

SCALES
of ASH &
SMOKE

◆ EMILY SCHNEIDER ◆



MAGIC KEEPERS PRESS



Scales of Ash & Smoke
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*For Cody—
who believed in my dreams even when I didn't.*

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



Characters:

Kaida: kye-duh

Tarrin: tare-in

Eklos: eck-los

Lita: lee-ta

Eldrin: el-drin

Martik: mar-tick

Roldan: roll-den

Barden: bar-den

Aela: ay-luh

Meara: meer-uh

Locations:

Elysia: el-lih-see-uh

Zarkuse: zar-koose

Vernista: ver-nih-stuh

Belharnt: bell-harnt

Shegora: sheh-gore-uh

Absult: ab-sult

Myrewell: mire-well

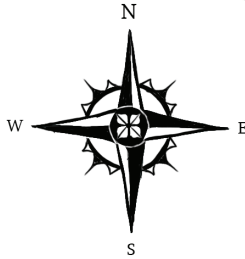
Ilgathor: Il-ga-thor

Others:

Flamaria: fla-mare-ee-uh

Ilusai: ill-oo-sye

ELYSIA





PART ONE

PROLOGUE

*A thousand years ago
Elysia was a world of peace.
Dragons and humans coexisted.
There was no fighting, no hatred, no war.
But there were two dragons, brothers.
One with a heart of frost and death.
The other with a heart of warmth and life.
The former was made of scales black as a nightmare.
The latter a calming midnight blue.
The brother with a disdain for life grew
to despise the human race,
His mind poisoned into believing they
meant the dragon's harm.
Yet the brother with compassion in his
heart did not feel the same.
On one fated day in his hundredth year,
A terrible pain tore through his mind,
Lights flashing over his scales.
When all had ceased,
His scales had become skin,
His wings and tail gone.
He came face to face with his brother,
Who now looked upon him with disgust.
The dragon with a warm heart was a shape-shifter.
And the dragon with a cold, brutal heart
Wanted him dead.*

—Legend of The Lone Dragon



CHAPTER ONE

KAIDA



SURVIVE.


The word was a chant winding itself around my bones as I pushed a heavy mop through yet another massive pile of vomit. My stomach twisted at the sloshing that sent a wave of fermented meats and ale up my nostrils, coating my mouth in a bitter tang. The cavernous room of The Den was rank with the sour stench, the air too stifling from the fire that roared in the enormous hearth behind me to dissipate it. Clinking scales and the banging of mugs echoed up to the ceiling, intermingling with the low growls and obnoxious chewing of the beasts occupying the chairs and tables surrounding me.

I sighed through my nose as I tried to ignore them, before scoffing to myself.

There was no ignoring the *dragons*.

Standing upright, they stood anywhere from seven to twenty feet tall, each beast a different color. Some were colored in dark, earthy tones of brown and green, while others were brighter, slightly more pastel. Only males had horns adorning their thick skulls, some straight as a rod, while others curled like a ram's.

Even sitting in their oversized chairs that groaned beneath their weight, they still towered over us humans that served in The



Den. The dragons often loved to toss food and bone scraps at me, throwing their tails beneath my feet, forcing me to crash, dishes and all, to the floor. Although I was fairly certain that their favorite way to torment me was puking their stomachs onto the floor, knowing I would have to clean it up.

A frustrated scream built in my throat as my fingernails dug deeper into the wood handle of the mop, and I choked down the fire that raged in my heart. All I ever wanted was to taste freedom like my mother had before I was born. The thought of freedom lit a fire within me, though it was small, that fueled my goal of surviving.

One more day.

Telling myself that was the only way I could force myself to continue. Survive one more day and perhaps freedom would find me, though I had no true reason to believe it ever would. And yet those thoughts haunted my daydreams, pushing me forward.

I trudged back into the kitchen with the bucket of slop and threw it into the roaring fire that had become affectionately known as the barf bin.

“Kaida,” a voice said behind me.

My muscles froze in place. Phantom claws of fear dug into my shoulders, my body expecting it to be my Master before my brain recognized the female voice that spoke. A short, severely thin girl circled me, stopping at the hearth to stir a cauldron of broth.

“Jinna,” I breathed, my muscles releasing, leaving my limbs feeling like jelly.

She was the only other slave that worked here. We were not friends; we couldn't be. It had become an unspoken rule among all humans. It was too dangerous. It was one more thing the dragons could use against you. Jinna and I rarely spoke, unless we knew without a doubt that we were alone, and we existed in a strangely comforting place of not being friends but knowing in some way that we still had each other.

“Have you seen Master Eklos today?” Her words were quiet, careful, the distinct mole on her right cheek twitching as she spoke.

“Not yet,” I said as I set the vomit bucket back in the corner along with the putrid mop.

A bitter puff of air escaped her mouth as she let out a dark chuckle. She tucked a strand of hair that had fallen loose behind her ear, leaving a black streak of ash behind.

“He is in an extraordinarily bad mood today. I would take care what you say.” Jinna’s words were not unkind, but a warning.

I released a long, shaky breath, and nodded. It was nothing surprising. His normal demeanor was foul to begin with. I could not recall a time in my life when Master Eklos had acted otherwise.

Jinna’s mouth twitched, and I watched as she opened it to speak, but then snapped her lips shut. She turned back to the pot hanging over the fire in front of her.

Jinna always went out of her way to keep herself beneath our Master’s notice. He killed her mother several years ago, leaving Jinna as the only person to care for her younger brother, thus ensuring her obedience.

Dusting off my filthy hands on my apron, I stepped over to the large table used for food preparation. Jinna did most of the cooking while I tended to the patrons in the tavern, occasionally helping her when I desperately needed to get away from the dragons and the cinders they blew at my back.

I grabbed a hunk of unidentifiable raw meat and a large knife and began whacking at it, chopping it into bite-size morsels to fit in the stew Jinna was stirring in the hearth. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her wringing her hands before she uncharacteristically squared her shoulders and turned toward me.

