

Look, whatever they tell you, I didn't *mean* to steal a dragon. I just wanted to find my dad--who I hadn't seen in over eight years, if you didn't know. And, yes, taking my new 'friend's bag seemed like the best way to accomplish that, at the time. I just didn't expect there to be a dragon in it.

Besides, I practically saved the guy's life, so he should have been grateful, right?

"So, ah....th-those guys aren't *dead*, are they?"

I threw a quick glance over at Dailen as we ran down the dark street, my silver earrings jangling against my face as I wondered once again how such a conscientious person could even bring himself to steal something, let alone a dragon. "Does it matter?"

Dailen bit his lip several times in succession, his brow creasing in worried folds..
"Well...ah..."

"No, they're not. They're only *resting*." I reached up to undo my updo with a deft twist, frowning as my boot splashed muddy water and who-knew-what-else on the edges of my dress. Didn't anyone ever clean up around here? "Which is why we need to get out of here before they wake up."

"O-Oh. Right. I knew that." Silence reigned for a moment, save for the sound of our pounding boots on the stone. "So, can I have my bag back?"

I instinctively pulled the strap of the bag in question closer to my body, hiding the crease in my brow at the weight inside. I hadn't had a chance to look in it yet--what with running for my life and all--but my curiosity was starting to burn as much as my shoulder muscles were.

“Not yet. When you tell me everything you know about Kaiden Dyran, then I’ll give it back to you.”

He hesitated for a moment, his fingers fidgeting with each other.. “Well, he...”

“Not *now*, idiot.” I fought the urge to roll my eyes at his naivety. “I want to actually listen to that part. Which means we need to find somewhere to hide first.” I threw him a pointed look, hoping that he’d get the hint. I wasn’t very familiar with this country yet, let alone this town. And it wasn’t like there was any deviance in color to distinguish each dirty street from the next, unlike in Galdania. Seriously, was there *anything* here that wasn’t brown or gray?

Realization finally flickered in Dailen’s eyes, like a match that took two strikes to catch fire. “Oh! Yeah, um...this way?”

The question in his voice wasn’t very reassuring, but I didn’t have much choice otherwise. I followed him as he turned down a side street, weaving through the alleys and everything as if he knew what he was doing.

Well, he’d better.

“There’s...There’s a place I always go...” His brow furrowed in confusion as he stopped, looking around. When I did the same, I wanted to scowl.

“You led us to a *dead end*?”

“No! I mean, I...I didn’t think it was...”

I frowned, scanning the area quickly. I knew our pursuers were probably not far behind us--I'd had prior experience with them--so going back wasn't really an option. It looked like there had been some buildings here at some point, but all that was left now was a heap of bricks and rubble piled up against the alley wall. With nothing else in sight and nowhere else to go, I strode towards it, lifting a foot and grimacing at how dirty the edge of my dress now was. It would take hours to scrub the filth out, if I could even find any clean water in this town.

Dailen's eyes widened as he watched me. "You shouldn't do that!"

Before a sarcastic response could leave my mouth, an unfamiliar laugh cut through the air.

"Well, well, what have we here? Got yourself a girlfriend, Shale?"

I turned around with a frown to see a rather tall redhead standing in front of Dailen, a triumphant smile on his face as he looked me over,. then raised an eyebrow at Dailen. "And a gifted one at that. My, my, you've turned into quite the rebel, haven't you?"

My senses went on high alert at that. How did he know about my gifts?

Dailen, meanwhile, looked back and forth between the two of us with his mouth hanging open rather unattractively, as if he couldn't decide which issue was more important. "Leave her alone, Blaze. And she's not my girlfriend."

Blaze laughed, throwing a wink in my direction before smirking at Dailen. "Sure, whatever you say. Though it's not important anyway." He glanced back over at me, his gaze settling on the bag slung over my shoulder. "I didn't think you'd go for such a priss, though. You know that's what she is, right?" The smile he gave Dailen made me want to smack him

across the face. “Just give me the bag back and I’ll let her go, ‘kay? We can pretend like this never happened.”

I could see despite Blaze’s obvious fakery that Dailen was considering it. I stashed my annoyance for later, looking for a way back down the pile that wouldn’t have me covered in dirt.

“B-But...”

A chunk of brick shifted beneath me and I nearly lost my footing, a curse slipping out under my breath that would have given my mother a heart attack were she able to hear it. The noise caught the attention of both boys; Dailen’s eyes went wide as saucers, Blaze’s narrowed in a frown. Luckily, my feet found purchase beneath the brick, meeting what sounded like metal as I regained my balance. But my relief was quickly shattered by Blaze’s harsh voice.

“Get *down* from there!”

Annoyance pricked at me again. Seriously, what did everyone have against me climbing this scrap pile? Yes, I was in a dress, and yes, I wasn’t sure the dirt would ever clean out of the delicate fabric, but I could still handle myself.

As if to prove me wrong, the heap of metal shifted again, and I hopped down to the ground just in time to see a large, beady eye blink open from below where I had just been standing.

Blaze swore under his breath and drew his sword, shoving Dailen behind him as he eyed the pile. “Take your girlfriend and go hide. Now.”

Dailen glanced over at me nervously, but I gave him a hard look, jumping back as a rock crashed to the ground at my feet. Dull, yellow metal glinted through the gaps in the rubble, overlapping in thin teardrop shapes like...scales. Dailen gasped and nearly stumbled backward as he watched the creature, wide-eyed. I simply found myself fascinated.

As the creature stood up, I caught sight of leathery folds, like translucent canvas, peeking through the top of the mound, which confirmed my suspicions. The creature swung its heavy head around to look at us all, shedding bits of rocks and dirt as it did. Its ember orange eyes settled on me with a glare. I suppose I couldn't blame it for being unhappy—I wouldn't want to be woken from my nap by a bunch of little pests climbing on and shouting around me either.

