

WILD WASTES 4



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Wild Wastes
-Book 4-

By Randi Darren

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Dedicated:

To my wife, Kristin, who encouraged me in all things.

To my son, Harrison, who will always at least try with a smile.

To my daughter, Amelia, who enjoys waking me up in the middle of the night to say “hi dada”.

To my family, who always told me I could write a book if I sat down and tried.

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The Selfless Hero Trilogy(Arand):

[Otherlife Dreams](#)

[Otherlife Nightmares](#)

[Otherlife Awakenings](#)

[Omnibus Edition\(All Three\)](#)

Dungeon Deposed Trilogy(Arand):

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[Dungeon Deposed 3](#)

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Fostering Faust Trilogy(Darren):

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Veil Verse Novels:

Cultivating Chaos(Arand):

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Chapter 1

Cycling the weapon to the left, Vince pulled the trigger, only to shift it a bit more to the left and pull the trigger again. The slide came back and locked into position.

The black, insect-like monsters kept charging at him.

Vince turned and tossed the pistol Felix had given him to a Legion security member.

Then he casually flicked his glowing energy weapon across in front of himself and took the top part of the monster's head off. It hit the ground and slid forward a short distance before coming to a stop in front of him.

Vince sniffed and took the reloaded pistol back from the Legionnaire.

Except the slide was still locked back.

Turning to look at the Legionnaire, Vince found they were actually an Undead monster now. The creature shambled toward him with its arms raised.

Whipping his blade around, Vince found his right arm was gone. It was hacked off at the elbow, and blood and gore pumped out endlessly.

In the next moment, his eyes popped open, and he found himself staring up at the ceiling of his bedroom. Above him were the beams that were always there.

Exactly as they should be.

Letting out a slow breath, Vince lifted a hand and pressed it to his face. He tried to push the nightmare out of his thoughts.

It'd only been a short time since the world his brother Felix hailed from had completely come apart. Around a month, give or take a few days.

It'd been an even shorter time since Vince had officially handed off most government responsibilities to Felix, Elysia, and Felicity.

A change that he'd become extremely and incredibly grateful for.

Problems that'd bogged him down in endless circular thoughts were now gone. Issues with food, resources, materials, and the economy were no longer his problem.

Elysia, Felicity, and Felix had swooped in, cleared it all up, and then handed it back to him and Yaris with instructions on what to handle and do to keep things on track.

Felicity was to Felix what Elysia was to Vince. Both Elves had worked together in the past— one had, in fact, trained the other— which made it all incredibly easy. They simply sat down, exchanged notes, information, and data, and then planned it all out.

Rolling over, Vince found Yaris next to him.

The pregnant and feisty Royal Elf had surprised him this year.

She had stepped up and become the Fes for his nation after single-handedly beating down every woman in his life. She claimed him and his affections in front of the entirety of the city.

Wrapping an arm around her, he pulled her against him and then pressed tightly to her back.

“Mmm, another nightmare, my love?” mumbled the sleepy Elf. Apparently, that’d been enough to wake her.

“Yeah. Not as bad,” replied Vince.

“Was it about the Tri-Iliance and their invasion? Karya, Daphne, or Green being... harmed?” asked the Queen of Yosemite. She was shifting around in his arms now, her voice having gained an edge of wakefulness to it.

“No,” he said with a smirk. He hadn’t had a single nightmare about any of that since they’d all been returned to him. Felix had simply resurrected his Dryads, and Runner, the Overgod, brought back Petra in a new body.

The invasion also didn’t rate very highly in his dreams either. They were a non-issue anymore given the treaty. The use of the Dragon-soul bombs had created an entire line of wastelands which kept the whole area a demilitarized zone.

Before he could explain the dream, Yaris had flipped over and was now facing him.

When he’d first met her, he found her looks to be absolutely captivating. She was most certainly an Elf and had the same general shape and heft that they all seemed predisposed to.

However, that was where her similarities to the other Elves ended.

Yaris was pretty in a way he'd never seen in an Elf. Her features were delicate and warm, while clearly a blend of all three races. She seemed to toe the line as a true Elven hybrid.

A dark-blond Elf with bright-blue eyes who had suspiciously gained the ability to pierce his thoughts and heart.

