

NIGHTJAR



gabbo de la parra

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The war between the kingdoms of Munus and Lakoneh ends when the greatest warrior of Lakoneh, Bracken the Lakon, is captured. Now he will become part of the Kept, the male harem of Adder, King of Munus.

As they discover the path to love and redemption, King and Warrior must learn that not everything is as it seems, and your worst enemy can become salvation to your people and your heart.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

NIGHTJAR

By Gabbo de la Parra

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two ancient warriors on the deck of a ship. The first has a battered helmet with white horse hair as adornment, his eyes look into the distance. He is slightly arched upward because the warrior behind him is holding his throat in a very possessive manner; this second man is crowned like a king. Their bodies are intimately united as the groin of the warrior-king dominantly curves over the other's backside.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It seems the King has taken another consort. He's infamous for seeing something he wants and taking it, especially after battle when he needs to syphon off aggression. Who needs consent when one's word is law in the realm? Judging by that soldier's calm face he well knows what he's in for and knows better than to resist too much, or too little, with other eyes upon them. Of course this battle-hardened man might be more than the King bargained for once they're in the relative privacy of his chambers.

Kings aren't well-known for their generosity in bed. I might go so far as to say they can be a bit careless of others' enjoyment. So my question for you, Dear Author, is whether this soldier is turned on by all the manhandling and disregard for his satisfaction, or if he will challenge his liege and get some of his own back. Does the King crave submission from his lovers when all he gets is resignation, or will a challenge light his fire? Either way, I'm sure it will be hot.

Drop these two into any context you please. Historical, futuristic, fantasy, role-playing in leather, I will gladly read any of them. I'm not squeamish so take the non-con/dub-con as far as you like. An HEA isn't necessary, but I'd like for both of them to eventually get what they need out of the time they have together.

Thanks,

Erin

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: enemies to lovers, warriors fighting love, 2 alpha males, wing riders, fantasy version of ancient Greece, royalty, dubious consent

Word Count: 32,792

NIGHTJAR
By Gabbo de la Parra

The Ten Kingdoms



“The gryphon riders are your solution.”

—Oracle of Apheilon at Cummia

Chapter One

Taken

“Oh, my King,” the warrior moaned.

Bracken didn't like to be called king. All kings were a bunch of peacocks; he wasn't like them. He took the cock out of his mouth and grunted, “Harder.”

It was great to have mighty cocks in both his holes, rewarding his warriors for a successful battle. These two were not the first fucking him tonight and would not be the last. The ambrosia of victory made him insatiable. He was proud—no other king of the Ten Kingdoms could say he had defeated Munus.

The hands gripping his hips pulled and guided. The hands pulling his braid and holding his jaw commanded. All three swayed as their bodies collided, dimmed lamps creating soft shadows in stark contrast with their powerful motions.

Long ago, before his older brother died, Bracken had wanted to be a scholar, but duty trumped dreams. Still, Apeilon was good; Bracken would never have known the pleasure of rough, calloused hands on his body if he were a man of letters instead of a warrior, protector of his people. He would not change a thing.

“So close, my King.” Jaxton, the one ramming his mouth, shuddered.

Bracken heard a ragged chuckle behind him. “I'll beat you to it,” hissed Brummi, speeding his pumping.

On all fours, Bracken was a beast in heat, ready to climax without even touching his own hard cock. He moved the hand he had been using to clutch the unpretentious covers of his makeshift bed to tug between his legs—to join his men in completion. Three volcanoes erupted simultaneously. The internal scream of his climax was glorious as he was flooded in both ends.

Yells outside the tent sharply removed them from blissful heights. Their camp was under attack. One of his men entered the tent, his eyes wild. “King Bracken, gryphon riders!”

Fuck.

“Ride your vultures. Don't leave a single one of those motherless dog-sons alive.”

Jaxton, Brummi, and Bracken jumped and scattered to grab weapons. Before the soldier could turn to leave the tent, a sword skewered him—his last sound a gurgled scream. They quickly picked up their long daggers; a tent wasn't a place to wield big swords like his Charos.

Their nudity wasn't a concern.

Ten enemies rushed in. Metal clashed. Bodies swirled.

Trained to fight in enclosed spaces like his low-ceiling tent, Bracken was surprised by the equal ability of his enemies. Their short swords didn't arch but worked laterally and horizontally. Still, enemy limbs were severed; blood gushed and stained. Bracken rolled to avoid a sharp edge coming at him, the coarse floor mats feeling strange against his bare skin. He almost hurt himself with the main post of the tent. Luckily, the weapon of one of the attackers got stuck in that same post, giving him the chance to stab the bastard in his armpit to disable him and finish him with a quick throat slash. The gash sprayed blood over him.

Bracken lost Brummi first. By the time Jaxton went down, Bracken was surrounded by three wickedly thin swords pointing at his neck. "Come quietly, Lakon. We have orders to take you alive. I don't like to disappoint my master."

Bracken growled but let his long dagger fall. Better to live and fight another day.

That resolution flung dangerously as he stepped out of his tent. His camp had been razed. Not ten paces from his tent, four enemies were lancing the last giant bearded vulture alive, Silvercall—his own mount. Slowly rising in the east, the first rays of the new day made her white feathers look almost golden as she lay dying.

They tied Bracken's hands and feet, then tossed him like a stinky bale on the lap of a rider. The gryphon jerked impatiently, eager to fly.

Shrieks and screeches accompanied the launching of a myriad gryphon riders. Bracken wondered how they had managed to come to their camp so quietly and surprise them.

They flew west toward the ocean, the taste of cum and blood on Bracken's tongue—the seed of fallen warriors silently dripping from his hole. His hard-on softened as the adrenaline left his body. Mourning and dread were not options... yet.

Soon, potent wings sailed over Cummia, the islet where the Oracle of Apheilon resided. Only those strong enough to swim from the beach and brave the shark-infested stretch to reach the jagged shore surrounding the temple were worthy of an answer. Bracken had done it only once for his people.

Perhaps if the vulhurs had been ready...

No. Lakonians didn't dwell in "ifs." When they heard the music, they'd face it and dance.

His custodian's gryphon, and several more, alighted on a massive ship in the middle of the ocean. Bracken assumed the others continued to Munus. The sun was almost in its zenith; sweat made Bracken's eyes itch. Good thing his hair was still tightly braided. He was pushed to his feet and untied. Sailors started to fill the deck. Some looked interested, others like they had better things to do than watch what was about to happen. Whatever that was.

"Bracken the Lakon. Rider of Vultures. King of Lakoneh. Welcome to my ship." The voice should have been a whip, instead it sounded like rough fingers over his lips, prying them open. He heard the murmurs and noticed how those uninterested before were eager now.

Bracken turned to face the man. "Adder." He would not say his enemy's titles.

Adder tilted his head sideways; he smirked. "You would not acknowledge me as your equal?" He tsked and shook his head. "It will not change the outcome anyway."

"I'm your prisoner. We are not equals."

"You're still a king."

Bracken would still be a king after Adder bent him and fucked him in front of all his men, as was the custom with the vanquished. What would happen after that was a different matter. The shriek of a gryphon hardened Bracken. This fucker had killed his valiant men and their precious vultures, including his own Silvercall. He would take the humiliation for them. He would be claimed, but he was still bathed in the blood of his enemies.

Two soldiers grabbed his arms to guide him to Adder. Bracken shook them off. "I can go by myself."

Icy eyes appraised him. "Eager?" asked Adder, and the men on the deck cackled. He was in full battle gear. Two manservants started helping him to undress.

“Why delay the inevitable? That’s not the Lakonian way.”

Forty paces later, Bracken stood in front of a naked, tall, and muscular Adder. His dark hair with faint whispers of silver enhanced the golden band adorned with three black diamonds over his brow. Bracken was shorter, but he didn’t need to raise his head to look at those cunning, night eyes. Bracken had a lot more white in his hair, but they were not old men; it was the burden of royalty and ruling.

Adder’s hard cock glistened in the midday blaze in its nest of night curls. Under other circumstances, Bracken would have appreciated length and girth and been excited about it. Same for the massive chest covered in delightful fur. Now it was pure duty, as many things had been in his life.

One of the manservants came with a pot of oil. Adder poured some over his cock, coating it. “Turn around and on your knees, King of Lakoneh.”

“You will take me standing. If you force me to my knees your cock will pay for it.”

These words gave pause to Adder—but fleetingly. If Bracken hadn’t been staring him down he would not have seen it.

“As you wish,” Adder said. A pinch of something Bracken couldn’t decipher made the voice deeper, almost heady.

A big hand found Bracken’s neck as soon as he gave his back to Adder. It caressed his Adam’s apple, while the oil-coated cock breached him. Soon Bracken was flush against Adder’s groin. It felt so fucking good he almost moaned. Almost. He didn’t close his eyes in bliss either. He glared, making eye contact with every single man on that putrid deck.

But this dog-son, Adder, didn’t batter Bracken like he was supposed to. He did it slowly, languidly, nearly savoring it. This wasn’t the way. The heat, the slowness, the hand caressing his throat, the fingers playing with his pubic hair, all conspired to unhinge Bracken. It was hard to resist; it was hard not to push back and impale himself on his enemy’s wonderful cock.

“You’re going to embarrass yourself,” Adder whispered playfully in Bracken’s ear.

“Damn you.”

“Beg me to stop.”

“No.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“No.”

Adder was whispering, while Bracken was answering back loudly. Surely the men around them thought Bracken was saying “no” out of fear or due to the humiliation of being vanquished. Adder grabbed Bracken’s cock and tugged.

“No.”

“I’m going to get you hard and make you come.”

“NO. That is not the way, and you know it!”

“Do I look like a give a fuck about *the way*?”

“Adder, stop,” Bracken sighed.

“Beg, so my men can hear you.”

“Adder, King of Munus, Beloved of Erin, Master of Gryphons, please stop,” Bracken said loudly. The only thing making it a plea was the word “please.” Everything else sounded like a command—or an insult. He knew Adder would not stop, but Bracken couldn’t bring himself to beg like a weakling. He would rather swallow his tongue to defuse his unhelpful libido.

“That’s a good king.” Adder pulled Bracken’s braid down, making his taut, wired body arch.

After three powerful thrusts, Adder came with a war cry that had his men cheering.

Bracken expected to be tossed toward the soldiers approaching them as Adder’s cock vacated him.

But Adder surprised him; he turned Bracken around and touched his brow with Bracken’s. They stood like that for several heartbeats. When they separated, he said to his men, “Bathe and clothe him. He and I will have a meal after that in the deckhouse.”

Bracken was taken below deck, where soldiers—not manservants—attended him. They let him soak his sore muscles in a wooden tub filled with warm water for a while. He was scrubbed and perfumed and given a rich burgundy tunic, a belt made of golden circular plates, and soft sandals that felt like pristine clouds. He didn’t let them unbraid his hair. Hair could be untied when you were done battling; Bracken didn’t think he was done yet.

Chapter Two

Favorite

“What in the name of Erin was that?”

“I don’t know.” Adder ran a hand through his hair. He paced around the deckhouse.

“You didn’t break him,” said Renan, surlier than usual.

“I didn’t feel like breaking him.”

“You know he’s a fucking trophy not a pet, right?”

“I’m aware of that, Great Counselor.” Adder gave his best friend and second in command a nasty look. “I just couldn’t.”

“You have twelve Kept, five War Trophies and seven Offerings. I’ve never seen you hesitate to break a War Trophy. Or an Offering for that matter.” Renan made that weird sound that was supposed to be a chuckle. Most people cringed when his friend made that sound.

“How do you want me to explain to you something I, myself, cannot begin to grasp?”

“You weren’t just unable to break him, now you’re having a meal with him! He’s supposed to be under lock until we reach the palace!”

“What is he going to do, Renan? Fling himself into the ocean? He knows he is a trophy, and he has honor.”

“I don’t know. His reputation says he is wicked in battle.”

“By losing her king, Lakoneh has learned her lesson. The battle is over; Munus won.”

Renan’s hand rested on Adder’s shoulder. “Are you sure you won?”

A knock on the door saved Adder from having to deal with that question. He didn’t have a clear answer for it, and that was disturbing.

Renan went to open the door and, with an obnoxious flourish, gestured Bracken inside. “King Bracken.”

Adder caught the minute flinch at the word “king.” He moved to the table and started fixing a plate for Bracken. The silence made him turn back toward the two men. “What’s going on?”

“I’m trying to gauge if he has a weapon. There’s nothing under his tunic, but...”

Adder didn’t roll his eyes, but he thought about it. He addressed Bracken, “You’re going to behave, right?”

Bracken gave a withering look to Renan before answering. “You claimed me in front of your men. I’m your property now. I know my place.” And just when Adder thought he was done, Bracken added, “Besides, if I wanted to do something dishonorable, as long as my hands are free I don’t need a weapon...”

What a wonderful contradiction Bracken the Lakon was. “You see, Great Counselor? He’s going to behave.”

“That’s not what he said,” Renan sputtered as if someone had hit him with a flying chamber pot.

“I’d like some privacy now.” Adder dismissed Renan with a wink.

His friend left, closing the door quietly but with a droning muttering that was a lot worse than a slamming door.

“Here.” Adder offered Bracken the plate he had been serving.

“Where are your manservants?”

“There are no manservants on this ship. The two men you saw helping me undress are punished soldiers. They did something very stupid and cannot wear the colors of Munus for two moons.”

Bracken shook his head. “You’re a cruel man. The colors of his people are sacred to a warrior.”

“You’d rather have them lashed.”

“I don’t know what they did, so I cannot rule on their sentence, but two moons without the colors of your country is cruelty.”

Adder sprang, like the viper that gave him his name, and grabbed Bracken by the jaw with one hand, squeezing it. “You think I’m cruel?”

Bracken narrowed his eyes and closed his fists, but didn’t move to free himself. “I’m undecided,” he growled between his teeth.

Adder’s hand snapped open. “That you are.”

This kind of Lakoneh was going to drive him crazy. All the control he had shown while being claimed, when it was obvious that he was enjoying it, had

turned Adder's fury into scorching lust. Not the kind of lust easily sated with conquering your partner, but the one that needed slow methodical determination to subjugate, to own, to possess. Adder wanted to see Bracken writhing, overwhelmed with pleasure. He wanted to shatter those walls that weren't fear but discipline. Yes, Adder had bent other men, and they had shown restraint, but because the action was alien to them and it was their duty to grit their teeth and take it. This rider of vultures was something Adder hadn't encountered before.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

Bracken might know the situation, but he wasn't going to stop being a king easily, and that was fine with Adder.

"How am I looking at you?"

"You seem inclined to open my head and examine my brain."

Adder tilted his head and stared into those ghostly eyes. Bracken's eyes were like a cloudless summer sky when the sun was at its highest, so light they were almost colorless, and his tanned skin made them more haunting by contrast. He walked to the door without answering and opened it. He yelled, "Raise anchor. We're going home."

The men cried, "Adder," in response.

Returning to the table, Adder started to fix his own plate. He felt Bracken's eyes following and studying him. He sat. "Let's eat. My palace will be a better place for examinations."

"If you say so, Beloved of Erin."

"You know, you say those words as if it is an insult. Don't you worship the goddess?"

Bracken looked at Adder as if he had sprouted another head. "Of course I do. She's the goddess of the land, the queen of the waters, mother of gryphons and vultures and all nature. She and Apheilon are everything, the balance, day and night, life and death."

"You're reciting like a scholar not a believer."

"And you said the examinations were going to happen at your palace." Bracken grinned cheekily. This made his features soften, but not in a weak way. It made them look almost divine, as if he were a statue of Apheilon come to life.

“You’re right. Let’s finish the meal and go outside for some fresh air.”

They didn’t speak another word until done. Adder stood and gestured toward the door. Outside two gryphons were grooming each other under the vigilant eye of their riders. One of the punished soldiers vigorously dried Adroit, Adder’s gryphon, who apparently had decided to take a dive and procure his own meal from the ocean. Now and then, Adroit would poke him with his beak, as if aware of the man’s sins.

“I thought they would be noisier,” Bracken commented as they moved fore.

This surprised Adder since he had expected a silent Bracken for the rest of the journey. Still, he answered with his own question. “Are your vultures noisy animals?”

“No.”

“Then what made you think gryphons would be so?”

“I haven’t been around them much, but the ones I recall were a loud bunch.”

“They were either untrained or sick.”

“Oh.”

They stopped at arm’s length from Adroit. The gryphon moved his head forward so Adder could pet him. Adder did it absentmindedly, mostly gauging Bracken’s reactions. Those magnificent eyes softened as Bracken heard the soft murmurs Adroit was making while petted. “You can touch him,” Adder offered.

Bracken narrowed his eyes and his features turned murderous. “Your men killed my vulture.”

Before he could censor his mouth, Adder said softly, “I’m sorry.”

“Are you?”

The words hadn’t been quiet, and the two riders close to them stared. “Do not question me, Lakon,” Adder said angrily, more for the benefit of his men than from actual ire. Adroit looked at him quizzically, thanks to his tone.

“That’s what I thought.”

It had come out under Bracken’s breath, but Adder heard it nonetheless.

This was not what Adder had intended. He gestured toward starboard. They propped their elbows on the rails as they reached the bulwark. The silhouette of

Busar was a faint interruption of the horizon; soon the engulfing twilight would make it disappear. Adder had been in the yearly summit of the Five Ocean Kingdoms in Gikid. It moved from island to island every year, and in two years it would be back to Munus, where Adder would have to deal with the other four kings and the thousand people each used as retinue. Why couldn't they be like him, who traveled only with Renan and a team of the Royal Guard to such events?

"Which Ocean Kingdom is that? We are not moving toward it, so it's not Munus," Bracken asked quietly, his gaze toward the darkening waters.

"It's Busar."

"I went there my first year as king. The wedding of their Crowned Prince to one of the princes of the other islands. The kingdom of Zigag, if I'm not mistaken."

"I don't remember that wedding."

"You weren't king yet. Your father was bedridden. I think no one from Munus was there."

Adder chuckled. "I'm older than you, but you were king before me."

"Destiny has no favorites, only victims," Bracken said in a convinced tone.

Adder exhaled softly as the night neared. "We were not born to be kings."

"And yet, here we are."

Chapter Three

Kept

Bracken slept alone in an unlocked cabin. His body simply decided that it was best to sleep instead of being awake and alert when his situation was already clear. He had been claimed by Adder as War Trophy and thus bound by honor to accept this man's ruling over him. He would be a Kept, and that was that. There were no Kept in Lakoneh; Bracken didn't leave enemies alive to become his pets. That was the Lakonian way: give your enemy a just death. Still, accepting your destiny was also honorable.

The loud dealings of mooring awoke Bracken. The entire ship was a blur of activity as he stepped onto the deck. Sails were folded, men yelled, gryphons flew in all directions. He stood out of the way, admiring and absorbing everything. Perhaps this would be his life now since Adder traveled a lot and might take a Kept with him for entertaining. Bracken wondered how many Kept Adder had.

The peace between the five Ocean Kingdoms and the five Land Kingdoms was relative at best and maintained with constant skirmishes. Big battles, like the one he thought he had won only to lose his men afterward, were rare but inevitable in an area where any slight could be considered a war declaration. To Bracken's knowledge, a king would only have high-ranking enemy officers, princes, or another king as Kept. Adder had subjugated the Land Kingdom of Vurgeg, Lakoneh's north neighbor, three years ago, but their king hadn't been at battle. Now Vurgeg was vassal to Munus, and all other kingdoms were trying to be extremely nice with the most powerful Ocean Kingdom. Bracken had had an honorable motive for war, so if this was the outcome, he welcomed it with acceptance in his heart.

Adder walked toward him with a friendly face. Like there was a reason for them to be friends. Although, Bracken felt uncharacteristically confused by the way things had unfolded between them the previous day. His body had taken away the option to think about it last night. Now it was Adder's presence.

