

TALE

# Love At The Solstice

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*(with help from Just Shooter for Northkeep specifics)*

**Characters:** Laminaria, Kryosin, Frosyth, Chilali

**Content Warnings:** Mild mention of death and gore. Slight bad language.

*5th Moon, 3016*

*Location: Eryin's Watch and Rivergard.*

Laminaria tightened the fur lined cloak around her shoulders as she followed the massive pale green dragon in front of her through ankle deep snow.

"I thought you said you knew where you were going?" She said, shaking snow from her horns. Kryosin looked over his shoulder and grinned. The massive ice dragon shook snow from his own cloak, a simple affair in a pale pink and silver. "Aye, of course I do, Commander. I just took you the scenic route. Ain't it pretty? Light's just right for it."

The water dragoness looked up through snowy boughs of the trees, smiling slightly as the weak sun made the ice crystals glitter. "You know, you're right Kry. And here's me thinking all that's in that head of yours is how to keep myself and others outta trouble. Turns out, there's a poet in there too."

"Away, marm," Kryosin snorted, adding his own green-blue element to the snow flurrying around them. "I just know what's pretty and what isn't and I thought you'd like to see it. You always said you wanted to visit where I came from."

"I thought you would have brought me in summer." Laminaria shivered again and galloped up to walk next to Kryosin. She looked up at her healer and friend with a tight smile. "Not in the middle of bloody winter. You know I'm a sun and surf kinda gal."

"Pfft, north ain't anything special in the summer." he winked. "But you would regret never seeing a good old Northkeep Solstice. It's something else; Warfang ain't got anything on them. The food, the wine, the stories, the pageants. It's also where you gets all the love birds tying the knot." he sniggered as Laminaria stuck her tongue out. "What's wrong, I thought you liked knowing folk were happy and such."

"Yeah but I don't want it shoved in my face."

"Chah, even I likes to see a little romance here and there. Besides, the more unities, the more the drink flows and let me tell ya, Northkeep knows how to drink."

"Now there's something I can get behind."

The two dragons plodded uphill between the trunks of the trees, Laminaria's breath steaming in the cold air. As they crested the hill, Laminaria gasped as she gazed out onto the winter landscape and at the city shining in the distance.

"See? Paradise Bay may have a seascape but it's nothing like Eryin's Watch in winter.

Especially on a day like today when the snow is low and the sun is up."

"You know, you might make a northern convert of me yet," the wind gusted, bringing crisp, cold air swirling around them. "Or not. How the hell do you stand this cold?"

"This ain't anything, Commander. I'm made of sterner stuff but I bet you put me on Agni Flats, I'll melt." He spread his wings. "Shall we? We want to make the city before the sun goes down."

Spreading her wings, Laminaria took her cue from Kry and leapt after him into the winter skies.

The flight was enjoyable, despite the cold, and she could see other dragons flying in, some in groups, some in singles. She swore she saw a group of Everwinters in a rough diamond winging in from the south.

They came into the glittering city and back winged to a landing. The water dragoness slipped slightly on the slush, only Kry's quick paw stopped her from falling on her muzzle.

"Whoops, there we go. You good?"

Laminaria checked her cloak, ensuring the fur lining hadn't got soaked. "I'm fine. Didn't expect that is all."

"Yeah, mind your feet. It gets a little slushy in the city."

But Laminaria couldn't care less about the slush at her feet when her eyes were caught by the splendor of the city during the solstice. Lanterns were strung across the streets and music flowed, it seemed, from every alley. The scent of food wafted down through the main thoroughfare, spiced meats and roasted vegetables, fish and things she couldn't quite name.

"This is incredible, Kry." She looked around to find her friend had vanished. Panic gripped her and she turned on the spot, seeking the ice dragon.

"How the hell can I lose that lump?" She muttered as she continued, pressured by those behind her to keep going.

Kry reappeared hobbling on three legs, a pair of skewers clutched in his left forepaw. "Sorry, Aria, here." He shoved the skewer at her.

Laminaria took it gingerly and nibbled at it. Spices and sweetness coated her tongue as she chewed on the meat. Moments later, the skewer was divested of meat and Laminaria licked her claws clean.

"Hells, Kry, that was delicious." Her stomach gurgled as she realised she hadn't eaten since breakfast. "But I'm starving. Shall we get something else?"

"Aye, follow me." He shoved his way through the crowd and brought Laminaria to a square where a fire had been built. Dragons sat around the fire, mugs of steaming wine clutched in paws and an ice dragon tended to a cauldron.

Kry went up and purchased two mugs, bringing them back to her and proffering one. "This will warm ya right up."

"I'm fine, Kry." Laminaria said with a snorted laugh. She took the mug and clutched it in her paws.

"Yeah, that's why yer shivering." He muttered as he readjusted her cloak. His paw lingered a little too long on her shoulder before he snapped it back. Laminaria cast him a look and pulled the cloak about herself more.

"I'm fine, you big worrywort." She sipped at the spiced wine. "Honestly, you're worse than my mother."

"I've met your mother and I can guarantee, I'm not." Kry huffed as he stared into his own mug. An uncomfortable silence fell between them as they sipped at their warm wine. Laminaria couldn't help but turn aside, unable to look at her friend for a moment. She understood, she did, she knew what turmoil the ice dragon faced every time she came to him wounded and broken to be patched up. She knew that every time she came in hurt, he broke a little more.

There was nothing she could do to piece his heart back together. She couldn't give him what he sought.

Something he shouldn't be seeking. He was unified, happily or not it didn't matter. She should have been out of his sight in that regard. However, she could see it every time she looked at him after he had healed her wounds, the pained look masked by a carefree grin.

She stared into her dwindling mug.

"Hey, aren't you Commander Laminaria, of the 52nd?"

Laminaria looked up to see an ice dragoness peering at her.

"Oh, yeah, that's me." She downed her drink and set her mug aside. "Commander Laminaria, of Deep Seekers, at your service."

"So, is it true that you killed an ape while flat on your back in the mud?"

Laminaria grinned then threw back her head and laughed. "Whoahaha, did I ever! Oh, you have to hear the best part of that story. That wasn't even the best bit."

Across the city, Frosyth picked his way around stalls and gathered dragons. He loved the solstice, loved meeting new people and writing new stories about those he met. The blue dragon wasn't particularly tall, but his presence and traits allowed him to slip through the crowds without much effort.

While not of the direct royal line, Frosyth had some of their blood in him, even distantly. The heavy crowned head held high gave him more presence than he deserved but he wasn't about to correct anyone. Not when it afforded him such ease of movement. He moved with a practised grace; he lifted and placed each paw deliberately. Most would think it was because he was naturally graceful.

Most would not realise he was clumsy and as likely to trip over his own feet as not. As a failing, it was probably one of the better ones. All it did was make him look like a fool on occasion. At least he knew how to speak and how to act. Besides, one didn't need to stay on their feet when sat at a desk most of the day.

He glanced up to where the royals would be feasting and entertaining and smiled softly. Sometimes, he did wish he was part of that. Oh what stories could the other clans tell. Why, hadn't one of Ensis Fumoveo's matriarchs taken down a basilisk some years ago? He would have dearly loved to take that account, heard it from every perspective. A joint venture that united the northern clans.

Save for Northkeep, who had not partaken in that particular encounter. More's the pity. Still, Northkeep had a varied and rich history but sometimes Frosyth wanted to know more of what happened south. The stories others could tell, the legacies, the legends. To drink the wine of variety would be a great treat for him.

Pausing at a stall, Frosyth purchased a roll packed with roasted meat and, as delicately as possible, munched on it as he walked. Not being the most stable dragons on four legs, walking three legged proved a small challenge and the ice dragon stumbled into a giant of a dragon.

"Oh, your pardon, sir." He said as he recovered himself.

"S'all right," the big ice dragon said, a cheery grin on his face.

Frosyth looked him over. He was a big, spiky fellow and he recognised him for the eastern reaches of Northkeep. "Ahh a fellow countryman." He blushed at the ridiculousness of the statement. "Well, of course, many residents from across the Northkeep region are in attendance so, naturally, you would be of this region. Unless of course you are actually not from this region but you have our blood in you." As he spoke, he noticed the big ice dragon's grin getting wider, making him pause. "Oh I am being presumptuous. Forgive me."

"Ah don't worry yourself sir. Judging by the spectacles perched on your head, I'm guessing you're a scholarly type. It's to be expected that yer a talkative one." he stroked one of his icicle-like horns. "Thens again, you gets some quiet ones too. Anywho, the name's Kryosin. Lieutenant Kryosin, that is, though I hates using the rank."

"Pleasure to meet you Kryosin, I am Frosyth of Northkeep." The two dragons started walking in the direction Kryosin had come from.

