that.

Because in the wake of the Revolution, to be dragonborn is to be wanted for dead. I was born Leo, son of Leon, dragonlord of Stormscourge House and Drakarch of the Far Highlands—but, since the orphanage, I’ve been Lee. Not even the First Protector, who saved my life and then welcomed me, without recognition, into his Guardian program two years after that, knows the truth.

That a Stormscourge tested into the meritocratic dragonriding program designed to replace everything his family stood for.

Even though I know I’m lucky to be here—lucky to be alive, lucky to have escaped the orphanage—memories of the old life have a way of intruding and twisting. Especially today, as Pallor

and I circle above the Palace arena, open to the public for the first time since the Revolution. The old regime had tournaments here, too. Tournaments I watched my father compete in, dreaming of the day it would be my turn.

I lean forward and rest a gloved hand on Pallor's silver-scaled neck as his wings, translucent in the morning light, tighten in a dive. Pallor is an aurelian, a smaller breed known for being careful and maneuverable, and the aurelian formation for today's ceremony is the only one complex enough to require coleaders. I can rehearse alone, but to do the thing properly, I need—

Annie. There she is.

Another aurelian, this one amber-toned, has emerged from the cave mouth at the base of the arena, and on her back rides my sparring partner, Annie. She and I have trained together for as long as we've been in the Guardian program, and we've known each other since the orphanage before that.

It's a past life's worth of memories that we're both pretty good at not talking about.

"Annie!" Crissa calls with a cheerful wave. "There you are."

"Lee's been flying like an idiot out here without you," Cor says.

Pallor and I fire ash downward. Cor dodges the stream with a bark of laughter.

Annie's lips curve at Cor's remark, but instead of answering, she rolls seamlessly into formation opposite me, her dragon, Aela, mirroring Pallor's movements. Annie's red-brown braid hangs low on her back, her pale freckled face set in concentration. I've thought of Annie as beautiful—strikingly beautiful—for almost as long as I can remember, but I've never told her that.

"Take it from the top?" I suggest.

There are calls of assent from the other three.

We right ourselves only when the bell rings the hour. The arena below, the Palace to one side and the pillar supporting Pytho's Keep on the other, the jagged rooftops, the plains stretching out to the sea—for a moment I feel a protectiveness, almost a possessiveness, of the city and island spread below. The vows that we took when we became Guardians echo in my mind: *All that I am, henceforth, belongs to Callipolis. By the wings of my dragon I will keep her . . .*

Today, eight of the Guardians will compete in the quarterfinal tournament for Firstrider, commander of the aerial fleet. I'm one of those eight, along with Annie, Cor, and Crissa. Qualifying rounds have been going on among the thirty-two dragonriders for weeks.

It will be the first time since the Revolution that Callipolis names a Firstrider, one of the few titles it's kept from the old regime. The dragons of the revolutionary fleet are finally old enough, and their riders well-enough trained, to vie for a position that's been vacant since the Revolution. For the other Guardians, the Firstrider Tournaments are a chance to prove themselves; for me, it will be that and something more.

Because *Firstrider* is a title I've wanted since before the Revolution. It would be all the recognition, power, and respect that my family lost over the course of a single bloody month when I was eight years old, regained.

Firstrider.

Distantly, below, the bells of the Palace clocktower are tolling. I rouse myself. "We should get in for breakfast. Goran said he'd have the tournament bracket ready by then."

We land on the Eyrie, the jutting stone platform that rises

from the center of the arena, where we dismount, unsaddle our dragons, and dismiss them to their nests in the caves below. Back in the Palace, we find the rest of the Guardian corps, thirty-odd students in all, trickling into the Cloister refectory from the dorms. The walls of the refectory are bare stone, the windows high and narrow, breakfast the usual slightly burnt porridge. Though we are technically Palace residents, we live in what were, before the Revolution, servants' quarters.

"You're up early."

Duck, Cor's younger brother, has scooted on his bench to make room for us where he's sitting with some friends. Though Duck and Cor share tanned olive skin and dark wavy hair, in manner they're opposites, Cor tending to scowl where Duck wears an open smile. Annie slides comfortably onto the bench beside Duck. They're both sixteen, a year younger than most of us, while it was the first commonality that brought them together, they remained friends because Duck seemed to like the challenge. It's hard to get Annie to smile, and Duck's good at it.

Duck lifts his spoon from his porridge and cocks it in Annie's direction. "Ready for your big day?"

Annie snorts, but all the same color enters her cheeks. A rare glimpse of ambitions she usually keeps close to the vest. She is hunching again: Always, on the ground, Annie hunches, as if hoping to take up less space. It's a jarring contrast to her confidence in the air.

Crissa tells Duck, in the bracing voice she pulls out whenever she's encouraging riders in her squadron: "Your big day, too."

Duck lifts his shoulders, grin flagging. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

Like the four of us, Duck made it into today's quarterfinals.

He'll do great—depending on how he handles his nerves, and who he's up against.

“Nervous, Dorian?”

Speaking of which. Power, one of the qualifying storm-scourge riders, has passed us on his way from the serving counter. He drapes an arm around Duck's shoulder, as if he were encouraging him, and flicks a spare palm over close-shaven black hair as he locks eyes with me. Power is around my height and weight, and this has always been the kind of calculation I make, and can tell he's making, when we look at each other.

Duck has gone rigid. “Get your hands off me,” he says through gritted teeth.

Cor sets down his glass with a click on the hardwood table. I return my spoon to a resting position in the bowl of porridge.

It's almost disappointing when Power withdraws his arm. He's become more careful in recent years. “Jumpy, are we?”

He wanders back to the empty seat between Darius and Alexa, who have been watching our interchange apprehensively. The tension slides out of Duck's shoulders, and he makes a guttural noise of disgust.

“Sometimes,” Cor muses, “I miss the days when patrician kids like Power got away with stuff, and it was up to us to keep them in line.”

“I don't,” Duck mutters.

In the old regime, my family was among the ruling dragon-born, and the patrician families like Power's were a tier below, wealthy but dragonless. Power holds the usual patrician disdain for commoners like Cor and Crissa and, most damningly, Annie, who is not only a commoner but a former serf.

Crissa murmurs, “I’m sure Goran misses those good old days, too.”

Her eyes narrow on the doorway of the refectory, where a single adult has entered the room. Goran, our patrician drill-master, is a ruddy-faced, aging, formerly fit officer gone to seed, with traces of a Dragontongue accent that he thickens when he wants to intimidate lowborn riders. The sight of him has always been unsettlingly familiar. We must have crossed paths in the years before, but he’s never recognized me, and that’s all that matters. Goran’s loyalty to Atreus is apparent; to the ideals of the Revolution, less so. Before Atreus put his foot down, Goran let Power and the other patrician Guardians get away with almost anything.

“Morning, Guardians,” Goran tells the room. “Ready to hear the bracket for today’s matches?”

The table goes silent. Goran begins to read from his list. “We’ve got Annie versus Darius—”

Darius, one of Power’s patrician friends in the stormscourge squadron, turns around to look at Annie, and I’m pleased to see that his usual easygoing bravado has been replaced by a furrowed brow. Annie folds her arms and glares back.