"Morning. We're going to Gryphonire."

"I've never ridden a gryphon," Bracken said, unapologetic.

"I'm riding you." Adder smirked.

Sure you will.

Bracken didn't answer, just kept his face blank. A soldier came with Adroit. Her saddle was a rich thing of luminous leather and gold adornments. Adder climbed easily since he only wore light armor. The way his powerful lightly haired thighs held him in place made Bracken think of the ruthless battering that never took place.

Adder extended a hand. "Come"

Clasping Adder's wrist, Bracken put a foot on the stirrup and was pulled upward. It was wrong the way his body reacted as he sat between pommel and groin. Almost the same position he had been in when Adder claimed him.

Reins in one hand, Adder pulled Bracken flush to his chest; the plates of his cuirass reminded Bracken this wasn't supposed to be enjoyable. He whispered in Bracken's ear, "Ready?"

The soft blow was a malign caress. Bracken couldn't help an involuntary shiver. This angered him. He growled, "The Lakon is always ready."

"We'll see. Home, Adroit!" Adder ordered with a pull to the reins.

Adroit launched herself upward almost vertically, something vultures didn't do. The gryphon did several circles, making the enormous ship look smaller and smaller, then headed south across the island.

"Why to Gryphonire and not to the city palace?" Bracken asked just to shake his mind away from memories of Silvercall and the nuisance of Adder's body pressed against his.

"Two reasons. I want to see my son after a week away from him and my true bed is at Gryphonire."

And his fuck toys need to be close to his bed.

Beyond the large fortified capital city of Munus, Varvarar, they flew over gentle green slopes and hills, grazed by all manner of bovidae. Extensive grain and produce farms colored the plains. Bracken knew of the rich metal mines toward the northern end of the island. These things made the people of Munus not just healthy and prosperous but eager to expand their power. Under normal circumstances Lakoneh would not envy Munus's wealth, but things had been hard last winter. It all led to Bracken being on the back of a gryphon with his traitorous body relishing Adder's harsh embrace during the entire two hundred and fifteen *mileh* flight. An hour of sensual torment.

Gryphonire was a tall rock formation in the middle of a solitary, shallow bay and only accessible by wings. One thing was to hear about it and another to see it with your own eyes. A formidable complex confidently lay on top, blinding in its splendor of long, white-marbled columns and walls, crowned with red-tiled roofs. Bracken was awestruck.

Adder must have sensed it in Bracken's body language because he murmured, full of himself, "Impressive, huh?"

A childish part of him, the one that had been climbing inside him irreverently and steadily since Bracken mounted the gryphon, wanted to say, "Meh." But the honorable adult, the respectful adult said, "Very much."

"I'm glad you like it."

These words didn't make any sense. Why would Adder care what Bracken thought of his nest palace? The way he spoke, the way he tilted his head to observe Bracken was pure nonsense; it made Bracken uneasy.

Bracken wasn't keen on uneasiness.

Gryphons and their riders came and went from the many terraces jutting from the monumental grey rock. They alighted on the one closest to the complex and dismounted. A muscular red-haired man and a boy that looked like a small version of Adder came to greet them, along with guards and servants to handle Adroit. The boy jumped into Adder's arms, exclaiming, "Abba, I missed you so much!"

Adder kissed the boy's face many times while ruffling his hair. The boy giggled, content. "I missed you too, son." Adder squeezed the boy with his powerful arms. "A lot." He turned to the redhead with a nod. "Selleck."

"My King," said Selleck with a reverent bow.

"This is your new charge, Bracken the Lakon. Rider of Vultures. King of Lakoneh," Adder informed Selleck, pointing at Bracken with a swift jaw movement.

"King Bracken." Selleck bowed again.

Bracken nodded politely.

"Lakon, meet the Overseer of the Kept." Then the boy elbowed Adder. This made Adder chuckle. "And this is my son, Prince Deron."

"Hello!" said Deron with all the enthusiasm of a whirlwind.

“Nice to meet you, Prince Deron,” Bracken offered as he lightly bowed.

“Selleck, I want the Lakon in my chambers after the evening meal. You two are dismissed.” Adder stood there with a stony demeanor, completely at odds with everything he had done until that moment.

“Yes, sire. Please follow me, King Bracken.”

Bracken followed Selleck, a bit miffed. Before they exited the terrace, he looked back and caught Adder staring at him with his head a little tilted and his brow furrowed as Deron talked to him animatedly.

It seems I am not alone in my confusion.

They moved through ample rock tunnels to emerge on the beautiful complex’s central courtyard. Men and women went about their daily activities, the calling of gryphons now and then interrupting the natural human bustle. They wound between columnar corridors of white marble adorned with giant vases of precious metals. A standing man could easily fit in any of these odd vases. Perhaps that was their actual purpose.

Selleck stopped in front of a huge, darkwood door. Intricate battle scenes lined it. There were no soldiers guarding it. “Here we are. This is the residence of the Kept.” He pushed the door.

The place was not what Bracken had been expecting. It looked like the monstrous love child of an inn and a gymnasium. Exercise equipment, game tables, and huge canopy beds with colorful drapes. The walls were pink and red; Bracken had never seen pink walls, not even in whorehouses.

At the other end of the strange room, a full pool glittered. A pool where something unpleasant was happening.

“He doesn’t look like he’s enjoying it.” Bracken eyed Selleck narrowly. Why wasn’t he stopping the two men forcing a younger one?

“I don’t think you are supposed to enjoy it. Penetration hurts.”

“Experience?”

“And a most hurtful one.” Selleck shook his head. “Don’t worry, if they get too rough with him I’ll stop them, and if they hurt the boy more than needed, I’ll punish them.”

“Magnanimous.”

“Oh, shut up.” Selleck grabbed Bracken’s upper arm and guided him forward. “Don’t let this moment disturb you. Those are two War Trophies making an Offering pay for a prank.” Selleck must have seen Bracken’s confusion written all over his face because he explained, “Offerings are sons of wealthy families offered for a boon or to ingratiate themselves with our king. Seven Offerings and five War Trophies share this space—well, now six with you, King Bracken.

“Those Offerings are little demon pests that gang up on the War Trophies. Obviously they must do it singling one at a time, and this leads to each group trying to one-up the other constantly.” Selleck kept moving Bracken toward the left side of the hall. “Last week the seven Offerings gangbanged one of the War Trophies. He was not happy all covered in semen at the end.”

“And King Adder approves these antics?”

Selleck’s face became serious abruptly. “Our King doesn’t care much for the Kept. He uses them once or twice when they arrive and then forgets about them. After a few years he sends the War Trophies as chiefs of distant out-of-the-way barracks. The Offerings might become ambassadors or administrative officers somewhere. You’re the first actual king he has. I know his father had the King of Doriar, but I’d need to go to the archives to find out what was done with him.” Selleck seemed genuinely apologetic.

Doriar was the southernmost kingdom of the five Land Kingdoms. Bracken remembered that story of the King of Doriar becoming a Kept from when he was a child.

“This is why the Lakon doesn’t have Kept,” Bracken said under his breath, as a glare caught his attention. It was a glittering gold statue of Apheilon, on a pedestal between red columns. Bracken ate the twenty paces swiftly and went to one knee reverently. “Father, bless my people and give wisdom to Idared to guide them until my nephew, Fern, can rule as my successor.” He then recited the old prayers. He stood up when he finished.

“Why don’t you have a son, King Bracken?” Selleck asked, clearly interested.

“I don’t have use for women. I prefer men. The son of my sister Laelia is my heir. Idared, his father, is my first general. His parents will be good regents until Fern is sixteen.”

“King Adder is the same way, but he paid a woman handsomely to carry his child. Of course we had her under lock for a year before he impregnated her just to be sure.” Selleck chuckled.

They had succeeded because the little Boy-Prince was an exact replica of Adder.

“That idea never crossed my mind,” accepted Bracken. “Fern was already three years old when I became King, after my older brother died without any children of his own. It was an instant given.”

“I see. Well, there’s no point now.” Selleck nodded.

“True.”

“I think it is time for you to be introduced to the other Kept.”

“Lead the way.”

As Bracken walked to meet the War Trophies and Offerings, he wondered why Adder wasn’t more active with his Kept. Was he in love with someone? He didn’t have an official consort; it would have been common knowledge around the Ten Kingdoms if there was one.

What about that dog-ass Great Counselor? No. That wasn’t the vibe between them. It was friendship, the kind of friendship Bracken had with his own second-in-command, and now regent for his nephew.

Perhaps King Adder wasn’t a sexual being. No shame on that either.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that lie.

The Gryphonire



Chapter Four

Guts

Adder was nervous, and he couldn't find a rational explanation as to why. Bracken wasn't his first Kept. Yes, he was the first king Kept Adder ever had, but... Bracken was more; he was a kindred spirit. Not just because both preferred men; this was intelligence he had received when he became king and learned about the other rulers of the Ten Kingdoms. Perhaps it was that neither of them had been born to be king. The gods had put them in that position without caring if they wanted it or not, and both had succeeded in taking care of their people without becoming ruthless and bitter.

Perhaps it was because both were riders of great flying beasts (his other Kept were from kingdoms without flying riders). They both knew the exhilaration of being in the sky, controlling power beyond human capabilities: men could swim, men could run, but men could not fly. Perhaps it was that he should think this man brutal and perverse and he couldn't. Still, Adder felt it was something else altogether; he couldn't name it yet, but it was his intention to find it out. He was not used to unnamed things wreaking havoc within him.

He was pacing around his chamber when a soft knock on the door made him stop. He pulled his tunic down, straightened his crown, and answered, "Come in."

Selleck opened the door with Bracken in tow. He did a half bow. "My King, here is Bracken the Lakon, Rider of Vultures, King of Lakoneh, as you commanded."

"Thank you, my friend."

After another half bow to each, Bracken and Adder, Selleck turned around, opened the door and left, closing it.

Bracken was scowling at Adder. He stood there by the entrance like a statue under a severe rainstorm. Even his fists were clenched, and yet he looked magnificent in his white and gold tunic, plaque belt, and sandals with leather strips up to his knees. The servants had undone his war-braided hair, and it cascaded in salt-and-peppered curls beyond his shoulders. He seemed a bridegroom on his wedding night.

A very pissed-off groom.

Adder wanted to smile and ask what had happened, but Bracken's rocky features didn't invite even a grin. "What's wrong?"

Bracken was silent and fuming. His eyes were mere slits, and his mouth had a murderous rictus.

If Adder didn't trust the honor bounding Bracken to be a Kept, he would have drawn his sword instantly. He walked toward the Lakon and pried his fists open. "Please tell me what happened. Did the other Kept do something to you?" He realized his mistake the second he closed his mouth as a growl emerged from Bracken.

"I'm not a fucking weakling." Bracken pushed Adder. "Yours is the only touch I will permit, and you know the reasons for that."

Adder pushed back, pinning Bracken against the wall, his forearm over the tanned throat. "Then tell me what the fuck happened and stop acting like a spoiled brat who wanted something and didn't get it."

Barely moving his lips, his teeth gritted, Bracken hissed, "Your people have a very wicked sense of what *preparation* means. I don't need two men holding me down while another inserts a tube in my ass to clean *me* for *you*. I've been having sex for eons. I know how not to shit on a man's cock."

Without suppressing a snort, Adder let go of Bracken with a warning push to stay where he was. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious."

It was hard not to gibe Bracken's silliness. Adder went with it. "You said mine was the only touch you will permit. I hope I don't have three unnecessarily dead servants."

Bracken's face went blank for two or three heartbeats, then he grumbled, "Dog-son asshole."

"You're the anal one here."

"Stop it."

"That's what you said yesterday."

"Who's being childish now?"

"Are you going to behave?"

"I promised I would yesterday."

“All right.” Adder walked to the bed and sat on it, extending a hand to Bracken. “Come.”

Bracken unbuckled his plaque belt and started to pull up his tunic. He didn't have anything underneath (as was their custom) and the play of muscles was delicious.

“What are you doing?” Adder asked when his brain grasped what was happening.

“I'm behaving. I'm getting naked so you can fuck me and be done with it.”

The false light of the oil lamps made Bracken's nudity different from that of their previous encounter in bright daylight. The shadows brought angles that enhanced muscles and scars into glorious masculine beauty.

An impressive image, similar to a wild gryphon waiting to pounce at you.

Ha, Adder was Master of Gryphons, and he would master this man no matter what.

Adder sprang from the bed, unbuckling his belt and getting rid of his tunic in one swift movement to end up facing Bracken, chest to chest. He grabbed Bracken's ass and ground their groins together. “You aren't behaving. You're practically *ordering me* to fuck you. That's not how we play this game.”

Bracken ground back and bit Adder's chin before saying, “A rigged game is not a real game. You already won, remember?”

Fuck.

The bite sent lightning throughout Adder's body, but it was true; this was a rigged game. Adder couldn't say differently without sounding like an idiot, or worse—a liar. He brushed Bracken's lips with his. “Still, let me show you how good I play.”

They didn't move to the bed, but to an armless chair, where Adder sat with Bracken on his lap; both became lips, and tongues, and limbs, and pulls, and shoves, grappling like two fucking krakens mating. Bracken could say that the game was rigged and that Adder had won already, but he was giving as good as he was taking, and that excited Adder like nothing had in a long time.

“Turn around,” Adder exhaled as he came out of the scuffle for air.

“Yes,” Bracken hissed. As he accommodated himself on Adder's groin to tease his cock, Adder pushed him forward. Quick reflexes threw arms forward

to avoid landing face-first. “What the fuck?” Bracken yelled, craning his neck backward, trying to look at Adder in the awkward position.

Adder had him exactly how he wanted, as if they were in a bizarre wheelbarrow race. He pulled himself upward enough to have Bracken’s round behind in the perfect position and dove between luscious cheeks, inhaling and tasting and biting.

“Oh merciful Erin,” Bracken groaned as his entire body trembled.

Adder saw goose bumps erupting over the hard muscles around his face. Now, with his prey secured, he sat back and continued the assault, using lips and teeth and nose. Bracken babbled incoherently. Curses and blessings came out mixed and strangled. His body writhed, a fine coat of sweat soon covering it.

Rimming was Adder’s favorite part of the bed sports, and by the few things he could grasp from Bracken’s irrational discourse, he was the first to take the time to bestow it upon the Lakon. What a waste of a perfect hole. But it was time for more than rimming. Adder changed weapons, first one and then two fingers. He played Bracken’s prostate like a lyre with slow, knowing motions, bringing sweet moans and grunts (his favorite melodies) out of him.

With his other hand, Adder pumped Bracken’s hard and leaking cock. In perfect harmony, he milked and strummed, rubbed and tugged, pulled and pushed until Bracken climaxed with a rough clamor as if Hate and Pleasure had just had a battle inside him. And they probably had.

Bracken slithered to the floor like melting snow over rock and turned to lie on his back, he pinned Adder with his cloudless-sky eyes. “You.”

Adder winked. “The bed is a better place to come down from ecstasy.” He offered his hand, and Bracken took it without fussing. The midnight blue and silver bedclothes framed Bracken’s strong planes and wild hair beautifully. Then he realized that his bed had been dressed with the colors of Lakoneh. “You are a marvelous sight,” Adder whispered, propping his head on his elbow, both long bodies side by side.

“Thank you.” Bracken nodded. “You’re not bad to look at yourself.”

This made Adder chuckle. He couldn’t resist and touched Bracken’s swollen, smiling lips. Bracken sucked the same fingers that had been inside him. Adder shivered, and it didn’t escape him that Bracken knew the role of those fingers.

“Let me take care of you,” Bracken murmured softly as he released the digits.

“No.” Adder shook his head. “Tonight is about you.”

Bracken didn’t say anything, just stared at Adder, puzzlement softening his sharp, commanding features. They remained like that for many minutes, in quiet silence. The quietness encouraged Adder’s nightjars to call.

“What is that creepy noise?”

“My pets.” Adder laughed. Nightjars were not indigenous to the Ten Kingdoms, but their distinctive call was for some reason soothing to Adder and helped him to sleep.

“It figures you have demon pets.”

“You can be so silly, Lakon. Come, let me show you.”

“You’re going to show me your demons?”

This gave pause to Adder. Yes, perhaps in the future they could show each other their demons and help one another to deal with them. For now it was just the birds. “Yes.” He jumped from the bed. “This way.”

They walked naked to the adjacent room that was lounge and clerical space. The birdcage was practically a room in itself. Bracken moved toward it, resting his hands on the intricate designs of the bars. “What are they called?”

“Nightjars.”

Adder had to admit that the view of Bracken’s powerful back, narrow hips, and muscular legs with nothing but the leather thongs of his sandals (ascending thick calves) was breathtaking. Then he remembered that the previous night, while alone in his bed on the ship, the pattern of Bracken’s war braids had made his hair remind Adder of the plumage of his nightjars.

The legends of the island continent, from whence his little pets had come, spoke of them as familiars to killer spirits and also called them corpse-eaters and goatsuckers. All nonsense, but wasn’t the vulture rider in front of him maligned just like the night birds after what he did to Adder’s ships?

Nothing in Bracken’s previous skirmishes with other kingdoms marked him as a brutal defiler, but the state of the ships when they were returned to Vurgeg left his vassals and the people of Munus revolted. They had clamored for vengeance, and he as a king had to do something to calm his people down.

After a moment of stillness, the nightjars started their song again. Bracken turned around and smiled at Adder. Maybe Bracken didn't order the things done on those ships. Perhaps it was the men he left in charge, and he wasn't aware of what happened. The things warring inside Adder, his confusing desire for Bracken and the grotesque idea that he was supposed to have of him, were overwhelming. He felt in his gut (and his gut had never failed him before) that he could trust Bracken's honor, but it was always wise to keep one's guard up.

Still, he was going to trust his gut tonight. He walked until his body was flush to Bracken's and circled the hard flanks. Adder felt Bracken melt into the embrace as he kissed one shoulder and murmured, "Let's go back to bed, Nightjar."

Bracken cocked his head sideways toward him and said calmly, "Is that the name you're giving me?"

"Yes."

Chapter Five

Confusion

When men became Kept, they were given new names so they understood that their previous life was over. Usually those new names were something inconsequential and meaningless to assert their position in the hierarchy structure and to remind them *the King owned what the King named*.

Nine days had gone, and no one but Adder called Bracken Nightjar.

And only when we are alone.

Even Selleck still addressed him as King Bracken whenever they interacted. Since Lakoneh didn't have Kept, Bracken wasn't sure if there was a time frame for this to happen or not. Also, he had slept every night beside Adder. The King of Munus did wicked things to Bracken before falling asleep but never fucked him again after The Claiming. Moreover, it had always been about Bracken's pleasure. He had started to think this was some plot to make him beg to be fucked out of guilt. It didn't make any sense; it was Adder's right to possess him. Yet, every motion, every maneuver of any part of him over Bracken's body was designed to unhinge him, to turn him into a babbling, writhing mass of need until he erupted in shattering orgasms. Then Adder would gently coax him to sleep with soothing murmurs until darkness swallowed him.

Adder.

Always Adder, hard and leaking, but never letting Bracken take care of him. To relieve the need that was clear in Adder's eyes in the way he devoured Bracken with each glance.

At first Bracken wasn't happy with this new name, Nightjar. After all, it was the name of a creepy little bird, the kind of tiny thing one could squash with a hand if you used enough pressure. It had seemed like a way to tell Bracken he was just that—a minute, fragile thing.

Nights passed, making Bracken realize that there had to be more to it. Adder took personal care of his nocturnal pets, bringing the insects they ate, talking to them. They were so used to him that they called in his presence when every other person would make them go silent if they got too close to their cage.