“I am taking my brother and leaving the village,” she whispered. “Tonight.”

Chills prickled along my skin.

“Leave?” I repeated, my tongue thick in my mouth.

Sweat dripped from Jinna's brow, dampening her chestnut brown hair, and she wiped at it, before patting her hand on her apron. She nodded, her gaze hard, like she had entirely made up her mind.

"H-how can you leave? Do you know what he will do to you if you are caught?" I stammered out. I had heard tales of other slaves trying to escape when I was a child. I had seen firsthand what the consequences were. A shudder racked through my body.

"This is no way to live, Kaida. My brother is beaten daily. I walk as if I am tiptoeing over hot coals, making myself into some semblance of a ghost in an attempt to keep him safe, but it never helps. This may be how the world has always been, but it is not how it should be. Just surviving is not living."

Jinna's words punched through my gut. I knew she was right, but the memory of what Master Eklos did to slaves who tried to escape, of what he did to my mother...

I couldn't help but think she was a fool.

The dragons had full reign over Elysia. There was no place for humans to go. No place outside of the dragon's reach, outside of *his* reach. Eklos would find her, through the sheer might of his extensive influence over Elysia. He would have her hunted down, made an example of, before publicly executing her.

I had seen it before.

All the reasons why she should not run away sat on my lips, but her face remained firm. She had made her decision. Jinna was leaving, no matter what I said. She had signed her own bill of execution.

I nodded without another word, wanting to hug the girl who I had pretended not to know, not to care about, for years. She made a fist with her right hand and brought it to the left side of her chest.

The breath caught in my throat.

That was the symbol of the human rebellion that had been

quelled centuries ago, after the dragons gained control of Elysia. The movement was meant to put an end to the humans' captivity.

Every last human in that movement had been slaughtered.

The only reason that I knew the gesture was because my mother had shown it to me on frigid nights when she hoped to distract me from our nearly frostbitten skin by sharing the old legends of Elysia.

How did *Jinna* know it?

Jinna turned away, going back to stirring the cauldron of stew. My lungs contracted, my heart throbbing at the thought that this would be the last time I would ever lay eyes on her. The room spun around me, and I fought to catch my breath. Air. I needed air.

I dropped the knife onto the table, the metal clanging in the sudden silence, and I nearly ran out of the room in my haste to get out of the sweltering kitchen. I wriggled around the tails and chairs in my path as I made my way to the front counter where the wooden planks that served as menus and various cleaning supplies were stored.

My feet came to a screeching halt as I tried to avoid stepping on the very tip of a blue dragon's tail and caught myself on the back of a chair. Eyes darting to the dragons surrounding me, I held my breath as I waited for one of them to react, to punish me for being clumsy. Air rushed from my mouth in a soundless whoosh when no one turned to me, no one acknowledged my existence. I continued forward, the stretch of the room growing longer with every step I took.

"There has been talk of *them* again," a voice rasped like crunching leaves as I passed by. "The Remnant of the Lone Dragon."

My steps faltered and I glanced over my shoulder.

"Yes," a second dragon hissed, its tongue snaking between jagged teeth. "They were in Zarkuse only a few days ago. Rumor has it they are looking for sympathizers to join their cause."

Ice filled my veins and I struggled to keep my feet moving forward.

“I would assume they will be coming to Vernista next.” A sinister smile twisted his brown snout, light glinting off his teeth.

“I have no doubt, not with—”

“KAIDA,” a deep male voice bellowed, causing me to jump, my entire body beginning to tremble.

Instincts kicking in, I spun to face him, my head bowed, keeping my eyes on the stones beneath my feet.

“*What* do you think you are doing?” Master Eklos snapped. The color drained from my face and my hands shook, despite this being a daily occurrence.

He was my Master. I was his slave.

Despite the rage that coursed through me that brought air to my lungs and fight to my spirit, my very bones remembered all that he had done to me and ached in his presence. Enormous black scaled feet that absorbed the dim light appeared in front of me. Smoke billowed out, encompassing my neck.

“Is it or is it not your place to listen in on the conversations of these patrons?”

I remained silent, not even bothering to deny the fact that I had been eavesdropping. I learned long ago to keep my mouth shut. Wiping clammy hands against the rough fabric of my pants, I fought down the urge to wipe the sweat that had beaded on my upper lip. Even the smallest movement could set him off.

“*Is it or is it not your place to listen in on the conversations of these patrons?*” he repeated, growling, curling his claws into fists.

When I said nothing, a tendril of smoke slithered out of his mouth in the shape of clawed fingers and yanked my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze. Scales the color of ashes towered over me, eyes red like burning coals piercing through me. Long, curled horns protruded from his head, miniature silver spikes running the length of his arms and the top of his wings.

This was Eklos, my Master since the day I was born.

I had never known a life outside of captivity. According to

tales I had heard, my mother had been a free human before I was born, though I had never heard of such a thing being possible. But Eklos finally found her with a baby in her arms and enslaved us both. My mother had been a rebellious soul, fighting him every chance she could, and in the end was severely punished for it.

I was only ten when Eklos took her away from me, publicly executing her in the village square. It was then that I tried to escape, to flee from his ownership. Eklos hunted me and then kept me imprisoned in Belharnt, an underground dungeon, specifically made for torturing humans, for seven years.

Eklos released me only a week ago from that hellish prison. I had been surprised to find that everything was still the same. Jinna, The Den, my tiny cave-home. It all remained unchanged, and I fell back into the rhythms of being a slave in Elysia with dreaded ease. Now, my only goal in life was to stay alive, if for no other reason than to honor my mother's life.

I squeezed my eyes closed, shutting out the memories that flooded my mind of every hammer crushing my bones, every dark, moldy corner I was shackled to. I let out a shaky breath, returning my attention to my Master.

The other dragons in the room had gone silent, watching our exchange, a deep loathing twisting their snouts into hideous sneers.