“—Cor versus Rock—”

Cor scowls despite the fact that it’s a decent pairing, no doubt calculating the possible combinations left to be assigned. Specifically, who might be paired with Duck.

“Next we’ll have Lee and Crissa—”

Crissa lets out a groan and presses her palms to her forehead in a theatrical gesture of dismay, then locks her eyes on mine. Crissa has the kind of face—perpetually sun-flushed, lips full, eyes round, framed by dark gold curls streaked with

blond—that, when you stare at it, you end up allowing your gaze to linger on too long. She lifts an eyebrow playfully.

“Do your worst, Lee.”

I can feel myself blushing for reasons that have nothing to do with the match. Crissa smirks. Cor rolls his eyes.

After ours comes the final pairing, the one we all saw coming as soon as Goran paired me and Crissa.

“Finally, we’ll have Power versus Duck.”

Power lets out a trilling drumroll, but he’s the only one who looks pleased. Duck has sunk low in his seat; Cor’s face has tightened. Annie’s arm moves ever so slightly, as if squeezing Duck’s hand beneath the table. Duck is one of the only people I have ever seen Annie touch voluntarily, and she does so often. Now, as she takes his hand, he perceptibly swallows.

According to Cor, they’re not together. But even if they’re not, it’s pretty clear Duck’s smitten. He has been for years and yet still Annie touches him like this, casually, as if they’re still kids—oblivious, as far as I can tell. Annie used to touch me like that, in the orphanage. She stopped when we came here.

I realize that Duck is staring at me, staring at him. We look away from each other at once.

“You’ve got a little over an hour till the opening ceremony,” Goran says, “so I’d recommend you get moving. How many of you have family coming today?”

There’s a show of hands. Pretty much everybody; Annie and I are the predictable exceptions. But then I see Annie’s fingers lifted a bit off the table; she is studying them as if surprised herself.

That doesn’t make sense. How could Annie have family coming?

“Save the greetings for the end,” Goran says. “But feel free to take the rest of the day off. Madam Mortmane will be doing sign-outs by the Cloister entrance. Any questions?”

When there aren’t, he catches my eye. “Lee, Annie, a word.”

I can’t remember the last time Goran wanted to speak with Annie. We wait, seated, as the others take their leave and Goran assumes a vacant chair at the head of the table. I can almost feel the tension riddling Annie’s body at his proximity. Although years have passed since he’s outright bullied her—the extra chores, the arbitrarily low marks, the ridicule on the Eyrie—Goran has never stopped treating Annie’s presence on the corps as particularly offensive, as if her status as a former serf, compounded with her gender, were one too many of Atreus’s innovations to be tolerated in one person.

“I’ve got notes from the ministry, one for each of you.”

He hands me mine, then Annie hers. As usual, he avoids looking at her, like she’s a perversion to keep in his peripheral vision.

My note is stamped with the seal of Atreus Athanatos, the First Protector.

“Read them later,” Goran says. “You’re dismissed.”

We stop together in the corridor outside to tear open our notes. Atreus has handwritten a single phrase. I read it, and for the first time today, the acid jolt of nerves hits my stomach.

Good luck, Lee.

I look up. Annie is still reading, frozen. Then her shoulders go up, and she tears her eyes away from her note.

“We should get to the armory,” she says.

By the time we arrive, the rest of the corps are getting ready to head underground to the dragon nests. Annie and I make

our way to the aurelian squad's cubbies amid riders shrugging on flamesuits, hooking on their last few plates of armor, and slinging tack over their shoulders to carry down to the caves. The room smells of leather, sweat, and ash: the smells of dragonriding.

I feel something pressed into my hand; Annie has passed me her note and turned away. Inviting me to read it but unwilling to watch as I do.

Our cubbies are side by side; in recent years I've trained myself to stare at anything, anything in the *world*, other than Annie when she's changing uniforms. Today, I stare at her note. Her message bears the seal of the Ministry of Propaganda, not the First Protector. It says:

THE MINISTRY WOULD LIKE TO REMIND ANTIGONE SUR AELA OF THE INTENSELY PUBLIC NATURE OF THE OBLIGATIONS OF RIDERS OF THE FOURTH ORDER, AND TO URGE HER TO CONSIDER CAREFULLY WHETHER SHE TRULY BELIEVES HER VOWS TO SERVE THE STATE WOULD BE BEST HONORED BY PURSUING SUCH A PUBLIC ROLE.

They want her to throw the match.

Beside me, Annie has finished putting on her flamesuit. Black leather, treated for heat and fire, hugs her slender frame from neckline to ankles, her braided hair a burst of red above the suit's dark silhouette. She makes no attempt to discuss the note, not while others are still around us, and so we finish arming in silence, strapping plates of armor, forged out of repurposed dragons' scales, over our flamesuits, and tightening them one by one. After the last riders have headed out and we're alone in the armory, Annie takes back her note.

“What did yours say?” she asks.

Atreus’s note is the last thing I want to show her. I hesitate.

“Please,” she says quietly.

Without waiting for my answer, she takes my note from the cubby. After reading it, she sinks down onto the bench beside me.

“Congratulations,” she says.

She doesn’t sound bitter, or even jealous—just tired.

“You’re the peasant they want,” she adds.

Peasant was one of the words banned after the Revolution, except in historical context. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Annie say it. Not in reference to herself.

Nor in reference to me, though it’s been my official identity for as long as she’s known me. It is an omission on her part that I’ve been conscious of since the orphanage, when I was less skilled at hiding where I came from, and that she’s only ever since acknowledged with certain silences.

I speak through a rising discomfort. “That’s not how—Atreus would never think of it like that—”

Annie’s head is tilted back as she studies the ceiling. “Atreus would. He needs riders in the Fourth Order who pass muster with the elites.”

The Fourth Order will be the rank given to the four riders who win today, signaling that of the thirty-two riders in the corps, they are the four most skilled. It’s the highest ranking in the fleet below Firstrider.

“You’re talking about—”

“I’m talking about succession.”

I freeze on the word; Annie sounds short of breath to utter it aloud.

Before he ends his stewardship of the new regime, Atreus’s

successor will be chosen from among the best and the brightest of the Guardians. The next Protector. All but officially, that selection pool will be made up of the Fourth Order.

“He’s thinking about succession,” Annie repeats, “and he needs peasants who don’t still—act like it.”

I speak through gritted teeth as I yank the straps of an arm guard tighter on my forearm. “You don’t *act like it*.”

Annie lets out a faint laugh. We both know I’m lying. I can guess as well as she what the ministry probably has on file: that Annie is known for being too deferential, too reserved, for having trouble with situations that require public speaking. She’s been at the top of the class for as long as I can remember but almost never raises her hand.

She could train past that. She could find the confidence if she tried and had the resources. But how is she supposed to look for that, to think she even *should* look for that, if the ministry sends her letters like this?

Something else, then. Something that has nothing to do with the ministry.

“You said you had family coming today?”

I ask the question gingerly, unsure whether I should ask it at all. Annie blinks, then shakes her head. “Not family. Friends . . . from my village.”