Reaching up with one hand, she laid it on his cheek and gazed into his face.

"No, it wasn't the Tri-lliance. Nor our temporary losses. Or would-be losses, either. There's no hurt in the eyes of my love. Couldn't have been the East either, their power vacuum is unrelated to us.

"Obviously, it wasn't Berenga, either. My dear, beautiful Fes was with us this evening for dinner and afterward. Nothing odd came up," Yaris continued.

Vince was still rather amused at how hard Yaris unmistakably doted on and cared for Berenga. Somewhere in their relationship, the Elf had apparently shifted her entire mentality toward the Orc.

She held her up as the pinnacle of a wife to Vince and demanded all others dare to be her equal. Even going so far as to invite the Orc into bed with Vince and herself.

As an active participant, no less.

Berenga had declined the first several times, though recently, bashfully, she had finally accepted after Yaris kept asking. All she'd done, though, was kiss Yaris a few times while Vince played with both of them.

Clearly, Yaris was aiming for more but was going very slow with the Orc.

"It wasn't about me or Verix, was it? You said you haven't dreamed about that since it happened," asked the Royal Elf. Then she shook her head. "No, it wasn't me or your conquest of me or my home.

"There's no reason it'd be anything to do with the emperor in the west, or his foolish civil war. Petra cleaned that up already and took most of it over for us. All that's left of them are several cities."

Yaris' sharp eyes were gazing intently into his.

Vince was actually enjoying himself now, listening to the powerful Elf rattle off anything and everything it could be.

“It’s not our babies,” she said with a shake of her head. She reached down and laid her free hand on her slightly swollen stomach. “Whenever it’s our children, you rush off to check on them or start to touch me there.

“Nor is it Petra, obviously. Since her return from the dead and acceptance as the lead general of Yosemite, you’ve been quite happy about that,” continued Yaris.

Against the advice of the Overgod Runner, they’d simply brought Petra back to Yosemite as who she was. They’d very likely blasphemed the gift they’d been given as they had haggled, browbeaten, and bartered back and forth with the Overgod until she’d been given back her original Soldier-ant body.

Just one that was no longer going to be beholden to a clock. She’d been returned to life, given eternal youth, and would be impervious to the effects of time.

Then they had promptly reinstated her as the lead general of Yosemite. Much to the chagrin and then joy of the populous.

Coupled with the return of the Dryads later, a massive shift in the religion of Yosemite had come into being. The Dryads of Yosemite were being venerated as priestesses of life and death.

They were the voices of the living and the voices of the dead. To the point that they’d begun immediately developing faith-based powers.

Every Dryad of Yosemite was akin to a priestess now.

The Dryads of the Wooden Heart grove under Meliae’s mother Mila had been spared that and were as they’d always been. Much to their own relief.

Upon Petra’s return to Yosemite at Vince’s side, Thera had been ecstatic. Within minutes of greeting her, the Dark Elf had demanded Petra complete a full return. She was the first and loudest person to suggest Petra take over the military again.

Thera was now a general in her own right who commanded several armies, though she reported to Petra as she’d wished. Along with a Necromancer and a Dragon who’d been working with both Petra and Thera.

They'd both been elevated to the rank of general and given armies composed of elements that'd be more useful to their abilities and race.

Duke Gerard of Denver had been incredibly pleased that a Necromancer such as himself had been raised to a position of authority and trust.

The Duke of Vegas, the Dragon Heint, had been equally thrilled at the elevation of a peer.

"Ah, your brother and the fall of his world. That's it," Yaris proclaimed accurately with a slow nod of her head. Then she leaned in and kissed Vince. The kiss lingered far longer than something that was just cursory. Eventually, she let it end and then nuzzled him, pressing in close to him. "It'll be fine, husband. Felix is very strong and he's clearly moving things the way he wants.

"Admittedly, the technology growth he wanted is slower now due to his homeworld falling, but it's still moving ahead. We can even speak with our vassals so easily now that he had those telegraph poles and wires put in.

"We're doing all we can to support him as he supports us. Though... you know, I must confess it, I wasn't very pleased with the idea of Yosemite and Legion becoming one. Not at first, at least.