"You nots a royal, are ya?" Kryosin asked as he looked Frosyth over.

"Ah, no. Perhaps there is some of their blood in my veins but it is as watered down as summer wine." Frosyth gave a dry laugh. "However, I am still part of the clan and do my duty by them."

"Heh, never was one for the scholarly arts. Can't hold a quill well te save my life. As for reading, well if it's about healing, sure, but anything else? Nah."

Frosyth blinked. "You're a healer? Pardon further presumptions but I had thought you to be infantry by your build."

"Yer not the first to make that assumption." Kryosin paused by another stall and picked up a couple of packets of preserved apple slices. "So yer forgiven that one. No, I don't much like the causing of wounds. It ain't nearly as satisfying as saving a life." He popped a still warm slice in his mouth. "Hmm, it's how I remember."

"Do you attend the solstice regularly?" Forsyth asked around licking his claws clean.

"Not as much I'd like te." Kryosin said. "Being in the army don't always afford you such comforts but I tries te get back to my folks at least once every couple of years. If I can land it around the solstice, then that's even better."

"So you are here with your parents?"

The big ice dragon shook his head. "Nah, not this year. Maybe next time." He winced and Frosyth didn't inquire further.

"What about you? Does your whole family celebrate?"

Forsyth chuckled. "Ah, yes, all of them. They're around, somewhere. But I do like my own company at times. Not that I don't love my family but," he sighed. "I've got nieces and nephews who have discovered they can chew on everything, including me."

"Ahh, yes. The childhood desire to shove anything and everything in their gobs." Kryosin sniggered. "I knows that feeling."

"Biters of your own?"

"Yup. Two sons and my missus dotes on them." The large ice dragon's smile softened.

"Unfortunately, I couldn't bring them either. Missus has duties at the temple."

"Oh a templar. How exciting." Frosyth said. "You must be proud."

"Oh we are. She is stellar. Always has been." Kryosin burbled. "She's good at what she does and even before that, she was quite the soldier. Wish I could have brought her though."

Frosyth hummed as he listened but his mind was working double time. There was something about the quickness of Kryosin's voice that suggested some sort of deception. What business was it of his though?

"You came with someone though," Frosyth said, pointing at the packets, "or do you just really like preserved apple slices?"

"Ah, ye got me there. Brought m'boss."

"I hope your commander is enjoying the festival and a well deserved break." His interest was now certainly piqued as he pondered the stories this commander would have. "You must be quite close to him to invite them to your place of birth."

"Ah, there ye go again with yer presumptions." Kryosin said, wagging the packets of apple slices. "My commander's a woman. A fine one at that."

"Oh, forgive me." Frosyth said, genuinely embarrassed. "Not that I don't think women can become commanders. Why, Commander Anatis is well renowned hereabouts. I just thought, considering-" he rolled his paw.

Kryosin's brow furrowed then sprang up in surprise. "Ah, you thought that me being the giant that I am, that I'd be more likely to be close to a man. Well, let's meet my boss and ye can decide for yerself what I find interesting bout her."

They pushed their way through into a square. Frosyth looked around, noting that most who were seated were clanless denizens of Northkeep.

"Whooohahaha, you bet ya. It fucking hurt too but I got the devil a cracker."

The sound rang around the square. While loud, the laugh was pleasant, hearty. Whoever owned it had enough joy for it to flow out so loudly.

"Ah speak of the devil." Kryosin said, rubbing his ear. "Sorry, I keeps saying we should weaponise that laugh of hers."

Frosyth walked around the fire to see where the sound had come from. There, seated in between a stocky ice dragon and a sleek fire dragon, sat a water dragoness. She had a mug clutched in on paw, which swung wildly, forcing the fire dragon to duck, as she spoke. He studied her carefully, noting the sweeping blue horns, the kelp-like frills, and rivulet-like markings peeking through her cloak, which had shifted in whatever actions she had taken to tell her story.

An emblem on her fur lined cloak caught his eye and his scholar mind flicked through his teachings. Interesting.

She looked up and Frosyth was caught by the aventurine eyes creased in laughter.

"Why hello there!" She said, spreading her arm wide, forcing the fire dragon to shift aside to avoid being smacked by the mug. "I'm sorry, am I disturbing folk?"

Frosyth blinked. "N-no. Not that I can see."

"Oh, well," she peered at him. "Ah, forgive me a little. I thought you might be part of the guards here but now I see, you're get up is more formal. Sorry."

"Oh, no, not a guard, just a scholar." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Please, continue your story."

He grunted as Kryosin bumped into him. "Ah you found her."

Laminaria chuckled as Kryosin came up behind the newcomer. "Took you long enough, Kry. I thought you went for snacks, not more poor souls to listen to me."

"Ah well, ye know me Commander. This here gentleman is Frosyth."

The blue ice dragon dipped his head in a polite bow. "A pleasure to meet you commander. Frosyth of Clan Northkeep, at your service."

Laminaria put aside her mug and stood, bowing back. "Commander Laminaria, of Clan Deep Seekers and commander of the 52nd regiment, at yours." She studied him as her head came back up. Diamond markings? Check. Crown of horns? Check. He definitely looked like how most Northkeeps were described to her. In fact...

"You related to Commander Anatis at all?"

"Distantly, probably several lines removed. She is, however, a figure of admiration for me."

Frosyth came closer and the ice dragon to her left shuffled over, letting him in. "Deep Seekers? You are far from home, my lady. How are you finding the north?"

A blush crept up her cheeks. Very few folk afforded her such politeness. She was well known for her slightly crass nature and to be addressed so formally caught her off guard. "It's bl-very cold but I can't deny it's beautiful. In the sun, at least. And this festival? Northkeep really knows how to throw a party, eh?"

"They do indeed but it's more than just a party." He huffed gently. "What do you know about our history?"

Laminaria winced. "Oooh, history? Not my forfeit but, hmm, let me try." She sat on her haunches and placed her front paws together as she thought. "Lemme see, Northkeep are an odd bunch. It took many years for Northkeep to come under the paw of Warfang, didn't it? Before that, they had the, urm, triumphate?"

Frosyth laughed. It was a sweet sound, more like a tinkle of icicles. "Oh dear. You have the very broad strokes. It's the Triumvirate and the solstice is a little bit of two things really. Once, it had been when Monarchs were crowned but we only had a couple of those before the Triumvirate was founded, which was also around the Solstice. To make things easier, and to keep our traditions, we merged the forming of the Triumvirate with the winter Solstice celebrations. So we celebrate, both the solstice, and our history. Without it, Northkeep would not be what it is. It's our blood, our life force." He winced slightly.

"If you're so focused on the past though, how can you look forward?" Laminaria accepted a refill on her mug.

"An interesting view point but let me offer a counter." Frosyth took up a mug and sipped at it.

"How can you move forward if you don't know where you came from? Our history helps ground us, reminding us what we achieved, what we lost, and what we learned. Surely you have studied past battles, learned from them, and utilised them in your own tactics. Do you not analyse your own battles, see what you did, what you could have done, what worked and what didn't?"

Claws tapped off the mug as Laminaria thought. "I do. Constantly. I even reenact them at times, you know, looking at them from different angles, as you said."

"Do you always take the commanding role, or do you switch it up a little?" Frosyth's tail swept back and forth. "Do you maybe play the part of the enemy, to see how you could break your own tactic?"

Laminaria gave the ice dragon a quizzical look. "Well ain't that a question?" She grinned, her sharp, water teeth flashing. "I do." The smile faded slightly as she looked down. "And, I try not to think of the worst mistakes, if I can help it. But you have to, you know, if you want to learn from it."

"Of course," Frosyth's voice softened. "I hope you don't dwell on it too much though."

"Heh, I'd be a bad commander if I didn't think about it at all but, no, I don't dwell on it too much."

Frosyth cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I just brought the mood right down, didn't I?"

"Not intentionally." Laminaria gazed at the fire. "It's just a fact of war, ain't it?"

"True." Frosyth looked around at the dragons chattering away. "What story were you telling when I arrived?"

Laminaria almost choked on her drink. "Oooh no, a fine bred lad like yourself shouldn't hear about that sort of crassness."

"Try me." Frosyth tilted his head. "You'll be surprised."

"Alright, don't say I didn't warn you." She sat back. "Right, so, we were running support for a couple of other regiments, you know, holding off one flank. But having a bunch of water and ice dragons in the regiment made the ground a little on the muddy side so you had to have your wits about ya.

Anywho, there we are, first rank, charging at the line, elements going. Got my squire at my side and the woman bloody lets rip with an earth tremor and I jump to the side because, let me tell you, when that girl gets going there's no stopping her. Well, my luck was not with me because a platoon of ice dragons had made a bleeding ice rink right in front of where I was heading. So I end up skating across this patch, flip, and end up in the mud on my back.

So, as you can imagine, it's not a good place for me to be. I'm on my back, luckily belly not exposed because I'm smart enough to armour myself. I'm struggling away when this big ape gets through the line and comes at me.

I let rip with a good old water breath and send him head over tail backwards. Still stuck on my back, mind. It recovers, comes at what it thinks is an easy target. Gets me a cracker in my right arm. I gives him a bloody good bath and that axe goes flying, straight onto my tail. Well, I roar a few good curses and manage to get that tail into play and swish, I get it straight in the neck with my tail blade. Still on my back.

A platoon comes up, finds me on my back, and the bloody lieutenant has the cheek to suggest I'm laying down on the job. I'm laying there thinking "well gee, no comment on how I took an ape down, on my back, with nothing more than a tail blade? No?" She paused and drained her mug.

"So there you have it, both my most impressive and least appreciated kill I have. I mean, how many others would have survived that?" She laughed, hoping to drown out the fear that clutched at her every time she recalled that ape bearing down on her. The wild eyed fear she had felt in that moment as she realised she was stuck and was easy prey.



Frosyth blinked slowly as he regarded her. "Honestly? Not many. The Ancestors must have been watching out for you that day. Not that it isn't a testament to your skill and quick thinking, of course. I can't imagine how frightening that was."

"It was," Laminaria licked her lips, "terrifying." She whispered. Her mind raced as she shoved the memory back in its little box. Coughing, she raised her head and glanced at Frosyth. "Anyway, enough about me. What about you, eh? Historian?"

"Oh you got me on the snout there," Frosyth said. "I'm particularly interested in studying, and reenacting, historic battles." He drew in the slush with his claw, mapping out a rough dot army. "I especially like to look at what could have happened if, say, this platoon was here instead of there. It is interesting to think about, and look at. How would things have gone if there was one little change?"

"It's like the pebble and the landslide question."

"Hmm?" Frosyth looked at her quizzically.

Laminaria rubbed her forearm. "Urm, you know, if the pebble fell here rather than there, would the landslide go this way or that...I think it's supposed to be a metaphor. Sorry, I'm not exactly scholarly."

"Funny, that's what your healer friend said," Frosyth said.

Kryosin, who had been in stare off with the fire dragon, finally managed to get himself situated on Laminaria's other side. He pushed the packet of apple slices into her paw. "Yeah, we're not the most book-learned lot."

"On the contrary," the darker blue ice dragon pulled himself upright. "You don't get to be a healer without study, and you don't get to be a commander without intelligence." He frowned. "Well, in theory."

"Hah!" Laminaria barked. "You should meet some of my contemporaries."

"There's always a few."

Kryosin snorted. "Pfft. Yeah, some soldiers have had the sense knocked right out of them."

"Or didn't have the sense to begin with." Laminaria sighed. "The number of soldiers I've had to take aside and teach to use their head as something other than a battering ram."

"Scholars aren't much different sometimes." Frosyth looked up, following the trail of a rising ember. "Have you ever tried to stop a scholar following a particular line of thinking when they are adamant they are right?"

"I can imagine." Laminaria muttered. "Stubbornness is universal." She sipped her drink.

"Especially among the youth." She paused and glanced at Frosyth who had spoken the same words. They winced and then laughed as they tried to excuse themselves.

"No go ahead."

"After you."

Kryosin rolled his eyes. "Oh now yer polite."

Laminaria snorted, fine blue mist escaping her nostrils. "No need for that."

"Do you want to see some of the other things going on here?" Frosyth suggested. "There's some performances going on that you might enjoy."

Laminaria got up, dusting off her cloak. "You know, I wouldn't mind that at all. You want to come along Kry?"

The large ice dragon went to shake his head but then rose. "Sure thing."

Frosyth waved with a wing. "Follow me." As they walked, Frosyth picked Laminaria's mind.

"So, you're from Warfang or are you part of the Ocean Domain branch?"

"Originally from Ocean but I joined the Warfang branch in order to join the army."

"Do you miss the ocean?"

"A little but I enjoy what I do, so, you know. Besides, my family are absolutely cracking."

Frosyth led them through the stone streets into the higher class area of the city. Northern clans stood in groups or streamed towards stages in squares. Frosyth paused and turned right down a road until they got to a stage with a beautiful ice dragoness perched on it. She was a pretty pale blue and white, her amethyst eyes scanning the crowd.

Laminaria sat and watched as the dragoness in her sheer gown leaned onto her hind legs and spread her wings, dazzling the crowd.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" Frosyth whispered. "She's one of my favourite singers. We call her the 'snowbird'."

The singer started to sing and Laminaria was caught by the etherealness of her voice. The song was something of a lament, one Frosyth was clearly familiar with as he sang along. It spoke of the Battle of the Kings, and the grief and sorrow the king had felt. Laminaria wasn't completely caught up on Northkeep history, though, but she could appreciate the soulful tone of the song. When the singer had concluded, there was a cacophony of flapping wings, including Laminaria's own.

"That was beautiful." She said, her voice breathy with awe.

"The story behind it is full of sorrow." Frosyth said, "and one we are taught very early on. It teaches us to not dwell in grief, to not let it hold our hearts too tightly."

The "Snowbird" started up a new song and Laminaria felt tears well as the next song touched on the sacrifice of Eyrin.

Despite all Northkeep had suffered, she was impressed they had held on to as much of their culture as they had. She looked up at Frosyth who had his eyes closed, his lips moving to the lyrics.

He opened his eyes and glanced at Laminaria. "History. Without it, we cannot hold onto who we are."

"So I see." Laminaria glanced down at her claws. "I wonder what history will make of all of us in the far off future?"

"Whatever they choose to preserve." Frosyth sighed. "While we at Northkeep try and preserve as much of our history as possible, not everyone is as vigilant. Some will keep only what deeds are important to them, while others will omit what is unsavoury." He snorted blue mist.

"Unsavoury or not, history is history. Good or bad."

The Snowbird finished her song and vacated the stage, giving way to a poet.

Laminaria felt a little bit of jealousy as she watched the dragoness weave her way through the crowd. She desired more than anything to have gentle claws, but hers were those of a warrior. She lifted a paw and studied her cracked claws.

"Are you alright? I haven't upset you, have I?" Frosyth asked.

"No, I uh, was thinking." Her paw went down so quickly, she slammed it on a stone. Hissing, she raised it again.

"Oh for," Kryosin said as he inspected her paw. "Honestly." A light trickle of red healing magic flowed from his own mighty paw to hers.

"Thanks, Kry." She examined her paw and placed it back down, with far more care.

Frosyth watched the interaction with interest. He had been studying both of them, looking for clues as to their relationship but the big one, Kryosin, had already indicated that he was unified. So why was he gazing at his commander with such tenderness? He noted how he fussed over her, rearranging her cloak and checking on her wellbeing. Sure, that was something a friend might do but there was something else going on.

Though, by the way Laminaria turned away, whatever feelings the big ice dragon had were not reciprocated.

As Kryosin looked up, he caught Frosyth watching and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Commander, maybe we should find accommodation. You know, it's getting dark and you're not used to the cold."

"I'm fine, Kry."

"But he does have a point; accommodation will be hard for you to find this late into the day."

Frosyth hummed. "I do know of a place, it's pricey though."

"Shouldn't be too much of an issue. Though my clan might not thank me." Laminaria winced.

"If you'll follow me." He pushed through the crowd, Laminaria and Kryosin at his heels. He led them to a refined inn and poked his head in.

"Ah, innkeep, I wonder if you would have," he turned around, "would one room suffice?"

"Not the first time I've shared a berth with Kry."

Frosyth turned back to the innkeeper. "One room available?"

The innkeeper nodded and beckoned Frosyth forward. "Not cheap you mind?"

"Not a problem." Frosyth reached into a pouch and put down a few coins.

Laminaria jerked her head up. "You don't have to do that."

"Consider it a thank you for indulging me." Frosyth said over his shoulder. "I have dragged you around this city at my insistence."

"What if I liked being dragged about hmm?" Laminaria snorted. "What do you say to that?"

"Well if that's the case would you like to be dragged to a good spot to see some element displays?"

Laminaria's eyes widened before she threw back her head and laughed, loudly. "Oooh boy, you're bold and no mistake. Sure, why not? What do you say Kry?"

Kryosin shrugged. "Eh, if it's all the same to ye commander, I'd like to do my own wanderings. I might bump into some old acquaintances."

"Alright then." Laminaria grinned. "Well, Frosyth, where we going and am I going to make it back in one piece?"

"I don't think you have to worry about me harming you," he said as they walked back out, the room secured. "You'd probably put me on my spikely behind quicker than I could breath."

"Don't sell yourself short. I find fighting against a complete amateur more unnerving than fighting against a seasoned ape. At least I know the seasoned ape is trying to kill me. The amateur might just be trying to knock me out." She fell into step, quite naturally, beside Frosyth though deliberately pulled herself back so he was leading. "And may completely botch it and end up killing me anyway. You can't second guess an amateur because you got no clue what they're gonna do."

"Oh, I don't know." Frosyth looked back. "I think an amateur is going to go with what they think is a weak spot, or an easy shot. Besides, you've made a grave misjudgement."

"Oh really?" Laminaria scoffed. "And what's that?"

Frosyth's tail whipped and then came to a controlled stop by Laminaria's head. The ice dragon grinned as he lowered it again. "You think me an amateur."

Laminaria hadn't flinched. She'd seen the dragon's tail waving and stiffen just before he'd whipped it and had braced herself. She'd watched as he'd turned it to potentially hit her flat on, thus avoiding an accidental slash. "Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all."

"And you're not at all phased. I am impressed."

They walked in silence to the city gates before Frosyth turned and pointed. "We're heading that way." He spread his wings and leapt into the air.

Laminaria followed him. As she did, a mischievous thought crossed her mind. She slipped back and moved up to be above Frosyth.

The ice dragon looked backwards to find his new companion had vanished. A tinge of panic touched his thoughts as he spun, looking for her.

A shape dove past him, close, so close that it sent him tumbling and a very light touch grazed his arm. He levelled out and whipped his head around to find Laminaria climbing back to join him.

"What in the Ancestors was that?"

"Just returning the favour." She grinned. "I have to give you credit for not moving. Had you moved, that might have been worse."

Frosyth's heart pounded and for a moment he was lost for words. Then he laughed.

"Alright, alright I deserved that. I really deserved that." He looked at his arm briefly, seeing a slight welt.

"Oh, oops." Laminaria said as she noticed it. "I was only supposed to tap you. Sorry."

"It's alright. What was it, your tail?"

"Nah, wing tip."

Frosyth lost his rhythm for a moment, dropping a little before he regained it. She had gotten that close? On a dive?

"How?"

"A little trick a fellow commander taught me." She said. "They're a wind dragon so naturally, they excel at this sort of stuff but they taught me how to upset the balance of a flighted enemy. Was kinda fun learning it."

"I see." Frosyth regained his rhythm and banked towards a hill. He backwinged to a landing, kicking up powdery snow.

Laminaria landed beside him, tip tapping as her paws sank into the snow. "ahhh, cold cold cold."

"You'll get used to it." Frosyth said lightly. "Better than standing on cold stone. Just keep scrunching your toes a little."

Following his advice, Laminaria soon found that she was getting used to the chill. Her breath fogged in the dimming light. How had the light gone so quickly? The setting sun turned the white winter landscape into a dusky pink.

"Oh wow." She said as she watched Eryin's Watch glow in the sun. "That's one helluva sight."

"It is. I think it's one of my favourites."

Laminaria cast a side long glance at him. "It's going to be a while before it's dark enough for element displays."

"So it is."

"Did you bring me out here to try and convert me to moving north? Gotta say, Kry tried that already. As pretty as it is, I don't think I can get used to the cold."

"Hah, no." Frosyth crunched snow between his paws. "Though, there is more to the north than chill winters. No, I will admit that my reasons were selfish."

"Is that so?" Laminaria watched as a slight gust flurried the snow around the ice dragon.

"I, hmm, how to put this. I am intrigued by you."

"Intrigued?" Laminaria barked another laugh. "You make me sound like some book or scroll you came across."

"So, maybe not the best way to put it." Frosyth dipped his head, embarrassed. "But, I guess, I am curious about you. I guess I want to know what makes a dragoness laugh like her joy cannot be stolen."

"Laugh?" Laminaria furrowed her brow.

"Yes, laugh. You have the most glorious laugh I have heard."

Laminaria's chest started to heave as she chuckled then laughed heartily. "Whoooahahahaha. Oh, oh my, you *like* my laugh? Most run away in horror, or at least plug their ears."

Frosyth leaned towards her. "Why? It's lovely."

Laminaria leaned away and turned so her blushing face couldn't be seen. "It's loud and brash and obnoxious. Kinda like its owner."

"I can't judge that. All I know so far is that you're a commander who uses her mind and has the skill to fight even against the odds." He sighed. "And no doubt, all you can gather from me is I'm bookish."

Laminaria turned enough to catch his eye. "No, no you love your clan and its history. And you're generous." She winked. "And you have a slight streak of mischief."

"Takes one to know one."

"You started it. Don't start a battle you can't finish."

"I fully intended to finish that battle, thank you." Frosyth said, pulling himself up. "I just didn't expect it on the flight here."

"Which just goes to show you that you don't know my tactics." She chuckled.

"So tell me then."

Laminaria paused before she continued, carefully. "Strike hard, strike fast, and if you can get them on the hop, do so. Take advantage of an opportunity when it arises and don't ever expect your plan to go any further than "this is how we approach" because I guarantee, that plan is in the wind the moment you clash with the enemy."

"An all in approach." Frosyth nodded. "And you're adaptable."

"I would say so." Laminaria frowned. "So when do I get to ask about you, huh?"

Frosyth blinked slowly and smiled. "I'm not stopping you. Ask me anything you like."

"Ooh, ok, hmm," put on the spot, Laminaria struggled to think of a question. She drew in the snow and scored out imaginary lines as she thought. "Ok, ok, let's see. Hmm. Ah!" She raised a claw. "Your favourite food."

"My favourite food?" Frosyth raised a brow in confusion. "Ok, not what I was expecting. Hmm, I'd say poached fish, with herbs. No, wait, hmm, sugared plums."

"Sugared plums?" Laminaria said, incredulously.

"Yes, sugared plums, is that so odd?"

"Not at all." Laminaria chuckled. "I like them, but I much prefer spiced apples." She tapped the snow. "Ok ok, I have a good one. What is your favourite word?"

Frosyth almost laughed as he looked at her earnest face; he had not expected a scholarly question. "Susurratation. It almost sounds like what it means. What's yours?"

"Widdershins!" Laminaria grinned.

"Widdershins...why?" Frosyth laughed. "Of all the words, why that one?"

"It sounded fun. Fun fact, I could not say 'W' for a very long time. Dropped the letter, substituted it, you name it. Just could not get it out." She leaned back and used her paw to mime someone talking. "Laminaria what sort of dragon are you? 'I'm a 'ater dagon' a what dragon? A 'ater dagon'..." she paused. "Couldn't say my 'R's either. Drove my parents bonkers trying to teach me to speak." Bonkers, she realised, was quite an understatement. She would sit for hours repeating words until she said at least one correctly.

"So, widdershins, was a word I found that I was determined to say, because it looked like a fun word. Took me weeks to say it." She wrote the word in the snow. "I couldn't stop saying it once I did. Now, every time I struggle to think of something, I just say 'widdershins' and, there we go." Her claw skittered as she realised what she'd divulged. More to the point, why had she divulged it?

"Sorry, that was a whole lot of, um, stuff."

Frosyth had remained quiet as she spoke, listening to her rapid fire explanation and found himself smiling at the idea of a little Laminaria running around shouting "widdershins". Her sudden change in demeanour, though, puzzled him.

So, to put her at ease, he divulged some of his own failings. "I'm so clumsy that I can trip over my own feet. I walk like I'm on parade. Before that I hit the ground so much," he touched his nose, where a patch of scales was thicker, "that I ended up permanently damaging my nose tip. See," he flicked the end of his nose, "can't feel a thing."

"Oooh, boy. Please tell me you didn't land like that either?"

"Thankfully not," Frosyth tapped a fading crack in his horn. "I did, however, go head over tail once. In my defence, I was racing a blizzard home."

"You see, that's what we call mitigating circumstances. Anything that happens because of external forces ain't your fault. Now, if you had chosen to fly when you knew a blizzard was on your tail," Laminaria wagged a claw, "then that's your own silly fault."

"I will have you know it was fine when I left," Frosyth said with mock indignity. "Blizzards can whip up quick here, though. So you have to be prepared to land fast and take cover."

"I bet." She looked up to a darkening sky where stars were starting to peek through. "Do you prefer morning, or evening?"

"I prefer the dawn. It's softer, and leads on to a new day. You?"

"I like the night." Laminaria whispered. "The stars are constant companions, no matter who you lose out there, the stars are always watching and listening." Her head tilted back further as she traced patterns in the air. "I like to see how many shapes I can make, you know, from the brightest stars. Isn't that silly?"

"No," Frosyth shuffled a little closer. "Something that makes you happy is never silly."

A burst of light startled them both as the evening's element display started. They sat, watching the display from the vantage point of the hill. As they did, they spoke more about themselves.

Laminaria told more of her tales from her regiment, which Frosyth listened to with interest and the occasional question.

In turn, Frosyth explained his work at Rivergard, and the reenactments he had been a part of. As the elements burst and flashed, the two dragons found themselves enjoying not only the display, but the company they were keeping.

When the display was finally over, Frosyth stood and offered his paw to Laminaria. "We should get you back. I keep forgetting I'm an ice dragon and can stand the cold but you must be starting to get chilled."

The water dragoness hadn't been paying attention but he'd drawn attention to it, she realised how cold she had become, despite her cloak. She took his paw and shivered. "Phwaa it's a bit chilly." She took a step, stumbling. "Oh, um,"

Frosyth led her down the hill, encouraging her to move a little to warm up. "I'm sorry, should have checked on you sooner."

"Nah, won't be the first time I've frozen my tail off. At least I'm dry, that's all I'll say." They got to a clear patch and spread their wings. "Lead on."

They took to the skies and Frosyth set a slow pace. "So, how did you find them?"

"Glorious. I have to say, you picked a good spot for them. Thank you. You didn't have to do all that."

"I wanted to. If this is the only time you come to the north, I would like you to leave knowing you at least got a good show out of it."

Laminaria hummed. "And what if it's not the only time I come to the north?"

"Then I hope you would look me out and maybe I can involve you in one of the reenactments we do." He looked over his shoulder. "Maybe take a turn at being commanded for a change?"

"Bring it on. I'm a mouthy wench though. If I think you're being stupid, I'll be telling ya."

"I well believe it."

They landed, with Laminaria watching as Frosyth took great care in his landing. Now he had told her, she noticed the deliberate way he stepped, how he placed each paw with delicacy. He held his tail level, almost as a counter balance and his wings close to his body, rather than up.

He guided her back to the inn, dodging around groups of tipsy dragons, some of whom were singing uproaringly songs of less than savoury nature.

They got to the door of the inn where Frosyth stood as Laminaria went inside.

"Wait," he called.

Laminaria looked back. "Yes?"

"Are you going to be around for a few days?"

"I might be." Laminaria said gently. "Why?"

"Well, we reenact one of our battles in a couple of days and I wonder if you would like to come and see?"

"But if I see it, what reason do I have to return hmm?" She asked, a cheeky grin on her face.

"Oh, there are hundreds of battles in Northkeep history. You'd have to come up often to see them all." Frosyth canted his head. "But if you don't want to see more of Northkeep..."

"Oh twist my wing will ya? Sure, why not."

"Excellent." He practically pranced on the spot. "Meet me at the gate tomorrow morning."

Laminaria chuckled as she moved into the inn and up to the room she was sharing with Kry. She stepped in to see the ice dragon beside the little fireplace, his nose buried in a book.

“Enjoy yer date, Aria?”

Laminaria snorted as she took her cloak off and plopped down opposite him. “Wasn’t a date, Kry.”

Kryosin turned a page delicately. “What else would ye call it? A nice man takes a nice lady to a secluded spot to watch some fireworks. What else would you call it?”

“He was just being polite. It’s a clan thing, Kry.” She got up and filled a cup with wine. “You know, be polite to each other, curry favour. Maybe he was just trying to show us southerners that the northerners are not just barbarians.” She said, poking her tongue out. “Maybe he was just being nice.”

“Uhuh, yeah, just being polite.” The pages scraped together as he turned them.

“We both know you aren’t reading so stop it.” Laminaria said, taking the book from him. “What in blazes has got into you?”

Kryosin snatched the book out of her paw. “I was reading, and I don’t like that you are so careless that ye go off with some stranger.”

“Oh please. I was hardly in any danger. Besides, Northkeep wouldn’t be so boorish as to threaten another clan without cause. I may not be high up in my clan’s ranks,” she snatched the book back and threw it across the room. “But I’m still a member of a clan. It would be a pretty poor political mistake for a Northkeep to harm someone from Deep Seekers. I was in no danger.”

“Chah, if ye think that is enough to keep you safe.”

“What has gotten into you!” Laminaria snarled, her eyes flashing blue.

“I’m sorry if I think that my friend is being careless!” Kryosin snapped back, ice misting from his nostrils. “You just went off with him like you had known him forever. You didn’t even think how it could look.”

Laminaria paused, watching Kry closely. He had dropped his lazy accent and spoke in a gruff, clipped manner. She took a breath, clearing her anger slightly. “Are you angry because I could have got hurt, or are you upset I was with a man?”

The big ice dragon pulled his head back swiftly, his eyes widening. “Wh-what?”

“You heard me now answer me.”

“You know I don’t like you getting hurt, Aria. You know that. I just, didn’t want you strung along. Yer not, well, yer not known much on the romantic scene.” He fumbled with his cloak edge, wrapping it around his claws. “I just, don’t want you getting pulled along only for ye to get hurt when he loses interest.”

“Well that’s presumptuous.” Laminaria snapped. “Am I not good enough?”

“Th-that’s not what I said.” Kry babbled as Laminaria advanced on him.

“Am I not interesting enough? Pretty enough? Smart enough? Do you think he’ll cast me aside like some toy when he gets bored? You don’t even know him.” She prodded him, hard, in the chest. “I don’t even know him yet!”

“Yeah and all he knows of ye is that you’re a commander and have fun war stories.”

Laminaria paused, her mouth agape. “That, that isn’t all I am, Kryosin! I’m more than my rank and my title! I would have thought you would know that!”

“I do know that!” Kryosin yelled back. “But I-”

“You, you what!” Laminaria got in his face, her nose pressed against his. “Come on Kryosin, say it.”



The ice dragon gulped. "Don't, don't make me."

"Say. It."

"But I don't think, I," he tried to pull away but Laminaria moved with him.

"Come on, you and I both know it."

He lowered his head, Laminaria letting him, and took a shaking breath. "I love you, Aria."

Laminaria sighed as she sat down. "There it is."

Kryosin started to sob. "W-why. Why make me say it? Do you enjoy watching my pain?"

"No. I've hated watching you tear yourself apart since I realised." Laminaria whispered as she settled down. "Watching that terror on your face as you healed me hurt, more so because I knew you would never admit it. Couldn't admit it." She shook her head. "Dammit, Kry, you're unified for Ancestor's sake!"

"I, I know." He said, his voice barely a whisper.

"Is Rewlina not enough for you?"

"No, wait, yes she is, but that's not," Kryosin lay down opposite her. "I don't know. That's the answer, commander. I don't know."

Laminaria huffed. "As you rather sharply pointed out, I'm not much in the romance scene but I imagine this is a pretty big transgression. Does she know?"

"I don't think so. Or, if she suspects, she says nothing."

"You know Tax knows."

"Figured as much. Nothing gets past that woman."

"No, it doesn't." They went quiet, the only sound the occasional pop from the fire.

Eventually, Kryosin spoke, his voice hoarse. "I'm sorry, commander. When we get back, I'll request a transfer."

"A transfer?" Laminaria frowned, puzzled. "Kry, I don't want to get rid of you."

"But, this, we can't."

The water dragoness put a paw to her mouth to forestall a chuckle. "Kry, we've been friends for too long to just drop it."

"But, I—"

"If you want, I can give you some leave to think about things, get your head on straight. Spend some time with Rewlina, remind yourself why you are unified."

Kryosin snorted. "Because I am what Brutehorn likes."

"You're telling me there is nothing about Rewlina you love?"

Kry tilted his head and tapped his chin with a claw. "Well, she can sing real pretty."

"As pretty as Snowbird?" Laminaria rested her chin on one paw.

"No," Kryosin closed his eyes. "No her voice is deep, like water droppin' into a deep pool. It's like, yer being swept away. Carried by the melody. She does this thing, when she's singing, where mist wreathes her head and horns." He hummed. "We sometimes sit in our rooms, and she'll take out paper and quill and," he laughed, "she'll scritch away and balls of paper fly across the room. But, when she's done, she comes up with the most beautiful verses i've heard."

"Well now, sounds like you love her plenty." Laminaria laughed softly. "Now, what is it you love about me?"

"Wh—" Kryosin's eyes snapped open.

"Come on. You just waxed lyrical about Rewlina's voice and skills. Let's hear what you have to say about me. Or can you only praise dragonesses when they ain't here?"

"Now you're just being cruel." Kryosin snipped.

"Am I?" Laminaria raised her head.

He licked his lips. "You're brave and yer tenacious and, and, yer beautiful." He scratched his head.

"Hmm? Is that all?" Laminaria huffed. "Well now I'm disappointed. Where're my poetic descriptions of my good points?"

"Pack it in!" Kryosin chuckled a cushion at her.

There was a tense moment as the cushion slid down Laminaria's muzzle. She picked it up and hefted it. "You know, I don't know much about romance." The cushion bounced higher. "But I do think I knows the difference between love and infatuation. You don't love me, Kry," the cushion went higher. "You love the idea of me." She whipped her tail and smacked the cushion straight at Kryosin. The ice dragon was caught so off guard that he went slamming backwards as it beamed him across the face.

"Ow." He groaned. "Ye sure know how to strike a man, don't ye?"

"Know your enemy, that's what I keep saying." Laminaria got up. "Now, are you going to continue being a little silly or are we going to try and get some sleep?"

"Would ye prefer the bed and I can take my rightful place on the floor, with m'shame, and m' dignity." Kryosin groaned as he got up and placed the slightly battered cushion aside.

"Or you can be a grown up and my friend and remember that we've shared closer quarters than this." She walked up and locked her horns into his. "Come on, Kry. We've been friends too long for things to break apart like this."

"I know." He sighed. "I might take ye up on yer offer for some time, though. Ye know, get my head screwed on."

"Granted." She pulled away. "And, just to throw confusion into the mix, I do love ya, you big lump. Just, not how you want me to."

"Heh, yeah, I know, Aria. I do."

"I mean it, Kry." She whispered. "You're my best friend. I don't want to lose you over something like this."

"I don't either and, and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." Kry followed her to the bed ledge where there were blankets aplenty.

"Come here you lump." She dragged him over. "Now, I'm going out tomorrow."

"With mr hunky ice?"

She shoved him playfully. "Oi!"

"What, he is a handsome fellow."

"You're just jealous."

"A little." Kry blushed and winced as Laminaria glared at him. "What, he *is* handsome and he does seem somewhat interesting. A bit dorky, though."

"Well, maybe I like a bit dorky."

"That would be just like you, wouldn't it?"

Laminaria battered him with another cushion. "Anyway, I'm going with him to see a reenactment thing. Do you want to come along?"

"I think I'd just ruin things. You go along and I'll be here when you get back." He settled down, tactfully placing a line of cushions between them. "And try and have fun. I'll maybe take some time to go and see some old friends."

"Alrighty then."

"Seriously, have fun. Besides, I don't think he likes me much."

"Now why do you say that?"

"I may have given him the evils earlier." Kryosin shied away as Laminaria snorted at him. "I was being stupid, alright?"

"Clearly." She tucked her head by her wing. "But let's not dwell on it tonight, yeah?"

"Yeah."

They slept, back to back, heads turned away from each other.

The next morning, Laminaria awoke to find most of the blankets had been placed on her in the night and Kry had vanished. She glanced around, finding a scroll on a table. She got up and read it, frowning slightly.

"Aria,

*I did some thinking and I think I'll go see my folks. You know, get some clear air. Please do enjoy your time with Forsyth. He seems like a decent enough fellow and, you know, maybe he'll get ya to like the north. Who knows.*

*I'm sorry I was such an ass. I'll try and make it up to you. I'll see you back at barracks in a week. Just do me a favour and don't get hurt, yeah?*

Kry."

Laminaria sighed as she put on her satchel, placing the scroll into it, and put on her cloak. After a hearty breakfast, she left the inn, padding through the streets. They were strangely quiet this early in the morning. Perhaps most were sleeping off a hangover? Whatever the reason, she was glad of the quiet, it allowed her to think.

Maybe she was being reckless. Forsyth was a complete stranger, after all, and she was agreeing to follow him ancestor's knows where. Perhaps she should have gotten more details.

"Come on, Aria," she muttered, "you're not gonna say you're scared now, are ya?" Though she did feel a flutter of something, excitement? Or perhaps, trepidation? She shook her head again to clear it as she came with sight of the gate.

Forsyth was waiting, geared up in a heavy furred cloak, his Northkeep emblem shining proudly on his chest. He waved as she came closer. As she did, she noticed he was wearing a pair of goggles not unlike what a surgechaser wore.

"Punctual, I like it!" He grinned. "You ready for a longish flight?"

"Where are we going?" she asked, "you never told me."

"Didn't I?" He winced.

"No, so if you wouldn't mind?"

"Rivergard." He said. "It's a fair flight away but it's where I live and work. We have some preparations to do for tomorrow and I really should take part." He stretched his wings. "Since I'm kinda leading this particular one."

"Oh so you don't just take part in reenactments." She leapt into the air after him.

"I do, but I sometimes get to lead them. Tomorrow is one of those days."

Laminaria flew quietly beside him, her mind racing. What in all the hells had made her think this was a good idea? Kry was right, this was a little foolish. She didn't even know this man and she had jumped straight into agreeing to go with him to somewhere she didn't even know.

Forsyth's voice cut through her thoughts. "Are you well?"

"Oh, um, yes, of course." Laminaria stammered. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You seem caught in your thoughts, is all." He put a little space between them. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No!" Laminaria started. "I mean, no, not at all. I was just... thinking."

"Would you mind if I asked what about?"

"It's stupid, really." She went into a lazy glide. "Not worth bothering someone about."

"If I didn't want to be bothered, I wouldn't ask." He smiled gently, his face brightening as he did.

"If you don't want to tell me, a stranger, then that's ok but, if you don't mind me saying, a stranger is not a bad person to talk to. They can't judge you on what they know about you, because they don't know you."

"You're saying my thoughts are safe in your ignorance?" Laminaria scrunched up her face as she tried to rationalise that.

"Something like that." Frosyth rolled, almost lazily. "It is entirely up to you, of course. I'll not push you either way."

Laminaria sucked her lip. "I had a fight, with my friend."

"The big guy?" Frosyth frowned. "He didn't-"

"NO!" Laminaria growled. "No, he would never hurt me."

"I'm sorry, that was rather rude of me to assume. Forgive me for my presumptions."

"It's alright, I get it," Laminaria sighed. "No, we had an argument. That's probably a better word. Yeah. An argument. He can be a little too protective at times."

"Ah," Frosyth hummed. "Yes, he was rather, hmm, careful with you yesterday. I suppose me spiriting you away didn't sit too well with him."

"A huge understatement. He was rather bitter, if I'm honest. He thought I was being reckless."

"And are you?" Frosyth asked. "Being reckless, I mean?"

"I, no, I don't think so." She frowned. "I don't get the impression you'd hurt me."

"Recklessness isn't just putting yourself in danger." He drifted a little closer. "It's also jumping into something without thinking."

"Is that such a bad thing?" Laminaria said, her voice almost carried away by the wind.

"Depends, really, on the situation." Frosyth flapped up and moved to her other side. "Jumping without thinking into a fight is just silly. Taking a chance on a stranger, well, that is risky too. But sometimes it's worth taking risks." He caught her eye and held her gaze. "There is a thrill, isn't there, in the unknown. You don't strike me as someone who takes the safe option, Laminaria." He went into a dive.

Her cheeks burned as he left her somewhat stunned. She followed him wordlessly, the winds cooling her heated cheeks. Catching him, she grinned and pulled her wings in tighter.

Frosyth matched her and they dove down through the clouds until the wintery landscape came into view.

Laminaria pulled up, blinded by the light on the snow. Frosyth whipped up and around to join her.

"Are you alright?"

Laminaria winced. "It's so damn bright."

"Hold on," he flew in a tight circle as he dug into his satchel and took out a strip of blue cloth.

"Here, tie this around your eyes. It should be sheer enough to see through. I'm sorry I should have thought about that."

With some difficulty, Laminaria got the cloth around her eyes. She hadn't realised the snow would be so blinding. Peering through the cloth, she found her vision greatly reduced.

"I don't know how well I'll land."

"I'll guide you down." Frosyth said, his voice tinged with worry. "Come on, just follow my tail and I'll guide you in."

They descended in a slow, wide spiral, Laminaria keeping Frosyth in the center of her vision. He came into land on a wide field, galloping to a stop. Then he looked around and pointed. "Come down in my tracks. That's it."

Laminaria flared her wings and came in at a run, her feet crunching in the snow. Her foot hit one of Frosyth's pawprints and skidded on the compressed snow. She tumbled forward, right into the ice dragon who had braced himself as soon as he'd seen her skid.

"Whoop!"

"Ooft." They fell in a tumbled heap in the snow.

"Oh geesh I'm so sorry," Laminaria said as she scrambled upright, untangling herself from his cloak.

"It's fine. Are you ok?" He asked, standing up and shaking off loose snow.

"Yup, landed on something soft...and the snow I guess."

"Hey!" Frosyth chuckled, whipping his tail to send snow powder at Laminaria.

"Bleh, hey, there was no call for that." She grinned widely as she untied the cloth and handed it back to him.

"What do you mean?" Forsyth asked innocently. "I was only keeping my balance. Not my fault you got in the way."

"Oooh, you just wait. I'll get you back."

"Is that a promise?"

Laminaria paused then threw her head back, laughing loudly. "Ha! Well, we shall see won't we? Now, are you gonna show me this reenactment thingy?"

"Not today, that's tomorrow." He led her to what could only be described as a fort that had expanded into a village. "Wanted to bring you here first. This is Rivergard, my home. Well, my home away from home."

Laminaria's eyes cast about, noting the river to the west, the flat land beyond. Northkeep were no fools and had placed their fort in an advantageous position.

"I assume the fort came first."

"Yes, the village grew up around it. Long after the battles had dimmed." He gestured to a field across the river where banners flew. "And that there is where our first civil war battle took place. It would be one of many such battles. It is said, the field ran so red, that it stained the grass for years. A rather morbid topic, admittedly." He winced. "But war is never jolly."

"No," Laminaria said as she followed him to the fort. "No, even the retellings of tales, there is no joy in them."

They headed into the village, where Frosyth showed her around a museum dedicated to the many battles at Rivergard. Laminaria was fascinated, not only by the wealth of history, but by Frosyth's passion as he spoke of each battle, how it was fought, how it was won or lost.

"My family would love you," she said as she gazed at a piece of armour taken from one of the battles. "They really would. You're so passionate."

"Thank you, I think." Forsyth said. "What are Deep Seekers like?"

"In a word? Mad. But in a good way." She trailed around the room. "They are tight, unshakable. They support you no matter what you decide, even if you decide to go against the grain."

Forsyth cocked his head. "Against the grain?"

"They're scholars of all sorts of things. You don't get many in the army." She chuckled. "I'm an oddball, got too much fight and adventure in me so I went for the army. They have supported me, even if they don't agree with my life direction. That's what they're like, you know. We are family and family supports each other."

"You're proud of them."

"Damn right!" She flashed her teeth. "And I'll stand by them, always."

They finished their tour, Forsyth gesturing to the buildings a little more as he spoke. They stopped outside a house where Forsyth paused again.

"Hmm. Perhaps the waystation would be better. It would be rather unseemly for you to stay with me." He shrank down. "Not that I'm questioning your virtue, of course, but, you know."

Laminaria waved a paw. "Uhuh, Ancestor's forbid you offer some hospitality. If I were a bloke..."

"Same issue, really." He flushed.

"Oooh," Laminaria snorted a laugh. "I see. Well, you best have no guests round save old dearies wanting to bring you food for the poor wee lad who works so hard." She fluttered her eyelashes outrageously.

"Ok, now you're being ridiculous." Forsyth poked his tongue out.

"Yeah well, lead on to the waystation."

The waystation, it turned out, was something akin to an inn, though not as luxurious. Forsyth explained it was more for those not intending to stay for long.

After leaving her to settle, Forsyth returned to his own dwelling, leaving Laminaria to her own devices. She went exploring and took a flight over the river, landing by the field. Her eyes widened at the scatter of posts and markers, each one likely denoting a fallen soldier with no name.

She picked her way carefully around them, feeling the weight of war and time on the field as if she had been there all those years ago. Standing on a rise, she gazed out over the field, taking in the vast number of posts and stone mounds.

Wind whistled through them, singing a mournful dirge to the fallen. She looked back at Rivergard, then at the field. How many had fought for Northkeep to remain independent only to fall, and for Northkeep to be subsumed into Warfang's grasp.

It gave her much to think about as she returned and settled in for the night.

The morning brought sweet pancakes and hot tea, both of which were welcome. Laminaria ate quickly then followed a group of dragons as they headed out to another field.

Settling beside two ice dragons, she peered out onto the wide expanse and to the two large groups of dragons on either side.

"So how does this work?" She asked the ice dragoness beside her.

"They follow the beats of a battle." She said, pointing at the dragons, "See how each one has a strip of cloth? That gets pulled when they 'die'." She pointed at two dragons holding banners.

"Those are the commanders. Looks like it's Icyilis and, oh no, Forsyth."

Laminaria frowned. "Why oh no?"

"Forsyth tends to try and mix things up. They'll run it through and then suddenly, he'll change tactic. I'm surprised Icyilis agreed if I'm honest. It's not a true portrayal of the battle."

Laminaria growled lightly. "Maybe there's a reason he does it."

"Oh, there is," the other ice dragoness said. "He wants to see how a battle *would* have gone if this happened or that happened. As if that would change history. It's pathetic, really."

"I wouldn't say pathetic, he's good at making tactical decisions."

The ice dragonesses tittered. "Yeah, but he makes poor decisions otherwise."

"didn't he give you a bunch of flowers you were allergic to?"

They sniggered and Laminaria felt anger welling up.

"He is hopeless. If it isn't a spear or a battle he doesn't know a damn thing."

"Can't believe he even tried."

Water rippled around Laminaria's paw as she raised it and flicked it at the dragonesses. They squeaked then snarled at her. "Hey!"

"Just because someone is awkward doesn't mean they're hopeless. He tried, that's better than not trying at all." Laminaria growled back. "So kindly stop your shit talk and let me observe the battle."

"Chah, stuck up bitch."

"Look who's talking." Laminaria snorted. "Now shush."

"Ah, well said indeed."

The soft, sibilant voice startled her and Laminaria whipped around, her eyes alighting on an elegant figure. Snowbird stood on her other side, head tilted slightly, an amused smile on her lips. Laminaria noted the polished horns, the perfectly manicured claws. How her cloak was held by a sparkling gem brooch that matched a set of rings on her horns. All in all, she was the picture of elegance.

"Thank you. You're the Snowbird, right?"

The dragoness opened her mouth and closed her eyes, her shoulders shaking. It took Laminaria a moment to realise she was laughing.

"A charming moniker, but yes, that is me." Her lips quirked up in a smirk. "And you are the dragoness that has caught Frosyth's eye." They both turned as horns sounded and the gathered forces started to charge at each other. "I saw you with him at my performance. He never misses one, you know."

A heat flushed up Laminaria's cheeks as she regarded the beautiful dragoness and she realised she was jealous.

"He doesn't?"

Snowbird shook her head, causing some of her jewellery to clink. "No, nor I any of his. Students of the arts must support each other after all." She looked side long at Laminaria. "Would you not say?"

"I suppose so." Laminaria winced as Frosyth's force was pushed back by the first ranks of his opponent. "He must think highly of you."

Snowbird laughed silently again. "I should think so, since he is my patron."

"Patron?" the water dragoness asked, feeling suddenly ashamed for her previous bout of jealousy.

"Indeed. Without his patronage, I may not have got to where I am." The ice dragoness' lips pouted as the two 'armies' clashed again. "Ooh, that one must have smarted."

"I didn't know." Laminaria found herself unable to look away from the battle yet didn't want to ignore her new companion. "He must love music."

"He loves interesting things. I was a curiosity," Snowbird clucked her tongue. "A waif, with a voice that he said reminded him of a glorious bird. To those he considers of interest to him, he affords much of his attention. He does not like to forget."

The two dragonesses fell silent for a while as the battle raged, both sides giving a good account of themselves.

"Why do some speak so ill of him?" She asked as she watched Frosyth's force deliberately give ground.

Snowbird looked around Laminaria at the two dragonesses still seated near them.

"Hmm. Well you couldn't have picked worse companions to seat yourself next to. Both of them have been objects of Frosyth's affections but could not understand his particular way of care."

She examined her claws as said dragonesses glared at her. "They are not worthy of his affections and do not appreciate his skills." She gestured to the field.

The dragonesses fell into watching in silence again.

Laminaria could tell, immediately, when Frosyth changed the tactic. She gathered, for this particular battle, Frosyth was supposed to pincer; he'd started to set up for it. Instead, he forced a wedge. His force was much larger than the opposing one; a wedge didn't make that much sense. Then she watched as Frosyth's force forced the smaller one apart, allowing the edges to be picked off.

Laminaria grinned; he wasn't a bad tactician but he'd made a fatal error. He'd led it directly.

His cloth was "captured" and his force made to surrender.

"It is a very particular skill though." She said as she watched the dragons help each other off the field.

"It is, and one few appreciate." Snowbird chuckled throatily. "Though I suspect from your rapt expression, you are one of the few." They watched as a figure peeled away from the others.

"And here he comes now. I should leave you both to enjoy each other's company." She got up and turned, padding softly away.

Laminaria nodded then raised her head and called after her. "Wait, what is your actual name?"

Snowbird paused and looked over her shoulder. "Ah but what is in a name hmm? But since you ask it, I shall give it. It is Chilali. And what shall I call you?"

"Laminaria."

Chilali raised a paw to her lips, smirking. "Laminaria, there's a song in that name." She spread her wings. "Ta ta for now. Give my regards to Frosyth." She took off, spraying up snow as she did.