Before I could react, a clawed hand slammed into my face, Eklos's immense strength sending me flying sideways, my hip crashing painfully into an oversized table before it collapsed beneath me, sending wood shards burrowing into my skin. I held in a groan as I pushed onto my knees.

I kneeled before Eklos and his snout contorted into an ugly smile.

"Much better," he said. "A slave on her knees before her Master. The proper place for human filth." Sparks flew from his nostrils as he reminded me once again of what I was: a slave. A

human cursed to live all my days bound to the vilest creatures in Elysia. This was all I had ever known.

Tears burned in my eyes, but not out of pain or sadness. It was soul-rending fury. It roiled in my blood, growing larger and blazing hotter with every day that passed. My throat burned as I swallowed it down, my entire body trembling with the effort of holding it at bay.

Survive. It was the word I said every time Eklos punished me.

It was the word that I repeated every night when I awoke screaming out of a nightmare of Belharnt, or when I remembered my mother's head rolling off her body and bouncing in a pile of blood on the stones in the village square.

I had to survive. My mother had learned her lesson for disobeying him, countless humans had learned it, and now Jinna likely would as well. But I refused to give Eklos the satisfaction of doing the same to me.

Claws ripped into my scalp, blood seeping down the back of my neck, as he grabbed a fistful of my hair and dragged me upright. He yanked me toward the entrance, and I felt the humid night air meet my skin a second before I hit the dirt road as Eklos threw me out the door. My teeth ached from the impact, and blood filled my mouth as I bit my tongue.

"Go back to your filthy hovel before I send you back to Belharnt," he barked, flames shooting out with each word.

I spit a mouthful of red saliva onto the dirt in front of me. Fire burned through my veins, my rage trying to escape the cage I kept it so tightly bound in. Not for the first time, I could feel something inside me made entirely of fiery anger leap, intending to lash out. But before I could move, smoke shot up through my nose, and everything went dark.



CHAPTER TWO

TARRIN




MY HEART FROZE in my chest as a burst of blue fire soared through the air, aimed at my face. I attempted to dodge the attack, instinct taking over as I threw a scaled hand up in front of my snout to stop it before it made impact. The flames wrapped around my body, the heat unbearable for only a moment before it dissipated into a light smoke that lingered in shafts of midmorning light streaming in from the windows.

I took a step back, twisting my foot to adjust my stance and tucking my wings in tight to protect them. Inhaling the thick summer air, magic flared in my core as I summoned blue flames into my palms. They danced and twirled above my scales before I drew back my arms and launched volley after volley at my attacker.

A green dragon stood across from me, barely half of my twelve-foot height, and ducked beneath the magical flames before slamming his claws into the cold black floor. The dragon jerked his hands in front of him, a wave of water rising with them, before he pushed it, sending it cascading in my direction.

The water crashed over me, lifting my body off balance, and I fell backward, landing awkwardly on my tail. Limbs flailing as I tried to right myself, another wave smothered me, jamming itself



up my nostrils. I pulled on my magic, begging it to create flames to evaporate the water, but it simply sputtered out in my palms. Coughing and gasping for air, I held up a hand in surrender.

“Enough,” I sputtered, spitting water from my mouth.

“Again,” the green dragon barked, assuming his fighting stance once more. One clawed foot stepped partly behind the other, one hand across his chest, the other above his head. Water droplets dripped down the sides of his scales.

I shook my head, gasping the humid air in the training room. “That is enough for today,” I replied, my voice hoarse from choking on the water.

“Your Highness, you should try again. I am using simple magic to attack you and you cannot even defend yourself. If I did not know better, I would say you are afraid of your own fire.”

I couldn't help the wince that twisted my face, the truth hitting too close to home. But my tutor, Alathar, did not know that, and I was not about to share the real reason behind seeking further magic training.

“I have a lot on my mind, Master Alathar,” I deflected, turning my snout away. It was not a total lie, but not entirely the truth either. I swiped at the sweat lining the scales above my eyes and glanced at the position of the sun. “Besides, I am late for a meeting with the Queen.”

Alathar sighed, smoke leaking from his nostrils, and went to fetch goblets of water for the two of us. “Very well, Your Highness.” The ground rumbled quietly beneath his footsteps as he returned to my side.

He handed me a cup and silence descended as we both drank, our dragon teeth clinking softly against the metal. Master Alathar wiped at his snout with the back of a scaled arm and cleared his throat. “Prince Tarrin, I feel the need to tell you that I will be going away for a time.”

“Away?” I repeated, unable to fathom my tutor for the last nineteen years leaving.

“Yes, Your Highness. I have family in the south that I have not seen for decades. The King and Queen have granted me leave to go visit them, seeing as your studies are nearly complete.”

I swallowed down the rising emotion in my throat. Alathar had been with me since I was a youngling. While we were not close by any means, I had grown to respect and even trust him. Most dragons in Elysia were power-hungry beasts, but not him. He had a genuine desire to better those around him through proper education.

Alathar was the only dragon that I could trust to train me further with magic without asking the very questions that I didn't want to answer.

“I am sad to hear of it, Master Alathar, but I wish you safe travels.”

The green dragon smiled fondly at me before raising his arm as if he were going to place it on my shoulder. Instead, he flicked his claws and sent water spraying into my face, and I couldn't help but chuckle as I wiped away the mist from my scales. That was the way we had said goodbye for years. Alathar probably hoped I would have learned to defend against it by now, but I grew fond of the gesture over the years and never bothered to try.

Master Alathar set down his empty goblet and nodded once. “Farewell until next time, Your Highness.” He offered a bow and lowered himself to all four legs as he strode out of the room, his tail slithering on the ground behind him. Most dragons preferred to walk upright on two legs, further asserting their dominance by making themselves taller, but not Alathar. He didn't play those typical dragon games or feel the need to make his strength known. I always liked that about him. For a dragon, he was incredibly humble.

As the door shut, I glanced once more at the sun's position and grimaced. Any thoughts I had on my tutor leaving the palace would have to be dissected later.

My mother was waiting.

The Queen was a strong female, a true and just ruler, and my best friend. And yet, I couldn't help the dread coiling in my gut over this meeting with her.

The scalding sun beat down on my scales as I left the palace proper and wove my way through the gardens. The sweet aroma of flowers filled the air, swirling through my nostrils. What usually calmed the thoughts racing through my mind, and settled the tension twisted tight in my core, had no effect today.

Gravel pebbles crunched beneath me as I peered over the tall rose bushes on either side of the path. My mother's enormous red figure was slouched against a wooden bench near the fountain on the other side of the garden, her gaze fixed on the trickling water in front of her. Inhaling, I sauntered over to her, bracing myself as I slipped into the seat next to her.

This conversation had been building for a while, ever since word of the human girl returning to Vernista had reached the palace walls a week ago. I didn't know anything about her, but it seemed my parents did.

My mother had not breathed a word of her existence to me until that day, even though she claimed to have been close friends with the girl's mother. When my parents had finally come to me, telling me about Aela's daughter, who she was, *what* she was... they had asked me to go find her. Asked, pleaded, begged, commanded, demanded. Every time I said no. Every time they would ask again.

Sure, I could go find her. It would be easy if she truly was what they claimed her to be. But I refused to bring a human to the palace. I refused the path that my mother had laid before me, relinquishing any choice of mine on the matter.

I waited for my mother to speak, watching her clawed hands fidget with a yellow rose, gently pulling off petal after petal, thorn after thorn.

“Your father has always loved the yellow roses,” she said, words soft as a whisper. “Planted them himself in these gardens when we came here.” She pulled the final two petals off and watched as they fell to the ground.

“I never understood his fascination with them. All I ever saw was a reminder that beautiful things have thorns.” She paused, placing her foot over the petals. “And beautiful things often cut the deepest.” She squished and twisted her clawed foot into the gravel, disintegrating the yellow fragments into dust before fixing her stern gaze on me.

“Tarrin, you *must* go find her,” she pleaded, a slight tremble creeping into her voice. She grabbed my clawed hands in hers and I watched as her red scales flickered in the sunlight, reflecting lights on the ground that danced with the turquoise ones coming from my own body.

“No, Mother.”

“*Tarrin—*”

“Mother, we have been going around in circles on this matter for days. I will not track down the human girl and I most definitely will not bring her *here*.”

She sighed, her ruby red shoulders slumping forward. Any other member of the Royal Family would have been reprimanded for such posture, but I had learned to expect such things from my mother. While she was Queen of Elysia, she hated all the protocols and rules that went along with it. I had always admired that she was willing to do what made her happy rather than what was expected.

“Please, Tarrin. Your father and I would not ask this of you unless it was vitally important. She *must* be found and brought here.”

The wooden bench groaned beneath me as I shifted my wings to a more comfortable position, unease settling in my stomach. The nearby fountain gurgled and trickled, unable to soothe my nerves.

“We are running out of time. If the Remnant finds her, she will be killed.”

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as I looked at my scaled hands, studying the cold, smooth texture. “We are dragons. She is human. She does not belong here. Why is this so important to you?”

At first, my mother said nothing, and after a moment, her weight lifted off the bench. Her long tail swished gently back and forth as she walked toward the fountain, scattering the dirt and gravel into small dust clouds behind her. Clasping her claws behind her back, she stared at the ripples in the water.

“I made a promise, Tarrin, to her mother. I have not kept it.” She paused, and I noticed her claws were trembling. “But even more than that, it is important to Elysia that she is kept safe. Important for *you*.”

Pebbles crunched as I stepped to her side and peered into the water, turning her words over in my mind.

“There must be another way.” *A way that doesn't involve me giving up my last ounce of freedom or bringing a human into the palace, not as a slave but as a guest.* I massaged the space between my eyes, a deep, throbbing ache beginning to form there.

“Our existence in Elysia depends upon you. Upon her,” she continued, the ultimatum clanging through me like a death knell. “There is no other way. You need her just as much as she needs you. Even if you cannot see it yet.”

What does that mean? Why would I need a human?

“She’s a shifter, Tarrin, not just a human. She is just like you. Wouldn’t you want someone to save you if circumstances were reversed?” My mother retorted, hearing my inner thoughts.

As shape-shifters, we shared a strange bond that allowed us to communicate within our minds. All shifters had such a bond. Usually, I was able to keep my thoughts closed off, but it grew more difficult as my emotions built up.

A long exhale whistled through my teeth. *Was my mother right?*

“Why doesn’t her father find her?”

“Her father is gone.”

“Where is he? Dead?” I spat the words, feeling my temper rise.

My mother winced, turning her face away. “I don’t know if her father is alive or long dead, nor do I know where he is. He’s probably somewhere deep in southern Elysia, if he has managed to survive this long.”

My eyebrows furrowed. This was the first time she had mentioned him. Had something happened between them?

“Tarrin, you must go,” she repeated, forcing my thoughts back to the girl. My mother turned her snout to look at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “Give her a chance. Give Elysia and our race a chance.”

I rubbed at the side of my snout. I loved my mother, but how could she be right about this? The girl was *human*. If she were truly a shape-shifter, why would she be willingly living as a slave? Even if she was a shifter, she was more human than dragon at this point. She did not belong here. She did not belong with *me*. She would hate me simply because I was a dragon. I would hate her because she was a human who did not understand our ways.

That was the natural way of life in Elysia. It had been for a thousand years.

A dragon and a human could not be together, let alone fix anything. How could we?

There was too much history, too much hatred between us.

And I would have to sacrifice *everything*. As the Prince of Elysia, most of my choices were already stripped from me, having been decided for me since the day I was born. I had fought hard for nineteen years to maintain some semblance of control over the rest of my life.

Truthfully, I hadn’t ever given much thought to a future where I was king, with a wife at my side. My parents were relatively

young and healthy for dragons. They would be king and queen for quite some time.

If I brought the girl to the palace, agreeing to my mother's terms, that last shred of freedom, to choose my future wife, would be gone like ashes on the wind. Could I give that up?