These nightly stays were also changing the dynamics within the Kept Hall. The War Trophies started to look at Bracken with suspicion. A very unhealthy dose of ill-disguised jealousy shone clear in their narrowed eyes. Bracken understood this. He was still called King and had surpassed the usual one or two nights of use after arrival. Nobody invited confidences but Bracken was sure Adder simply fucked them and was done with it. This made all the confusion in his head grow bigger and wilder.

On the other hand, the Offerings fluttered around him like he was some kind of hero for retaining Adder's attentions, which in turn angered the War Trophies even more.

Bracken tried not to dwell on these things as he filled his plate with the dishes laid for their midday meal. He sat alone at one end of the long darkwood table. He had purposely waited until everybody was seated so he could choose a spot far from them. The War Trophies commanded the opposite end, glaring at him between bites and grumbling among themselves. The Offerings had done a number on one of them the previous day. Bracken knew the men at the other end were brewing something nasty; he just couldn't be sure if it was going to be directed at the kids or at him.

"You're so lucky, he's so dreamy," said Eta as he sat beside Bracken, uninvited.

Bracken had been attracted to men all his life; not even before he became the Warrior King of the Lakonians had he ever used the word "dreamy" to describe another man.

"I would say more like nightmarish." Bracken chuckled. He liked this kid. All the Offerings were pampered, court-raised lads, but this one had a sharp wit to him that appealed to Bracken's own caustic sense of humor.

"How could you say that of our king?"

"Thought you were talking about Mu," Bracken said pointing at the wickedest-looking of all the War Trophies. "You two have your very own special side-war going on."

Eta snorted, "He's a beast, but his ass is pretty tight."

"Tread carefully. These men are not silly things to play with."

"What are they going to do? They can't hurt us, we belong to King Adder."

"You could always have a fatal 'accident.' Don't anger them more than is necessary."

The kid's face contorted. "You think they could resort to that?"

"If you push them hard enough, they might. They have nothing to lose. Their lives are already somebody else's property."

"You mean *our* lives."

"Semantics. I'm on this boat as much as everyone in this hall. I'm just not going to make it harder by creating unneeded enemies."

Selleck entered the hall and walked straight to them. "May I sit?"

Bracken nodded and eyed Eta, telling him silently, "This is polite behavior."

Selleck sat placidly.

"Would you like me to fix you a plate?" Eta asked Selleck.

"Thank you, Eta. I already ate." Selleck looked at Bracken's plate. It was empty. "If you're done, King Bracken, please follow me."

Bracken stood up, winked at Eta and went to wash his hands. Selleck awaited him by the door. They left the Kept, strolling through sunny corridors. They moved toward a part of the palace Bracken didn't know. Not that he knew much of it; he wasn't interested either. Soon, they were at the stables, where gryphons were housed. The accommodations were different from the ones the Lakonian had for their vultures, but more similar to the ones they had built for their creations the vulhurs, an alchemy-marriage of horse and vulture.

Selleck stopped them in front of several enclosures and waved his hand as a merchant offering his goodies. "King Adder wants you to choose a gryphon for your personal use."

"What?"

"He told me you haven't ridden a gryphon, but I don't think they are that different from a vulture, riding-wise."

"Does any of the other Kept have their own gryphon?" Bracken didn't want a gryphon; he was still mourning the loss of Silvercall. He had been training a vulhur as a secondary mount, but a gryphon was out of the question.

"No, King Bracken. Only you would have one."

"Is this an order?"

Puzzlement was written all over the red-haired man. "I-I don't think it was. It's a gift," he stuttered.

It was in bad taste to refuse a gift, but this would cause more trouble than Bracken needed. He would have to say yes now and speak to Adder about it in the first opportunity. “I just wanted to be sure,” he offered nonchalantly. “Any of these?” They were facing five gryphons in various colors.

“Yes. These are trained but don’t have a master yet, so any could adapt to you easily.”

Bracken went for the darkest one instead of the one that resembled Silvercall the most. That way if he ended up stuck with the beast it would not be a constant reminder of what he’d lost.

Many hours later, Bracken returned to the Kept Hall, exhilarated and not liking himself much. He had such a great time learning to ride “his” gryphon, he felt ashamed and beyond guilty.

“Hey, Lakon, changing colors? Now that the *Master of Gryphons* has been riding you, you think it is cute to forget your vulture. You disgust me,” yelled Rho from their usual end of the table, waving a chicken leg at Bracken. The other War Trophies cackled as if the idiot had just delivered the punch line of a joke instead of an insult.

Making his way to the smorgasbord, Bracken kept a straight face. He filled his plate and sat at the head of the opposite end, not in a side of the end as usual. He started eating, his eyes unyielding over the War Trophies.

The seven Offerings moved from the middle of the table and surrounded Bracken. At his left Eta spoke, “Aren’t you going to say anything, King Bracken?”

“One does not answer to the bark of dogs, especially if they are behind a fence.”

“Nice,” said Xi at Bracken’s right. The other Offerings snorted and guffawed happily.

Bracken’s end of the table finished their meal in animated conversation, while the other end seemed the gathering of a storm with many growls for thunder. They were given the concoction that slowed their bowel movements to a minimum for twelve hours. Then, they went with assistants to be prepared for the King’s selection of the night. This was done to all of them because it was unknown who the King would choose until Selleck appeared at the door. Bracken had heard the War Trophies complaining about it. The King never summoned anyone, and they were submitted to this handling unnecessarily. He

also heard that now that Adder sent for Bracken every night he should be the only one going through the process.

Adder had given Selleck instructions to let Bracken do his preparations on his own after the childish fit he had thrown the first night. Bracken wasn't proud of his reaction, but being caught unawares had been the part that pissed him off the most.

Bracken prepared himself silently under the vigilant gaze of the servants that weren't touching him but needed to be there to assure that he didn't cheat; if Bracken did a number on the King because they weren't paying attention that would be all for them. Or so they thought.

When all the Kept were ready, they lounged amid colorful pillows and rugs, listening to the entertainment of the evening. The musicians from Doriar were still a bit rattled by the flight to Gryphonire but quickly composed themselves. The Kept were not permitted to drink spirits until after one had been chosen for the night. The rest could get drunk and do whatever they wanted, even indulge in sexual activities among themselves. If this happened (Bracken couldn't be sure; he had never stayed for the night with the rest), he was sure the two bands never intermingled sexually, unless it was some kind of prank on each other.

Unsure if Adder was going to summon him tonight, Bracken couldn't appreciate the antics of the Offerings as they danced and pranced with the music. This time he was truly hoping to be called so he could talk to Adder about the gryphon.

Yes. Keep telling yourself it's because of the gift.

Sometimes Bracken hated his consciousness vehemently. Did he want to think about the soft caresses and the languid kisses and Adder's mouth on his cock? No. He didn't. But no other lover had ever taken the time to pleasure Bracken beyond penetration and using Bracken to find *their* pleasure. He could count with his fingers (without using all) the few that had sucked his cock in the middle of the fracas.

The thing was, after Bracken's arrival at Gryphonire, Adder had shown him a side of pleasure he didn't know existed.

Disconcerting couldn't begin to describe the actions of the King of Munus.

Beyond the usual time for Selleck's appearance, the Kept grumbled and paced because they wanted their drinks. Bracken ruminated and worried, thinking he had served his purpose; he surmised the gryphon was some ridiculous parting gift.

Another hour passed before Selleck entered the Kept Hall with a wicked gleam in his eyes. He stopped before them, his hands behind his back and balancing on the balls of his feet. “Good evening, Kept. The King has summoned... Eta.”

Twelve men looked at Bracken, all surprised for an instant. Then, the expressions changed according to the group. The Offerings were confused but soon enough started to elbow Eta, who stared at Bracken with a big apology in his green eyes. The War Trophies smirked and elbowed each other for a completely different reason. “About time, we were parched here,” said Mu throwing his arms around Nu and Rho, arching an eyebrow in Bracken’s direction.

Bracken didn’t say anything, just kept his face blank. He’d find another way to talk to Adder. This wasn’t the end of the world.

Selleck cleared his throat. “The King also wants to see King Bracken.”

Chapter Six

Unforgiveable

“Oh, Nightjar, you can be so silly.”

They were in bed. Adder had his leg over Nightjar’s groin and his head propped on his elbow.

“What else should I have thought?”

“I promise I’ll never force you to do anything you don’t agree with.” Adder smiled.

“It didn’t seem like you were giving Eta an option.”

“He could have said no.”

“I know Renan is your best friend and Great Counselor. But letting Eta go with him doesn’t feel right.”

“Today is Renan’s birthday, and I asked him what he wanted. He said Eta. I told him if Eta refused there was nothing I could do about it.”

“And if he had requested me?”

Adder didn’t need to think about his response twice. “I would have punched him in the face.”

Nightjar grimaced. “A simple ‘no’ would have been sufficient.”

“Not for me. Renan should know better.”

“Does he know something I don’t?”

“Did you like your gift?” Adder changed the topic unabashedly. There were a lot of things he still couldn’t answer to himself, let alone to Nightjar. Renan had told him to be careful around Nightjar, but the more Adder tried to avoid getting attached to the vulture rider the more he failed.

With narrowed eyes, Nightjar murmured, “I appreciate it, but I don’t want it.”

“Why not?” Adder kissed his Nightjar softly. “Selleck and the trainer said you had a great time learning to ride it.”

“That I did. But you are singling me out. It will fester in the Kept Hall.”

“There’s no reason for that. None of them was a flying rider. Rho was a narwhal rider from Gikid and Nu a rider of orcas from Busar. The others are from land kingdoms so I guess they can ride horses and the big felines.”

“They can learn,” Nightjar huffed.

“Don’t be absurd. Flying riders are born, not taught, and you know that.”

Nightjar nodded, but he seemed unconvinced.

“Don’t worry about it,” Adder said quietly, caressing Nightjar’s cheek. “The day after tomorrow we’ll go for a ride together.”

Leaning onto the touch, Nightjar closed his eyes. “I’ll look forward to it.” When he opened them, there was something Adder had never seen before. “Please let me take care of you tonight.”

A lump formed in Adder’s throat. “Why?”

“I’ve never been a selfish person, *my King*. I think it’s time I return all the pleasure you have given me. It’s my duty.” Nightjar said these things as he moved Adder to lie on his back by slowly pushing him toward that position. “You have been so good to me, teaching me things I didn’t know were possible between men.”

His Nightjar spoke of duty as he straddled Adder, but that flame in his eyes shone from a different place. Adder wanted to give more to this man, but perhaps it was time to accept some pleasure of his own. “Thanks.”

Nightjar nodded and brushed his lips over Adder’s. “Never thank me for something you deserve.” He kissed Adder thoroughly then, his tongue roaming, conquering, disturbing every cell of Adder’s body.

Should he stay still and let Nightjar continue? Adder couldn’t. The urge to touch and feel Nightjar had grown steadily every night. He was at a point where the nightly hours weren’t enough to be around the Lakon. Only his royal duties were keeping him from spending entire days worshiping the vulture rider. His hands found Nightjar’s shoulders and surfed over hard muscles.

Humming into Adder’s mouth, Nightjar broke the kiss and lapped Adder’s neck, his tongue going lower, leaving fire and goose bumps in its wake. He circled one nipple, then the other, making Adder moan and pull Nightjar’s salt-and-pepper hair, asking for a deeper connection. His wish was granted, and as Adder’s nipples became pebbles, Nightjar left them at the mercy of the mischievous breeze playing within the chamber. The cold, playful whisper over the sensitive nubs forced Adder to shiver.

Fingers and lips barely grazed Adder's chest and abdomen in a downward motion designed to make him lose control and ache. A million years later when he had closed his eyes to rein in the whipping sensations biting him, he felt Nightjar nuzzling his throbbing cock. It was an evil, dragging move, along with powerful inhaling that had Adder moaning incoherently.

Soon, but not soon enough, wet fire engulfed all his hardness. Teeth skillfully scratched his shaft. Next, came a maddening mixture of suction and bobbing until Nightjar's throat closed around his cock head. Adder boiled, both hands over Nightjar's wild mane, not pushing, just relishing the silky texture, adding more stimulation to his already overwhelmed brain.

Adder recognized the surge of his climax as he felt his entire being contracting toward the center of so much pleasure. Nightjar's saliva ran over Adder's testicles, and he snapped, yanking his cock from the glorious heat and turning them both around. Nightjar fell on his back, and Adder aimed at his mouth as rope after rope of thick semen escaped him. Amid his own spasms, Adder felt Nightjar's own spunk land on the back of his thigh and calf, and they both laughed, joyous and sated.

As the laughter subsided, Adder licked his mess from Nightjar's cheeks and chin. To his utter contentment, the Lakon pulled him in for a resounding kiss, sharing his essence with a groan that was at once desperate and satisfied.

"You taste so sweet," Nightjar offered, a massive grin brightening his handsome face. "Hope I don't need to wait another nine days to savor you again."

"That can be arranged." Adder winked.

Morning came, and Adder sent Nightjar to the Kept Hall reluctantly. They said good-bye by the door with a soft, languid kiss; something they had never done before. Adder realized the change in their connection after the wonderful night. He watched Nightjar go with what he was sure was the sappiest grin in the world, but he didn't care; he felt goofy and happy and absolutely rejuvenated.

An hour later, Adder was about to climb onto Adroit when Selleck came into the courtyard, yelling, "My King, something horrible has happened." He looked wild and afraid.

Adder grabbed him by the arms and shook him. "What? What happened?"

“King Bracken has been stabbed.”

All the light of the sunny morning was swallowed by sudden cruel darkness. Adder felt sick and close to faint, but he couldn't do that, he had to go to his Nightjar.

“Where?”

“The Kept Hall. I left the healers with him.”

Adder ran. Never in his life had he loathed the length and expanse of Gryphonire as he did today. He kicked the door of the Kept Hall, and the dreadful calm of a lost situation hit him as he registered his surroundings. The healers worked frantically, trying to stop the bleeding, while palace guards held off the bewildered Kept.

“My King, we're losing him,” one of the healers said in a broken voice, shaking his head.

Adder grabbed Selleck, who had just stopped beside him, heaving. “Find Timir now and send him to my chambers.” Selleck's eyes were plates for a heartbeat then he nodded and took off. Adder turned to the healers. “Pick him up. Guards, help them!” All had puzzled faces but obeyed immediately. He guided them to his quarters. The moment they deposited Nightjar on Adder's bed he ordered everyone out of the room. The healers pleaded with him, but he pushed all out.

“Don't you die on me now, Nightjar. You hear me?” Adder pushed hair off the pale forehead. Blood was drenching the bed.

Timir entered with Selleck. “My King.” He looked at Nightjar somberly.

“Out, Selleck, out!”

Selleck scurried away. Adder turned to Timir. “Alchemist, do The Rite now!”

“King Adder, that's just...”

“Do. The. Fucking. Rite.”

“This will shorten your life, my King!”

“Do I look like I give a fuck about that?!”

Nightjar gasped for air and groaned.

“NOW!”

“All right, all right.” Timir made a placating gesture with both hands. “Give me your dagger.”

Adder presented it to the alchemist. Holding it with his left hand, Timir started to swing it in a circular upward motion, murmuring incantations in a language unknown to Adder. The nightjars in the adjacent room began to call desperately; moans and sighs inundated the room. It seemed as if the light entering through the windows was moving deliberately toward the tip of the dagger.

“Remove the tunic or rip it. I need to see the wounds,” Timir ordered firmly.

Serenity washed over Adder, and he got rid of the tunic with a calmness he had only felt on the battlefield amid the clank of metal and the roar of fighting men. Soon Bracken, no, Nightjar was naked and almost empty of blood.

“Give me your left hand.”

Adder gave his left hand as if it belonged to somebody else.

Timir cut. “Blood of the King, a life for a life. By the blessing of Erin and Apheilon save this life with the blood of the King.” He repeated these words over and over as blood dripped over the wounds. A hissing sound and steam rose with every slowly landing drop.

The nightjars called wildly in the background. It was daylight; they had never called during daylight.

Lightheaded, Adder saw how the wounds were healing, closing on their own like the shrinking petals of a flower ready to sleep. Coloring returned to Nightjar, and soon he looked just as he had earlier that day, placidly sleeping before Adder awoken him. The only proof of the nightmare was the blood on the bed and Adder’s swirling vision.

Timir let go of Adder’s hand.

Adder looked at his palm and saw his own wound closing and disappearing. The cut had been over his Life Line. It had lost a third of its length.

Timir chanted again. Perhaps releasing the power he had conjured into Adder’s dagger. The light returned to its rightful place outside the windows. “You need to sit, my King. I’ll go and prepare you some nice restorative for later.”

“You do that. I have business to attend.”

The door to the chambers opened with a bang. It was Renan. “What the hell happened?”

Adder waved a hand dismissively but didn’t answer. He needed all his strength for what he had to do next.

“The worst is over, Great Counselor,” Timir offered.

“Renan, please stay with Bracken.” Adder moved toward the door.

“Where are you going? You look like you are about to keel over.” Renan tried to grab Adder, but Adder shrugged him away.

“You stay here and guard him.” Adder reached the door and called, “Guards!” Two guards came running to him. He put his arms around their shoulders. “Take me to the Kept Hall.”

By the time they reached the hall, Adder almost felt like himself again. He thanked the guards and told them to bring the Kept. He wasn’t completely ready to stand by himself so he leaned on the edge of the long darkwood table where the Kept ate.

Relief turned into anger as the twelve men waited before him minutes later. Adder took a deep breath and focused on being a king and not an overwhelmed lover. “Who did this? I promise the culprit a swift death if he speaks on his own.” He looked at each silently. “If someone else has to point him out, I will make him suffer.” Remembering the wounds’ pattern, Adder realized that it must have been more than one person because the stabs were on both flanks. He arched an eyebrow. “Nothing?” He grasped his chin and said softly, “I might reconsider my offer and kill all of you just to be done with this.”

No man moved a muscle, but Adder saw that the Offerings were ready to crumble.

“Eta, tell me what happened!” Adder snapped at the green-eyed Offering.

The young man hesitated. He was naturally pale, but now he looked like a ghost. “Well, we were moving things from that corner over there to have a game of ball after breakfast...”

Adder tsked. “Give me the short version.”

“Mu and Rho did it. Nu, Iota, and Kappa were blocking our view, but we heard a yelp and rushed to stop them.” When Eta said “we” he was talking about himself and the other Offerings. They were all nodding vigorously.

“War Trophies, do you deny the Offerings’ version?”

The five men shrugged.

“So be it. Guards tie these men’s hands and follow me.” Adder turned to the Offerings. “You wait here.” He called at the Overseer, who had been quietly observing from a corner. “Selleck, come with us.”

They moved in silent procession through the palace. People stopped what they were doing to stare, agape. Many followed them to see what was going to happen. Adder guided them to one of the platforms where gryphons and riders were already coming and going.

“Put them on the edge,” Adder ordered to the guards. Each War Trophy had two guards flanking him. Adder spoke aloud for all assembled to hear him. “Let it be known that these men committed treason by attempting to murder one of their own. Their lives belong to me, and by trying to end a life that didn’t belong to them, they have injured me in more ways than one. I sentence them to die, and the execution is to be carried out immediately.

“I’m not going to say I am sad because I don’t have patience for those who betray me. But these men harmed someone dear to me and that is unforgivable.” Adder nodded more to himself than to those around him. “Now you pay. Guards, daggers out. One stab on each flank below the ribs.” Adder heard people gasping in the background. He didn’t care. This was his right, as king and as lover. The five War Trophies bled, their tunics already soaking with their filthy blood. “Throw them down.”

Their screams were swallowed by the abyss.

“You,” Adder pointed at a mounted rider, “check if they’re dead.”

The gryphon and his rider swiftly dove. A few minutes later the soldier alighted beside Adder. “Two are dead. The other three still breathe.”