"I was rather happy as your queen. Now, though, after it's done, it's quite lovely. All we ended up doing was changing some elements of our government, but the rest hasn't changed.

"Felix acts as an emperor for us all and supports us quite well. Not to mention, being his sister-in-law gives me quite a few perks. It's somewhat fun to go visit Legion and have all those very smart and talented people rush off to help me with anything they can. I try not to do it often, as I wouldn't want to wear out such a warm welcome."

I... forgot that she gets chatty at night.

Probably shouldn't have woken her. Now she's— oh, I can fix it.

Vince pushed Yaris down into their bed and kissed her hotly. He moved his hand up her nightdress and started to fondle her even as he pushed his knee up between her legs.

“I need you, my Queen,” he said huskily after breaking the kiss. “I need my Yaris. My Elven beauty. Now.”

Yaris stared up at him with wide eyes and a very red face, though she was grinning from ear to ear.

“Then, by all means, have your queen, my King. Have what’s yours by right, law, and tradition. My husband... my Vince,” whispered the Elf. She reached up and started caressing his face once again.

He was grateful that while she was the Fes, she was still an Elf at heart.

Because if she wanted to fight him for it, she’d probably be able to give him a true struggle. To the point that he’d likely have to knock her out completely or kill her to get a chance to bed her.

Only Yaris could compete with him at a physical level. Not even Taylor or Ramona could.

Somehow, someway, the rather willowy Elf had trained herself to the point of becoming an elite soldier, then offset her physical prowess with magic.

She was actually terrifying when she let loose.

He rather enjoyed how warm and cuddly Yaris was, given her strength.

Kissing her again, Vince set about bedding his Royal Elven wife.

A woman he’d married for a political reason and then found she was a truly impressive specimen among all others, long after he’d already stolen her from the world.

Walking through his home, Vince was quite happy.

Dryads wandered this way and that as they minded the family and went about their tasks. They were the glue that held everything together at the base. The women who provided him with children and acted as mothers to any child he had, regardless of the birth mother.

Berest sprinted past him at full steam being chased by her brothers, Keith and Vince. The three of them giggled and laughed as

they powered down the hall.

The small Orc was a mirror image of her mother, Berenga, just with a much lighter skin tone. Keith and Vince resembled one another, but also looked a lot like himself. The three of them were always getting into something.

Depending on what that mischief was, the leadership role often changed.

“Hi, Dad!” called Berest blowing past him.

“Hi, Dad!” said Keith as well, chasing after his sister.

Vince the second paused in front of his father to give him a hug. Then ran off without saying anything at all.

Coming along behind them, and at a much more reserved pace, was Mila.

Many of the younger children, and every single one of the Elven children, gathered around her. The young girl gave Vince a smile as she walked by, walking hand in hand with Falaein Junior and Ami, his daughter with Elysia.

“Father,” she said as she moved past him with a smile. She was a reserved and very emotionally in-tune little girl. “Love you.”

The simple words heralded a chorus of “Love you”'s from the other children. All waved at their father as they trooped by.

“We’re going to have a tea party with Aunties Karya, Daphne, and Green. You should come by,” offered Mila before she focused her attention forward again.

Her entourage all nodded their heads at that.

“Mm. Not going to have to worry about that one,” Vince murmured to himself.

“No, you will not,” declared a firm voice.

Turning, he found Berenga, his Orc Fes, heading his way.

At her left was Meliae, and on her right, Petra.

Grinning, Vince found himself staring at the women who had helped him build Yosemite from the ground up.

Berenga was looking much older than she did when they’d first met. Orcs were stronger, faster, and typically superior in every way to a human in physicality.

They just didn't have as long of a lifespan and tended to burn out at around sixty years old.

Her long black hair was pulled behind her head in a tight ponytail, her dark-black eyes were amused-looking as she walked up to him.

The replacement prosthetic hand and leg moved as naturally as her original limbs had. In fact, she often dressed in a way that made that right arm prominent.

He wouldn't doubt for a fact that she took pride in her loss and replacement. Almost like a badge.

Vince had been surprised to find out that she could actually feel the limbs as well. She could touch things with them and get feedback. An actual haptic response.

Though, thankfully, she didn't experience pain.