Blaze wasted little time in acting as his eyes took in the dragon, noting where its gaze was and settling his own on its feet, where gleaming silver claws rested on the stone like curved needles. I could practically see the gears in his head turning as he moved behind it, keeping one eye on me and the dragon as he raised his sword.

The dragon lifted its upper lip in a cranky snarl, showing its long, very sharp teeth, the tips stained red with blood. I probably should have been afraid at that point, but I wasn't. If anything, I was just...curious. I'd never seen a dragon up close that wasn't fat and lazing around a pen, adorned with jewels and other such things. This one was lean, muscular, and looked like it could kill me with one swipe of its claw.

And yet, I didn't think it would.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Blaze poised with his sword to strike. Without thinking about what might happen, I yelled. "What are you *doing*?"

The dragon whipped its head around just as Blaze plunged his blade into its foot. It let out an enraged roar, nostrils flaring as it swiped at Blaze with its claw. He pulled his blade out, dodging out of the way, but wasn't fast enough. The dragon's claw caught his sleeve, tearing through it and his skin with a sickening rip that made my stomach turn. He scowled. Clapping his free hand over the wound, he backed away from the dragon, giving me a rather hateful glare. "Are you *trying* to get me killed?"

"I don't know!" I shot back, too frustrated to think about what I was saying. "Is there some reason I shouldn't be?"

A frown spread across his face at that, and he ducked down to avoid a pass of the dragon's spiked tail. "Well, considering that I'm your only chance of getting out of here alive, yes, I think there is!"

"You're the only reason I'm *in* danger now!"

Blaze scowled but didn't respond, jumping back to avoid another swipe from the dragon's claw. He was running out of room between the dragon and the wall, and the dragon didn't seem like it was going to stop until he was dead. As much as the guy infuriated me, I really didn't want to see someone killed tonight. Besides, now that he'd angered it, who knew if it'd come back after me once it was done?

But what exactly could I do against a dragon? I didn't have a sword, and it's not like I could just ask the dragon to back off like I could back home. Or...could I?

It seemed like a long shot, but, hey, a long shot was better than no shot, right? I'd not used my gifts much before, but I'd been told quite often before that I was 'persuasive', almost to an eerie extent. I once convinced Marcel to let me 'borrow' one of the Viyer's horses by planting the thought in his head that I'd been given permission. Of course, he'd

gotten in quite a bit of trouble afterward, and I can't say I didn't feel guilty, but maybe that same tactic would work now.

I closed my eyes, reaching out to the dragon's mind and cautiously brushing the fringes of its thoughts. The cold, sinister corruption of its mind sent a shudder down my spine that I tried hard to suppress. It was darker than any mind I'd ever reached out to, and I nearly pulled out on instinct. But Blaze was keeping the dragon distracted, so I pushed away the urge and focused on sending my thoughts to the dragon—calming things, like images of it peacefully sleeping as before in its nice little pile of rubble. The dragon resisted, trying to shake my thoughts off, but I pushed harder, insisting as soothingly as I could that this wasn't worth all its trouble. Blaze was little more than a silly nuisance anyway, so why should it let him ruin its lovely rest?

I opened my eyes and looked over at the dragon. Blaze still stood tense, watching the dragon, but it was no longer attacking him, which was good. I released a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding and closed my eyes again. Now that the dragon was calm, I focused on sending one simple command to its mind. *Sleep.*

It took a moment, but with one final growl, the dragon curled back up where it had first been sleeping, yawning and closing its eyes. Blaze stared at the dragon, a tense and suspicious frown still drawing his brow together. I raised an eyebrow at him.

"What, no thank you?"

He swung his gaze toward me, flicking it briefly back to the dragon, then at me. "How did you do that?"

I scoffed. “Well, excuse me for saving your life, Grumpy. A simple thank you would be nice.”

“No.” Blaze shook his head, looking back down at his wound and frowning, his gaze tense like he was thinking something through. He glanced up at me again, his eyes piercing and almost accusatory.. “*How* did you do that?”

I was about to reply when a different voice cut me off, much softer and calmer than Blaze’s. “Need some help, dear?”

Geez, what was with all the people dropping in? Was this some sort of party I wasn’t aware of? And where had Dailen gotten to, anyway?

When I turned around, though, I found myself staring at a woman who made all my annoyed thoughts stop. She looked so graceful and calm that she may have been a river spirit, for those who believed in those old stories. Her skin was a rich, deep color like the dark woods of the forests back home, a strong contrast to the bright blue garments flowing down to nearly touch her sandaled feet. Her smile was as warm as her eyes, as she took everything in calmly, as if this sort of thing was entirely normal to her.

Blaze simply looked her up and down briefly, almost annoyed. “Took you long enough.” He waved his hand in my direction, rather dismissively. “Now, will you please get her out of here?”

The woman glanced between the two of us, noting the dragon as well as Blaze’s wound. “You should get that looked at. Take Dailen and the girl; I will take care of this.”

Whoa, whoa. Take me *where*? I mean, yeah, the guy had at least been trying to ‘save’ me, but that didn’t mean I was going anywhere with him. The only things I needed was this

bag I was still carrying--which was still making my arm burn from the weight--and Dailen. Maybe I could slip away while these two talked.

Before I could get very far, however, a sharp pain exploded in my temple. Darkness swam in waves through my vision and I hissed in a breath, my head pounding like it'd been trampled by a thousand horses. My hands went numb, my feet unsteady as the ground started tilting up toward me. The last thing I saw before I blacked out was Blaze's incorrigible smirk.

"You're not getting away that easily, Priss."

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