My mind emptied out as the resolution echoed like a gong in my mind: *This is what a king does for his kingdom. What he does for his people. Sacrifice.*

A ragged breath blew out from between my lips as I fought to tune out the words, though it was a futile effort.

My mother, Queen of Elysia, had never been wrong before. Not once in my life.

I knew that I needed to trust her; that her reasoning for this, even though I didn't understand it, was valid.

Someday I would be king, and my life would consist of nothing but sacrifice. I might as well get used to it now, starting with this.

Even though a sinking pit opened in my stomach, I knew I would do anything for Elysia; for my family.

I ran a clawed hand over my face, rubbing at the scales on the side of my snout.

For Elysia, I would do it.

For my mother, I would find the girl.

I took another deep breath, inhaling the scent of flowers that did nothing to calm my senses and said, "I will go."



CHAPTER THREE

KAIDA

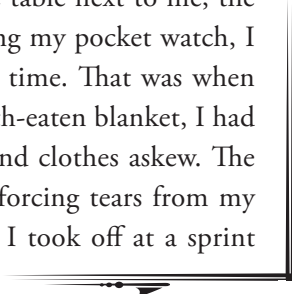


SWEAT POURED DOWN my face, my heartbeat stuttering in my chest as I sprinted down the cobblestone road, rocks and pebbles skittering out from under my feet. The scalding afternoon sun beat down, causing sweat to slide down my back. Muddy puddles left over from the summer storms splashed and sprayed up as I stomped through them, spattering my legs with grime.

My limbs were numb, and my lungs begged for air, but I couldn't stop. Heart pounding, I willed my feet to move faster, trees streaking past in vibrant blurs in my peripheral vision.

Late. I was so late.

Minutes ago, I had shot awake in bed, frantically looking around the small dirt cave that was my bedroom. The fire in the small hearth in the corner had gone cold hours ago, and the air felt damp and musty. I reached over to the table next to me, the wood nearly falling apart with rot. Grabbing my pocket watch, I squinted in the dim light to make out the time. That was when the panic had started. Tossing back the moth-eaten blanket, I had all but flown out of the cave, hair messy and clothes askew. The sunlight blinded me as I stepped outside, forcing tears from my eyes that streaked down my filthy cheeks. I took off at a sprint



toward the center of the village, begging my wobbly legs to hold out a little bit longer.

Last night, Eklos had thrown me out of The Den. Smothering my mind in his toxic smoke, he had numbed all my senses, sending me into an unfeeling sleep.

It was both a punishment and a preventative measure, and unfortunately it was not the first time it had happened. The point was to keep me confined, keep me from trying to escape, keep me in the dark.

It was a reminder.

Eklos was a Smoke Wielder. He called to it, forced it to do his bidding. That was how he was able to control smoke, how he could fill my mind and vision, sending me into darkness.

My stomach twisted. More than anything I wanted to be free, like my mother dreamed of. To go where I pleased, do what I pleased; answer to no one. Be my own master. To finally live in peace and not in fear.

But such a fate, such a place, did not exist in Elysia.

The crimson-steepled building finally appeared in view. The Den was a source of food and gossip for the dragons. Many often came, always of the unsavory sort, to discuss plans and schemes away from prying ears. A shiver crawled over my skin at the memory of the dragons discussing the Remnant yesterday.

According to them, the Remnant of the Lone Dragon was coming. Here, to Vernista. I fought against the sinking feeling in my stomach.

Legend claimed that a thousand years ago, the number of humans in Elysia far outnumbered the dragons. There was a lone dragon that began to stir up animosity amongst the other dragons toward the humans. His mind had been poisoned into believing that dragons were the superior race, and that humans planned to kill them all and take over Elysia.

That dragon, with scales as black as the night sky, was one of

the most powerful dragons to have ever lived. He convinced the other dragons to start an uprising against the “lesser” humans.

As one would expect, it did not fare well for the humans, leaving more than half the human race slaughtered. The remainder of the population were taken in chains and forced to live as slaves until their final breaths.

The Lone Dragon died before he could accomplish his mission but left behind the Remnant who were to carry on his stead.

I always thought that it was just legend. Nightmarish stories meant to keep slaves in line.

I slowed my steps and swallowed down the lump in my throat as I neared the front door, the tall red steeples of The Den blocking the sun from my tired eyes. The windows wore bars made of black steel, and the front entrance, a door made of a thick dark wood, loomed high above me.

This was my prison.

Gasping for air, hunched over, with my hands on my knees, I paused. The sand and stone beneath my feet were vibrating slightly from the steps of the dragons inside. I squeezed my eyes shut as my body snapped into a defensive mode, preparing for whatever punishment Eklos deemed worthy today.

I should be used to the ice flooding my veins, the tremors that always overtook my body, the inability to breathe. But I do not think it is possible to get used to the darkness that lives inside these dragons.

I took a deep breath and turned the rusted doorknob, frosty air enveloping my body as I stepped through the door. A dozen heads turned to look at me, but none of them were human. Ruby, turquoise, and emerald eyes connected to giant skulls with long snouts, bore into mine. One by one they snapped their heads away, the silver of their horns flashing in the torchlight, focusing on anything other than me. Even in the dim light, scales glistened, flickering rainbows of light on the brick walls. My eyes slid to

the ground and I obediently hung my head and stepped behind the counter. Running my fingers through my sweat drenched hair plastered to my skin, I tied a leather band around it at the base of my neck. My thoughts instantly drifted to Jinna, whether I would find her in the kitchen or dead in the village square. I glanced at the wooden door that led to the kitchen, wishing I could see through it to know for sure what had happened to her.

“You are late,” a voice like rumbling thunder boomed, starting me from my thoughts. My breath caught in my throat.

I spun to face my Master but kept my eyes fixed on the ground. It was a sign of disrespect for a human to look a dragon in the eye. Putting my hands behind my back, and letting my head hang even lower, I remained silent, ever the submissive slave.

“No excuses today?” Eklos paused, waiting with expectancy, like a predatory animal ready to pounce.

When I did not respond, he continued, sparks shooting from his nostrils. “What makes you think, *slave*, that you can disobey my orders? Defy me by disregarding my rules?” He towered over me, smoke billowing from his mouth in thick, black tendrils snaking around me.

The desire to meet his unrelenting gaze, to gain the satisfaction of having his pride wounded in front of the patrons of The Den was physically painful. But that was what my mother had done. That was why she was no longer alive. She had been a wild spirit, discontent to sit back and let herself be used and abused, and it had resulted in her death seven years ago.

I pressed my lips together and waited, heart pattering in my chest as sulfurous breath shoved its way into my nose. After a few more moments, Eklos snorted, sending sparks flying out of his nostrils, and I winced as they landed on my skin.

“Get to work,” he spat, drawing a sharp claw down my forearm, drawing blood. “And I suggest you think hard on whether I need to remind you of the consequences for disobedient slaves. That was

a lesson your mother was never able to learn. Do not be like her.” He patted my cheek, right where he hit me yesterday, in a show of dominance. I steadied my hands against my sides to keep from flinching as his scales scraped against my skin, before he turned and stalked away, the mugs rattling on nearby tables.

I was not unused to his threats, for they happened multiple times each day, and I had become numb to all his punishments, except one. The worst was the fire whip: a razor-sharp whip, with spikes of broken glass and blue flames, the hottest imaginable, encasing the entire length. It was not used often but the pain was paralyzing, the burns untreatable. That was what killed my mother, right before they clawed her head from her shoulders.

I forced the thought from my mind, refusing to acknowledge the pang in my stomach that always accompanied my memories of her. I pulled on my tattered work smock and began the daily chores I had become accustomed to. I slipped back into the kitchen to retrieve the vomit pail and mop and came to an immediate halt.

Jinna was not there; her usual perch by the fire abandoned.

A new boy, perhaps fifteen, stood near the wood-burning stove in the corner, stirring an enormous pot of some sort of stew.

Had Jinna escaped? Was she truly able to smuggle her brother away from the village without being caught?

Or was she dead?

My vision blurred and it grew difficult to breathe around the thick lump that had risen in my throat.

A fierce growl in the tavern drew me back to the present and my body moved automatically, grabbing the bucket and a platter piled high with food. I dropped the tray of roasted chickens, turkeys, and other various small birds at a crowded table of dragons and moved toward the back to mop up a questionable pile of slop in the corner.

I finished serving the twelve dragons in the room, their grumbling and growling echoing off the walls. The tables they sat at

were three times the size of any human table and scattered around each one were massive wooden chairs with cutouts in the back to account for their wings. The furniture was packed in tight, and it was an effort, even with my small size, to maneuver through it all without disturbing the patrons.

“Watch out, human!” one dragon barked as I shimmied between two chairs, which was then followed by another dragon yelling, “Move, slave!”

I cursed the dragons beneath my breath as I crept back to the counter, struggling to avoid the massive wings that overflowed from chairs into the walkway, and sat on the floor, desperate for a momentary reprieve.

Pulling my legs in close, I wrapped my arms around them and rested my head on my knees, squeezing my eyes against the burning that threatened to spill tears down my face.

It was loud in The Den. The growling of unhappy customers contrasted with the booming deep laughter of others. The sound floated up into the steepled ceiling above and then slammed back down to the ground over and over. Noise pressed in on every side, and I held my face in my hands, as if that would stop the barrage.

I barely registered the smoky scent, like charred bones, that wrapped around my head before claws ripped into my neck. I let out a cry as the beast dragged me eight feet up in the air, bringing me face to snout with a dragon covered in scales the color of dirt.

“Oy, slave. What do you think you are doing on the floor?” The dragon’s voice had an unpleasant accent that sounded as if he were speaking through a pinched nose.

He did not give me a chance to answer before my body left the ground and I was thrown toward a sea of eleven other dragons. I landed face down onto the table on top of the huge platter of food that I had delivered only minutes ago. The food exploded beneath me, coating each dragon at the table in a greasy slime. I did not register the pain from animal bones and broken plates jabbing

into my skin as every pair of eyes turned their gaze on me. I tried to scramble away, but my wrist barked in protest and I fell back onto the table.

Another set of claws grabbed me by the back of my neck and tossed me onto the floor, my back colliding with several chairs that clattered away on impact. I saw Eklos standing off to the side, a smug smile contorting his snout as he watched the other dragons attack me.

A clawed foot kicked at my stomach, piercing my skin, and I could not hold back the scream that slipped through my lips. Another kick landed on my back and I glanced up in time to see a giant dragon foot poised over my face, ready to smash my skull into pieces. I flinched, bringing my hands up in a feeble attempt to protect myself. I waited for the impact, but a hush fell through the room, the dragons' taunts going silent.

I peeked around my hands and gasped.

Deep green eyes met mine and an eerie tingle pricked across my skin. A turquoise dragon towered above me; his clawed hand wrapped around the brown dragon's foot mere inches from my face. The scales on his forehead bunched together as he narrowed his eyes, studying me.

A suffocating silence filled the room. I felt a heavy pressure squeezing against my brain.

Are you the daughter of Aela?

The words rippled through my mind, unheard by the dragons in the room, and it was all I could do to stifle my gasp. The floor dropped out from under me, and a sharp ache pummeled through my body, eclipsing all other pain from the dragon's attack.

Aela was my mother. I had not heard or spoken my mother's name since she died. It was too painful, carried too much weight.

Stunned, I was unsure whether to be more surprised that this dragon had spoken to me entirely in my mind, or that he knew of my mother.

I am not here to harm you. Are you Aela's daughter?

When I did not answer, he shoved the dirt-colored dragon away, sending him sprawling backward onto his tail, a table splintering in half beneath the weight. I gaped, expecting for all twelve of The Den's patrons to retaliate, but instead each one fell to their knees. I risked a glance up at Eklos and noticed he was frozen, eyes wide and fixed on the turquoise dragon.

"Your Highness," Eklos sputtered, hesitating a moment before bending down and bowing his head.

I struggled to keep my mouth from hitting the floor in shock. I had never seen Eklos submissive before. Dragons were immensely powerful, constantly fighting and battling for dominance. They never bowed to each other, never kneeled, as doing so would make them vulnerable.

Your Highness? What would someone of the Royal Family be doing at The Den? He could not truly be the Prince. The Prince of Elysia would never have stopped an attack on a human.

I started to kneel, knowing I was required to follow their example.

You need not bow to me. A deep male's voice filled my head, and I flinched. I looked at the dragon, mouth gaping, but his face revealed nothing. No emotion and no hint of who he could be or how he had just spoken to me without even breathing a word.

"I have come to collect this girl." The strange dragon's voice reverberated off the walls. Eklos, whether trying to be brave or just stupid, let a defiant mask cover his face. His eyes hardened and he began to stand.

"She is my slave—"

"Silence," the other snapped as he shoved Eklos back to his knee. My Master kept his head down this time, remaining quiet. I would be lying if I said I did not enjoy it, the sight of him on his knees, put in his place like he had always done to me. The dragon gave no further explanation to him and glanced down at me. His expression was hard and distant.

Do not fight. Come with me now. The words ran through my head once again. He reached down and grabbed my arm in his huge, clawed hand, his scales rough, scratching against my skin.

A scream built in my throat and I clamped my lips together to keep from crying for help. There was no point. The dragons would sooner kill me than help me.

The dragon pulled me along, my feet tripping and stumbling beneath me. His aggravation seeped into my mind and he tugged harder as if he were eager to escape the tavern.

Once outside The Den, he released his grip, and I gently rubbed the aching spot where his claws had been. The dragon continued walking down the cobblestone road, leaving me no choice but to follow. There was no way I was staying near The Den, risking that dirt dragon coming out for round two.

Finally, we stopped among a small grove of trees a good distance from Eklos and the rest of the beasts. The dragon turned and fixed his gaze on mine and I instinctively held my breath. I knew it was wrong for me to hold his gaze, but something about the way he studied me froze me in place. Perhaps it was shock or the summer heat causing my eyes to play tricks, but I swear the dragon's eyes softened.

"Who are you?" I asked at last, my mouth dry as cotton.

"I am Prince Tarrin of Elysia."

My mouth popped open as he confirmed my suspicions. "I'm sorry, what?" I asked dumbly. A half smirk bent his snout.

"I am the Prince, the son of King Martik and Queen Lita. You know, the dragons you blame for your abysmal life." His tone was harsh and any kindness I thought I saw in his eyes had disappeared.

"How..." I started to ask how he could possibly know that, but the words dried up on my tongue.

I had never heard much about the Royal Family when I was a child. I always assumed that they were evil, cruel dragons, like all the others since they allowed so many atrocities to happen. Deep

down I had always blamed the King and Queen for the life I was forced to live. They could have ended slavery at any point, ending the torture and abuse that I suffered at the hand of Eklos. That countless slaves suffered at the claws of their Masters.

“Never mind, human. Are you the daughter of Aela?” The Prince of Elysia asked once again, interrupting my swirling thoughts.

I crossed my arms, barely letting my temper out of its cage to keep from falling apart at the mention of her name. “Why would a dragon care who I am?”

A knowing smirk spread across his snout.

“Who says I am only a dragon?” he retorted just before his face began to morph. The transformation was like a wavering line gently moving down his body.

The scales on his face flickered back and dissolved before my eyes, and skin, golden from the sun, covered every inch they revealed. Scars marred the right half of his face as if he had been burned and it never truly healed. The same emerald eyes bore into mine as his nose and jawline took shape. Clawed hands became human hands, perfectly clean fingernails popped into place where the claws had been. The transformation continued, his enormous body shrinking down in size, becoming the height of a tall human male, and his wings and tail vanished like they never existed. Clothes rippled into place, as if they had been sitting under his scales the entire time.

An elegant black jacket hung from his muscular frame, each golden button polished and shiny, and leather pants clung to his legs with boots laced to his knees. Dark hair hung in loose waves to his shoulders.

I gaped at the Prince. When I was younger, my mother told me stories of dragons that were able to shape-shift between human and dragon forms. I never imagined there was any truth to them.

I swallowed hard, forcing my mouth to close. The Prince’s shoulders loosened a hair, as if he had expected a worse reaction.

“Do you really not know?” he asked. I could see the bewilderment in his eyes.

“Know what?”

“You honestly have no inkling of who you are?”

I tried not to flinch at his exasperated tone.

Prince Tarrin looked at me for a long while. When I did not respond, he shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. The movement was so human like that I found myself momentarily forgetting that he was a dragon. Then he grabbed my wrist, rough calluses brushing against my skin as he pulled me forward and said, “Come with me.”

He led me across the road, and through a path of trees that were all different shapes and sizes, and the leaves were bright as jewels in their rainbow of colors. Sapphire, ruby, and emerald leaves shimmered in the sun like crowns upon the trees’ trunks. The trunks were of varying sizes and shades of whites, grays, and browns. Birds flitted back and forth from branch to branch, chirping their songs. Pebbles crunched beneath our feet, adding to the music of the woods.

I wanted to pull out of his grip, to get away from the feeling of his skin on mine, especially when I knew a monster lurked just beneath.

Prince Tarrin stopped abruptly, releasing my arm. “I am not going to hurt you.” His words were like an ice bath freezing every thought in my mind.

“Then what do you want, Prince? Don’t you have enough slaves at your palace?” My eyes widened at the boldness of my own words, but something about him had that small piece of bravery within me awakening. That piece that had laid dormant since my mother had died.

“I was sent by the Queen to retrieve you.” He shrugged his shoulders again, and I purposefully ignored yet another human-like gesture.

“Why?”

I could not fathom why the Queen of Elysia would want me at the Royal Palace, let alone why she would even know of my existence.

“The Queen wants Aela’s daughter.”

I flinched at my mother’s name, taking a step back. “My name is Kaida,” I snapped, not wanting him to utter her name again.

The Prince looked at me for a long moment, his wide eyes and flared nostrils betraying his annoyance at the way I spoke to him. I feared that he would punish me for disrespecting him so I quickly asked, “Why would the Queen of Elysia want me?”

He sighed. “Kaida, you are *mutator formarum*. A shape-shifter.” He paused, watching my face. “Like me.”

I could not move. Despite the summer heat, ice poured over my skin, immobilizing every muscle. No. He must have made a mistake. He found the wrong person. I was not a shape-shifter.

Mutator formarum were so incredibly rare, and nearly extinct at that, that they were hardly ever taught about or even spoken of in Elysia. Many dragons thought poorly of them, believing them to be abominations since they were a mixed breed of human and dragon. I had never met one in my seventeen years, and I certainly hadn’t known that the Prince of Elysia was one of them.

My thoughts were racing in my head, all jumbled together and running over each other.

“You have the wrong person,” I said at last. “I’m not a shape-shifter. You have made a mistake.” My palms were slick with sweat and my heart pounded in my chest. I clenched my hands, nails digging into my palms far too hard.

“Kaida,” the Prince said, his voice hesitant. “Have you never felt *something* inside you? Something different, something powerful, perhaps? Something that was pushing to get out?”

How could he possibly know that?

The memory of Eklos throwing me into the dirt the previous

night came to mind, and that *thing* I felt inside me, thrashing at the tight leash I kept on it. I always attributed that feeling to my anger and rage. Never once would I have considered that it was a *dragon inside of me*.

I needed to sit down. Sweat slid down my back, and I swayed on my feet. The Prince had to be wrong. I was simply imagining all of this. This was all a vivid dream. I would wake up in a few moments, in my dirty cave of a house, under Eklos's thumb.

This couldn't be real.

"Kaida, it is real. You're a shifter." His words were soft, like he was speaking to an animal readying to bolt. He took a careful step toward me.

Unreasonable tears filled my eyes. "If I'm a shifter, why have I never changed forms before?"

He raked a hand through his hair once more. "Many young shifters are not able to assume their other form until they have learned about their abilities. It has something to do with the shifter magic, which is different from a normal dragon's magic. I would assume that since you have grown up without the knowledge of your abilities... you have not been able to shift before."

Truthfully, it sounded insane to me, and like a convenient excuse that the Prince came up with to convince me to go with him.

But as if his words had been a trigger, I felt a strange warmth in my stomach that quickly grew to a searing heat. The space behind my eyes throbbed and my limbs started to ache. Bile rose in my throat and I fell to my knees, heaving up my empty stomach.

I heard Prince Tarrin's sudden intake of breath before I noticed my hands begin to change. It moved both far too slow and much too quickly. My fingernails extended into silver claws, purple scales flickering in layers across my skin. My arms elongated before my eyes, and I felt a strange sensation near my butt.

I pushed to my feet, watching the scales settle into place, layer

after layer, over my body. The pain in my face hit a crescendo and I let out a scream, holding the sides of my head.

As quickly as it began, it stopped. There was no pain, only a gentle heat swirling in my core.

I glanced down at the ground and saw that the earth was crumbling away beneath my feet. My vision instantly grew clearer. I could see every individual grain of dirt lying on the ground, every ant scurrying for the safety of their hill. I could see the ultraviolet rays of the sun and the wispy clouds far above in the atmosphere that a human's eye could never see.

Prince Tarrin was in his turquoise dragon form once again. Grabbing my arm, he brought me to the edge of the river nearby. "Look in the water."

I hesitated for a moment, studying his face, then poked my head out over the water and gasped. I was not looking at a frail human girl. My body was indeed covered in amethyst-colored scales, each one reflecting color off every blade of grass on the ground. Sharp claws poked out from where my fingers used to be, and my long snout curled back into a disbelieving smile, which looked more like a grimace with my dragon teeth. My bright blue eyes were the only part of me that did not change. I raised my hand, opening it and closing it, watching the scales move and contract with each movement.

How is this possible?

Bile rose in my throat once more as I took in my reflection, the purple scales that now covered my enormous body, the membranous, iridescent wings that now protruded from my back. The one thing that I despised with every fiber of my being, the one thing that gave me endless nightmares and haunted my daydreams... I was one of them.

My scales were cool to the touch, but beneath them it felt like a roaring fire. I wanted to scream. I felt disgusting. I felt *wrong*.

My emotions were so strong, it was a struggle to stand beneath

their weight. I could not remember ever experiencing these feelings as a human, having learned to shut them down and ignore how I felt. But I could not ignore these.

What did this mean?

If I was a dragon, did that mean I was no longer a slave?

Suddenly my goal of staying alive, making it through another day, was gone. The need to survive as a human had changed. Who was I without it?

“I know this is a lot to process but you need to close your snout before you drool all over yourself.” Prince Tarrin could not seem to decide if he was irritated or amused.

I closed my large mouth, a blush creeping over my cheeks, thankfully hidden beneath the scales that covered them. Questions bounced back and forth through my mind as I studied the Prince’s face. I looked around again, at the trees, the river, and even glanced toward the red steeples of The Den in the distance.

What now?

As if hearing my thoughts again, he nodded his head in the direction of the road, beckoning me to follow, this time not grabbing my hand.

What other choice did I have? I could not go back, and I could not pretend I was simply a human slave anymore. My only choice was to follow the Prince, as loathe as I was to admit it.

“Where are we going?” I asked as we began walking, two dragons side by side down the endless dirt road.

Prince Tarrin did not respond right away, and we walked in silence a few more moments when, finally, he spoke.

“I am bringing you to the Royal Palace where you will meet the King and Queen,” he said, hesitating a second longer before continuing. “You and I are betrothed. Kaida, you are to be my wife.”