Frosyth landed a moment later, his head turning to follow the retreating figure. He was geared up in a strange armour, one she recognised from the museum.

"Hey, you sure you should be wearing that?" Laminaria asked.

Frosyth took off the helm. "It's pot metal. Just supposed to look like the real thing." He set it aside, his face turned away from the ice dragonesses who glared at him.

"So, what did you think?" He asked as he sat beside her, steam rising from him.

"That was incredible; all the excitement of war with none of the casualties." Laminaria shoved him playfully. "But you over reached."

"Yeah, I got caught up in it. The pincer originally didn't work; the other force was able to break out of it, so I tried a wedge. It probably would have worked if I had been a smart commander and not been right at the front."



"I think you commanded well."

The dragonesses snorted and tittered. "Pfft, what would you know of it?"

"Yeah, he's always making stupid changes. Why can't you just stick to the script, Frosyth?"

Frosyth lowered his head. "Oh, because you're too much of a coward to do some real fighting."

Laminaria snarled again at them. "Didn't I already tell you two to pack it in? What the hell would you know? Either of you soldiers?"

They shook their heads.

"Oh, so you're scholars of warfare then?"

Another set of head shaking.

"Ah, I see, so you're just opinionated bitches then, that it?"

They looked at each other then at Laminaria, affronted. Before they could say anything,

Laminaria drew herself up.

"Allow me to introduce myself; Commander Laminaria, of the 52nd regiment. I might know a thing or two about command." She advanced and they skittered backwards. "Now, unless you got something nice to say, I suggest you bugger off."

They turned tail, sneering, and took to the sky.

"Thank you, you didn't have to do that." Frosyth mumbled.

"Ah they were starting to annoy me." Laminaria said. "They don't get to say those things without consequence."

"They weren't wrong." Frosyth shrugged his wings. "I am a coward."

"Why? Because you don't fight for real?" She clucked her tongue. "It isn't for everyone. It takes a particular type of training and mindset to do it for any length of time. Besides, world needs its scholars as much as it needs its soldiers. Not wanting to fight ain't anything to be ashamed of."

"You don't understand. I am a coward." He put aside his gear. "I couldn't fight, if I wanted to. I couldn't take a life."

Laminaria sat, her tail curled around her feet. "Can I ask why?"

"It's stupid." Frosyth looked into her face and saw her peering back, not a hint of judgement on her features. "Alright, it is a small story.

We were out hunting when I was younger. I'd got behind somehow and I heard something crying. I, uh, nosed in the bushes and I found this bird." He pulled his paws apart to indicate its size. "About this big. One of the winter birds and, well, it had a broken wing. I looked at it, and the wing, and realised it would never fly again. I knew it would be cruel to let it live so I," he winced, "I snapped its neck, right there in the snow. I cried, I'd never taken the life of anything before.

My friends found me and started teasing me about crying over a bird. They said 'it's just a bird' and I thought, but that bird had a life and I just took it without really thinking." He sniffed. "We continued the hunt and we found something and, well, I just couldn't. The bird, it had no life left to live. It would have died, slow and painful. But this boar, it was in its prime and it was full of life and, I just couldn't." He lowered his head again to stare at the ground.

Laminaria ducked her head to meet his eye. "Compassion is not weakness. Do not mistake a gentle heart for a cowardly one. Some of the fiercest soldiers I have are the most compassionate. Look at Kry; he wouldn't harm a fly unless that fly was about six foot tall and looking to take a chunk out of a soldier he was trying to heal. Then he'd fight, aye, and he'd fight

to defend that soldier with all the ferocity a good heart can muster.” She raised his chin with a paw. “Compassion takes strength, Frosyth.”

“I’d make a terrible soldier, though.”

“You would, but you’d make a good healer.” Laminaria smiled softly. “One doesn’t need to take a life, to prove themselves. You treated that little bird with dignity. How many others would have just walked by, shrugged, and gone ‘oh well, it’ll be dead soon’,”

“Would you have?”

“No, I’d have done the same as you. Hell, I’d even have buried it with ceremony.”

“Really?” Frosyth wiped his eyes.

“Yeah. Should have seen me when I lost my first fish. I was a mess. My dad thought I was being really silly. It was a fish. But it was *my* fish and I was supposed to care for it and so I buried it.”

She clucked her tongue. “I think the rock is still there.”

“You keep fish?” Frosyth asked as he gathered up his gear.

Laminaria helped him carry it down as she answered. “Yup. in a pond. I like the colourful ones and I keep some really nice ones in there. Been expanding my collection.” She raised her paw, forming a water ball. “Being able to do this makes collecting them so much easier.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of folk keeping fish to look at.”

“Why not? Easy to keep. You just pop them in a pond with some plants and some beasties to feed them and tada, you have a fish pond with pretty fish.”

“I think I’d like to see that.” They handed in the gear to a couple of dragons who loaded it up on a wagon.

“Maybe if you ever visit Warfang city, you can call on me?”

Frosyth hummed. “Is that an invitation?”

“Um, yeah, yeah sure. An invitation.” Laminaria flushed. “Only if you happen to be in the area, you know?”

They flew back to Rivergard, arriving just before snow started to fall.

“Looks like you might be here until this clears. You got a bit off a journey to get back to the portal.” Frosyth said, guiding her back to the waystation.

“Yeah but should only be a day or so.”

“If you like, I can accompany you back?” he rubbed his neck. “Only as a guide and, you know, I can maybe find places to stop if things get bad.”

“Why Frosyth, I would almost suggest you didn’t want me to go.” Laminaria teased.

“Maybe.” He blushed. “I, I’ve enjoyed your company and, I’ll admit, I’m loathed to lose it.”

Laminaria’s eyes widened. “I, I was,”

“I know, you probably meant it as a joke.” His blush deepened. “But I mean it. I have liked your company. Perhaps I’m being, hmm, too forward?”

“Oh, no,” Laminaria chuckled throatily. “No, I’ve enjoyed your company too.”

“Maybe you can come back some time and enjoy it some more?” He asked, then covered his head with a wing. “I’m sorry, that was terrible.”

Laminaria moved his wing aside. “Maybe I can. Who knows, you might have made a northern convert of me yet.”

They locked eyes, aventurine meeting amethyst, gazes softening as they stood on the threshold of the waystation.

“Promise that you’ll come back here sometime?”

Laminaria wasn't one for promises, usually. She could rarely keep the ones where folk asked her to return safe but this was different. "I promise, I'll come back and see you some time. This has been fun."

Frosyth leaned forward then paused and pulled back, smiling shyly. "Just, send me a letter when you're thinking of coming back. And, if you're agreeable, could we write?"

"To each other?" Laminaria nodded. "Yes, I'd like that."

"Then, if the weather clears tomorrow, I'll guide you back to the portal."

"Alright."

"Until then," he waved a wing.

Laminaria raised her paw to her cheek, feeling the gentle heat. She walked inside, her footsteps soft, carrying her to the small room. Her heart fluttered a little and she chided herself gently.

"Oh come on, Aria, you're a bit old for this sort of girlish behaviour." She laughed to herself, settling down with a sigh.

True to his word, Frosyth guided her back to the portal. He knew shortcuts and ways around the area that she would never have guessed at. It took them two days but they reached the nexus by midday on the second day. They landed, Laminaria immediately searching for her papers to travel.

Frosyth extended a paw. "Fair travels, Laminaria of Deep Seekers."

Laminaria put her paw in his, surprised when he lowered his muzzle and kissed the back of it.

"Thank you, Frosyth of Northkeep. I am grateful for your hospitality and the kindness you've shown me." The strange formality of their words made the situation more awkward than anticipated.

"You are very welcome, and you will have a friendly hearth when you come back." He winked.

"Try and come in summer; we put on a really big show then."

"I'll hold you to it." She pulled her paw away with some reluctance and padded to the portal.

Handing over her pass, she looked back once to see Frosyth waving at her before she stepped through and was transported to the main hub in Warfang.

For a moment, she felt the chill winds of Northkeep nip at her heels before the comparatively warmer air of the main hub hit her. She was home but a tiny part of her wished for the winter skies already.

On her return to the estate, she was greeted warmly by her clan who enquired about her trip.

"Did you have fun?"

Laminaria glanced up at the darkening sky, the stars starting to show through. "You know, I did have fun. It was worth it."

"Bring back anything nice?"

Laminaria glanced at the back of her paw. "Only memories." She went to her pond and gazed at the fish as they swam in a school around the reeds. Maybe she should get some fish that looked like snow, or some that looked like a winter sky.

These thoughts swam around her mind as the fish did, drawing her into a state of dreamy satisfaction. Yes, that would be grand indeed.

Above, the stars twinkled as lights from the north danced across the sky, lightening the winter night.