My village are two more words Annie usually avoids saying. She enunciates them carefully, as if they’re foreign.

“They wrote,” she goes on. “A letter. Not from the parents, they don’t read.” I risk a quick glance at her; her face begins to redden at *read*. “But their son’s been in school since the Revolution, so he wrote. That they’d be coming. They were the family who I was with for a bit before Albans.”

Albans was our orphanage. She hasn't mentioned her circumstances before it, at least in front of me, in years.

She fiddles with her hair, pushing a few strands out of her eyes and behind her ear. "I haven't seen them since—" She looks up and I realize I'm staring at her; I look away and she does, too, seizing her boots, jamming one foot after another into them.

"I bet your making Fourth Order would mean a lot to them," I tell her. "It would probably mean a lot to anyone coming in from the provinces to watch the tournament. You'd be—"

Still bent over her boots, Annie prompts me softly.

"I'd be what?"

I hear myself say it. Words that would have shamed my father to hear said by anyone, let alone by me.

"You'd be making history."

Annie has reached for her helmet, the other gloved hand braced on her knees, about to push to her feet. There's a strange curve to her smile, a lift to her eyebrows, as she looks at me. When she speaks, she doesn't counter that I would, according to the lowborn identity I've assumed, be making history, too.

As if she knows I'm not. As if she knows that I am simply hoping, desperately, hungrily, to repeat it.

"Let's go, Lee."



2

THE FOURTH ORDER

Before he met the girl, the boy in the orphanage moved like a sleepwalker. Tasteless meals, hard beds on cold nights, the bullying and the beatings—he passed through all of it unseeing. Let them bully him. Let them beat him. They were nothing. Their language was the one he had listened to as he watched his family die.

Instead of listening, he remembered. He remembered his family around him, his sisters' laughter, his brother's teasing, his mother's voice. A world of light and warmth, great fireplaces tended by servants, ornate glass windows overlooking the Firemouth, chandeliers hanging low over tables piled high with food. He remembered the sight of his father at court, resplendent as he received his subjects. He remembered lifting aloft, the city falling below, his father's arm steadying him as the wings of his stormscourge beat the air. Her name was Aletheia, and sometimes, his father allowed him to bring her scraps from the table.

“One day,” his father told him, his arm around him as the highlands of Callipolis stretched below Aletheia's wings, “this



will be yours, if a dragon Chooses you. You will learn to rule, just as I did.”

“Did your father teach you?”

“What he could. But much of it came naturally to me, Leo. Just as it will for you. We were born to rule, just as the peasants were born to serve.”

He found that he could live in these memories for hours. And when they ran out he invented futures: a dragon he would be Chosen by, dragonfire he would have power over, the people who had taken everything from him helpless and awaiting punishment. He imagined making them pay.

When he did this, it kept the real world, and the other memories, out. Nothing hurt so much as being forced back to the present.

That was what happened when he met the girl.

He could see through the doorway that it was one child against two larger ones. The girl struggled. It was all familiar.

But then, for the first time since he came to the orphanage, he found himself walking toward the violence rather than away from it.

He pulled a kitchen knife out of his pocket as he approached. The words in the other language came slowly, but they were there. “Go away.”

At the sight of his knife, they fled.

As he knelt beside the girl, he realized he recognized her: She shared courses with him at school, despite the fact that she was at least a year younger than him and his classmates. She had scrawny limbs, scraggly red-brown hair, and clothes that were well-worn even by orphanage standards. He was struck, as he looked at her, by how small she seemed.

It was the first time he had ever found himself thinking this about someone else: In his family, he had been the smallest.

“You shouldn’t have fought them,” he said. “They only make it harder for you when you fight them. They only hurt you more—”

He stopped himself.

The girl shrugged and looked up at him, her face wet with tears, and he saw a bitter ferocity and determination there that he recognized.

“Sometimes you can’t not fight,” she said.

ANNIE

No amount of practice prepares you for the sight of the arena’s stands completely full, banners flapping in the wind, trumpets sounding the Anthem of the Revolution as the drums keep time. Aela and I delight together in the searing blue horizon, the sharp late-spring breeze, the city cheering below us as we perform the opening ceremony. Moments like this, it hits me like it did the first time: that the life I have begun to think of as routine is, in fact, extraordinary. Today, in the stands below, the people are watching commoners like themselves ride dragons. It’s the kind of thing that can’t help making you feel proud of your country.

Even if it turns out that your country is not so proud of you.

But as that thought threatens to overwhelm, I feel Aela’s body, warm through the saddle, her presence soft at the back of my mind. *Hold. Be still. Not now.* For as long as I can remember, Aela has been able to temper the feelings I couldn’t. Even in the very beginning, when I was still a child with lingering

nightmares of dragonfire. With Aela, they fell away. A dragon's comfort for a dragon's crimes. What would people from my village think? What would my parents have thought, my brothers and sisters? Questions I've never had answered, but when I'm with Aela, they don't matter anymore.

Together with Lee sur Pallor, we lead the aurelian squadron over the heads of the audience while the shimmering skyfish dart back and forth across the arena above us. As we practiced this morning, Cor keeps the stormscourge squadron high, their ash safely out of range of citizens in the stands below.

Atreus begins his speech after we've landed and dismissed our dragons. Even at a distance from the Palace Box, it's impossible to miss Atreus's presence, his close-cut steel-gray hair, his confident pose that more than makes up for his simple, muted garb. The only thing lost is the way his gaze makes you feel powerful. Important. Needed. When we first met him, as children freshly Chosen by the new regime's hatchling dragons, a shiver went down my back when he said my name. Bound for the first time to Aela's, in drakonym, like a dragonlord's. *Antigone sur Aela, make your vows.*

What would it have been like, I can't help wondering, to receive a wish of good luck from *him* this morning, instead of one of caution from the Ministry of Propaganda? What did Lee feel as he read those words? And is that why, standing beside me, he is able to look so unabashedly confident as he regards the waiting crowd—

But confidence has never been something Lee's been short on, notes from Atreus or no. That's been apparent from the beginning.

A lot of things have been apparent from the beginning, with Lee.

“Men and women of Callipolis,” Atreus proclaims, “welcome to the quarterfinal Firstrider Tournament. Ten years ago, you made a historic choice. You chose to test everyone equally, to choose the best among you to become dragonriders, and to train them to lead. To bring Callipolis into a new era of greatness, of air power in the service of what is right. Of virtuous leaders and just rule. For the years between the old way of dragons and the new, you have allowed me to be your steward. Now I ask you to look to your future. To your Guardians. Four of whom today will become semifinalists for Firstrider, and members of the Fourth Order.

“In a few years I will say: May the most virtuous Guardian rule. But today, I say: May the best riders win.”

The cheering goes up, resounding. It sets my blood on fire.

I take a seat on the stone bleachers beside Duck to watch the first match: his brother, Cor, against Rock, who rides a storm-scourge like Cor, and comes from a highland serf family, like me. Rock has stubbly gray-blond hair, fair skin, and a hulking frame that earned him his nickname years ago. When the announcer uses his real name, riders on the Eyrie act surprised.

“Good luck, *Richard!*” they call.

Rock takes the ribbing in good cheer, exchanging a last few shoulder pumps with Lotus and Darius before heading down the stone ramp to the cave mouth alongside Cor.

For the first time since our conversation, the cool reassurance of Lee’s voice saying what I already knew wavers. Lee was right—I’d be making history if I made it into the Fourth Order today. But so would Rock. And who doesn’t like *Rock*? Boisterous, steadfast, confident? The kind of peasant even the patrician kids like . . .

It's not like my note said anything that isn't true. It's not as though I'd like public roles. Or want that much attention. I like winning, and I'm good at it, but there's more to this than winning a match. Making the Fourth Order would put me on display. I'd hate that. I'd be *bad* at it. Right?

But—

Beside me, Duck's leg hammers the bleacher, expelling nerves for his brother. Cor and Rock, down at the cave mouth, are blowing into the summoning whistles built into their wristbands, filling the cave with a sound that human ears cannot hear, but their dragons have been trained to recognize. In the early days of dragonriding, when the connections between riders and dragons were strongest, it is said that riders could summon their dragons mind to mind—but that hasn't been done in centuries.

Their dragons emerge; Cor and Rock mount and take off. They stall above the arena at ten meters apart, level with the wall of the Outer Palace, the Inner Palace rising still higher, and the karst supporting Pytho's Keep towering over them. The bell rings, Cor advances, Rock swerves, and the realization hits me.

Rock's not good enough to beat Cor.

It wouldn't be an obvious call to the audience, but it's easy for me to see the signs: Rock sur Bast moves too slowly; Cor sur Maurana keeps getting within range. Though Cor's shots are going wide, as soon as one aims true, Rock won't have time to dodge. Tournament sparring is won by hits of unsparked dragonfire—a smoky substance called ash, which has enough heat to burn and blackens tourney armor on contact. The torso counts as a kill shot, the limbs as penalties; three penalties serve as a kill.

“Come on, Cor!”

Duck has gotten to his feet beside me, leaning against the railing of the Eyrie, squinting upward against the glare of the sun. When Rock lands the first penalty—a lucky shot that blackens Cor’s arm—Duck inhales like he feels the burn.

“Stormscourge fire. Nothing burns so bad, they say,” says Power, who’s joined us on Duck’s other side. His movements on the ground are like his flying: lithe and predatory as a slinking cat. His helmet is tucked under his arm, the sunlight glowing on his brown skin and the shaven edge of his hair. Duck stiffens but doesn’t look left.

“Care to comment, Annie?” Power adds.

Asking for my expertise on stormscourge fire is one of Power’s favorite ways to taunt me. He likes to study my face while he does it, as I stare back woodenly. After so many years, it feels like a kind of tradition.

Duck’s fists are curling. When we were kids, Power’s allusions to what happened to my family got Duck riled enough to fight. Fights that he lost. Power’s muscles are compact, his tactics in fisticuffs closer to a street rat’s than a patrician child’s.

“What do you want?” Duck growls.

Power leans close, too close, to Duck. His voice is a low murmur. “A long, slow roast.”

Duck stiffens, and I place a restraining hand on his arm.

“Get away from us,” I tell Power.

Our conversation is quiet, but it’s caught the attention of riders on nearby bleachers. Lee and Crissa are closest. At my quelling glance, Lee remains where he is, but continues to watch. Waiting, poised to move.

Now Power’s turned his attention from Duck to me, like a dragon on a new scent. Dark brown eyes bore into mine, white

teeth flashing. He inclines his head in a mockery of old regime obeisance, as if I were dragonborn.

I can feel heat in my face. As Power slinks away, Duck shrugs my hand off his arm. Though his eyes have returned to his brother's match above us, his breathing is light. "Hey, Annie?"

"Yeah?"

"Want to come with me to see my family during the break?"

"I thought we're supposed to wait till the end—"

"I think I'd better do it before."

I think of Power's eyes, fury-lit, and feel the helpless ache that I associate with watching Duck get hurt. Power sur Eater has hospitalized other riders before.

"All right."

Duck takes his eyes off the match long enough to smile crookedly at me. The wind tugs at his wavy hair as a sheepish but stubborn shrug pulls his shoulders up, like his good humor is itself an act of defiance. When I first met him, he took my hand and led me onto the roof of the Cloister, just to look at the stars. At the time, I hadn't understood. Just to see the stars? We can see them anytime. *Not like this*, Duck told me. *You'll see. They're beautiful.*

And I wasn't prepared for how beautiful they were, so close and still on that crenellated rooftop that they seemed close enough to touch. We got caught, but it was worth it. It was the first detention Goran ever gave me that I completed smiling.

The crowd is erupting. Cor has dived down, swept close, and landed a third penalty shot against Rock. Duck lets out a triumphant yell, his fist pumping the air.

Cor sur Maurana landed a kill shot. The match is over.

I'm the only highlander left in the running.

On the Eyrie, Cor and Rock dismount with the telltale stiffness of fresh burns. The announcer proclaims Cor sur Maurana as the first member of the Fourth Order, and Cor waves his arm in the air. An adrenaline high makes his grin seem a little crazed. Rock is welcomed off his dragon by his friend Lotus, who helps him limp over to the railing while his stormscourge takes off for the caves.

“You put in a good fight, friend,” Lotus says. The son of a celebrated patrician poet, Lotus’s wiry hair, brown skin, and lanky frame are a study in contrast to Rock’s highland build.

Rock dusts his hands together. “Now, for our wager on Lee and Crissa?”

As Guardians, we’ve taken vows forswearing the earthly pleasures of money, marriage, and offspring—but gambling still finds a way, at least where Rock and Lotus are concerned.

“Yes indeed,” says Lotus. “I’ll raise you a Dragontongue translation that—”

“You know we can *hear* you,” Crissa interrupts them. “And I assume you’ll be betting on me, Lotus. Since I’m your squadron leader?”

Lotus gulps. Crissa smirks, then catches Lee’s eye and pounds a fist into her palm. “Ready, Lee?”

Clad in scale-plated tourney armor, unsmiling, with his dark hair, gray eyes, and high cheekbones, Lee looks more like a warlord from a tapestry of the Bassilean Wars than an opponent to trash talk. But Crissa is undeterred. And to my surprise, Lee lifts an eyebrow at her. A minute rejoinder that is enough to make Crissa blush.

Another bet going on, in the girls’ dorm: how much of Crissa’s flirting it will take for Lee to—in Deirdre’s words—*succumb*.

Deirdre and Alexa started it, and even Orla joined in eventually. Crissa knows about the pot and thinks it's funny. I avoid conversations about it. There have been no payouts.

Lee and Crissa make their way down the ramp to the summoning point, and the sound of Deirdre's and Alexa's giggling from a nearby bleacher grates in my ears. But when they launch into the air, the Eyrie falls silent. All concerns with Crissa, her flirting, and Lee's inscrutable responses to it fall away at the sight of Lee flying.

I'm Lee's sparring partner so often that I rarely get the chance to watch him. Lee and Pallor move with a perfect balance of fluidity and precision, never overshooting, never falling short, never holding back. It's so beautiful that I find myself holding my breath, aching to get in the air myself. I want to be the one responding to their attacks and retreats, to feel the intoxication that comes from sparring with someone who pushes you to fly your best, your most daring, your hardest.

Crissa is probably our strongest skyfish rider. She knows how to turn her skyfish's natural speed and flexibility to her advantage. But even this does very little against Lee's pinpoint control.

"Why does he keep missing openings?" Rock murmurs.

But he doesn't know Lee's style as I do. Lee isn't missing openings. He's just not going for anything less than a kill shot.

Finally, Crissa grows impatient, veers into a roundabout, and charges. Lee swerves left a split second before Pallor fires. Pallor's first breath of ash is the one that wins the match: The front of Crissa's cuirass blackens. Lee won without a single penalty.

When he lands and removes his helmet, his face—in contrast to Cor's startled euphoria—is completely calm. He finds Crissa, who smiles with contained disappointment as she shakes

his hand. Lee maintains a look of stone-faced tranquility as the sound of cheering comes from the stands and the announcer declares him the second member of the Fourth Order. It's like he's been waiting for it.

I feel a twinge of something between bitterness and admiration: It comes so naturally to him. Not just winning—but thinking he *should* win.

And then the rejoining thought, unwanted but undeniable: *Of course it does. Of course it comes naturally to him.*

It'd come naturally to you, too, if you were dragonborn.

The term feels dirty. Like *peasant*, banned, except rather than from the lexicon, it is banned from my mind in reference to Lee. Sneaking into my thoughts now only because he looks so bloody *poised*.

Of course, his birth was never *substantiated*—

But it never really needed to be substantiated.

And it never mattered. What matters is, Lee flies well. He's a good leader, and he's my friend. He deserves to win. Why should I begrudge him the comfort he has in doing it?

Why should I begrudge him the First Protector's favor, this supposed slum orphan with all his unexpected confidence and grace—

A twenty-minute break has been called before the final two matches: Duck's against Power, and mine against Darius. The riders who've already sparred are making their way down the Eyrie stairs to the Palace entrance, where medics are ready to treat their burns during the break. Duck touches my arm.

"Coming?"

Duck's family are sitting in the Bronze section, reserved for *skilled labor*; below them the Iron section for *unskilled labor*;

high above them, on either side of the Palace Box, are the Silver and Gold sections, for the *spirited*—meaning military—and *philosophical* classes. Before the Revolution, your family determined your class—commoner, patrician, dragonborn—but under the new regime, class is something you’re tested into.

“Looking for someone?” Duck asks.

I’m scanning the crowd, ignoring the stares that our armor is attracting, looking faces from my village. Where are they? Aren’t they here? They would definitely be class-bronze; farming counts as skilled labor. This is the section where they would be sitting.

“Dorian! You’re here! And Annie!”

The Sutters surround us. I’m embraced by Duck’s mother and his two sisters while his youngest brother jumps onto a bench and launches himself into Duck’s arms. The Sutters, much like Duck, have always been unquestioning in their welcome.

“Exciting about Cor, isn’t it? Do you think he could make Firstrider?”

Duck squints: I wonder if we’re both weighing the likelihood of Cor having a chance when Lee’s a semifinalist, too. “Maybe. But Firstrider’s more of an honorary title in times of peace.”

“There might be a war,” Duck’s younger sister Merina points out. Her pigtails flop as she bounces on the balls of her feet. Like all of the Sutter children, Merina has her mother’s tan complexion and her father’s hazel eyes and wavy hair.

Duck laughs and shakes his head. “Probably not.” He ticks off, comfortably: “We’ve got a good relationship with Damos, the dragons of the Iscan Archipelago are sworn neutral, the Bassilean Empire’s been in decline for centuries . . .”

Duck has said nothing more than the baseline of what we’ve

learned in class about the geopolitics of the region, but his family stares as if he'd jarred them. The Sutters own a bakery in Highmarket. They've always taken pride in Cor's and Duck's advancement, but with a certain wary incomprehension.

Mr. Sutter says, with an odd strain in his deep voice, "There's New Pythos. They've got it in for us, haven't they?"

It's an attempt to keep up in displays of knowledge, so awkwardly delivered that I feel peripheral shame. Duck hoists his little brother Greg up onto his back, lines appearing on his forehead as he considers how to answer. Mr. Sutter doesn't realize it, but he's just betrayed his educational level. For years, New Pythos has been rumored to harbor survivors from the Three Families that escaped the Palace Day massacres, but its military might is known to be negligible. The island doesn't have dragons. Or air power. Not even a naval fleet, because the karst pillars that surround it make its waters nearly impassable. But the Ministry of Propaganda keeps up rumors of a New Pythian threat among the lower class metals all the same. They are—as the propaganda officials tell Guardians in class—*useful*, for inspiring patriotism.

An explanation that's easier to take in stride before your class-bronze dad repeats it back to you.

Duck agrees slowly. "That's true. There's New Pythos."

Mrs. Sutter's arms, perpetually flour-dusted, are placed on her hips as if to ward off the tension that she senses rising between her husband and son. "War or no, Fourth Order's an honor in its own right."

Merina pipes up eagerly. "We were learning about that in school this week. Fourth Order means they're considering you for next Protector. Cor'll be doing more rounds and speeches

and going to fancy parties with the class-golds and sort of, auditioning—”

They’re learning about the Fourth Order in *school*? The thought of children across the country talking about us fills me with anxiety. Even as I remind myself that of course they are. It’s relevant to them. *We’re* relevant to them.

The ministry would like to remind Antigone sur Aela of the intensely public nature of the obligations of a Fourth Order rider . . .

Ana, the oldest girl in the Sutter family, shudders. “That sounds terrifying. Better Cor than me.”

Tall, bony, plain-faced, Ana has just summed up my own feelings. I feel a rush of fondness for her.

“Have you taken your metals test yet?” I ask her.

A year younger than us, Ana is in her final year of school, when the metals test is usually administered. She nods, then flicks her bare wrist. “Results aren’t back yet. But I don’t test well like Duck and Cor.”

When the results are returned, Ana will wear the wristband her test assigned her. Her parents’ bronze wristbands flash in the sun, the mark of skilled labor. Duck’s and mine, the rarest in the city, are gold entwined with silver, indicating that when we took the test as children in the Guardian talent search, we tested as both *philosophical* and *spirited*.

The bells are ringing. Duck’s shoulders set at the sound, as he remembers what comes next. Power. “Time to be getting back.”

Mrs. Sutter hugs me farewell, an unthinkingly maternal act that leaves me flustered. “Good luck at your match, dear. You’ll come for Midsummer this year? No excuses this time.”

“We will drag Annie and Lee bodily from the Cloister if need be,” Duck assures her.

On the way back up to the Eyrie, I crane my neck to search the crowds in the Bronze stands. But there's still no sign of anyone from my village.

Maybe they didn't come.

It'd mean a lot to the people in your village if you made Fourth Order, Lee said this morning.

It's funny how much the thought of it mattering to them matters to *me*.

I'm so absorbed straining for a sight of them that I practically stumble into Darius, my match opponent, descending from the bleachers in the Gold section. He's blond, tall, well-built like a statue of white marble. He has friends with him, other patrician boys who've tested Gold. I know most of them by sight; Guardians attend many of their classes with the Gold students—they're our future peers, coworkers—underlings. Many of the officials I do rounds with when I tour the Inner Palace and other branches of government are their parents.

And all of them would love for Darius sur Myra to make the Fourth Order.

Darius sees me, stops dead, and then gestures at the stone archway we're both about to walk through, the picture of gentility. "After you, Annie."

Dragons. I'll throw it. I've got to throw it. What were my vows for, if not obedience to the will of the state? And the state wants this boy. It hurts but I don't *blame* them. I just went cold from the thought of mere *schoolchildren* talking about me, didn't I? Darius isn't my favorite person but he's decent, he'd do a fine job—

Duck and Power are up next; Darius and I will close the tournament.

On the Eyrie, Duck, who is now rigid with nerves, submits to his brother's check-over of his suit and his murmured advice. Power's stormscourge is large enough that he doesn't have to worry about fire conservation and precision; Eater pretty much never runs out. Duck's best strategy is to move, move, move, and hopefully wear them down.

"And no—bloody—spillovers," Cor hisses.

Most of the time, the line between our emotions and our dragons' is dim, subliminal. But with violent flares of emotions, the walls break down, and you share everything. Spilling over can be a rider's greatest advantage or greatest weakness. Some riders, like Power, spill over on purpose; Lee and I don't, though I'm more comfortable sharing minds with my dragon than Lee is. Duck's the sort of rider who spills over easily and shouldn't. In his and Certa's case, it never ends well. They lose control.

Duck and Power walk down the ramp; Lee goes to stand beside Cor and Crissa, and though I don't usually seek his company when he's with the other two squadron leaders, I find myself moving toward him as if pulled. Stress reaction, orphanage behavior—I diagnose it even as I let myself do it. When he sees me approaching, he breaks away to join me at the Eyrie's edge. Side by side, we lean against the rail to watch.

Duck and Power assume position overhead. There's silence on the Eyrie again, as there was for Lee's match, but this time it's silence of a different kind. Even Rock and Lotus have forgone making bets.

And then it begins. Power sur Eater attacks; Duck sur Certa retreats; and then Duck sets off, Power in pursuit. But Power must figure out Duck's strategy soon enough, because we hear him shout: "Running? Brings me back to the good old days, Dorian!"

“Tune him out, Duck,” Lee murmurs, his gray eyes fixed on Duck’s mother-of-pearl skyfish, his fingers tight on the Eyrice railing.

But Duck has never been good at tuning Power out. Sure enough, a telltale ripple goes through his skyfish. Not something the audience would notice, but we can tell it’s the first sign of a spillover.

And then Duck makes a jackknife turn and fires. Power dodges; the ash passes harmlessly over his shoulder; and he takes advantage of the close range to fire himself. He hits Duck on the leg, full heat.

The audience gasps in appreciation and the bell rings to mark the penalty; but on the Eyrice, muttering has broken out with a different realization. Duck’s opening was wide; Power could have made a kill shot. Instead, Power went for a full-heat penalty.

A long, slow roast. Power’s going to draw this out.

The two of them back out of range while Duck opens the coolant shafts on the leg of his flamesuit, a temporary pain reliever that will delay his reaction to the burn. Then they reset and advance again. By now, Duck has unmistakably spilled over; Certa is twitching at odd moments, her movements uncoordinated. Whatever emotions Duck is experiencing are now reverberating, dragon-size, between the two of them. Power scores his second penalty hit barely a minute later, this time across Duck’s arm and side. Again, avoiding a kill shot even though he had the opening; again, full heat.

I’m beginning to feel sick to my stomach.

Stormscurge fire. Nothing burns so bad.

I can feel memories rising like a coming storm. Predictable.

I should have seen it coming, the one way this morning could get *harder*. Not this, not now, of all times—

But once it starts happening, it always *keeps* happening. And so I clutch the rail and will the world around me to stay in focus.

I can feel Lee's eyes, which should be on the match, on me instead.

Behind us, Cor says, "Master Goran, call a foul."

"It's not a foul to make a kill shot and miss, Cor."

Cor rounds on our drillmaster. His voice is shaking. "Power is playing with his prey before he eats it."

Goran's tension with the three squadron leaders has never exactly been a secret, though none of them has ever acknowledged it: Atreus, not Goran, appointed three lowborn riders, one of them female, to leadership positions within the corps two years ago.

"Power has done nothing illegal," Goran says.

Cor makes a choking sound. He turns from Goran. Crissa lays a hand on his arm.

"I'm going to fetch the medic," she says. "Why don't you come with me?"

He shrugs her off. "No."

I'm pretty sure my face is showing nothing, betraying *nothing*, but all the same Lee has stepped closer to me so our sides are touching and places his hand beside mine on the rail. A silent invitation, where no one will see it but me. For a second, I fight the urge. But the world is going in and out; the memories are closing in; the thought of Duck up there, hurting, with no way out, threatens to overwhelm. I give in. Seizing Lee's hand and holding, focusing on his grip. I'm pretty sure my nails are

digging into his skin, but he doesn't pull away, only returns the pressure. I don't look at him.

Overhead, Duck seems to have abandoned—or perhaps forgotten—his original strategy of keeping distance. He and Power are circling each other, Duck's skyfish rippling with their shared emotions. Within seconds, Power takes his third and final shot. Though it need only be a partial hit to finish the match, he makes it a kill shot anyway. Duck is engulfed in thick black smoke. When it clears, his silhouette is stiff on his dragon. They descend slowly behind Power and Eater to the Eyrie. Power dismounts. He's smiling.

"Hope he's all right," he says. "That came out a bit more forcefully than I intended—"

Cor launches for him with a wordless cry. Lee's hand tears free of mine to help hold him back.

Goran and the medic cut the straps tying Duck's boots to his stirrups and ease him from Certa's back. Her gaze is vacant: the expression of a dragon whose rider is unconscious. I take in the sight of Duck's limp figure, the smell of smoke, and feel the panic roll over me in cold waves.

Nothing burns like stormscourge fire.

Lee steps forward and then, when he realizes I am moving with him, turns and catches me across the waist, holding me back. He turns me toward him, seeking my eyes.

"Annie."

"I have to—"

I'm straining to get past him, unable to speak, barely able to see Duck for what I can no longer fight remembering. The memories of stormscourge fire engulfing my whole world while I watched and could do nothing.

Then Lee's blazing eyes find mine. The world stills. Everything else falls away.

"I'll take care of him. You need to go."

At first I don't understand. And then it comes rushing back: my match. I still have a match.

A match that I'm not supposed to win. A match that no one in my village came to see. A match that, if I win, will thrust me into the kind of spotlight that makes me ill to imagine.

The ministry would like to remind Antigone sur Aela of the intensely public nature—

—vows to serve the state—

I look from Cor, as Crissa strains to hold him back, to Duck, unconscious as the medic removes his armor; to Power, watching with a satisfied smile. Then I look to the cave mouth, where Darius waits for me, wrist lifted to his mouth to summon his stormscourge as his family and friends watch from the Gold stands.

And then all those things fade away, and all that is left is a single thought:

Like hell am I throwing this match.

I look up at Lee and nod. Whatever he's searching my eyes for, he seems to find. His hands drop from my shoulders and I turn from him to walk toward the cave.

"Annie," says a different voice.

I stop again. Goran's hand has taken my shoulder. I look back at him.

"Remember what the ministry wrote you about," Goran says.

He towers over me, broad-shouldered in his uniform, the figure that for years I associated with the sour taste of my own

inadequacy. For a moment I feel a clarity that's piercing and bright. The kind I usually only feel with Aela, except this time, I find it alone. Crystallized within it is an anger I had forgotten I possessed.

I turn my back on him without a word.

LEE

There is a moment when it happens, usually somewhere between summoning and launch, where Annie transforms from the person she is on the ground to the one she becomes in the air. Where the hesitation vanishes, the awkwardness falls away, and suddenly she's free. Unleashed.

As many times as I have seen it happen, today I am struck by it as if it were the first time. As she and Darius rise into the air to take their positions, I can practically feel the surge of energy rising.

Duck is stirring, groaning; the coolant that Dr. Welsey applies is beginning to do its work. Keeping my eyes on Annie's copper-toned aurelian, I rise from their sides to go and stand beside Goran.

"Looks like it really did the trick," I tell him.

His eyes remained fixed on the dragons above us, and he responds with irritation.

"I'm sorry?"

"Whatever you just said to her."

The bell rings. Darius and his iron-gray stormscourge charge forward, while Annie and Aela turn upward and begin to rise.

Racing the pull of gravity, charging full speed into the

cloudless sky. So fast, so sure, so beautiful that the hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

The others might not see the difference, but I do. Annie flies like something out of the old order. She always has. The instincts that were trained, for me, by a childhood of watching dragons with their riders are, for her, instincts she was simply *born with*. After all, the riders of the new regime have no role models of mature riders. We do not have the luxury of being trained by our dragonriding fathers, whose own training came from their fathers before them.

Whatever guidance my father could have given me died with him. But Annie has never needed guidance at all.

Darius realizes what's happening a split second later and urges his stormscourge up after her, to regain the vertical distance, but she's already taken the lead, and in any case Aela is faster and lighter than Myra.

There are whistles of delight around us as the other riders realize what Annie's doing. Height is always an advantage; gravity is a weapon. But the most obvious way to use it—descending from on high with double the speed of your opponent—is the kind of maneuver very few riders have the skill to pull off. I feel a smile breaking my face. Goran is silent, his brows scrunched up as he stares upward into the sun.

The gap widens as they rise; slowly, as they become mere points of darkness against the sky, each begins to slow. And then Annie, a mere pinprick above us, stalls.

For a moment everything is still.

She dives.

Darius, hovering below her, wavers and stalls, preparing for her attack. There are screams around us: from the other riders,

from the stands. Aela's wings are beating at full force, maximizing her speed in free fall; she is hurtling toward Darius. And then when they are in range it happens in a blurring instant: Darius fires, she swerves, it misses, and she fires into an opening that only she can see. And then she's hurtling past him, toward the Eyrie, and Darius is following behind. The front of his armor is blackened with a kill shot.

Annie won her match in a little under two minutes.

The bell is ringing as Aela skids and clatters onto the Eyrie edge. Annie slices the straps fixing her boots in their stirrups and leaps off. She takes off her helmet: her red-tinged hair, the same color as Aela's scales, glints in the sunlight, streaked and flattened with sweat. Her expression is defiant, almost angry. But then at the sound of the screaming and cheering it changes: slowly, haltingly, as she makes sense of it, she begins to smile.

Darius dismounts laboriously. Annie goes to him and offers her hand. She seems surprised when he shakes it.

Antigone sur Aela, the final member of the Fourth Order, the announcer tells the crowd.

I have moved toward her, pulled by the magnetism of her beaming smile; as I congratulate her and our eyes meet, I see her smile change and briefly soften. As if she recognizes, in a fleeting moment, the same thing I do: The tournaments aren't over; the bracket is narrowing; she and I are, after today's results, set on an increasingly likely collision course.

But that's still long way off and possibly not a future at all. The way the penalties from today add up, the next tournament, in a month, will place me against Cor; Annie will face Power. And then still one more tournament to determine First rider.

Together, the four of us mount the stairs for the concluding

ceremony. Duck has been taken to the Palace infirmary; Cor is reasonably calmed, but nevertheless, I take care to walk between him and Power. Annie's breath is still heaving, the sweat on her face undried.

It's not until we enter the Palace Box that I feel the familiarity of it roll over me in a wave I'd forgotten to steel myself against.

I have memories of this place.

Atreus is seated on the dais that once held the seats of the three triarchs who ruled together before the Revolution. Arcturus Aurelian, Kit Skyfish, and my uncle, Crethon Stormscourge. Now there's only the First Protector. Around him—in the seats that were once reserved for the most powerful members of the dragonborn families—now sit the members of his council and other officials of the new regime. The jewels and sumptuous gowns that I remember are replaced by the simple uniforms of government functionaries. Instead of the triarchy's infinite loop of the circling dragons of the Three Families, the black banners rippling above us bear the Revolution's dragon, wings spread, breathing four circlets of fire in iron, bronze, silver, and gold, the four classes of the new regime.

There's an aisle down the length of the box, from the stairs we've mounted to the dais where Atreus waits. The last time I was in this place, I watched my father walk down it.

Beside me, Annie inhales the faintest breath. She looks from me to the faces of the adults turned toward us—the same ones who revealed themselves, this morning, to doubt her fitness for this moment. Annie's letter was unsigned, but the Minister of Propaganda, Miranda Hane, is standing in this audience, three feet away from Atreus, and her eyes are on Annie.

There's no time to exchange more than a glance, so all I can

do is give Annie a smile and a nod forward as we begin our walk down the aisle. Annie's steps are paced with mine; her gaze, like mine, set straight ahead. I can practically hear her holding her breath as she imitates me.

This is how you do it. This is how you own a victory.

My father's rugged smile, his tired but triumphant gait, his sparking eye catching his older brother's with a muted shrug as he knelt to accept his laurel, return to me as I walk. The last tournament I saw him in, I was seven years old. A melee against the Aurelians, a bit of spring entertainment that was their calm before the storm in a year of growing unrest. Unrest that would become a revolution.

Now, ten years later, I bend a knee before the man who betrayed my father and my people. He places the laurel of the Fourth Order on my brow. Beside me, Annie takes a knee to accept her own laurel in turn.

In a concluding speech, Atreus refers to the tournaments ahead that will move us one step closer to the title of Firstrider of Callipolis, and after that, to the naming of Atreus's successor. One step closer to solidifying the institutions of a revolutionary regime that replaces the one held by my family for centuries.

The revolutionary regime that struggles to undo their centuries' worth of wrongs.

Annie stands beside me, her expression frozen, her breathing light and rapid, as these words wash over us. I marvel, with the part of my mind not lost in memories of another life, at the fact that this girl, who can stare down a dragon twice Aela's size, can be stricken by the sight of a few dozen functionaries' scrutinizing faces.

My father's voice returns to me from another lifetime: *It will come to you naturally, Leo. We were born to rule.*

No. That world is gone now, and I'm done with it.

And then, with a surging sorrow that I thought I had outgrown: *Forgive me, Father.*

ANNIE

Rock is waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, blocking the exit with his great frame, and he's beaming. It is not an expression I'd expect from someone who just lost his match.

"They're here," he says.

His highland accent has thickened inexplicably.

My stomach flips. "Who?"

"That family. From your village. Got here just before your match started; they're sitting next to my folks. You didn't tell me you had highlanders coming!"

He seizes my arm, and I follow him into the Bronze section, pushing through the crowds of people who part with excited congratulations as we pass. I register, only in afterthought, that the congratulations are directed at *me*.

And then I see them. A burly, graying man, a stout woman with her hair wrapped under a faded scarf, and a line of children beside them who share their parents' sunburned faces and yellow hair. They're older and taller, and also *fatter*—their bodies full and well-fed, no more jutting bones or too-taut skin.

"Annie," Mr. Macky croaks, with the highland accent that still brings me warmth, though it faded from my own speech long ago.

Mrs. Macky says, “Annie, darling, you did wonderfully. We’re so proud.”

“Thank you,” I start to say.

But the words don’t get all the way out, because I’ve choked on them.

And then Mr. Macky, whom I haven’t seen since I was six, who last knew me as a freshly orphaned child sleepless from nightmares of dragonfire, puts his arms around me the same way he did ten years ago, and says, “That I lived to see the day when Silas’s daughter rode a dragon. We’ve never been prouder of anything, Annie.”

It’s not a long reunion, but every minute of it feels like water on parched earth. They tell me how Holbin has changed since last I saw it—the houses rebuilt, new herds raised, wool sold to the city textile houses as a part of Atreus’s push to grow trade and alleviate Callipolis’s dependence on subsistence farming. At first, the Holbiners had been nervous of these innovations. But now, well-fed even in winter, their memories of the old famines long faded and their children attending sporadic schooling down in Thornham, Holbin has more to hope for and little left to fear. “Except dragons,” Macky jokes, and then hastens to add: “But that’s just people being backward, they’ll see they’ve nothing to fear with you riding one, Annie. One day.”

The Mackys’ oldest son, whose letter reached me a week ago, hands me a bouquet of wildflowers that smell like home. When I compliment his writing—a childish script, poorly spelled and not punctuated at all, but for all that something akin to a miracle—he blushes. I remember him as a toddler; he’s thirteen now.

Too soon, it’s time to bid them farewell. They mean to drive back today alongside Rock’s family, who offer them to stay

the night with them in their home in the Near Highlands at Thornham, on their way back to Holbin.

I weave toward the Palace entrance through a lingering crowd whose congratulations I receive with dazed gratitude in passing. Thumped on the shoulder, bronze and iron wristbands flashing on wrists as craftsmen and day laborers beam at me and usher me through their midst, calling out in the hard vowels of the urban accents. I'm shorter than most of them by a head.

"It's the highland rider! Antigone sur Aela!"

"How's that for a win!"

"*Told you*, Geoff, told you the girl riders could hold their own . . ."

"You flew very well."

I stop at the sound of the last voice. Low and toned with an accent that sounds faintly foreign, cutting through the murmur of the crowd easily. A young woman's voice. When I turn to look, I see that she's barely older than me, perhaps Crissa's age. Long, dark hair frames a narrow face and piercing gray eyes above a dark, full-length cloak.

"Thank you," I say.

"You are Antigone?"

"Yes."

"A worthy name. Uncommon. Are you from a patrician family?"

I shake my head, surprised that she doesn't know. "Holbin," I say. "The highlands."

A victor's laurel on my forehead, highland wildflowers in my arms, the words fill me with pride.

The girl's eyes flash in surprise.

“Extraordinary,” she says. “And what about the other rider, the other talented one. What is his name?”

The other talented one. I don’t need to ask who she means, though I feel it would be inappropriate not to. “On the white aurelian?”

The traditional description of Pallor’s color mutation, silver where most aurelians are shades of amber and gold.

“Yes.”

“Lee. Lee sur Pallor.”

“Lee,” the girl repeats, thoughtfully. “Where is he from?”

She is studying me intently. My pulse accelerates, and it is suddenly difficult to provide the needed answer.

“Cheapside,” I tell her. “A slum orphan.”

The Guardians’ neighborhoods of origin is publicly available information. I cannot shake the impression, as I say it, that I am telling this girl something she already knows; that what she’s really interested in is my face as I say it. But that makes no sense.

She must be from Damos. That’s why she’s asking these questions any Callipolan would know. Although she is pale, almost as pale as a Callipolan highlander. . .

“Indeed?” the girl says, her eyes still travelling my face. “Well. Congratulations again, Antigone.”

And then she turns and walks away, pulling her hood over her head as she does. Below the hem of her cloak I can make out riding boots.

But then I look at the boots more closely. I take in the leather reinforced to resist heat, shafts for coolant, slits for bootknives and slots for straps to tie in to stirrups . . .

Those aren’t just riding boots. They’re *dragonriding* boots.

I am still puzzling over her footwear as I reenter the Palace

and return to the Guardians' Cloister, whose disjointed collection of repurposed servants' quarters and former dragonlords' studies surround a small central courtyard in the wing of the Outer Palace. This afternoon, the Cloister is deserted. The rest of the Guardians are out in the city with their friends and families, celebrating.

Except, of course, Lee.

"There you are," he says.

He's washed, put on his ground uniform, and taken off his laurel. But he's still flushed with triumph, his face lit by a half smile that makes him seem younger, less guarded, less tired. The face of someone who's glimpsed the future and found it bright.

"I was just about to check on Duck in the infirmary. Want to come?"

Duck. How could I have forgotten? "Yes. Let me change first."

In the empty girls' dorm I pause before entering the washroom. Apart from the Guardians' banner, an entwined circlet of silver and gold on black, hanging above the doorway, the room is austere. But the Guardians' proscription from possessions doesn't prevent us from decorating our spaces in small ways. Crissa covers the wall of her desk with her drawings and bits of shells and sea glass from her hometown on the coast; some of the others tack up assignments they're trying to memorize or bits of their favorite Dragontongue poetry.

I go to my bare desk and place the wildflowers in my drinking glass. Then I remove the laurel from my brow and hook it on the wall.

I pull the ministry's letter from my pocket and read it again.

The ministry would like to remind Antigone sur Aela of the obligations of a Fourth Order rider . . .

Maybe I read it wrong from the start.

Maybe it's a challenge.

And even if it's not, I'm going to tell myself it is.

Let everything that intimidates me about the Fourth Order be another test, another training hurdle, another set of skills to master. Even if I don't make Firstrider, even if I'm never chosen for Protector—I'll serve the state better by bettering myself. One step at a time.

I can make history one step at a time.

I tack the ministry's note to my wall, too.