Adder leaned over the edge and looked down. The tide was getting high. “Good. Let them suffer.”

Chapter Seven

Temptation

“Hello.”

Bracken wasn't sure why he was looking at Renan's sneaky face looming over him. He was positive ground beef felt more wholesome before being put to fire. He stared at Renan blankly; he didn't like the man. Perhaps if he didn't answer the weasel would go away.

“Do you think he recognizes me?” Renan asked a tall, wiry man who was certainly old but had been handsome at some point in his life.

“He's out of danger, but he's going to be very weak for many days.”

For some reason this old man's voice seemed familiar to Bracken. Did he know this man? It would be a catastrophe if he had lost his memory but still remembered Renan of all people. But the words were truthful; Bracken's feeble state didn't let him move a single finger. He thought he had chosen not to speak to Renan, but maybe he couldn't. Still he'd wait until somebody else (someone he recognized) came along to try and say something.

Bracken moved his eyes around. This was Adder's bedchamber. Why was he in Adder's quarters with these men but without him? The last thing he remembered was eating breakfast, then Rho and Mu came from behind saying something stupid. The memory of pain struck him, hard and blinding. He moaned and closed his eyes, but his body didn't bow under the assault; he was that fragile, motionless.

The bang of a door violently opened made Bracken open his eyes. Finally, a familiar face. Adder. He pushed the two men aside and caressed Bracken's cheek. “How are you?”

“I feel weird. I can't move,” his mind said, but neither his lips nor anything else moved. Bracken furrowed his brow; he scowled. No. Nothing even twitched.

Adder straightened himself. “Renan, please leave me alone with Timir for a moment.”

“But...”

A hand landed on Renan's shoulder. "Just for a moment," Adder said quietly.

Renan nodded and left the room muttering under his breath, almost in the same way he had while on Adder's ship the first time Bracken saw him.

"You didn't tell him what we did."

"Of course not, my King. No one but those of the King's blood need to know about The Rite."

The Rite? What the fuck is The Rite?

"Good. Now tell me what's wrong with him?"

Timir glanced at Bracken with a fatherly expression that he didn't like a bit. "You gave him life. He's practically a newborn in the body of an adult."

"Are you telling me Bracken is lost and there is a baby in there?" Adder hissed, grabbing the old man by the arms and shaking him.

"That's not what I meant. He just needs to relearn to use his body, regain command of it. He should be mentally sound."

This seemed to appease Adder. He released Timir. "How long will it take for him to be back to normal?"

"The more physical a person is the quicker he bounces back." Timir moved out of Bracken's line of sight, then came back with a goblet, offering it to Adder. "Drink half of this, sire. You can try to give the other half to King Bracken."

Adder nodded and drank. He turned and sat on the bed, putting his hand behind Bracken to pull him upward. What Bracken found in Adder's eyes as they met made him weaker for a completely different reason. "Come now, just a few sips. This is going to help you."

Nothing responded. Bracken wanted to scream in frustration. He tried to tell Adder with his eyes how powerless he was. Adder understood.

"Timir, a little help here?"

The old man opened Bracken's mouth using thumb and forefinger to force it. Bracken was sure he looked like a fucking fish. The liquid hit his tongue. Fire wasn't enough to describe the sensation. As he involuntarily swallowed, the scorching kicks and pokes unknotted the weakness holding him hostage.

“That’s a good boy.” Adder put him carefully back on the bed. He kissed Bracken on the forehead. He stayed there, his lips pressed to Bracken’s skin for more heartbeats than necessary.

“I think I’ll go now. I’m going to make more of this to give him another dose tomorrow,” Timir offered with that odd tone of someone who caught another doing something they shouldn’t be doing. He moved away.

As soon as the door clicked closed, Adder brushed his lips over Bracken’s. He murmured, “I killed those who hurt you, my Nightjar. All of them.” His voice trembled.

“Adder,” Bracken thought, but Adder’s jerk told him he had actually said it albeit feebly.

Smooches rained over his face. His and Adder’s chuckles mingled. “That old sucker’s potion is already working!” Adder exclaimed breathlessly.

Bracken murmured, “Sucker.”

“Oh, I’ll suck you until my jaw falls apart as soon as you are capable of pulling my hair!” Adder laughed loudly and heartily this time. He sobered up and stared at Bracken for a long moment. Then he rested his head over Bracken’s heart, whispering, “It was all worth it.”

Bracken had the suspicion that Adder was talking about “The Rite,” whatever that was. He couldn’t summon the energy to ask about it though. He was sleepy. Someone told him once that sleeping was a big part of healing. He wanted to heal quickly, at least enough to pull Adder’s hair.

That’s a nice goal.

His lips were capable of a smile as the room started to fade.

Bracken closed his eyes.

Days passed. Bracken was sure of this because he saw light, then the nightjars called. Also a plump chatterbox of a woman called Zenith came and flexed his limbs. Every joint of his body was bent and straightened many times, thrice during daylight and twice while the nightjars called. Bracken thought that if he didn’t say anything she would shut up, because normal people didn’t have conversations with themselves for so long. It didn’t work. Still, her continuous work was helping him to wrestle back his mobility. Soon, Bracken was able to go and relieve himself on his own.

The Offerings stopped by, mostly just to check on him, but Eta, Phi, and Xi stayed longer, sometimes reading for him, others singing or telling him jokes. They were good kids. Selleck came too; he brought Bracken sweets and finger food—things Bracken wasn't supposed to be eating because he was on a strict liquid diet thanks to Timir, something Bracken thought incredibly stupid. He was sure nobody could get stronger with just liquids. Even if those liquids were magic potions.

Renan popped in now and then to say “Hello,” but Bracken closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep. Nobody questioned this because he slept a lot. He didn't like Renan no matter how much Adder loved him. Bracken's gut told him Renan wasn't trustworthy. Nine out of ten times, Bracken's gut was right, so he was going to listen to it until Renan did something capable of changing Bracken's mind.

Adder was the true constant presence during Bracken's recuperation. He told Bracken stories of his childhood. They shared how much they missed their older brothers. Adder spoke as well of his plans for Deron, how he wanted the people of Munus healthy and prosperous, and many other things grand and little. These moments made it difficult to keep his distance, to be bound to his station by his honor and nothing else.

Each instant they spent together was accompanied by a passing touch, a caress, a timid kiss on the lips. It both moved and frustrated Bracken in equal manner. He wasn't a fragile thing to be treated like a delicate vase or worse—a flower.

The other thing that was getting on Bracken's nerves (in more ways than he cared to analyze) was Adder sleeping on a chair next to the bed. Bracken could understand the first few days. He wasn't truly keeping track of time but he calculated it had been around two weeks. Before long, Adder's body would resent the awkward position. Bracken was already resenting it for him.

Bracken decided he was going to say something.

After Zenith's second massacre of his body for the evening, Bracken waited until Adder finished taking care of the nightjars.

As Adder settled on the uncomfortable chair, Bracken asked, “Why don't you come to your bed?”

“Because you are not well enough yet for my touch the way I want. I will not be able to keep my hands to myself if I'm there with you.”

“I’m a warrior, remember? Perhaps what I need to heal quicker is some rough handling...”

“Don’t tempt me, you fool. I’m not going to destroy all Timir’s and Zenith’s work thanks to my lack of self-control where you are concerned.”

“Coward.”

“You’ll pay for that.”

“I will welcome the punishment gladly.”

Adder arched an eyebrow.

Bracken crooked his index finger at Adder playfully. “For the time being, you can come closer. So I can pull your hair.”

Chapter Eight

Trust

Adder noticed he and Adroit had the same happy spring as a groom brought her. He chuckled. Timir and the healers had concluded that his Nightjar was fit to leave the bed and start moving around in a more regular fashion. The morning was sunny and almost cloudless, just like the eyes of the man he had left on his bed.

Bubbly would be an understatement to describe Adder's mood. The thought of sending Renan to handle the daily dealings of the Royal Court and take the day off was a tempting, pleasant one. Still, Adder decided to go to the city palace for a couple of hours and come back after the midday meal to give Nightjar some time alone to do whatever he wanted.

After a lot of internal negotiation, Adder had made two decisions. First, he was going to disband the Kept; there was no rule saying he must have one—Lakoneh didn't even have one. Second, he was going to find a way to talk to Nightjar about the stolen ships and the macabre spectacle on them when they were returned to Vurgeg. There must be an explanation, and he wanted to clear that out before the next part of his second decision could come to fruition. As Adder was getting ready to climb Adroit, he saw a groom bringing Renan's gryphon, Soulfire. They could make the flight to the city palace together. It wasn't easy to have a conversation while flying, and they would be surrounded by their escorts, but they could start one as soon as they dismounted. Adder was really excited to share his plans with his best friend and counselor.

"Morning, my King. That goofy grin is very becoming." Renan chuckled.

"You don't know the half of it." Adder smiled broadly.

"Something tells me Bracken has a lot to do with it."

Adder nodded, gesturing Renan to mount Soulfire quickly. They did it simultaneously.

"You look like you need a race," Renan offered with a smirk when both were seated.

"Splendid idea. After that, we'll have a nice chat before the hearings of the day."

“Winner gets to choose lunch. Up!” Renan challenged, whipping the reins of Soulfire. The tawny gryphon launched himself upward.

“Hey!” Adder laughed and yelled, “Up!” Now he had to win because when Renan did he always picked something nasty that Adder would not enjoy, just to be an asshole.

The roads, the farms, the people, the animals, the plains, the valleys, all were a blur as the gryphons raced toward Varvarar, the capital city of Munus. They did the hour ride in less than thirty minutes, their escorts following closely as if they were racing too.

Within the fortified city, Soulfire and Adroit glided over tall, whitewashed buildings, their red dome-shaped roofs shining like rubies thanks to the morning light. Only the temples of Erin and Apheilon and the palace had triangular roofs to distinguish them from other constructions inside the city walls. But all roofs were red—red like the strong blood of Adder’s people.

Adroit nose-dove and reached the landing courtyard of the palace two seconds before Soulfire alighted roughly beside her. “I won!” Adder laughed and dismounted with an agile jump, pumping his fist in the air. He turned to grab Adroit’s head and gave her a resounding kiss. “That’s my girl.”

Renan dismounted more gracefully and bowed. “A worthy victory, sire.”

Adder punched him on the shoulder. “You only call me ‘sire’ when you are pissed off. It was just a silly race. You know I had to win to avoid some disgusting dish made of entrails or only-Apheilon-knows-what.”

“Of course.”

“Oh, don’t be a sourpuss.” Adder embraced his best friend with one arm and guided him toward the main building of the palace complex. “I decided to disband the Kept.”

“What?” Renan faltered, jostling Adder. “Why would you do that?”

“Not a big deal.” Adder pushed Renan since they were shoulder to shoulder. “It’s an outdated institution. It’s not like I have any use for them after all.” He nodded to some court members walking in the opposite direction. “And after what happened to Bracken...”

Renan stopped them and dislodged himself from Adder’s embrace. “So this is about him.” He stared at Adder.

“Nah. It’s not *about* him. I was considering it before he arrived. The attempt on his life just reinforced my decision.” He winked. “I have no use for a harem, Renan.”

“The Kept is not only a harem, Adder. It’s a symbol of power.”

Adder rolled his eyes. “To whom? We are the most powerful kingdom of the Ten Kingdoms. No one on land or sea has our resources or military force.” He shrugged. “Lakoneh doesn’t have Kept.”

“And it all circles back to the Lakon anyway.” Renan shook his head. “You know they don’t have it because they don’t leave people alive to make them prisoners.”

“I know that.” Adder nodded. He refused to let Renan deflate his happy mood. “Ah, we’ll find another way to scare the fuck out of the other kingdoms without that old-fashioned practice.” He winked.

Renan crossed his arms. “All right, let’s accept for a moment that you disband the Kept. Right now you don’t have War Trophies, except Bracken, so you don’t need to make them captains of garrisons or whatever. You still have seven Offerings. What about them?”

“Trifle.” Adder dismissed the situation with a wave of his hand. “We can make them ambassadors or something else like before. Selleck knows them better than anyone, so he can see to that.”

“What about the Lakon?”

Adder grinned. “I want to make him my consort.”

“Your what?!”

“You know, the man you marry and who rules with you.”

Shaking his head, Renan pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. “I’ve known you since we were toddlers. You have never been a man to think with your cock. What is this nonsense?” He put his hand on Adder’s arm. “You can have any man in the world,” he squeezed and cocked his head, “and you’re going to choose that monster.” Renan’s eyes had a strange, almost watery glint to them.

“I need to find out what happened with the ships,” Adder patted his friend’s cheek, “but I am sure he’s not a monster, Renan. There must be an explanation.”

Renan moved his hand from Adder's arm to his neck; his thumb caressed the corner of Adder's jaw. "I'm going to trust my King because my *friend* is stupidly in love." He smirked. "I'll support my crazy friend though. If he wants to marry a vulture rider so be it."

There was a sad echo of resignation in Renan's chuckle.

Just the fact that he was so easily siding with Adder was in and of itself a quasi-miracle.

Adder didn't know what to make of it.

Chapter Nine

Trickery

“I’m going to miss these pink walls.” Eta sighed. He and Bracken sat together, finishing the last meal that would ever be served in the Kept Hall.

“I never understood that color. Or the red columns,” Bracken commented, looking at the now almost empty large space.

“Have you ever witnessed a naval massacre? The water ends up pink. That’s the meaning of it—to remind us of the power of Munus.”

“And here I thought it was the color of our assholes after a powerful battering,” Bracken offered with a straight face.

Eta spewed his wine and coughed. Bracken dutifully pounded the boy’s back to help him. After recovering, Eta murmured, “I’m also going to miss that nasty sense of humor.”

Bracken ruffled dark blond curls. “You will be missed too, little friend.”

Redness reached Eta’s pale cheeks; he looked up from under long, golden lashes.

Selleck entered the hall, his gait brisk toward them.

“I guess it’s time.” Eta peered at him with those bright green eyes. “Are you scared, King Bracken?” he asked softly.

Am I?

With the Kept disbanded, what was Bracken’s place in Gryphonire? In Adder’s life? “There is a reason for everything, even if we cannot fathom that reason immediately.”

Eta arched an eyebrow.

Chuckling, Bracken shook his head. “Not scared. More like mildly concerned.” He grinned.

With a nod, Eta stood up. Solemn didn’t look right in his usually happy, almost-too-pretty, oval face.

Selleck bowed. “King Bracken.” After Bracken acknowledged him, he turned to Eta. “Ready?”

Putting his hand over Bracken's hand, Eta inquired quietly, "Would you see me off?"

"Of course."

They all walked to the landing courtyard. A burly rider waited to carry Eta, along with a group of escorts. He was expected at the Court of Nivoril, where he had been appointed assistant to Munus's Ambassador there.

"Don't forget to write." Selleck kissed Eta's brow.

Eta and Bracken hugged, then Bracken helped him to climb the night-dark gryphon. Sweet Eta looked fragile in front of the soldier as he settled down, his yellow tunic in high contrast with the burgundy garb of the rider. He waved shyly. "I'll never forget you."

Selleck and Bracken nodded, their smiles sad. The rider dipped his head courtly and yelled, "Up!"

Soon Eta and his party were mere dots disappearing to the east.

"We moved the last of your assigned clothes to King Adder's quarters," Selleck told Bracken as they walked back to the main building.

"What are you going to do with the Kept Hall?"

"The king will figure something out. It has the only indoor pool of Gryphonire after all." Selleck winked.

"And you? What would you do now?"

"I am to be your personal aide."

"My what? Why would I need that?" Bracken burst.

"Well, you need someone to take care of you and handle your daily routine and other things. Right now we need to get you ready for tonight's feast. King Adder is taking you to Varvarar."

Bracken learned long ago to not blush. He wasn't a maiden. But the thought of being carried by Adder, just like Eta some minutes ago or when he came to Gryphonire left a pleasant tingle all over his body. Sixty-nining with Adder and finishing in each other's mouths earlier today certainly fueled a lot of that tingling.

"Ahem." Selleck looked at him sideways. "You have your own gryphon now. You know you aren't riding with the King in the same saddle, right?"

“I know.”

“Then erase that sappy grin off your face. It doesn’t go well with your usual brooding-warrior demeanor.”

“I don’t like cheeky aides.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t hire me.”

Bracken narrowed his eyes and snorted. Selleck would be a worthy opponent.

Many hours later, after much scrubbing and perfuming and wardrobe changing, Bracken sat beside Adder in the Great Hall of the Varvarar Palace. The immense table had forty seats, all occupied.

Two princes and representatives of the other four Ocean Kingdoms and Vurgeg had come to pay their respects to Bracken, as the person seated at Adder’s right (in the place of honor), not as the former King of Lakoneh. They acted with deference, but there was a certain hesitation that spoke of badly disguised uneasiness. Part of their discomfort had cause. There was no precedent for what Adder was doing. No one had ever seen a War Trophy seated beside his king in a formal reception.

It was the custom in the Ten Kingdoms to not put a chair at the right of the King commanding the table if he didn’t have a wife, a consort, or was a widower. Adder had placed Bracken as if he were his betrothed, his consort-to-be because everybody knew Adder was not married yet. The fact that he was dressed mostly in white didn’t help much; even his overtunic with its royal blue trimmings was white like a summer cloud. Myriad thoughts assaulted Bracken as he tried not to divine Adder’s reasoning for this unusual action.

Bracken surreptitiously glanced at the king beside him. Adder wore the burgundy and gold colors of Munus. Thick gold bracelets and rings adorned him. His hair, with its hints of silver, was windswept as if he had just alighted from his gryphon. Dark eyes competed with the three black diamonds on his crown, but diamonds didn’t glint with merriment or pride, nor had they laugh lines around them. Adder’s lips were perdition; even his square jaw had done wicked things to Bracken’s body. He wanted to hope, but there was no reason for hope. There was no logic in hope; he was a War Trophy, a mere toy. A toy should neither hope nor wish.

Something caught Bracken’s attention, one of the servants pouring wine across the table. His coloring was wrong; the beard was missing, but he knew

him. Their gazes locked. The man did several eye movements that for the untrained meant nothing, but for the Lakonian were a code. The man was a Lightfeet, a royal spy.

Perplexed, Bracken asked what was his purpose there; the answer was a simply coded “we need to talk.”

“My King,” Bracken murmured in Adder’s ear, “the lamb has not agreed with me. I need to take care of some business.”

Adder patted his hand with a smile. “Go, go.” He turned back to the old representative of Kaskal who was reminiscing of younger years when learning to ride his narwhal.

Nonchalantly, Bracken left the Great Hall.

Selleck came out of nowhere. “Can I help you?”

Bracken scowled at him. “You are lucky I don’t have a sword. Never jump at me like that again.”

“Of course, King Bracken.” He bowed swiftly. “What do you need?”

“I need to take a dump,” Bracken growled.

“The pheasant?”

“Or any of the other twenty dead animals on the table,” grunted Bracken.

“Aw, come this way please.” Selleck moved aside to let him pass. “By the way, it’s in very poor taste to speak ill of your guests.”

The chuckle didn’t do anything to mollify Bracken. Still he said, “I was talking about the seasoned, minced, and cooked beasts not the ones eating them and talking nonsense over them.” He stopped abruptly, pulling Selleck by the arm. “Did you say my guests? Those people are not my guests, they are Adder’s guests.” Bracken was in Selleck’s face a heartbeat later. “Do you know something I don’t?”

Swallowing visibly, Selleck shook his head. “Not at all. I’m just here to make sure your every need is met.”

“Good. Point out the direction of the relieving area, then go back to the Great Hall. Or are you planning on being there to wipe my ass too?”

Selleck took a moment to answer as if he was actually considering it. He grimaced. “In the next intersection turn left and then right. You’ll find it easily enough.”