He'd already seen her use her arm as a weapon in sparring as well as a shield. Mr. White had assured her up and down that given the "tiny robots" that dwelled inside it, she'd never be able to damage it.

Even if she tried to, whatever the fuck that meant. Vince wasn't sure.

"It's our Berest and Keith who'll be problematic," murmured Meliae with a pout. "Berenga, were you like this? I bet you were."

The eternally pregnant Dryad gave Vince a bright and winsome smile. She promptly pushed down on the dress she was wearing to emphasize her extremely "full" look. Apparently, she was growing triplets at the moment.

Her perfect hourglass figure was somewhat of a distant memory, but Vince didn't mind. The white-haired beauty with her ever-present smile was still beautiful to him.

In his heart, he couldn't deny that he loved seeing her pregnant. He was rather possessive of his Dryads at this point.

She must have noticed something in his look because her green eyes started to contract, the pupil slowly vanishing as they began to glow.

"Yes. I... yes. Our daughter will be an issue," Berenga said with a tusk-bearing grin.

The trio stopped in front of him, and the Orc went in for a hug and a kiss. She held onto him tightly.

Hugging her back, Vince leaned in close to her ear.

“Do I need to tell Yaris to back off?” he asked her in as low a tone as he could manage.

Berenga straightened up for a fraction of a second, then she chuckled.

Kissing his cheek, she leaned back and shook her head.

“No. I find her determined chase of me flattering. Never thought she and I would... well... it’s weird,” Berenga said, wrinkling her nose but grinning.

“This one would greet her husband, Fes. Please?” asked Petra from her side.

“Oh, damn, I’m sorry, Petra,” Berenga murmured and then quickly got out of the way. The two of them were long-standing friends at this point.

Berenga had mourned Petra’s death a considerable amount.

Looking to the Soldier-ant, Vince had only a second before she was on him.

Her blonde hair had been cut short. As short as it had been when he’d first met her, in fact. Her crystalline-blue eyes were also far more alive now. Death had given her an extreme love of life.

“I... love you,” Petra said, having picked him up with two arms and two ant legs. She had him squished to her front and was rocking back and forth. “I love you, Vince. I love you, Vince, my love.”

That change showed up most often whenever she was with him. Her normal demeanor blew off faster than Meliae’s clothes in the bedroom.

She began to kiss him repeatedly, her arms trying to crush him against her armor.

“Petra, for the... you can’t eat him,” Meliae said with a laugh.

Petra kissed him several more times before putting him down, though she didn’t let go of him. She stared into his face with a wide smile.

“This one wishes only for her master, her love, to be happy. He spent a favor with a god only to have this one back by his side,”

declared the Soldier-ant. "He could have wished for anything, even for his own father to come back.

"He wanted this one. This one is forever blessed and will never forget it."

"Mom!" shouted a voice.

All three women looked up to where the voice had come from.

All children in the family were equal, and all mothers were moms. Even if they weren't their biological child.

Coming around the corner was Falaein the Second.

Walking with determination, the young boy marched up to Berenga and held his arms up to her. A smile was on his face.

Berenga smirked, then picked up the boy and stuck him on her hip.

"Mom, I love you," said the boy and then kissed her cheek. Pulling his arms in front of himself, he snuggled up to her and laid his head on her shoulder. "Will you tuck me in tonight? Monsters under my bed. Mom said you were the strongest ever and could protect everyone. That even she would lose to you."

Snorting, Berenga blushed and then kissed the boy's temple.

Vince doubted very much that Yaris would lose to Berenga, but the woman in question seemed to think differently.

"Yes, I will," murmured Berenga.

"Mmkay. Come have tea with us?" asked the boy. It was obvious he didn't want to let go.

Chuckling now, Berenga sighed and looked at Vince.

There was regret there.

Regret that she'd never had another child and now wouldn't. On top of that, her clock was running out.

He knew that she loved all the children, but she had still wanted to have a little boy.

"Hello," said a voice from behind them.

Turning, everyone looked at the speaker.

Standing there was a man Vince had never met before.

He had brown eyes, so dark they were almost black. His straight black hair lay flat on his head. He was dressed in a way that reminded Vince of both Felix and the Overgod.

“I’d love to attend a tea party. