

Chapter 1

The mountain is always dripping.

Water. Blood. Guilt.

It's hard to tell which is which when you're chained to a wall in a rebel prison, counting your breaths between echoes of distant screams.

The Varethian Mountains don't care. Tavro's spine stretches up past the clouds, snow-capped peaks knifing the sky, and somewhere far below all that old ice and stone, I am locked in a damp cave that smells like mildew, iron, and unwashed men.

So, basically, hell.

My wrists burn where the shackles bite in. They're carved with sigils—dull black lines burned into the metal that blur the edges of my magic. Not enough to smother it completely, just enough to make it feel like I'm constantly suffocating. Like there's fire in my chest trying to claw its way out, and someone's holding a wet blanket over my lungs.

I stare at the opposite wall, watching water drip from a stalactite into a puddle at my feet. One drop. Two. Three.

Screaming stopped a while ago.

Either the rebels are between torture sessions, or whoever was screaming doesn't have enough throat left.

Bootsteps echo down the tunnel.

Not the heavy, uncertain stomp of a bored guard. These are softer. Measured. Confident. A predator's walk.

My shoulders tighten without my permission.

He rounds the corner with a torch in hand, and the cave flares in golden light. The shadows cling to him like they recognize their own.

Dark hair pulled back at the nape of his neck. A scar bisecting one eyebrow. Loose leathers and furs, layered the way only someone who grew up in these mountains knows how—patchwork and practical, with knives strapped everywhere there's a spare strip of cloth.

Kastor Rhane. Rebel leader. Liar. Traitor. Smug bastard.

He used to have another name. One he gave me when we shared a campfire on the Tavrian road. When he “happened” across me traveling alone.

I don't use that name anymore.

“Princess.” His voice curls around the word like smoke. “You look well.”

I bare my teeth. “You look like something I scraped off my boot.”

He chuckles and steps closer, raising the torch. Light licks over the carved bars of my cell—old dragonsteel, stolen from Tavro's armories and hammered into cages. Dragonsteel doesn't melt, nor does it break. Even my magic respects it.

Queen Philomara always did like her toys indestructible.

Kastor's gaze drags over me, taking in the dried blood, the bruises blooming up the length of my arms like sick flowers, the shredded edge of my tunic where a guard's knife slipped a little too eagerly against my ribs.

“You sleep?” he asks casually.

“I dream,” I say. “Of stabbing you.”

He grins. “I'm flattered you think of me at night.”

I spit. The glob lands just shy of his boots.

“Next time I'll aim higher,” I mutter.

“Temper, temper.” He tuts, shifting his weight. Behind him, in the tunnel, I glimpse the glow of more torches, the silhouettes of his rebels moving like shadows on the stone. A whole camp is hidden in this cavern system, tucked into the hollowed throats of the mountains—fires, bunks, armories, war councils. A parasite burrowed into Tavro's bones.

I'd almost admired them.

Before they chained me up.

Before he smiled at me with that same easy warmth and stuck a knife in my back.

Kastor flicks a bit of dust from his sleeve. “You're quieter today.”

“Maybe I'm tired of screaming at someone who thinks he's a hero,” I shoot back. “You're not. You're just another man who thinks hurting me is the first step toward fixing the world.”

His eyes darken, the amusement draining out of his face. “This isn't about you, Allara.”

“Oh, right.” I laugh, sharp and humorless. “Silly me. I forgot. I’m just a tool. A throne. A bargaining chip with a pulse.”

His jaw tightens. He steps closer to the bars, so close I can smell the leather of his jerkin and the metallic tang of the mountain air clinging to him.

“You are the heir to Tavro,” he says low, like a secret, like a sin. “Granddaughter to Queen Philomara and King Lirian. Their ghost child. Their hidden mistake. You were never ‘just’ anything.”

The titles land like punches.

Queen Philomara. King Lirian.

I see my grandmother’s perfectly composed face, lips painted in palace red, eyes lined sharp as blades. I see my grandfather’s hands—steady on a scepter, stained with other people’s lives.

I see my mother dying in a bed too big for her, hair a dark, tangled halo on the pillow, skin withering faster than time should allow. I see butterflies of molten light bursting from my chest when she stopped breathing, setting the world on fire.

I swallow, forcing the vision down.

“You knew from the beginning,” I say quietly. “Didn’t you?”

Kastor doesn’t blink. “Of course I did.”

Rage blooms hot and wild in my chest.

I think of that first night on the road through the Tavrian pass.

The wind had been screaming through the broken teeth of the old stone archway, ice cutting through my cloak like knives. He’d appeared out of the mist with a half-smile and a hand outstretched, a stranger with kind eyes and a spare bedroll, firelight flickering against his cheekbones.

“You shouldn’t be traveling alone,” he’d said. “These roads aren’t safe.”

“Neither am I,” I’d replied.

He’d laughed. It had felt... real.

He’d stayed with me for three days after that. Shared stories, shared rations, shared warmth by a single fire. He’d let me argue with him about Tavro’s laws and the kingdom’s curse and whether the royal bloodline was worth saving. He’d listened—actually listened—to me rage about my grandparents, about how they’d used my mother, used me, used every scrap of magic in our line until our veins ran dust and ash.

He'd looked at me like I was more than my magic. More than my curse.

Then he'd drugged my drink on the fourth night and delivered me to his rebels in chains.

"Why?" The word scrapes my throat raw. "If you wanted a hostage, why not just take me? Why pretend to care? Why make me trust you?"

Kastor's gaze flickers, just for a moment. "Because you would have burned half the valley if I'd tried to take you by force."

He's not wrong.

The last time someone tried, an entire inn turned to cinders before I even realized I'd lost control. Fiery butterflies swarming out of my skin, wings of living flame, trailing embers and destruction. Screams. Smoke. The smell of cooked flesh.

I still hear them at night. The people I couldn't save from myself.

He sees something shift in my eyes.

"Look around you," he says quietly, gesturing with the torch, casting moving light across the cave wall. "The people out there? They're not nobles. They're not lounging in marble halls while dragons guard their ceilings. They're farmers. Miners. Widows. Children who watched your grandmother's dragon burn their villages because she needed to make a point."

"That wasn't my choice," I snap. "I've never ordered a dragon to do anything."

"No," Kastor agrees. "But dragons listen to your bloodline. And your bloodline listens to no one."

He leans in, eyes hard. "Do you know what they call the curse in the lowlands? They call it a noose."

I flinch. "Don't talk to me about the curse like I don't understand it. It killed my mother."

"It killed a lot of people," he replies. "You're just the one with dragons hovering over you while you sleep."

Outside, a low thunder rolls across the rock, faint but unmistakable. The cave trembles just enough that dust sifts from the ceiling.

Not thunder. Wings.

A smile ghosts at the edge of my lips before I can stop it.

Kastor notices. Of course he does.

"What was that?" His gaze sharpens.

“Seismic instability,” I say sweetly. “Mountains do that. You’d know if you’d finished school.”

His expression doesn’t change.

Another rumble sweeps through the stone, closer this time, rattling the bars. Somewhere deeper in the tunnel network, someone shouts in confusion. Another voice answers, high and afraid.

The fire in my chest stirs.

Allara.

The voice sears into my mind like a falling star, bright and loud and furious.

By every god ever named, what did you do this time?

My heart lurches.

Elyphora.

Her presence crashes against my consciousness, all teeth and wings and wild joy. She feels bigger than the last time I rode her—a storm given scales. Heat pours along the bond, flooding my veins.

I almost sob in relief.

You took your time, I think back, the thought as much feeling as words. The shackles’ sigils try to muffle the connection, but they can’t smother it; nothing can smother her.

We were halfway across the continent when you got yourself kidnapped, she snaps. *Do you know how far that is for a dragon, Allara? My wings hurt. Aurelith is ancient, her joints are complaining, and you are grounded. Forever.*

A second voice brushes my mind—cooler, older, weight like steady stone under crashing waves.

My joints are fine, the elder dragon says primly. *And so are hers. Do not dramatize.*

Aurelith.

My mother’s dragon. My dragon, now. The second bond still feels strange, a puzzle piece hammered into place where nothing should fit. Two dragons. One royal. It’s wrong, by every law of Tavro’s old magic.

Philomara called it an abomination.

I call it my mother’s last *fuck you* to her parents.

The cave shakes as something massive slams into the mountainside, sending spiderweb fractures through the dusty ceiling. Kastor grabs the bars to steady himself.

“What did you do?” he demands, eyes flicking between my face and the tunnel behind him.

I can’t help it. A laugh bubbles up from my chest—half-hysterical, half feral.

“Do you really think the heir of Tavro travels without an escort?” I ask, tilting my head. “I’m not the only dangerous thing my grandparents made.”

A roar tears through the mountain, so loud my bones vibrate with it. Dozens of footsteps pound past the mouth of my cell corridor as rebels sprint toward the exit. Shouts echo:

“Dragons!”

“Get the ballistae!”

“Move, move, MOVE!”

My smile spreads, sharp and slow.

Kastor swears under his breath.

Elyphora, Aurelith’s voice reverberates through my skull, laced with exasperation. *We are here to retrieve Allara, not depopulate the mountain.*

“But they stabbed her,” Elyphora protests, outraged. I feel her swoop, the rush of cold mountain air under her wings, the scent of pine and burning canvas. *They put chains on her, Aurelith. Chains. I am going to eat them.*

No, you are not eating anyone.

A beat of silence.

Something screams. The sound cuts off in a wet crunch.

Elyphora.

A huff. *Fine.* A pause.

Somewhere beyond the stone, men are dying. I can hear it: the roar of dragonfire, the crackle of burning tents, the clatter of collapsing wood and stone, the muffled concussions of whatever half-baked weapons the rebels scraped together to fight dragons.

Part of me knows I should feel guilty.

Another part remembers my mother’s tears when she thought I couldn’t see. The way her body wasted away while Philomara smiled over court documents and talked about “necessary sacrifices.”

The rebels want to tear down the throne.

My grandparents want to use me to hold it up.

Some days, I'm not sure who I hate more.

Kastor rips his gaze from the tunnel and focuses on me again. "Call them off," he orders, voice low and lethal. "You're Bonded to at least one of them. Tell them to stand down, or I'll start putting knives in your people."

I snort. "My people? You mean the same rebels who've been using me as a punching bag? The ones you told I was a monster so they'd stop flinching when they heard me sobbing through the night?"

His jaw flexes. "They're not your enemy, Allara."

A bitter laugh rips out of me. "Then why am I in a cell?"

"Because you are too dangerous to roam free until we know which side you're on."

"The side that isn't lying to me would be a good start," I hiss. "You could have told me who you were. You could have asked for my help."

"And you could have told me the curse is killing people in the royal dungeons," he shoots back. "You could have admitted your grandparents are looking for a way to chain your dragons the way they chained your mother."

My throat closes around a flood of old fear.

Philomara's voice in my ear: *You are Tavro's salvation, Allara. Do not fail us as your mother did.*

The way she'd smiled when I shattered a training dummy with a wave of my hand and a swarm of molten butterflies.

The way the court had watched me like a loaded crossbow.

"I am not my grandparents," I say, the words ground between my teeth. "And I am not your weapon."

He holds my gaze. "Then what are you?"

The mountain answers for me.

The floor lurches as Elyphora slams into the ledge just outside the cavern entrance, talons carving furrows into the stone. The roar that follows is so loud that the torch in Kastor's hand gutters, almost going out.

Rock dust rains down like dry snow. Men scream in terror.

Kastor curses under his breath and shoves the torch into a wall sconce. "This isn't over," he tells me, backing away. "If we survive this, you and I are going to have a very long conversation about where your loyalties lie."

I flash him my brightest, most insincere smile. "I'll pencil you in between 'bleed out on the floor' and 'set the monarchy on fire.'"

He actually huffs a laugh at that, the bastard, then turns and sprints down the tunnel, barking orders.

The moment he's gone, I sag against the chains, breath coming fast. The sigils burn hotter against my skin as my magic pushes, testing, straining.

Allara. Aurelith again, quieter now, like thunder on the horizon. *Where are you?*

"In a cave," I murmur aloud, just to hear my own voice. "Iron shackles. Dragonsteel bars. Arrogant men. Same old story."

We can smell your fear, Elyphora says. *And your blood. And your terrible prison stew. Have you been eating?*

"Elyphora," I hiss. "Focus."

I am focused, she insists. *I am focused on tearing the roof off this mountain.*

Aurelith chides, *The mountain will outlast you. The rebels will not. Priorities.*

Their argument becomes a familiar, comforting buzz in the back of my mind as I look around my cell, every sense sharpened. The walls are hewn rough from the mountain's throat, still bearing chisel marks and the stubborn resistance of ancient stone. The rebels have turned the deeper caverns into a warren—barracks, armories, war rooms, kitchens. Somewhere above, I know there will be lookout posts cut into the cliff face, ragged black banners snapping in the wind, the sigil of the rebellion—a broken crown—daubed in red paint.

Tavro's capital, Tavros, is a day or two away by flight. A week at least on foot. The dragons must have flown hard, riding the cold currents.

I swallow.

"They came," I whisper.

For me.

Not because Philomara snapped her fingers. Not because Lirian ordered it. Not because anyone bound them with chains or blood oaths.

They came because they chose me.

Tears sting my eyes. I blink them away viciously. Crying in a cell is exactly the kind of poetic tragedy my grandparents would adore. I refuse to give the universe the satisfaction.

Movement flickers at the end of the corridor.

One of Kastor's guards staggers into view, clutching a spear. His face is streaked with soot, eyes wide with blind panic. Blood slicks his left sleeve. Behind him, far-off in the maze of tunnels, the air glows red-orange with reflected fire.

He stumbles toward my cell, muttering, "Gods, gods, gods, gods—"

A massive, gleaming eye appears over his shoulder.

The guard freezes.

I don't.

"Run," I say calmly.

He whips around.

Elyphora is wedged into the tunnel behind him, her head forced low by the ceiling. Her scales shimmer in iridescent blues, purples, and greens, like my butterflies turned solid and weaponized. Her teeth are longer than my forearm. Smoke curls from the gap between them, carrying the scent of scorched fabric and cooked meat.

"Oh," the guard says faintly.

Then Elyphora snaps him up like a particularly crunchy snack.

There's a wet crack. His spear clatters to the ground, rolling into my cell through the bars.

Elyphora! Aurelith's voice booms so loud I wince. *What did I say?*

Elyphora chews guiltily, then huffs. A chunk of rebel tumbles out of her mouth, landing with a disgusting plop just shy of my puddle.

She spits again, tongue wrinkling in distaste. *Humans taste awful*, she complains, smoke puffing from her nostrils. *Too much fear. Not enough seasoning.*

My laugh comes out strangled. "Next time, try marinating them first."

Her eye swivels to me, pupils a thin, delighted slit. *Little ashling.*

She pushes her snout up against the bars, and for a terrifying heartbeat, I think the dragonsteel will hold and we'll be stuck like this—with me inside, her outside, and more rebels pouring in with ballista bolts and fire-dampening nets.

But Aurelith moves behind her, larger and darker, the cave trembling under her weight. With delicate precision, she hooks one massive talon around the top of the dragonsteel door.

There's a sound like the world cracking.

Dragonsteel doesn't melt. It doesn't break.

Unless the dragon trying to break it remembers forging it in the first place.

Aurelith was there when Tavro was born. When the first kings rode dragons into the sky and swore oaths over molten rock. She remembers the language of fire and ore and oath-blood.

The sigils carved into the cage flare once, protesting.

Then they shatter, showering the cave floor in cold sparks.

The bars twist like soft clay in Aurelith's grip. In two breaths, the door is half-bent, half-ripped out of its frame and flung aside with contempt.

The shackles on my wrists still burn, but the sight of open space in front of me makes my knees weak.

Elyphora shoves her head through, nudging my chest so hard I stumble. She inhales deeply, eyes closing.

You smell awful, she informs me. Like men and hopelessness and someone else's soup.

"Nice to see you too," I rasp.

I raise my hands, chains rattling, and rest my forehead against her snout. Heat bleeds into my skin. Our bond flares, tasting of wind and lightning and ash and something that feels horribly like love.

Behind Elyphora, Aurelith lowers her head, golden eyes solemn.

You have a talent for trouble, she tells me.

"Runs in the family," I mutter.

Rebel shouts echo closer now—boots pounding, weapons clattering. Kastor's voice barks commands, trying to organize chaos. Trying to keep his people alive.

If I walk out of this mountain with my dragons and leave the rebellion to burn, Philomara wins. She gets her rogue heir back, her dragons, and her proof that she was always right about me.

If I stay and help the very rebels who chained me, Kastor wins.

"Of all the times for a moral crisis," I groan.

Elyphora huffs, smoke curling over my face. *We came to get you. We will get you. Then we decide who gets to keep their mountains.*

And their throats, Aurelith adds calmly.

The dragons wait for my decision.

For once, everyone does.

I flex my wrists. The shackles cut deeper, drawing fresh blood.

Blood that belongs to Philomara's line. To Lirian's. To the curse that has strangled Tavro for a generation.

I am tired of being everyone else's consequence.

I look toward the tunnel where the rebels are gathering, where Kastor is shouting, where more men and women—who have also been used up and spit out by the throne—are about to die screaming under dragonfire.

"I'm not saving him," I tell my dragons.

Of course not, Elyphora says. *We can just scorch him a little.*

Aurelith's eye narrows, amused. *What will you do?*

I stand straighter, tasting iron and ash and exhaustion on my tongue.

"I'm going to make sure this mountain remembers my name," I say.

"Then," I add under my breath, bitterness curling sharp and certain through my veins, "I'm going to make Tavro choose."

The walls around us shake again as another explosion rocks the caverns.

I step forward over the threshold of my ruined cell, chains trailing like broken promises.

And for the first time since Kastor Rhane smiled at me over a campfire and offered me a seat by his flame, I am not the one trapped.

I am the one coming.

For him.

For my grandparents.

For the curse that has its fingers around all our throats.

Let the mountains drip.

This time, at least some of the blood will be mine by choice.

Chapter 2

The wind hits my face like a slap as Aurelith shoots out of the cavern mouth, wings slicing through the icy mountain air. Elyphora streaks beside us, scales casting kaleidoscopic flashes of blue and green across the dark rock faces. I cling to Aurelith's spine, my fingers tangled in the thick, ancient ridge of scales behind her horns.

The Varethian Mountains stretch in every direction—peaks like jagged teeth, valleys drowning in shadow, the sky so cold it feels like it wants to bruise me. Snow whips into my face as Aurelith banks hard to avoid a jutting cliff, and Elyphora hollers into the wind:

WE SHOULD DO THIS MORE OFTEN!

"We're escaping a rebel prison, Ely..."

SO?

Aurelith grumbles. *Must you both shout?*

"Love you too," I mutter, patting her neck. "Please don't drop me."

I carried your mother for two decades, Aurelith says. I am perfectly capable of transporting one small menace.

Did you hear that?! Elyphore shrieks with delight. She called you a menace! This is the best day of my life!

Ely—

Something explodes beneath us.

Aurelith's body jolts, wings pitching sideways as a flash of blue lightning streaks upward from the rebel camp far below.

"What—?" I gasp, turning in the saddle.

A second bolt fires. Not lightning.

Magic. Ancient Tavian magic.

The sky crackles with the binding magic—blue sigils blazing into existence, forming a lattice of glowing symbols that pulse with a deep, resonant hum.

It vibrates through my chest, my bones, my dragon bonds.

“What is that?” I shout.

Aurelith’s growl rumbles like distant thunder. *Ancient binds. From the first kings. They should not exist anymore.*

“Why not?”

Because Philomara destroyed the last of them before you were born.

My grandmother.

Of course, it comes back to her.

Another glowing sigil flares, expanding like a net of fire. Aurelith tries to spiral upward—too late.

The net hits her full across the chest. Her roar tears open the sky, the shockwave nearly unseating me.

“Aurelith!”

Pain floods our bond—blinding, icy, violent. Aurelith’s wings seize and stutter. She flails, desperately trying to catch the wind.

Elyphora screams beside us. *Aurelith! Left wing! Left wing!*

Silence! Aurelith snarls. *Do not panic.*

Panic? I am fully panicking.

“Aurelith, pull up!”

I am attempting—

Her words cut off as her massive body lurches sideways. The world turns upside down—sky, rock, sky again. I squeeze my legs tight and cling to her scales as we plummet lower.

Elyphora spirals under us, wings beating frantically. *I’ll catch you! I’ll catch you!*

“No!” I choke. “You’ll get hit too!”

The glowing net on Aurelith’s chest glows brighter, stabbing agony through the bond.

Hold on, she sends to me, her mental voice shaking for the first time. *Do. Not. Let. Go.*

My palms are slick with blood from my torn skin, but I grip harder.

We smash through a layer of low clouds, the world roaring past us in a blur of stone. The rebels must still be triggering the magic because blue bolts shoot upward in jagged arcs, lighting up the cavern mouths, the cliff faces, even the undersides of the clouds.

The sky has become a cage.

Aurelith's wings flare open—too late to soar, but enough to slow us. She crashes hard into the side of the mountain, claws digging long furrows into the rock. Her wings drag, scraping sparks as she fights to stop our descent.

We slam through a narrow overhang—stone exploding around us—and tumble into darkness.

Everything goes black for a moment. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs, and when my vision clears, we're deep inside a cavern—one of the rebel tunnels, but farther away than the one I was in before. Aurelith is half slumped against the wall, one wing bent awkwardly.

"Aurelith!" I scramble forward, slipping on the loose stones.

Elyphora lands hard beside us, shaking dust and debris from her wings. *Can someone explain why humans invented magic that hurts dragons? Because frankly, it seems pretty rude.*

Aurelith huffs weakly.

"Why would the rebels have these?"

Before either of them can answer me, shouts echo through the tunnel above us.

Torches flare.

Boots thunder.

The rebels have found us.

Elyphora's tail lashes, fury crackling down the bond. *Let me eat them.*

Aurelith snarls. *No.*

But—

No.

"Girls?" I whisper. "We need a plan."

Aurelith shakes her head, smoke curling from her nostrils. *We do. The plan is this: We finish what your mother began.*

My blood freezes. “What?”

Aurelith turns a golden eye to burn into mine.

Your mother’s disownment broke the royal line. Her defiance lit the spark that will one day free Tavro. We will finish what she started.

Here.

Now.

With you.

I’m shaking. Not from fear. From something worse.

Purpose. A fate I never wanted.

“M-maybe we should discuss this when we’re not about to be murdered—”

Too late.

Rebels flood the ledge above—archers, spearmen, torchbearers. Then the ones on the ropes—descending like angry mountain spiders.

They surround us in a perfect circle.

Kastor drops into the cavern last—landing in a crouch, blade drawn, eyes burning with fury and disbelief.

“Allara,” he says. “I’m warning you. Don’t move.”

I snort. “I’m literally trapped under two dragons and an ancient magical war crime. Believe me, I’m not moving.”

He grits his teeth, scanning Aurelith’s injured form. “You’re surrounded. You must know you cannot win.”

Elyphora bares every one of her teeth. *Try me.*

“Stop,” Kastor snaps. “If you fight down here, the ceiling will collapse on all of us.”

“That sounds like a you problem,” I say sweetly.

His gaze snaps back to mine. There’s anger there. And underneath it—fear.

“For the love of all gods,” he groans, “can you go one hour without making things worse?”

“Can you go one hour without betraying me?”

The rebels nearest him flinch.

Kastor's jaw clenches. "That wasn't betrayal—"

"Drugging me and chaining me to a cave wall absolutely counts as betrayal."

"Princess—"

"DO NOT CALL ME THAT!"

Silence crashes through the cavern.

Kastor breathes once, slowly. "Allara. Please. Stand down."

Aurelith shifts painfully. *Little one. Enough. These humans believe they have power here. Let them presume it a moment more.*

Elyphora's mind bristles. *I can kill them.*

"We know," I whisper, touching her muzzle. "But Aurelith's right."

Elyphora huffs, then mutters, *Fine. But I'm biting at least one of them later.*

Kastor lifts his hand slowly, signaling his rebels to lower their weapons—but not sheathe them. Not trust. Just pause.

He steps closer, stopping two feet from Aurelith's snout.

"Do you yield?" he says, voice low.

I tilt my head. "Yield?"

"Yes."

"To you?" I blink, then grin. "Absolutely not."

Kastor swears under his breath. Loudly.

I smile, bloody and wild.

I'm a lit fuse.

And the mountain is full of gunpowder.

Chapter 3

The cavern doesn't just echo with shouting—it thrashes with it.

Voices ricochet off the jagged stone, twisting into a single fracture roar. Torches hiss. Weapons clatter. Someone cries. Someone else curses. Someone laughs in the type of shrill way that makes me question their mental stability.

Aurelith lies beside me like a wounded god—wings tucked tight, chest rising in slow, measured breaths. Smoke curls from the edges of her maw as the last of the binding magic burns off her scales.

Elyphora prowls in loops around us, claws tapping, wings twitching, tail slicing the air like she's carving names into the future kill list. One wrong move from the rebels and she will gleefully roast every single one of them.

Me?

I'm the disheveled, bleeding, dirty centerpiece of a mountain-sized disaster.

And in front of me—

Fucking Kastor Rhane.

He stands like an unmovable pillar between his people and my dragons—broad shoulders tight, jaw clenched, posture radiating the kind of restrained danger that makes even dragons watch carefully.

He doesn't look scared.

He looks like he's about four heartbeats away from tearing out someone's throat.

"EVERYONE BACK," Kastor says.

He doesn't shout.

He doesn't need to.

His voice cracks through the cavern like a blade sliding from its sheath—cold, sharp, commanding.

And the rebels obey. Immediately.

Those in the front stumble back so fast they nearly trample themselves. Those in the rear press against the cavern walls as if distance might save them. Even the torchbearers lower their flames instinctively.

This is not a man whose orders are optional.

He surveys the crows with predator-still eyes.

Half of them are shaking.

The other half look like they're praying he won't aim his anger at them.

Then—

Someone exclaims, "We should kill her before she becomes her grandmother!"

The words trigger another wave of panic through the rebellion.

"She's too dangerous—look what she brought into our mountain!"

"We need her! She's the heir!"

"She can break the curse!"

"She'll burn us all!"

A child's voice shrills above the chaos: "BURN HER! BURN HER!"

Elyphora perks up.

That sounds fun. I bet they taste great barbecued.

"No," I mutter.

Silence, both of you.

Someone waves a frying pan. Someone else throws a rock—

Elyphora catches the rock midair in her teeth, crunches it like a cookie, and spits sandy dust at the man's feet.

Try it again, she purrs, and I'll eat something softer next time.

The man drops like a sack of potatoes.

Honestly, relatable.

Kastor doesn't even glance at his fallen rebel. Instead, he moves forward with the slow, deadly calm of a man who knows no one here will dare challenge him.

He lifts his hand.

"One. More. Word," he says, quiet and lethal, "and I will personally remove your tongue."

The cavern goes silent.

You could hear a feather fall.

Elyphora leans toward me. *They listen to him.*

"They should," I whisper. "He looks like he collects spines for fun."

So... is that your type? Elyphora snorts, causing the rebels to shift back again.

Kastor turns slowly, sweeping the entire chamber with a look that could peel bark off a tree.

"This," he says, voice low but carrying to every corner, "is not how we survive. It is not how we win. It is not how we rise from the ashes Philomara buried us in."

No one argues.

No one dares.

He points at me.

Then at the rebels.

"She is not Philomara."

A man near the back blurts, "They share blood!"

Kastor rounds on him so fast the man stumbles backward.

"Blood," Kastor says evenly, "did not burn your homes. The THRONE did."

A ripple goes through the rebels—shame, fear, anger, grief, all tangled together.

I look at their faces.

A woman missing fingers.

A man with burn scars clawing his neck.

A boy too thin, too hungry.

An elder clutching a rosary made from broken dragon bone.

All broken.

All abandoned.

All collateral damage of the throne.

Aurelith murmurs in my mind:

You see? They are wounded, not wicked.

Elyphora snorts. *I still want to bite them.*

Aurelith swats her with her tail.

Then Kastor says something that stills even my dragons.

“You all know Philomara killed my sister.”

Time stops.

My breath hitches.

He never mentioned that.

His voice stays steady, but it’s the steadiness of a man holding himself together through brute force.

“She burned our village as punishment for defying her collectors. My sister died screaming while I watched. She was only twelve.”

Twelve.

I swallow hard.

He looks at the rebels—not like their leader, but like their equal in suffering.

“Don’t tell me I don’t know what the royal bloodline is capable of.”

The rebels flinch.

Then Kastor looks at me.

“And don’t you pretend you don’t know it, either.”

His words slice me open.

Because he’s right.

I DO know.

I know what they did to my mother, Ravina.

What they did to me. What they still want to do to me.

I know how the throne chews people up and spits out bones.

And so I speak.

“They hurt you,” I say softly. “My grandparents. The throne. All of them living plush lives in that castle.”

Silence falls.

A heavy, reverent silence.

“They hurt you,” I repeat. “And they hurt my mother. And they hurt me.”

Some gasp.

Some look away.

Some blink back tears.

“My mother didn’t leave the throne,” I say. “She fled it. When Ravina chose me instead of the kingdom—”

I swallow hard.

“—they punished her for it. They disowned her, and in doing so shattered the royal line. They knew their mistake immediately. Philomara knew it. Lirian knew it. But they didn’t try to fix it until it was too late. Until the curse had already spread over the land.”

Someone whispers, “Gods...”

“And when she died,” I go on, voice shaking, “When my mother died, Philomara didn’t cry. She told me it was a loss I would have to get over.”

My nails dig into my palms.

“Lirian told me to ‘carry on my purpose.’”

I spit. “And I will. But not the way they meant.”

The dragons rumble approval.

The rebels stare.

Someone quietly says, "She's one of us."

Someone else says, "No... she's what we COULD be."

Someone else, tremulous: "She's hope."

And someone in the back still mutters, "She's going to burn us all alive."

I grin. "Only if you keep saying stupid fucking things."

A few rebels laugh—raw, broken laughter, but laughter nonetheless.

Then Kastor steps forward.

And the cavern straightens itself instinctively.

"We have ONE path," he says, voice steady and iron-hard. "Unite—or die under the same throne that has been killing us for generations."

He points at me again.

Not accusing.

Commanding.

"She is the key to Tavro's salvation."

"And destruction," someone murmurs.

Kastor doesn't look away.

"Yes," he says. "Exactly why I will decide when she burns."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Excuse me?"

He steps closer.

Close enough to feel the heat of him.

Close enough for me to want to *bite* him.

Close enough for him to look directly into my eyes and say—

"If you betray us, princess, I will cut you down myself."

The rebels suck in a collective breath.

Aurelith stiffens.

Elyphora snarls.

I put a hand on her snout. "Easy."

Then I step toward Kastor until my chest grazes the leather of his vest.

"We understand each other," I say.

His breath catches.

Barely.

But I notice.

He disgusts me.

Kastor turns back to his rebels, voice resonant.

"The monarchy destroyed everything we had. Now we destroy it. Together."

The rebels bow their heads.

Some in respect.

Some in fear.

Some in grief-laced agreement.

And looking at them—these scarred people who survived the throne's cruelty—I feel something jagged and dangerous settle in my bones.

"They're not my captors," I whisper.

Aurelith answers:

They are your people.

Your casualties.

The monarchy's victims.

Elyphora adds brightly: *And maybe snacks later.*

"We'll see," I mutter.

Then I lift my chin and meet Kastor's stare across the cavern.

I smile.

Sharp.

Bloody.

Chapter 4

The moment Aurelith steps out of the cavern mouth—limping slightly, chest still smoking from the net—she pauses at the cliff’s edge and inhales sharply.

I’ve never heard her sound afraid before.

Something is wrong.

Her words pulse through the bond like a cold wind.

Elyphora creeps up beside her, wings tucked tight, claws clicking nervously over stone.

It smells like moldy sadness.

“Not helping,” I mutter.

But she’s not wrong.

The moment the air hits my lungs, I taste it—an acrid, metallic taint mixed with something worse. Something hollow. As if the land itself is exhaling its last breath in thin, rasping gasps.

Below us, in the wide bowl of the valley, the world lies still.

Too still.

Kastor steps up to the cliff’s edge a few feet ahead, his cloak snapping in the wind, hair tugged loose by the mountain gust. He scans the land with a grim, resigned expression.

“This,” he says quietly, “is what the curse has done.”

I look harder.

And then I see it.

Not the way a princess reads a report or a scholar reads old texts.

I see it like a dragon sees it—through the bonds thrumming under my skin, through the crackling of magic trying and failing to breathe around me.

Every field is dying.

Not winter-dead or frost-bitten or dormant.

Dying.

Soil cracked open like dry lips.

Rows of shriveled crops, stalks bent and blackened.

Irrigation channels empty, lined with salt and ash.

Fruit orchards curled in on themselves as if they starved long before the snow came.

Distant cottages slump, their roofs caved in. Smoke rises from only a few chimneys, weak and wavering.

Even the wind feels wrong—thinner, brittle, carrying the faint scent of burnt stone.

“Gods,” I whisper.

Kastor keeps looking at the horizon, at the brittle grass swaying like broken fingers.

Then he says, voice low and steady, “You didn’t know.”

Aurelith lowers her head beside me, her massive form trembling ever so slightly.

The land is reflecting the royal bloodline, Allara. Magic receding. Life collapsing inward.

I blink hard, trying to make the pieces fit.

“The... the curse is really doing *this*?”

Yes. Her voice is heavy as mountains. *Your bloodline’s magic has grown unstable. It was the thing holding Tavro together. And now... it is unraveling.*

Elyphora flutters her wings uneasily. *Everything tastes sour. Even the air. I don’t like it, Allara.*

We descend the mountain trail, Aurelith moving carefully, her injured wing dragging slightly, Elyphora staying close as if trying to shield her larger companion.

Rebels flank us, dozens of them, escorting us down the narrow path toward the lower camp. None come close enough to brush against dragon scales. They’re scared. Angry. Disturbed.

And beneath all of that—they’re exhausted.

I see it in their sunken cheeks, their cracked lips, their worn boots and threadbare cloaks. I can hear their knees creak over the crunch of frost.

They're living things inside a dying kingdom.

The closer we get to the settlement, the worse it becomes.

A field lies to our right, empty except for a woman kneeling in the dirt. Her hands sink into the soil again and again, fingers clawing desperately at earth that no longer answers her touch. The crops around her are brittle skeletons.

"What's she doing?" I ask softly.

Kastor glances over his shoulder. "Trying to coax the magic back. She used to be a crop witch."

"And now?"

He shrugs. "Now nothing grows."

Ahead, a group of rebels chop wood from a dead tree. When the axe hits, the bark crumbles like ash. The logs split not with a clean crack, but with a hollow collapse—disintegrating in brittle chunks.

Magic-death.

The kind that starts at the root and crawls upward.

A child—thin, wrapped in a blanket with holes—sits on a stump, holding a small wooden toy shaped like a dragon. The toy's head is broken clean off.

He makes no attempt to fix it.

Just stares at the fields with the empty focus of someone who's seen too much.

My throat closes.

We reach the heart of the camp—a collection of tents arranged in a circle, smoke curling from cramped cooking fires. The air here is thick with the scent of bitter herbs, unwashed bodies, and the metallic tang of magic burnout.

Healers tend to dozens of people lying on cots or bedrolls.

Some wheeze with lungs full of curse ash.

Some stare blankly at nothing.

Some tremble with fever that glows faintly blue under their skin.

A woman pulls a blanket over a motionless shape.

My breath stutters.

“Is that—”

“Yes,” Kastor says quietly.

“What was wrong with them?”

He looks away.

“The curse seems to hit common folk hardest.”

“Why?”

Aurelith answers before he can.

Because they have little magic to share the burden.

I grip one of her scales for balance. “What burden?”

Her eyes lower to the dying camp.

The curse is siphoning strength, warmth, vitality from everything around it. Like a star consuming itself.

Elyphora snarls softly. *A hungry curse.*

The ground beneath us trembles.

Then pulses.

Then stills.

I nearly lose my footing.

Kastor steadies me with a hand on my elbow. “Don’t worry. The land just seems to do that now.”

“That’s... comforting.”

“It shouldn’t be.”

We walk deeper into the camp.

A man sits by a fire, stirring a pot of something watery and gray. When he lifts the spoon, the contents slide off like melted ice.

“Dinner,” Kastor murmurs. “Root broth.”

“What kind of root?”

He gives me a long stare. “Whatever hasn’t died.”

Elyphora wrinkles her snout.

It smells like toes.

“Not helpful.”

Aurelith nudges her. *Show respect. These people endure more than we have witnessed.*

Elyphora lowers her head, chastened.

We pass a line of rebels waiting outside the healer’s tent.

A boy of maybe twelve clutches his younger sister’s hand—both shivering, eyes sunken. A man behind them collapses briefly, caught by two others who prop him up as if they’ve done it many times before.

One woman, her veins glowing faintly blue, coughs violently into a cloth. When she pulls it away, the edges shimmer with spell-burn dust.

“Curse damage,” Kastor confirms my thoughts grimly. “It starts small. A fever. A cough. Bones aching in the cold. Then the magic inside their blood starts collapsing. When it reaches the heart... there’s nothing left.”

I swallow hard.

“They’re dying.”

His voice is razor-thin. “Yes.”

Aurelith’s mental tone is soft but unwavering.

This kingdom rots from the roots, Allara.

My chest hurts.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

In the way grief hurts when you finally stop running from it.

“I didn’t know the extent of it,” I whisper. “My grandmother made it sound like they had it under control.”

“You weren’t supposed to know,” Kastor replies. “Philomara keeps the palace pristine.”

I stop dead in the center of the camp.

Around me, rebels shuffle past—thin, hollow-eyed, worn. A group of children poke at a dried patch of grass as if hoping it might come back to life.

A cattle pen stands empty. The wood is splintered and cracked. No animals remain—not enough magic left to keep them alive.

A stream nearby once flowed bright with enchanted water. Now it trickles weakly, tinged gray, barely enough to fill a bucket.

Everything feels faded.

Washed out.

Haunted.

Aurelith lowers her head until her snout touches my shoulder.

This is the truth your mother tried to protect you from.

I blink rapidly. “She wanted me to grow up away from this.”

She wanted to save you. But she could not save Tavro.

“But why didn’t the throne stop it? Why didn’t the council—why didn’t ANYONE—”

Kastor laughs bitterly.

I stare at him.

At the rebels.

At the dying valley.

At the ash-soaked air.

And something inside me shifts.

Something old.

Something burning.

Something hungry in a way that has nothing to do with power and everything to do with justice.

“I’m going to destroy it,” I say quietly.

Kastor frowns. “The throne?”

“All of it.”