Bracken nodded, turning Selleck around to face toward the Great Hall. “That’s a good aide.” He slapped Selleck on the ass. “Off you go.”

His appointed aide walked away, head down—shoulders hunched.

The need to pee actually surged, so Bracken found the place, doing his business quickly. He was expecting to find the Lightfeet before returning to the Great Hall. Effectively the spy was carrying a tray, laden with dirty dishes. They ran into each other. Golden plates, goblets, and cutlery did cartwheels before landing with ringing crashes.

Bracken knelt to help the spy.

“Oh, master, I’m so sorry. Please, don’t bother yourself helping me,” the man said aloud. “The war with Munus wasn’t retaliation for the stolen ships. Someone massacred the sailors on the ships we returned to Vurgeg. They think it was us and Munus had to act accordingly. The whole thing was a setup. Lord Idared suspects even the fire on the Royal Granaries was no accident,” he whispered quickly.

Fuck.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do now. I’m King Adder’s War Trophy. Idared and Laelia must rule until Fern is old enough,” Bracken exhaled between his teeth.

“Please, master. I beg you. Let me do this by myself. I will be lashed!” The Lightfeet implored dramatically, then hissed, “Sorry, my King. I was sent to scout the situation. We’ll come to get you very soon.”

“Lakoneh can’t do that. It’s dishonorable.”

The Lightfeet looked at Bracken in the eye, breaking character—putting his life at risk. “King Bracken, there’s no honor in what you’re going through if the war started by trickery.”

Chapter Ten

Goal

“Your future consort seems upset,” Renan commented as Adder stepped beside him. “What did you do to him?”

“I haven’t done anything to him.” And that had Adder absolutely exasperated. “We sleep in the same bed, but there’s a tension between us that wasn’t there before. Not even upon his arrival.”

“Well, he’s taking his sexual frustration out on your poor soldiers.”

They stood on the edge of the practice yard, and, effectively, Nightjar was pulverizing the men trying to train with him. Good thing they were using blunt wooden swords; if not, Adder would be facing a decimation of his forces.

“I don’t know how to broach the issue of the Vurgeg ships.”

Or a marriage proposal.

Nightjar swung one of the two swords he was wielding in an arch and smacked the shoulder of a soldier with the flat part. The man was almost flung by the impact and rolled in the sand with a yelp. His (apparently very angry) consort-to-be fought three men at once, and they looked like baby gryphons who didn’t know how to use their talons yet.

Adder winced as the second sword descended and veered, slicing a midriff, followed by a sharp elbow to the chest. The man was lucky those were practice weapons, but he’d still be plenty sore for a day or two thanks to the Lakon’s ire.

They watched Nightjar mince two more triads. Enough was enough. If Nightjar could get rid of his irritation fighting, so could Adder. He crooked his finger at a soldier watching the unfortunate matches close to them.

“Yes, my King?”

“Bring me one of those helmets that cover most of the face.”

“At once, sire.”

Renan arched an eyebrow. Adder started removing his many rings and bracelets. The Great Counselor shook his head wordlessly as he received the adornments.

The early afternoon was hot, and the men practicing were all in just loincloths and sandals. Renan and Adder were bare chested, only wearing light leather skirts with plated belts. Adder didn't have a loincloth underneath so when the soldier came back with the helmet he ordered the man to give him his. Without hesitation the man took it off while Adder made quick work of his own covering.

"Your sandals are different," Renan pointed out. The leather in theirs was thicker and laced up to the knees; the soldiers' were ankle high.

"Shit. Soldier, your sandals."

The soldier chuckled and removed his footwear. Under any other circumstance the other men would have been whistling and catcalling, but all understood pretty quickly Adder's intention, so they kept quiet to not attract attention to their area.

By the time Adder looked like any other man in the yard, Nightjar did a high kick, knocking a tooth from one of the men fighting him.

"Ouch," hissed Renan.

Practice swords were handed to Adder, and he jogged toward Nightjar, who was on the sand holding the man he had knocked along with his tooth. The four were laughing, and Nightjar was patting the soldier's head and apologizing. Adder stood in front of them.

Nightjar looked up and waved his hand. "I'm done for the day, soldier."

Adder shook his head. He moved to a fighting stance and jerked his head, challenging.

"Did you see what I did to your comrades?" But Nightjar went to his feet, picking up his helmet from the sand.

First a shrug, then Adder challenged Nightjar again. The thought of flapping his elbows like a chicken crossed his mind, but that would be too much. Right now he was somewhat safe if Nightjar had decided to quit the practice already; the chicken bit would just land him in a whole lot of extra trouble.

Nightjar did an odd move with one foot tapping his sword, and the flick made the sword jump to his hand. He did the same strange motion with the other. Now he had both swords in his hands.

Wow, I must learn to do that.

Spinning his swords like a fire dancer, Nightjar circled Adder. He moved with a grace that hadn't been there when he was practicing with the other men. And he was waiting for Adder to attack first.

So be it.

Adder advanced with his swords at an angle, one higher than the other, and swung as if aiming with the right, but he was actually preparing to work the left counterclockwise. But Nightjar saw the ruse and deflected both contradicting swings. The dry thud of wood colliding was almost anticlimactic. Adder should be fighting his Nightjar with metal, blood should be claimed.

Thrust. Parry. Swing. Parry. Chop. Parry. Adder was working up a sweat, and the flying sand clung to his skin. His cock grew harder with each arch, with every swirl and spin, with any contact of their bodies. But Nightjar was silent. He wasn't grunting or yelling like he had with the others. And this enraged Adder. He attacked, and he was deflected once, twice, thrice. His Nightjar was toying with him. Then Adder realized he had been almost as quiet so the Lakon didn't recognize his voice; every noise had come from him without opening his mouth. His father had taught him this technique because it irritated the opponents and they would surely lose focus.

The Lakon was doing to Adder exactly the same thing he had been doing unconsciously. He did it to conceal his identity, and Nightjar did it to fuck with him.

That second of realization cost him. Before he could dodge, Nightjar grabbed him by the small of his back and pulled their bodies together, their hard-ons rubbed roughly. Their helmets clanged with the impact as Nightjar headbutted him.

"You're going down, bold one," Nightjar growled when their eyes met just a few inches between them.

Adder pushed and used the minimal space to bring his knee up. A swift sidle and his partner's groin was out of harm's way, but Nightjar used the momentum to grab the back of Adder's knee and yanked, making him lose his footing.

Nightjar landed heavily on top of Adder, knocking the wind out of him. Pure instinct made Adder use the hilt of his left sword to stab at Nightjar's side. They rolled; the impacts of his helmet on the sandy ground were dizzying Adder. Still, adrenaline ruled, and in the split second he was on top he sprang

backward, gained his footing and both swords ended up over Nightjar's throat with a hasty movement. It hadn't been graceful, but it was over.

With a soft thump, Nightjar's head rested on the sand; he flung his swords to the side, conceding the match. He lay there sprawled, heaving, and his long delicious cock was so visible through the sweaty loincloth that all Adder wanted to do was sink to his knees and worship it.

The men cheered around them. Adder took the helmet off, and the soldiers started to chant, "Adder! Adder! Adder!"

Renan came to them and offered his hand to Nightjar. The Lakon took it reluctantly. The moment he was on his feet, he gave Adder a withering scowl, saying between his teeth, "I'm going to get cleaned up."

The Great Counselor whistled. "You are in trouble, my King."

Two hours and one realization later (after searching throughout Gryphonire), Adder found Nightjar swimming in the Kept Hall pool. He stomped to the edge and stood there with his fists on his hips.

The former King of Lakoneh took his time to reach him.

"You knew it was I, didn't you."

"Of course. How could you think I wouldn't recognize your body, the way you smell when you sweat, the way you move?"

The frank leer made Adder shiver, but what came of his mouth was "You cheated!"

"How the fuck did I cheat when you won?"

"Because you had me and you let me win to not embarrass me in front of my men."

"Do I look like I give a fuck about embarrassing you?"

"No, you don't. That's why you stole my ships and then sent that macabre spectacle back to Vurgeg!"

"My people were starving!"

"You could have come to Munus asking for help instead of stealing from me!"

"We did and you rebuffed us. Fucker, you even killed two of my three emissaries! After that nobody would help us because they were afraid of you."

This gave pause to Adder. “I haven’t received any emissaries from Lakoneh ever.”

Nightjar climbed from the pool. Water ran from his long hair and along his magnificent body, his wet nudity perturbingly distracting. He stabbed Adder in the center of the chest with a hard finger. “Don’t lie. What’s done is done. Besides what was the big deal? The tribute of Vurgeg was ten ships. It wasn’t even something you needed. *We* were starving.”

Adder grabbed Nightjar’s wrist. “One of us is lying, and it is not me.” He pulled their bodies together with his arm circling the Lakon’s lower back, his tunic instantly wet. Although that wasn’t the only thing wetting in his body.

“I’m no liar, Beloved of Erin. This shit fest started because you wouldn’t help my starving people.”

“What about the defiled bodies on the returned ships? The reports said they were half eaten, apparently by vultures, then shitted and peed on by humans. You couldn’t just give them an honorable death.”

Nightjar narrowed his eyes but ground his solid cock against Adder’s. “We took what we needed and told them to return home. We didn’t harm or kill a single person on those ships. You probably did that to have a fucking excuse to invade us.”

“You should know better by now. I don’t need excuses to do what I want.”

Their lips brushed.

Cloudless-sky eyes stared at Adder defiantly. “Are you going to fuck me?”

“You deserve it.”

“Then get that damn tunic off and do it.”

The tunic wasn’t gently removed; it was torn apart. The only foreplay was cruel mouths, furious teeth, rabid hands—overheated bodies lying on cold marble floor.

They rolled, almost in the same way they had on the sand of the practice yard, but now the fight was also exploration and conquering, discovery and subjugation, urgency and craving. Adder ended up on top, his body covering Nightjar’s. He held both wrists above the salt-and-pepper moist curls with one hand, using the other to prop powerful legs over his shoulders. He scooped the fluids pouring from the Lakon’s leaking member (accumulating on his abdomen) and used them as lubrication.

Moans surged as fingers breached a tight space. Without missing a beat, Adder brushed his own cock and the liquid proof of his need, grazing the rosy entrance he desperately wanted to pound and own.

“How many times do you have to win to fuck me the way a warrior deserves to be fucked?” Nightjar challenged.

Adder growled and pushed in. Their eyes locked, and the words that Adder needed to scream in that instant were “be mine, be mine, be mine.”

Nightjar’s body accepted him, embraced him, and the heat and the squeeze were glorious, sublime. Nothing like The Claiming on his ship, that forceful proof of his ruling over the Lakon; this was something else. Adder didn’t see resignation or duty in those almost colorless lakes; he saw fire. He saw power. He saw the reflection of his own desire, and he hoped.

He thrust, and there was no deflection; Nightjar’s body moved to receive him, not in confrontation but in a blissful welcoming that became more agitated and vocal and sweaty with each collision.

Suddenly, Nightjar was wrestling him, rolling them around. He straddled Adder, impaling himself, taking control of the assault. He rocked, gyrated, commanded. His eyes and hair were wild, unnatural, and Adder pulled him down, to kiss, to devour each other’s mouths—because he was close to his destruction, and he wanted his Nightjar to swallow his cry of completion.

Pleasure rushed forward and shook him, wrung him, made him an exploding fountain. The Lakon swallowed Adder’s cry as he came and came and came, wanting to shout a thousand promises that were wrong for this violent moment.

Nightjar’s climax followed quickly. Rope after rope of pearly seed coated Adder’s chest, and he reverently swallowed his lover’s convulsing cries.

Moments later, as they descended from the high mountain where their bed sports race had led them, Nightjar, close to Adder’s face, sighed, “Thank you.”

Adder chuckled. “Remember what you said about thanking for something one deserves.”

“Don’t throw my own words at me,” Nightjar huffed. “Bad King, bad.”

Adder realized this was the first time he had fucked inside the Kept Hall, and he had a moment of inspiration. “You are not leaving this hall until I’ve

made you come as many times as you said the word fuck or any of its inflections within the last hour.”

Rising his head, Nightjar looked at him seriously; still his eyes were full of mischief. “Then you have six orgasms to go, my King.”

Chapter Eleven

Linchpin

The light in the chamber had changed many times, but Bracken didn't want to leave the bed. His body still thrummed with the memory of Adder's rough hands over his body.

After so many days without touching him, Adder had gone not just inside his body but deeper to a place Bracken didn't know existed within him. True, Bracken had been the one avoiding Adder, acting cold and distant, but Adder never forced himself on him. It was the King's right to do as he pleased with his War Trophies; still Adder waited until their fight about the Vurgeg ships broke whatever was holding him back.

What was Adder planning? So far he seemed content with only Bracken as War Trophy. He hadn't demanded of Lakoneh to become vassals like Vurgeg. Apparently, annexation wasn't his agenda.

Bracken stretched. His body felt sore and bruised. He had been pleased and sated, utterly conquered and worshiped. And because of that, the thousand questions (snarling and snapping at each other in his head) seemed wrong, illogical. Uncharacteristically, his warrior's instincts nudged him to relax after the sexual combat, while his brain stayed in total turmoil. His head ignored the languid commands of his body; he needed to figure things out. It was important to know what was happening before Lakoneh attempted to rescue him.

A soft knock on the door was all the warning he had before Selleck and Prince Deron entered the bedchamber.

"Hello!" exclaimed Deron as he climbed onto the immense bed. The sea of rich fabrics and pillows didn't seem to bother him at all. "Time to wake up, King Bracken!"

"I'm not a..." Bracken didn't finish. Selleck shook his head. The boy didn't know his true status in Gryphonire. Instead Bracken said, "I'm lazy today. I wanna stay in bed."

Deron finally reached him, starting to tickle him at once. It was Bracken's fault; he had told the Prince the other day he could come to visit whenever he felt like it. "Get up! Get up! I came to invite you to a warrior's meal!" he giggled, still tickling and poking.

Bracken searched Selleck's face for an explanation; Selleck did a gesture with his hand indicating to "go with the flow." Bracken poked Deron back. "I need to get dressed then. Or should I go naked like the warriors of old?"

Stopping his attack, Deron looked at him as if considering his question. His head cocked in a perfect imitation of his father. This caused a sudden contraction on Bracken's chest; he didn't want to investigate the reason for it. Deron appeared to come to a resolution. He loosened the scrunch on his face and uttered solemnly, "We're flying. I don't think naked is a good idea."

"Dressed it is then."

"Splendid," Deron said, just like his father would. He crawled to leave the bed.

Quickly, Bracken washed his face and cleaned his mouth, then found clothes and sandals. He could see throughout all these motions that Deron was vibrating with excitement. The boy talked animatedly to Selleck. His aide only nodded silently, a placid smile on his face.

Selleck didn't look like he was faking it. That was a good thing because Bracken would have not been happy otherwise.

"I'm ready."

Deron turned to look at him and started to laugh. He pointed at Bracken. "Your head looks like one of those felines they ride in Sulfus."

Sulfus was the northernmost of the Land Kingdoms. Her warriors rode giant felines with wild manes around their heads when they were not covered with armor. Bracken roared like one of those enormous cats; he turned his hands into clawed paws. "I heard they give little children to their mounts for breakfast."

Dark big eyes startled for an instant, then narrowed with suspicion. "I've never heard that." He turned to Selleck. "Is this true?"

"I don't know, my Prince." Selleck shrugged. "You've traveled more extensively than me."

"*That* is true," Deron agreed. He grabbed Bracken's hand, towing him out of Adder's quarters. "We'll deal with your hair later."

Deron's brisk pace took them to one of the terraces fairly quick. Their gryphons were saddled and ready to depart. Ten guards were leaving with them.

"King Bracken, this is Allu, captain of Prince Deron's guard." Selleck made the introductions.

Bracken nodded.

Allu bowed courtly. "Sire."

"Let's go!" Deron clapped his hands. He climbed onto his gryphon with surprising agility for a five-year-old. His gryphon wasn't normal size but it wasn't a youngling either. Still, it was a perfect fit for Deron. Bracken wondered if Munus's alchemists had kept it on the short side for the prince's benefit; he'd had never heard of miniature gryphons like certain breeds of horses. In Lakoneh, riders grew with their vultures; that encouraged their connection.

Thunderstrike, Bracken's gryphon, made mewling sounds as he patted the wide, feathery neck. He had neglected the poor animal because he didn't want to get attached to it; not if his people were coming for him.

Selleck was the last to climb his mount. In perfect harmony, all whipped their reins, shouting "up." Thirteen gryphons launched themselves upward. They headed westward, crossing Gryphonire's bay swiftly.

Twirling and whooping, Deron guided the group. Bracken was impressed by the little prince's dominion over his gryphon. He was a natural. Would a child of his be this dexterous? Bracken had never thought about children, but seeing Deron's skill tempted him with the idea of a small version of him whooping on his own vulture. Gods, Bracken missed Silvercall. She was gone; no amount of wishful thinking could bring her back. No point in dwelling on this bout of sadness.

Ten minutes after their departure, Deron pointed downward, winking at Bracken. They approached a plain where a squad of Munus soldiers had already made camp. Bracken hadn't seen any garrisons close by. The group alighted; Deron jumped from his gryphon and rushed toward Bracken. "Come, the food must be ready!"

"Slow down, warrior." Bracken chuckled, but the boy was already pulling him toward a massive roasting pig and other cooking fires. The soldiers bowed at them as they passed.

Deron plopped himself on a log by one of the fires, patting the space beside him.

"What's the name of this place?" Bracken asked Deron.

"This is the Pepbod plain." Deron became serious and continued as if giving a lecture. "In the early days of Munus a great battle took place here, and the first king of Munus came to power by winning it."

“Your ancestor,” Bracken offered.

“Yes. I come from a long line of great rulers.” Deron nodded proudly.

Bracken wasn’t sure if they were all great. If he wasn’t mistaken Adder’s grandfather had killed his brother to become king. Surely, Deron didn’t know this yet, but he was bound to learn about it someday. It was part of his history.

“I’m sure you will be an excellent king yourself one day.”

“For that I need to know how to wield a sword.” Deron twisted his lips. “Abba says I have to wait until I’m seven.”

“You mean you don’t even have a toy sword?”

Bracken didn’t want to intrude in the boy’s education, but if he was so skillful flying surely he could wield a little wooden sword.

Deron shook his head wordlessly.

“Well, if it is all right with you, I’ll speak with the King about it.”

Those big eyes (so dark like his father’s) brightened instantly. “Would you do that?”

“If you allow it, I can be your emissary.” Bracken smiled.

Climbing on the log to be able to reach Bracken’s shoulder, Deron put his tiny hand on it and regally said, “King Bracken, I accept you as my emissary to the King of Munus regarding a toy sword.”

Applause and cheers thundered around them. Bracken hadn’t noticed that the men surrounding them were paying attention to their little exchange. They both waved at the men grandly. Deron sat back. They stared at the fire silently. Selleck came to sit beside them.

The silence among them wasn’t awkward, but it was silly. “So this is a warrior’s meal. A meal you eat at camp surrounded by warriors,” Bracken commented casually. The other two nodded. “Was this squad training here?”

“No. They came early this morning to prepare this, so you and I could have our meal together,” Deron explained in the manner of a general describing a battle plan.

“Are you sure you are only five?” Bracken narrowed his eyes.

“I’ll be six in a month.”

“That explains a lot.”

Deron snapped his finger as if remembering something. "I'll be right back." He jumped from the log and ran toward Allu, who wasn't far. He said something in the man's ear. Allu beckoned one of his men, gave some instructions, and the man left at a trot to where the gryphons were tended.

Bracken looked at Selleck. Selleck simply shrugged, obviously as clueless as Bracken. Then a dreadful idea came to Bracken out of nowhere. He did his best to ask nonchalantly, "Selleck, if something happens to Adder before Deron is fit to rule who becomes regent?"

"The Great Counselor. Why?"

"Just a simple question."

"That's a weird thing to ask out of the blue."

"Not really. Remember I told you my nephew is my heir."

Selleck looked at him suspiciously. "I still don't see the relation. Your nephew is thirteen already. He will rule in three years. Prince Deron is just five."

"He's about to be six," Bracken pointed with a grin.

Deron chose that moment to reappear with something clutched in his tiny fist. "Here."

"What is it?" Bracken opened his palm to receive it.

It was a long leather string.

"You can tie your hair with it." Deron snickered then. "The flight made it worse."

"Are you making fun of your emissary?"

Deron shook his head violently, but his grin was too big and too comical.

A soldier came up to them and bowed. "Prince Deron, the food is ready."

"Let's eat!" Deron yelled and ran to get a plate.

The soldiers cheered.

Selleck and Bracken stood up to follow Deron. His aide still looked at him suspiciously.

Perhaps Selleck, and Munus at large, should be suspicious of somebody else.

Chapter Twelve

Plan

The Record Room was supposed to be uncomplicated.

Adder growled as he rolled back another parchment. He hadn't asked for help to keep his investigation under wraps, but he was failing on his own. Sighing, he went to the door and called a clerk. "Summon Amanbar."

If he was going to ask for help he might as well call the Head of the Archives. He didn't trust a low clerk not to go babbling afterward.

Amanbar came into the room and bowed. Not a hair out of place from her severe coif. She had ruled the archives under three kings, rumored to be everlasting to keep a promise to Adder's grandfather. "What a pleasure to see you here, my King." She smiled conspiratorially.

It always amused Adder how ancient she was supposed to be but looked no older than Adder's mother would be (in her late forties) if she were alive. "I have a mission for you, my dear Amanbar."

She nodded, waiting for him.

"I was advised that Lakonian emissaries came last winter. I need the transcription of that visit."

"Easy enough, sire." She seemed to study him for a moment. "You were looking by month, weren't you?"

Adder shrugged, suddenly feeling childlike.

"Things regarding other kingdoms are filed under the kingdom's name. Munus's businesses are filed monthly."

"I'll *file* that information for my next foray into your realm, dear."

Amanbar giggled softly. "Please follow me."

They found a two-door cabinet with the word LAKONEH neatly labeled on top of it. Amanbar simply opened it because it wasn't locked. There were around twenty racks with at least thirty diamond shaped spaces in each, but there were only four scrolls in them.

"Seems like Lakoneh doesn't visit much," Adder commented, surprised. Now that he thought about it, he had been king for eight years and couldn't recall a single direct interaction with Lakoneh.

Odd since Nightjar's kingdom was a rich one, perhaps not agriculturally, but they had enough resources of other types to be able to procure food if needed. The Ten Kingdoms traded among them, but he had only seen Nightjar a few times in meetings regarding all kingdoms, and always away from Munus.

"Hmm, this last scroll is ten years old." Amanbar brought Adder out of his musings, a cloud of dust accompanying her words.

"Could it have been wrongly filed?"

"Human error is always a possibility, but since a visit from Lakoneh is such a rare occurrence it shouldn't have happened." She arched an eyebrow. "If it did."

"What are you implying?"

Before answering, she swept one finger on the dust next to where the scroll she opened had laid. Then she used another finger to do the same on a random place within the cabinet. "The dust is not as thick here." She pointed at the empty space beside the scroll as she put it back. "Maybe someone took the transcription of that recent visit."

Adder cocked his head. "Or there was no visit and my informant is wrong."

"An absolute possibility, my King." She bowed. Then she looked at him brilliantly. "Isn't the twin princes of Zigag's birthday during the winter, and you always take Prince Deron there for a couple of days?"

"Yes it is. But what does it has to do with anything?"

"The Lakonian visit could have happened when you were not presiding over the hearings because you were away with the prince."

And the person who presided over the hearings when he was away was Renan.

"Thanks for your time, Amanbar," Adder said courtly.

She bowed elegantly. "Whatever you need, I'm always here for you, sire."

Where was Renan when Adder needed him?

Adder had sent a herald the previous night to inform the city that there would be no hearings today because he'd decided between sex in the Kept Hall and sex in their chamber to do this little investigation. He stopped in his tracks toward the Hearing Offices. Did he just think about his chambers as "theirs," his and the Lakon's?

Yes, I did.

And that was the logical frame of mind as he was thinking of asking Bracken, his Nightjar, to marry him.

“Where is the Great Counselor?” Adder asked one official as he entered the Hearing Offices.

“He went to Lemvar for the day, my King.”

Shit. Lemvar was the outermost city of Munus, at the other end of the island. Renan would return straight to Gryphonire. All right, there were other people in each hearing, someone must remember if emissaries from Lakoneh came last winter. They were in the beginning of autumn, it shouldn't be that hard to recall, precisely because (as Amanbar had mentioned) it was a rare occurrence. The official waited to be dismissed. Adder asked, “What group managed the hearings last winter?”

The man thought for a moment. “The White Group, sire.”

“Thank you.” Adder did an about-face and hurried to the White Group offices. People started to bow and greet him as soon as he entered the practical, unadorned space. High windows inundated the austere space with incongruently cheerful light.

The White Group was the most orthodox of all the officials of the kingdom; they probably had their own backup records. Adder stopped in front of Head of the Whites' desk. Kurtfer stood up with haste, bowing profusely. “My King, what brings you here?”

“Did emissaries from Lakoneh come last winter?”

“Well, yes, sire,” Kurtfer answered, his face puzzled.

“And I was away.”

“Yes. The Great Counselor presided that hearing. An unfortunate incident.” He shook his head, and then flinched as if he shouldn't have said that.

“What do you mean?”

Kurtfer hesitated, and looked around like someone ready to flee.

“You may speak freely, Kurtfer. Explain yourself.”

“My King, I am a lowly thing to ever consider questioning your decisions, but all the people present during that hearing thought your instructions to deal

with the Lakonians very harsh. After all, they were asking for help and willing to pay for the food.” He bowed again before saying, “You are a great and noble king, and it seemed so out of character to instruct the Great Counselor to deny hungry people and kill two of their three emissaries.”

The rage surging inside Adder shouldn’t explode in front of this man. It needed to be aimed at someone else. He kept his face impassive. “Sometimes things are more complicated than what they seem on the surface.”

“I’m sure of that, my King. You must have had your reasons. I’m no one to question them.” Kurtfer lowered his head.

“Thank you for your time,” Adder said flatly. He left the White Group offices in search of Adroit. He was going back to Gryphonire to wait for his friend.

Evening arrived, and Adder sat in Renan’s chambers. He had avoided Nightjar and mostly everybody because he was sure his temper would flare and cause some unnecessary inconvenience. The worst had been Deron, who was astoundingly excited after his warrior’s meal with Nightjar. He felt like shit for avoiding his son.

All these hours later, Adder wasn’t as pissed off as he had been upon finding what Renan had done, but he was far from being forgiving about it. He had tried to conjure a logical explanation for Renan’s actions. Did he know something about Lakoneh at the time that prompted him to be so harsh on behalf of Adder?

Nightjar’s hateful face as he spoke about his starving people kept appearing to Adder, and that was the thing that aggravated him the most. Nightjar had called him cruel when he learned about the two soldiers that couldn’t wear the colors of Munus. Sometimes things looked rash and unyielding when you didn’t have all the pieces to put the puzzle together. He didn’t have all the pieces of the Vurgeg ships, and he didn’t have all the pieces of Renan’s refusal to aid Lakoneh. But one thing was the reaction to the other, or so it seemed.

Adder hadn’t been in Renan’s chambers in months, but he noted changes that might seem nothing for the untrained eye. Everything was heavily adorned and extravagant; as if competing with Adder’s own chambers. When servants came to light the lamps in Renan’s room, he ordered them to just light two, the closest to him. The rest of the room remained in darkness, and that was how Renan found it.

The Great Counselor cursed the darkness as he stubbed his foot with something in his way. Any other person would have been startled to find another sitting in his room uninvited; Renan simply said “hey” when he saw Adder faintly illuminated by the scarce light.

“How was your day in Lemvar?”

“Favorable,” Renan responded, moving to a chair facing Adder and starting to unlace his braces. His scabbard with Schizo still attached to his waist.

“Why kill two of the three Lakonian emissaries?”

Renan cocked his head, unreadable. “You only need one person to relay a message.”

“That’s not the way Munus does things, Renan.”

“Seemed like the right action at the time.” Renan shrugged.

“The right *thing to do* always has a purpose. I don’t see a purpose to killing those men.”

“It was a man and a woman actually, and the purpose was to send a message to Lakoneh.”

It was one thing to kill in battle, defending your land, your people. What Renan did seemed simply evil for the sake of evil.

“And according to you, what was this message that needed blood spilled to be conveyed?”

“Well,” Renan move to his feet, found a pitcher and poured some water, “you know how Lakoneh always stands apart. They are part of the Five Kingdoms of Land, but keep to themselves, not getting involved in anything. When asked to deal with matters of the Ten Kingdoms they stay neutral, not in favor or against any situation. They needed to know Munus would not take their shit anymore.”

This was the most unconvincing reason Renan had ever given for any of his decisions. Adder went to his friend. “Too much, Renan. Too much,” Adder said quietly, squeezing his friend’s shoulder. “They were starving, and they were not asking for handouts. They were willing to pay for the food.”

“That was the worst part. They weren’t even begging.”

“Would you have acted differently if they had come begging?”

Renan shook his head petulantly. “Nah. They came with a cockamamie story about the Lakon going to the Oracle of Cummia, and the Oracle telling him that *we* were the solution to their problem. As if by invoking Apheilon we were going to be lenient.”

“You know why one of my titles is ‘Beloved of Erin’?”

“Yes. Your mother had to make a sacrifice at the feet of the goddess to be able to get pregnant.” Renan grimaced as if Adder asked this question weekly.

“But you don’t know what the sacrifice was or how she came to know to do so.”

“No.”

“My father swam to Cummia, Renan. And the Oracle said that the only way for my mother’s womb to be fruitful was to be bitten by an adder in the presence of Erin.” Adder moved away from his best friend and paced back and forth. “Their reaction was that of any normal person ‘how can the bite of a poisonous snake be helpful?’ but they had faith in the gods, and they did it and here I am.”

Adder’s dead older brothers were sons of a different mother. His father had loved Adder’s mother so much that he risked the shark-infested waters to find a way for the woman he loved to give him a child. And thanks to that their lineage hadn’t been broken either.

“And your point is?”

“That we trust the wisdom of the gods, Renan. You should have investigated if their claims were true before acting.”

“What’s done is done. Besides—”

An alarm that had never sound before rang violently. Someone was attempting to invade Gryphonire. Renan and Adder unsheathed Schizo and Telos, and ran toward the doors. As they exited guards came to them. “Flying riders, my King,” said one. “They have the colors of Lakoneh, but they are not riding vultures. We’ve never seen the beast they ride!”

Adder’s first thought was Deron. Allu and his men should be able to protect him, but he needed to be sure. He told the guards, “Half of you with me, the other half protect the Great Counselor.” He turned to Renan. “Go to the safe room within the rock. We’ll meet you there when it’s over.”

Renan grabbed his wrist. “I should fight beside you.”

“No. I need you to protect my son if something happens to me.”

“As you wish.” Renan let go of Adder’s hand and left with the guards surrounding him.

The sounds of battle, the clang of metal, the yells of injury, and the crash of things flung and broken sounded in the courtyards and terraces. Allu’s men and two other squads were surrounding Deron’s quarters when he arrived with a complete squad that had joined him on his way there. He looked at the men guarding the door.

One said, “Captain Allu is in there with him, my King.”

Adder exhaled, relieved. Now he only needed to find his Nightjar. There were always guards at his chambers’ doors but he couldn’t be sure if others joined them due to the commotion, and they wouldn’t know what to do with the Lakon since there was no contingency plan for a guest in his chambers.

All those concerns dissipated when he found Nightjar with Deron on his lap. Both were safe; Allu and eight of his men had been guarding them inside.

Nightjar rocked Deron sweetly. “I told you your Abba wouldn’t take long.”

Chapter Thirteen

Burden

The boy on his lap jerked to get to his father. Bracken let go. The outer calm he had maintained since the first alarm sounded was ready to shatter. He knew why his people had come; that didn't mean he had to like it. Worst of all, the idea of something happening to Adder was unbearable. It was hard to accept it wasn't only for Deron, but for his own sake.

Deron jumped to his father's arms, hugging him. "Abba, ask King Bracken! I was afraid but I didn't cry or anything!"

Adder stared at Bracken. His eyes spoke of more than just whether his son had been crying or not. He had seen concern like that when his mother was about to die in his father's eyes.

Bracken swallowed hard. "Yes. Prince Deron is a very brave child." He mouthed, "What about you?"

"I'm fine," Adder answered silently as he held his son tightly to his chest. "The guards say the invaders have the colors of Lakoneh, but they are not riding vultures. They are riding something else."

The vulhurs.

"Let me go to my people and stop this unnecessary madness." Bracken went to his feet.

"My King, I wouldn't advise that. King Bracken may try to escape," Allu said unapologetically.

"Are you going to escape, Nightjar?"

Calling him by their private name was a low blow. Still, it didn't seem like Adder had done it to guilt him. Perhaps it had been unconscious.

Bracken negated Allu's accusation with his head. "I'm bound by honor to you. I won't try to escape nor betray you. Let's just end this. Send them back home."

Adder spoke to Deron, "Now, brave prince, you're going to stay here with your guards until King Bracken and I return."

"But, Abba," Deron groaned.

“You need to stay put, so I can do what I need to do without worrying about you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my King.” Deron circled his father’s neck briefly then pushed away. Adder put him on the floor. He moved to sit on the bed by himself; a regal aloofness enveloped him.

“Come on, Lakon. Let’s take care of your people.”

Bracken waved good-bye to Deron. He hoped he’d be able to see this awesome child again. They exited the prince’s quarters. The men Adder had brought with him joined them; they jogged to where the ruckus of the chaos seemed loudest.

The torches illuminating the corridors cast strange shadows on Adder’s blank face. Bracken wanted to ask things, confide things, but they were surrounded by soldiers. There were no wounded or dead in the corridors. It seemed the conflict had remained limited to the courtyards and landing terraces.

Bracken kept eyeing the giant vases neatly placed along the marble walls with caution, expecting soldiers to jump from them and attack. No one did what Renan was planning (if his suspicions were right) alone. Who knew how many of these men were truly loyal to Adder? How many were Renan’s accomplices just waiting for a second of carelessness to strike down their king? Could they even trust the men guarding Deron?

Too many unknowns.

Not even a king could be in two places at once. Bracken needed a sword, a dagger, anything. He was outnumbered if it came to defending Adder from the traitors. They entered a balcony. Below the bloodshed was coming to an end, even the vulhurs stomped upon fallen Munus’s warriors. His people had gained the main courtyard.

“Sons of Lakoneh,” Bracken shouted, “this is Bracken, Rider of Vultures, your brother.”

“Our King!” shouted one of the men back.

“Yeah,” cried all, raising their weapons.

Bracken was not going to argue semantics with a hundred or so blood-soaked men. “Why are you here? The conflict between Lakoneh and Munus ended at the Furya Plateau. There’s no score to settle here.”

A tall, broad blond man moved among the others, closer to the balcony. Bracken recognized him instantly, not only because the moon was full, but because it was a body he had enjoyed many times. Phebos, one of Idared's brothers, shouted, "Lakon, brother of my brother, come down so I can tell you our reasons." He turned to the men around him and gave instructions quietly. The Lakonian Horn called gravely to signal the end of the fight. Men were dispatched to inform those who could not hear the horn around Gryphonire.

"We need to go down." Bracken searched Adder's eyes.

"No." Adder pushed Bracken aside. "You, blond. Choose riders to fly with you and bring your beasts to that terrace over there so you can talk to your King."

Phebos looked at Bracken, searching for instructions.

Bracken nodded. "Do as he says. Bring two men with you."

Minutes later, Bracken saw the unsettling way in which the soldiers of Munus and their king regarded the vulhurs. None said a word, but the quick glance exchanges and stony grimaces were expressive enough. Half vulture half horse, the mighty beasts seemed creatures of nightmare compared to the graceful gryphons and bearded vultures. Perhaps the fact that their feathers were so tiny that they looked more like fur added to the overall dark first impression.

Phebos embraced Bracken. "My King, are you all right?" He kissed Bracken on the lips. Bracken heard a very distinctive cough behind him.

Bracken pushed Phebos at arm's length. "I'm well, my friend. A Lightfeet told me Lakoneh was coming for me. He also spoke of trickery."

"Yes. The fires on the Royal Granaries last winter were not accidents. We found the culprits. They confessed. People from Munus hired them to betray their nation."

"Impossible," growled Adder. He advanced menacingly toward Phebos. "You lie, you motherless dog-son."

"Why would I lie, King of Munus?" Phebos arched an eyebrow. "We have the Munus agents in custody. It took time, but they gave us a way to find the trace we needed. We know the name of the person orchestrating the whole thing. Even the defiling of the bodies on the Vurgeg ships."

Deep inside, Bracken was certain it was Renan, but, for Adder's sake, he hoped he was mistaken.

“Say the name, and I will find the truth. I swear on Erin and Apheilon,” Adder growled.

“Your Great Counselor, Renan of Bathos.” Phebos tossed the name like something vile, pestilent.

“Fuck,” Adder sighed. Bracken put a hand on Adder’s shoulder as Adder added, “He was the one who received your emissaries. I wasn’t in Munus when it happened.”

So Renan was truly the one behind all this. “I’m sorry, Adder. I know how much he means to you.”

“The pain of losing my friend, my brother, will go away. His betrayal, never.” Adder turned to one of the soldiers behind him. “Fetch the Great Counselor. Don’t explain anything, just tell him I require his presence.” The soldier nodded with a “yes, my King” and left.

“Can you trust that man?” Bracken asked quietly.

“Can I trust anyone?” Adder’s voice sounded more weary than sad.

Bracken simply squeezed the shoulder when their eyes met.

“My King,” said Phebos, and both Adder and Bracken turned to look at him. His eyes were daggers aimed at Adder. “You don’t need to honor the King of Munus’s Claiming. It was all trickery. Why should we believe his Great Counselor wasn’t acting on his orders?”

“He’s right, King Bracken,” Adder agreed. “Your people were starving because someone burned your granaries. Their hunger brought you to my court and that refusal pushed you to steal the tribute ships. I had to retaliate not just for the stolen ships but for the defiling of the bodies. None of this was fortuitous nor the will of the god and the goddess.”

Did Adder know that Bracken had risked the waters to reach Cummia and the Oracle had sent his people to seek Munus’s support? Some of this must be the will of the gods if the situation put them together like this. If not, why would the Oracle of Apheilon send Lakoneh to the hands of Munus? Still, this didn’t seem like the moment to argue with Adder, with these men surrounding them.

Not now that Phebos was there, determined to take Bracken back to Lakoneh, no matter what. He would find a way. After all, they were claiming him as their king. A king had the authority to tell them to go fuck themselves for a while if he thought it fitting, right?

They stood there in uncomfortable silence for the most part of the next fifteen minutes, the screech-snort of the vulhurs the only thing breaking it now and then.

A commotion alerted them of the return of the soldier with Renan. Alas, he was alone and out of breath when he reached them. “King Adder, the Great Counselor.” The man heaved, trying hard to breathe. “He and twenty riders rode northwestward.” He was bent with his hands on his thighs.

Adder turned to Bracken. “Return home, Nightjar. I relinquish you.” He faced his men. “Come with me, we need to find that dog-son traitor.”

Why did it hurt to hear the words “Nightjar” and “I relinquish you” together? Bracken grabbed Adder’s wrist. “Renan affronted us too. We have a right to his life as much as you do.”

First, Adder lowered his head to look at the hand on his wrist. Bracken thought Adder was going to jerk it away; they were in front of his men after all. Instead Adder surprised him. He raised his head, their eyes met, and (with an evil grin) Adder said, “Then let’s see who relieves him of that burden first.”

Chapter Fourteen

Forgiveness

Adder was not happy with that blond lummoX, Phebos, so close to Nightjar. The man's first mistake had been to bring the Lakoneh's sword, Charos, from Lakoneh. Adder had been planning on giving him a sword as he proposed. There was no point in that now. The second mistake had been to convince Nightjar to fly one of those dreadful beasts, the vulhurs, instead of Thunderstrike. Another slight and Adder would find any excuse to skewer the dog-son with his own sword, Telos.

A new morning came to be, orange and magnificent, as Adroit followed Soulfire's trail in the currents of air. Those who didn't ride gryphons were not aware of their ability to find each other, especially if they had been raised together or their riders had a connection. Renan's and Adder's gryphons would be able to find each other even if one was in Munus and another in one of the Land Kingdoms. Distance was nothing for them because the messages in the wind did not die for a gryphon seeking another. Knowing this, Renan had escaped on Soulfire, sure that they would pursue him. This meant he was planning something, an ambush or something more evil.

Contrary to what Adder had expected, Renan didn't flee to Lemvar, where his family had an estate; he'd decided to make his stand halfway there. Adroit was descending toward the Cerbera Forest, a dense marsh area of not-so-tall trees, where people in ancient times used to come to commit suicide. The mysterious evergreens with their vibrantly green leaves, beautiful white flowers, and plump mango-like fruits were a deception because they contained a toxin capable of stopping the human heart if ingested. It was also a place where gryphons could not maneuver successfully if a fight ensued. It was better to not search for Renan and his cohort on their gryphons' backs. They alighted at the edge of the forest, forty gryphon riders and forty vulhur riders.

"We can't take the gryphons in there," Adder explained to Nightjar, dismounting.

"Ah," the King of Lakoneh patted the neck of his beast, "but the vulhurs can negotiate it easily."

Adder could see why since their form was streamlined, encompassing the agility of the horse with the flying capability of the vulture. They had not been

created to be beautiful but to be effective. He shuddered internally; these monsters could be a threat to all the kingdoms if Lakoneh decided to use them on a conquering agenda.

That asshole Phebos and his beast trotted forward. "I'll take you, King of Munus." He extended his hand, offering to pull Adder upward.

Adder would rather throw one of those vulhurs on his back and carry it around the Cerbera Forest than to share a mount with that blond lummo.

Nightjar move forward. "King Adder is coming with me, Phebos. Don't be obnoxious." He chuckled and winked.

The wink was returned with a cheeky grin.

The image of Phebos's head flying in the air after a lightning swing of Telos prevented Adder from telling the man to go fuck a vulture because Nightjar was his. The awareness of his time around the Lakon coming to an end was a toxic addition to his already foul mood. He took the hand that Nightjar offered and climbed behind him. The armor felt right as he embraced it, and he noticed the slight trembling of the hard body flush to him.

Other words would come out wrong, so Adder settled for, "I'm ready."

Five men were left to attend the gryphons, the others shared mounts with the Lakonians, minus two trackers (one for each kingdom), who moved on foot. So at the end, there were more Lakonians in their party, which meant that Renan's capture would be a victory for Lakoneh instead of Munus. But that was a petty thought; the important thing here was to find the traitor.

They moved through the trees since this forest didn't have a defined path to cross it. The low branches were so close they only had to extend their hands upward to touch the hanging, ripe fruits. Some Lakonians were grabbing them and saving them on their saddles. "These fruits are poisonous to humans," Adder told Nightjar.

"They know. We have these trees in Lakoneh too."

"Then what are they saving them for?"

"What do you think?"

"You Lakonians are something."

"That's why we keep to ourselves."

Adder sighed. "I'm going to miss you, Nightjar."

The Lakon's helmeted head moved backward and rested on Adder's shoulder. "Let's not think about that right now." The almost colorless eyes stayed open, looking at the green leaves blocking the still-awakening sky, and their bodies swung softly with the steady gait of the vulhur.

The temptation to kiss the exposed throat was strong, and Adder didn't resist it. Nightjar moaned when Adder's lips touched him. "I just hope there is an *after* for us," Adder murmured.

"I found it!" called one of the trackers.

They converged toward the trackers. They followed them for twenty minutes when suddenly, yells and war cries descended upon them. Their attackers didn't wear the colors of Munus but those of the House of Bathos, green and silver.

So the dog-son is planning a civil war.

Adder tried to dismount, but Nightjar kept him in place and snapped, "Not yet. Let the warriors do their job." Still, they moved amid the fracas, slicing and hacking, each leaning from one flank of the vulhur.

Most of the men of Munus were on the ground, using the vulhurs to cover their backs, and the Lakonian riders fought alongside them from their saddles in astonishing synchronization. Even the vulhurs had joined the fight, their powerful beaks biting off limbs and necks and their hooves stomping on fallen enemies. Renan's men were myriad, but soon the combined forces of Lakoneh and Munus were decimating them.

Out of nowhere, a roar surged above the screams and yells and the clang of metal on metal. So out of place, it rent the chaotic rhythm of the battle. Everyone stood still for several heartbeats, trying to fathom the origin of that unnerving sound. Another roar, and then they saw it coming, zigzagging swiftly amid the poisonous trees, a fucking giant feline covered in silver-plated armor. Adder couldn't say he had seen the feline before, but he would recognize the armor of the rider anywhere. Renan was riding a beast that didn't have a reason to be in Munus.

Pouncing on the nearest vulhur, the feline went for its neck. The force of the attack toppled the animal and hurled the rider away. Bewildered, all watched as the feline shook the vulhur in its jaws as if it were a rag doll.

"NO," Nightjar shouted out. His outraged call galvanized his men and those of Munus still standing back to battle. The sounds of war rose to the sky anew.

Renan steered his feline away from the dying vulhur toward Nightjar and Adder. As he came closer, he yelled, "You two are mine."

Phebos and his vulhur crashed into Renan sideways before he could reach them. Both Phebos and Renan were flung from their saddles with the impact. The vulhur didn't have a chance but gave a good fight before the feline shredded it. Phebos engaged Renan, and Nightjar and Adder jumped from their mount and ran to them.

The impact had Phebos limping; thus he deflected more than attacked, but he stood his ground even if it was with difficulty. Nightjar entered their space and caught a downward cut that would have severed Phebos's forearm and kicked Renan in the stomach making him stagger backward. Adder grabbed Phebos and sent him out of the way. "He's ours."

Renan straightened himself and circled with them. He had Schizo and another sword Adder didn't recognize, but it had a Sulfus-style coiled hilt. The sword and the feline were strong indicators of foreign support. If Adder confirmed that Sulfus was backing Renan up, there would be an all-out war before next spring. Renan sliced his swords down rapidly, making a figure eight as if this was some kind of swordsmanship exhibition. "Come on, birdies. Time to finish this."

Nightjar and Adder had their own swords in their rights and long daggers in their lefts. Adder spun Telos before lunging. "Why, Renan? I loved you like a brother."

The Great Counselor deflected with a counterstroke. "That wasn't enough."

From the left, Nightjar backswung. "There was no reason to pull Lakoneh into your shit."

Renan laughed and swung upward to parry Nightjar's cut with his left as he flicked Schizo at Adder. "I was hoping you would end Adder."

"Because you didn't have the balls to do it yourself," hissed Nightjar as he cut sideways aiming at Renan's ribs.

Adder swung low from the opposite direction to slash the back of Renan's knees. "You had everything," he spat.

With a skillful backward jump, Renan avoided both impacts. "I couldn't claim your place if I killed you myself. But this cocksucker had to fall for your dick and you for his tight ass." He thrust forward with both swords. "Now I'm gonna get rid of both of you and claim two kingdoms."

“Pleasure is not a crime, but high treason is,” Adder growled, dodging a descending blow. He cut with Telos as if directing his right toward the neck, and as Renan moved to parry, he stabbed Renan’s thigh with his left. “And you’re going to pay for it.” He lowered himself, and Nightjar severed Renan’s neck neatly with Charos. The shower of blood on them was minimal as both kicked the body away. They turned around quickly, putting their backs together and ready for the next assailant, but no one was coming. The battle around them had come to a standstill waiting for the outcome of their match.

The men in the House of Bathos’s colors threw down their weapons in surrender. Several Lakonians were wrangling the feline. Both men of Munus and Lakoneh were pushing the enemies to their knees.

Adder grabbed the Lakon’s face and kissed him—kissed him like never before because perhaps this was his last chance to do so. It was sweet and wrong because there was blood on their lips, but they were victorious and alive and hard.

Phebos shouted, “What do we do with these?”

Adder let go of a shocked-looking Nightjar. He understood the question since the Lakonians never kept prisoners.

“Sons of Lakoneh, haven’t you spilled enough blood of Munus already?” Nightjar asked as he composed himself. He took Adder’s hand. “These traitors belong to their king. I claimed the life of our enemy. That *is* enough for *your* king.”

The Lakonians cheered the name of their king, “Bracken! Bracken! Bracken!”

“Men of Lakoneh and Munus,” Adder shouted, and the chanting men became silent. “Traitors do not have a place in my kingdom. I cannot allow their poisonous hearts to beat and sully our land, the land of our ancestors.” He raised Nightjar’s hand to his lips and kissed it. “Sons of Lakoneh, please step aside and let your brothers of Munus take care of the traitors for there is no leniency toward those who follow Greed instead of Brotherhood.” He saw the men wearing the midnight blue and silver of Lakoneh move away from those on their knees. “Let this be a lesson. Let their wicked hearts die here among poisonous trees to end this circle of lies and deception.” His men grabbed hairs and placed swords on throats. He squeezed Nightjar’s hand. “Your sentence is only one and it won’t be delayed. I hope you find forgiveness in the hands of Erin and Apheilon because there’s none in my heart.”

Chapter Fifteen

Wish

Shillelagh, the Head Alchemist of Lakoneh, greeted Bracken as he alighted at his palace in Nakohel, the capital city of Lakoneh. “My King, it’s so good to see you again.” He bowed and moved aside so Bracken could crouch and kiss the ground. He took his helmet off and felt the earth on his lips. So many moons away from his homeland, it seemed almost a miracle that he was back. Alas, not a completely happy one.

As Bracken straightened himself up the chubby hands of Shillelagh grabbed his shoulders. He protested, “What is this manhandling, Alchemist?”

“Who did The Rite on you, sire? We heard that you were attacked, but for it to be so grave that The Rite was needed is inconceivable,” Shillelagh said after taking Bracken’s chin and squeezing his face, turning it this side and then the other. His old but rotund face scrunched, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

Bracken swatted the alchemist away. The man was worse than a pesky fly when he turned grabby. “Nobody did The Rite on me. I would have known.”

Although, now that Shillelagh mentions it, I do have a distant, fuzzy recollection of Timir saying something about “a mite.”

“Not necessarily, King Bracken. You must have been a child trapped in a man’s body for weeks and by the time your full consciousness returned to you most of those ‘new childhood recollections’ would have been gone.” Shillelagh turned to one of Bracken’s escorts, beckoning him. “Help the King out of his armor.”

This armor was the only thing he had left from Adder, beside the memories. Adder had secured it on Bracken’s body with firm, sad hands and whispered good-byes. It seemed almost a sacrilege to be out of it so quickly. “What are you planning, Shillelagh?” Bracken growled, scowling at the alchemist.

“A test, my King.”

Another rider moved to help. Soon, Bracken was only in his tunic, his arms crossed over his chest, and seriously ready to smack the Head Alchemist.

“The tunic too, sire.”

Nudity wasn't a problem for them, but Bracken couldn't see the purpose of this exercise. He took the tunic off and stood there, counting to ten to keep himself from strangling the old man.

Shillelagh walked around him, observing, looking for something Bracken couldn't fathom. "Aha!" he exclaimed. "Come over, rider." He pointed over Bracken's left side. "What do you see here?"

The man looked at the place with a puzzled face for several heartbeats, his head cocked and with squinting eyes. "Just skin, Alchemist. Normal tanned skin," he said flatly, apparently not sure if he had aced the test or not.

Bracken could see the scar left by the assault in the Kept Hall. How could this man not see it? He was about to say something when Shillelagh put his hand up, asking him to wait.

"And here?" he asked the man to check the opposite side, where the other scar was clearly visible to Bracken.

Squinting more, the rider moved closer, so close Bracken thought the man was going to touch him, but he didn't. "Am I supposed to see something, Alchemist? All I see is regular skin. What am I looking for?"

"You did well," Shillelagh said, patting the rider's shoulder. He called another man to inspect Bracken with the same results, then five more. Phebos was one of the last to try. He put his fingers on Bracken's flank, but the touch, far from inciting the usual response, just annoyed him doubly.

None saw the scars from the attack. They weren't the only scars on Bracken's body, but these areas were devoid of marks; thus, those two could not be confused with old ones.

"What's the meaning of this, Shillelagh?" Bracken asked, disturbed. He had never performed The Rite himself, only knowing about it as part of his Royal Training—an arcane thing and only for few. Fern would only learn it after he became king and not before.

"Scars left by The Rite are only for those who bear them and us who can see things in deeper realms." Shillelagh moved closer and tiptoed to speak in Bracken's ear, "The King of Munus saved your life with his own blood."

Fuck.

Even away from Adder, Bracken discovered new things that encouraged the illusion of something greater than just mere attraction between them. The Rite

took life from the giver. Adder had lost perhaps years of his life (depending on how much blood they had used) for a Kept, a mere War Trophy. He looked at the alchemist for a moment, then blinked. “Thank you, Shillelagh. I need to be alone now.” He asked for his tunic and donned it with a swift motion; he didn’t bother with a belt.

The men around him bowed and let him go. Phebos walked beside him silently, dissuading anyone who seemed inclined to stop him for a word.

Bracken didn’t admire the blue marble of his palace walls or the swirling columns of its corridors, didn’t care for the beautiful statues of old kings and queens of Lakoneh, nor for his people bowing as he walked among them. He just wanted to be alone. Alone to process the confusion and the need and the helplessness enveloping and restraining him like a sweaty bedsheet during a nightmare. “I don’t want to be disturbed until I come out on my own,” he ordered Phebos when they reached his chambers’ doors.

“You know I’m here for you if you need me.” Phebos took Bracken’s hand and pressed it over his heart.

“You’re a good friend,” Bracken murmured, removing his hand quietly from the other’s hold.

“Whatever you need, Bracken.”

“All I need right now is solitude, Phebos. Now post guards at my door and see to your wounds. You aren’t indestructible. None of us is.” Bracken opened his door, entered his chamber, and left blond, broad-shouldered Phebos standing outside with a pained expression on his handsome face.

Three days later, Bracken came out of his chambers, resolute. He had decided to forgive his heart for being selfish—forgetting its duty to Bracken’s people. He had resolved to let Adder be a good memory amid an awful moment of his life. He had chosen devotion to his nation instead of the egotistical dream where the King of Munus was something other than a man who had him in his grip thanks to the trickery of another.

Bracken found Laelia sewing with other ladies in one of the high pavilions of the palace. The weather was getting chiller because autumn was coming to its end, but it was still very sunny; thus the women enjoyed the light and the breeze, shielded by their gauzy shawls.

Laelia saw him, put her work aside, and ran into his arms. “Oh, brother, I was so worried. It’s not like you to coop yourself up for days.” She inspected his face, her violet eyes almost watery. “Are you all right now?”

“I’m a king.” How he hated that word, but it was his reality. “I ought to be all right for my subjects.”

She sobered up, narrowing her eyes. “You know that’s a lot of smeared vulture dung.”

In spite of himself, he chuckled. People said they looked a lot alike when they glared. “Careful, little sister, you might soil your chiton with such words spilling from your pretty mouth.”

“Something happened to you in Munus, and I’m not talking about being a Kept, or the attack, or the treachery of that dog-son Renan of Bathos. I’m talking about your heart. Lakonian women can be as hard as their men, but we know matters of the heart when we see them. The sadness I see in your eyes comes from a heart that has been denied. But that’s your deed, coming from a stubborn and misguided sense of duty.”

“Matters of the heart are two-way paths. They cannot be one-sided,” he offered with a grimace.

“And you have proof that it is one-sided?” She arched an eyebrow.

Bracken shrugged.

“Sweet Erin. You men are so dumb. You can face armies and draw blood like farts, but are incapable of handling the simplest things.” She rolled her eyes. “Did you ask?”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“So you’re ready to live with a broken heart because you didn’t have the courage to ask a question?”

“Tread carefully, Laelia. Do not dare to call the Lakon a coward.”

“Then don’t act like one,” she huffed. “Find a way to ask the stupid question and *then* live with *those* consequences, not the ones you made up in your mind!” She turned around, threw herself onto her seat, and accepted her needlework from one of the other ladies.

That went well.

Still, his sister’s words haunted him for many days afterward, effectively mining the decisions he had made on his own. Nights were the worst because the silence of his chamber was a sharp knife. Bracken couldn’t believe he missed Adder’s creepy-sounding little birds.

Fuck. I even miss him whispering Nightjar in my ear as he stroked me, as he fingered me, as he made me his with patient determination.

Was it wrong that this Nightjar missed its cage, even if it was a cage made of sweet words and caresses, of lips and murmurs, of skin and wonder? Was it love that kept squeezing Bracken's heart and turning him inside out?

Idared hadn't helped matters either with this nugget of wisdom, "Where is it written that you cannot be a man in love and a good king at the same time? Didn't your father love your mother until his last breath, even if she went to Erin's bosom before him?"

Yes, Bracken was in love with Adder. Learning that Adder had given his blood in The Rite to save Bracken's life had sealed that wretched fate. How could he not love the man who had sacrificed the length of his life to give Bracken another chance at living? Had Adder done this hoping that they could be together? Was Bracken truly living if he denied himself happiness?

What if?

No. Lakonians didn't dwell in "ifs." When they heard the music, they'd face it and dance. Right now the Lakon was avoiding the music, not even tapping a foot. There was only one thing to do to stop this destructive pain.

The next morning, with the first rays of the rising sun, Bracken mounted Rampant, his vulhur, and rode west, surrounded by six Royal Guards, toward the Gate, the beach facing the Oracle of Apeilon at Cummia. He would not ride another vulture after the death of Silvercall, but the men with him flew on the magnificent birds as it was the custom. Vulhurs had been created for war. Perhaps for Bracken this was a battle of sorts.

The first hour of the two-hour flight from Nakohel to the Gate passed without incident when they encountered a vulture rider coming in the opposite direction. It was a messenger from the garrison near the Gate.

All descended. The messenger dismounted and came to him. He bowed. "My King, we have spotted gryphon riders at the Gate. I was on my way to alert the palace of the situation."

"How many?" Bracken asked.

"Seven, sire," the rider answered. "The garrison moved men to the shore to avoid any confrontation between the men of Munus and any other people seeking the Oracle."

“All right. Continue your journey. Inform General Idared that you saw me. My destination is the Gate, so I will deal with the situation there.”

Bracken and his men gained the sky. The vultures and Rampant did the remaining distance of the flight in thirty minutes.

They alighted on the beach, not far from the gryphon riders. Bracken recognized Adroit instantly. Selleck was also among the Munus men.

“This is an unexpected surprise, King Bracken,” Selleck said as he walked toward Bracken, opening his arms to embrace him.

The vulture riders surrounded Bracken in a blink. He told them to stand back and hugged his former personal aide. “What is this? Why is Adroit here?”

Selleck held Bracken at arm’s length. “King Adder came to seek the wisdom of the Oracle.”

Could it be possible that they came to the same conclusion?

“When did he go?”

“With the first light.”

A good, strong swimmer would take almost forty-five minutes to reach the jagged shores of Cummia, if the sharks didn’t make a feast first. The legend said that those seeking the wisdom of the Oracle with true faith in their hearts were protected against the ferocious predators. They had swum, circling Bracken for a while when he braved the waters, so he had to believe that the legend was true. There were very few other explanations.

Selleck and Bracken walked to the gryphon riders. The men bowed, recognizing him. Bracken nodded. “Brothers of Munus, let’s break fast and wait for your king.” Both groups of riders cheered. As the soldiers distributed food and drinks, Bracken went to Adroit. He petted the great head with expressive, golden eyes. “I hope your master has the same question I have.”

Adroit purred almost in affirmation.

After eating, Selleck and Bracken sat on the sand away from the others. “Deron has been asking about you unstoppably. He’s convinced that you’re coming back because you are his emissary regarding his toy sword,” Selleck commented casually.

Bracken had forgotten all about that.

“I know you aren’t my aide anymore, but please remind me to broach that subject as soon as we see Adder.”

“Of course.” Selleck stared at him for a long moment. “There’s no law saying you cannot visit. You know that, right?”

“It’s complicated.”

Selleck shook his head. “I just hope you two get the answer you need from the Oracle and be done with it already.”

“I really hate cheeky aides.”

A shrug was Selleck’s silent response.

When the sun found its zenith, Bracken started to worry. He started to pace the shore looking for any signal of someone swimming back from Cummia. One rider from Munus and another from Lakoneh played noughts and crosses on the sand a bit away from where Bracken paced; suddenly, one of them yelled, “I see something!”

Bracken used his hand like a visor to protect his eyes from the blinding winter sun and inspected the glittering waters, trying to find that something the rider had seen. He found it. It was a dark-haired man, swimming with great effort.

Now they only had to wait for the man to gain the shore on his own or they would botch the man’s effort for the Oracle. All the riders moved to the shore and cheered, encouraging the man.

It’s he.

Bracken was the first to reach him as Adder crawled on the sand away from the waves. They embraced, both on their knees. Bracken didn’t have words; he only squeezed Adder silently.

Adder coughed and pushed Bracken away a little. “Blessed be Erin and Apheilon. I went to Cummia for an answer, and before the end of the day, the gods have granted me a wish.”

Chapter Sixteen

Equality

Adroit hadn't been happy, flying beside them, as Adder rode with his Nightjar on Rampant. A gryphon would follow your orders, but you could see the "under protest" fire in their eyes when they did not agree with those orders. But Adder was too tired after the swim to steer and it felt too right to be in Nightjar's embrace to let the opportunity pass. He'd make it up to Adroit later.

Alas, contrary to what Adder had hoped, Nightjar had left other people in charge of him upon their arrival at the palace in Nakohel. He had excused himself saying that he wanted to organize a feast to welcome Adder properly to Lakoneh, for his people to know that there was no animosity left between the two kingdoms.

"Will it be all right with you if I send Selleck to fetch Deron? I miss him and want him here with us for the feast," Nightjar said with a brilliant smile that reached his eyes and made them sparkle.

"Of course. He misses you too, a lot."

"Thank you."

Now Adder held Deron's hand as they walked into Nightjar's Great Hall. Deron had arrived an hour earlier with whirlwind excitement. Good thing Adder had many hours to rest from his visit to the Oracle of Apheilon—where he'd gotten his answer. All that was left was to put that answer into practice.

Three long tables occupied the central space of the large room. People milled around them but none were seated. Two of the tables were parallel to each other while the third stood opposite the entrance, its ends perpendicular to the other two. Torches illuminated the marble walls, casting wavering shadows on the swirling columns and the richly dressed, moving people.

The animated noise of the gathering silenced as Adder and Deron entered. Adder found the cloudless-sky eyes immediately. The King of Lakoneh looked magnificent wearing the colors of his land, his tunic midnight blue, and his overtunic a silvery fabric that enhanced his deliciously tanned skin.

"Adder, King of Munus, Beloved of Erin, Master of Gryphons." Nightjar made a pause. "And my friend, Prince Deron of Munus, welcome to my house.

Welcome to Lakoneh.” He spread his arms and went to embrace them; first Adder in an almost formal way but with a wink as they separated. Then he let Deron jump into his hug and squeeze him with fervor.

“I’m so happy to see you! I thought you forgot about me!” Deron burst in his usual exuberant way.

“Never. I’m your emissary, remember?” Nightjar chuckled.

What was this emissary thing? Adder had heard about it before in conversations between Selleck and Deron, but he had no clue as to the meaning of it. Why would a king be the emissary of a child?

“Come on, Adder. Let me introduce you to my family.” Nightjar extended his hand and moved, carrying Deron in his arms.

A svelte mostly ethereal version of Nightjar in a silky pink dress skillfully draped about her stood beside a tall, square-shouldered blond man that had a slight resemblance to Phebos, who Adder hated no more after his valiant crash against Renan in the middle of the battle of the Cerbera Forest. These two must be Laelia and General Idared, sister and brother-in-law of Nightjar. Between them, a young man, technically still a boy but almost as tall as his mother (who wasn’t really a short woman) with blond hair and those colorless eyes like his uncle in high contrast with the brown but beautiful eyes of his father. Fern, Nightjar’s heir.

After the introductions were made, Nightjar called for the feast to start. Adder was surprised when he saw a chair in the place reserved for the King’s consort. Custom dictated for that space to be empty since Bracken of Lakoneh was unmarried. Adder himself had broken the custom by seating Nightjar in that prominent place in his own Great Hall, but it had been to give the Lakon a hint of his intentions. Could it be possible that this was the same case?

Nightjar looked at the high-backed chair and then at Adder. “I’m repaying your kindness. Be happy that I didn’t dress you all in white like a blushing bride.” He grinned inscrutably.

Just that, the payment of a supposed debt?

Adder wasn’t sure of what to say or worse what to think. He sat with a grimace and drank the first goblet of wine in one gulp, a servant quickly refilling it. He glanced about the tables and found Deron smiling and talking to Fern. His son wasn’t sitting on a child’s chair but one with longer legs so he would be at the same level with his fellow diners. Surely it was a chair that had

been created when Prince Fern was little, but it touched something inside Adder that Nightjar had thought to bring it to the table for Deron.

“Is Munus in trouble?” asked Laelia without preamble. She sat beside him, and had been graceful enough to let him put some food inside him before dumping that seemingly random question on him.

Out of sorts since the beginning of the feast, Adder had been caught unawares but had enough control to not flinch or show any other outer sign of discomfort. “Not at all, my dear Laelia. What would make you think so?”

“Then you went to the Oracle of Apeilon to ask about my brother.” It was a plain statement not a question.

“Yes.”

“Good. Don’t take forever to do whatever needs to be done. No matter if it’s good or bad.” She fluttered her long dark lashes. To anyone observing she was telling him some girly anecdote. “Bracken told me what you said to him at the shore.”

So she was his confidant. “I love your brother,” he offered honestly.

“Well, don’t tell me, tell him.” Laelia waved her hand dismissively. “He seems to think that love is impossible between you two.” She smiled coquettishly. “I’d slap him out of it, but that’s not my place.”

Just by the grace of Erin, Adder didn’t sputter wine and lamb at her words. He just coughed. Nightjar stopped the conversation he was having with Idared at his left and asked, “Are you all right?”

Adder only nodded.

Nightjar stared at him quizzically for a moment, then returned to his conversation with his general. Laelia had turned to the other side. Engrossed with another lady in an enthusiastic exchange, she now seemed determined to ignore Adder.

The feast was not an extended affair. The Lakonian were famous for their brevity. After all, that was what Nightjar’s first title meant. He was the Lakon, the first among his people—and succinct in words and actions.

Soon, Nightjar and Adder were saying their “good nights” to Deron and leaving him surrounded by Allu and his men.

“Let me show you to your sleeping quarters.” Nightjar pointed forward.

Shit. It seems like I'm not going to sleep with him.

“Don’t bother. I know how to return to the chambers where I rested and changed,” Adder offered, trying to sound neutral instead of disappointed and miffed.

“I’m giving you different accommodations for the night.”

“Oh.” Adder didn’t know what else to say.

“Would you like me to arrange some entertainment for you?”

The Lakon’s businesslike tone was frankly infuriating.

“Are you kidding me? Why would I want any other person than you?”

Nightjar stared at him, astonished. “I didn’t…”

“You didn’t what?!” Adder threw his hands in the air, not caring about the guards surrounding them. “Stop playing mind games with me!”

“Do I look like I’m playing?” Nightjar glared, and his voice was dangerously low.

“Where are you sending me to sleep, a fucking dungeon?”

“My chambers.”

“Oh.” Adder froze on the spot. “I’m an idiot.”

“Your words…”

That did it. Adder grabbed Nightjar by the shoulders and smashed him against a nearby wall. The guards around them were from both kingdoms. He saw their hesitation for a heartbeat, but before they could react, Nightjar put his hand up, letting his men know he was all right.

“I hate that you do this to me,” Adder growled.

“What am I doing? Tell me,” Nightjar hissed, peering at Adder’s face.

“You confuse me. You make me crazy. I lose control.”

“You’ve never lost control around me.”

“Not when you’re in my arms. It’s when I don’t have you, when I cannot see you,” Adder frustratingly confessed.

Nightjar swallowed hard and insanely audibly. It seemed like all the men around them were holding their breath. “I think it’s best to continue this conversation privately.” He tried to shrug Adder off.

This made Adder realize how much force he was putting into restraining Nightjar. He released him and started to straighten Nightjar's overtunic. Nightjar let him, his hand resting on the wall as if he was summoning the strength to push himself off it. "I'm really sorry," Adder said quietly.

The Lakon only nodded.

They did the rest of the walk to Nightjar's quarters in silence. Even the steps of their guards seemed muffled and hesitant.

The Oracle had told him that to be together they had to be equals.

And Adder was botching the path to equality grandly.

Chapter Seventeen

Knowledge

As soon as the doors closed, Bracken grabbed Adder by the jaw and pushed him against the wall. “You’re in my fucking kingdom. Never do something like that in front of my people again. You can manhandle me all you want when we’re alone.” He kissed the startled Adder like there was no tomorrow.

By pressing it over his chest, Bracken’s hand kept Adder flush against the wall; the other stroked an increasingly growing cock under rich fabrics. Bracken couldn’t have known that Adder dressed in all the colors of the sunset would be such a massive turn on; he would have skipped the feast altogether for his own benefit.

Finally, he had this man, his torment and redemption, facing him—inescapable. Bracken didn’t want words, but there had to be some.

Sentiments are the ruin of men of action.

And yet without them, true kings could not rule; true men could not live. Bracken stopped his assault on Adder’s upper and lower fronts.

“I’m yours. Marry me,” Adder said breathless, panting.

Why did life have to be so complicated? Why couldn’t they just be two riders who met in a dark tavern?

“Kings don’t marry other kings,” Bracken summarized.

“Why not?” The flame in Adder’s eyes was a reminder of what Bracken saw on the deck of an enemy ship a long ago day. It was enhanced, more disturbing, but still the same blaze as when their foreheads touched after The Claiming.

“We cannot unite the kingdoms. There has been too much blood, too much deception between realms. There have always been ten kingdoms, we cannot make them nine.”

“Who says we need to unite them? Be the king of my heart. The king of my soul. Let the land be land and people be people, but be mine as I am yours.”

Bracken didn’t answer. He kissed Adder’s lips softly and went to his knees. He had ceased his stroking, but his hand had retained Adder’s cock. It was solid

in his hand. He removed the fabric and inhaled, nuzzling the thick shaft, savoring that fragrance, unique and intoxicating.

Adder made a defeated sound above him.

No thoughts, just senses.

Bracken moved his lips about the hardened length, myriad sensations rippling throughout his body, imposing, visceral, devastating. All multiplied and exploded as he swallowed with devotional pace, tongue circling, teeth grazing. Bracken looked upward; he couldn't see himself reflected in Adder's dark eyes in the dim light of his chambers, but he beheld hope and desire on that regal face to his inexorable undoing.

Closing his eyes and sucking eagerly, Bracken let his hands roam over the hard planes of Adder's abdomen and hairy chest. So focused on touch and taste and smell—both forgot about removing clothing or moving to a different part of the chamber. They stayed there by the door, like hungry men, needy and desperate, afraid this moment might be snatched away from them.

The leather strips of Adder's sandals felt rough and unyielding against glorious, warm skin as Bracken's hands started a new journey, caressing from ankles to the back of the knees. Always upward, he mapped strong thighs. Fine hairs tickled his fingers pads and guided him to round muscles that he used for leverage. He deep-throated; a fuzzy sac welcomed his lower lip while dark curls caressed his upper lip.

Adder combed Bracken's loose hair back, then touched his cheek. "Please," he murmured softly, moving his hand to the chin and pulling up lightly.

With his entire body on fire, Bracken dislodged the girth commanding him. His hole screamed for attention, but he would let Adder do. He straightened up wordlessly.

Pushing the overtunic off Bracken's shoulders, Adder sought his eyes. "You need to stop avoiding my question, using pleasure to confuse me." He chuckled a little.

"I thought I did that just by being out of sight."

"Bastard," Adder said lovingly, caressing Bracken's cheekbone with his thumb. He lifted Bracken's tunic to pull it off. As soon as Bracken was naked, Adder pressed their bodies together, his hands wandering over every surface they could reach.

“Who’s using pleasure to confuse now?” Bracken whispered in Adder’s ear.

“The Oracle gave me an answer, now I need yours.” Adder grabbed Bracken’s ass, spreading cheeks and seeking the tight spot. He inserted a digit.

“You want me to be coherent while you finger me?”

“Yes.”

“Dog-son,” Bracken moaned.

“You cannot lie if you cannot think,” Adder explained, then bit Bracken’s neck.

Teeth became knives, inflicting pleasure, tearing boundaries apart. Bracken retained enough lucidity to ask, “What was your question to the Oracle?”

Adder licked the skin he had bitten, then continued upward, his tongue flat, leaving a wet erotic trail. “You don’t need the question,” he murmured gravely. “But I can give you the answer.” He shifted to look Bracken in the eye. “We’re meant to be equals.”

More than the words, the tone made Bracken shudder.

Equals.

“You were at that beach because you were going to visit the Oracle yourself,” Adder stated matter-of-factly.

Bracken only nodded.

“You don’t ask what you already know. You had your answer before. ‘The gryphon riders are your solution.’ Why do you think you need another answer?”

“This is a different matter,” Bracken said breathlessly.

“Is it really?” Adder’s dark eyes blazed. “You are my answer as I am yours.” He held Bracken’s face with both hands. “I love you. And if you don’t love me now, give me time. Let me win your heart.” He kissed Bracken’s eyes. “Every man before you was a game or duty, but you opened something inside me during The Claiming. I saw myself reflected in you.” Adder sighed. “It’s hard to explain.”

Their brows touched; their crowns made a shy clink. “I know what you mean,” Bracken uttered quietly. He took a deep breath. “That first night in Gryphonire I went to your bed expecting to be used. Instead, you showed me a

different side of manliness. A side of lovemaking focused on giving and not on taking.”

Their lips brushed. The lust between them turned into something clearer, brighter, lighter. Bracken took Adder’s hand. He guided him through the chamber to the bed. He turned and removed Adder’s overtunic, then his tunic. There was something really hot about Adder in just his crown, rings, and golden sandals with their strips crisscrossing over those massive calves. His cock rose proudly from its nest of dark curls. His balls were taut and mouthwatering.

Bracken lay over the furs on his bed, stretching his body. “I want you inside me.”

“I’m yours to command.” Adder put one knee on the bed, his body looming over Bracken. He used saliva to slick his cock, then put more on Bracken’s hole. He raised Bracken’s legs, pushing forward. The world around them dissolved with every inch. The sting was bliss, curse, redemption. When he couldn’t get any deeper, he bent Bracken until their faces were almost touching, and exhaled a single word, “Nightjar.”

Bracken’s entire body trembled. Adder’s hips started to move, with that kind of shallow circular motion that he knew drove Bracken out of his mind really quick. Soon they both were panting and sweating and ready to crash into cliffs of climax and destruction. But Adder stopped before their prow touched the rocks. “We cannot be equals if I cannot give you my all.” He left Bracken’s body slowly.

The confusion dissipated quickly as Adder crawled over the furs, positioning himself on all fours and calling, “Claim me, Bracken the Lakon. Rider of Vultures. King of Lakoneh.” He spit on his hand and prepared his hole.

Bracken had never been compelled to take another man before, yet this had been offered out of love. His body reacted with enthusiasm and vigor and surprising determination. Bracken also realized that the word “king” coming from Adder’s lips didn’t make him flinch.

Adder looked over his shoulder at him. “Please, Nightjar.”

Lubing his weapon, Bracken teased Adder’s hole the way he liked his to be teased. Adder’s moans and groans were too encouraging to not let himself go. The sensation was new and overwhelming. The reluctant yielding of tight muscles had goose bumps erupting all over Bracken; the sweet squeeze was making him dizzy, happily lightheaded.

Finally in, Bracken didn't want to move, didn't want to lose the perfect arrangement. He looked at the expanse before him, Adder's wide back and narrow waist, the glorious muscles of his ass—how they fitted gloriously over Bracken's groin.

Adder's body arched upward, his arms reaching back until he had his hands clasped behind Bracken's neck. With a motion designed to obliterate Bracken's mind, Adder impaled himself on Bracken's cock even more if possible and rotated his hips unhurriedly, evilly.

A stream of words started to pour out of Adder in a steadily continuous growl. How Bracken had opened his eyes. How similar they were. Two men who had not been born to be kings ruling out of love for their people, for their land. How he had loved Bracken more each day while he was convalescent after the attack as they learned new things about each other. All this mixed with curses and blessings and soft pleas for Bracken's hands to touch him, to steer him into paradise, oblivion, or totally welcome darkness.

Astonished and aroused to unknown levels, Bracken seized Adder's hips and took control of their ship. Now it was he who was pushing Adder away from his cock to bring him back in carefully calculated angles to wrench grunts and groans out of Adder, moving his hips at counterpoint.

"I'm so fucking close, Nightjar."

"Yes, I'm your Nightjar." Bracken kissed Adder's temple since the dark head rested over his shoulder. "Yours. Just yours, Adder," he whispered almost agonizingly. "I love you more than I thought I was capable of."

"Spill in me, Lakon, Rider of Vultures. Keep your cock in me while you come."

Each muscle in Bracken's body clenched, turned inward for a heartbeat just to explode and shatter in the next. Spurt after spurt rushed out of him to claim Adder of Munus as his, to make them one.

Adder's own climax had him shuddering and heaving in Bracken's arms.

Then, as Bracken felt seed caress his balls as it trickled out of Adder, his lover, in the most sinfully and perfectly glorious deep voice, he uttered, "Oh, my King."

The End

Adder & Bracken



Comments

The traits of the Lakonian people are loosely based on the ancient Spartans who inhabited the main city of an area of Greece named Laconia. The English adjective *laconic*, from Greek *Lakōn* “an inhabitant of Laconia, a Spartan,” reflects the Spartan reputation for incisive brevity when speaking and the value they placed on not mincing words.

So, forgive Bracken when he seems short in his thought process because that is just how he was raised.

Glossary

Mileh = miles. E.g. the total area of Munus in square mileh is 205,897, a little bit more than Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee combined.

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters, and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) is available now for your e-reading devices. His historical novel The Pompeian Horse will be available in spring 2016.

Contact & Media Info

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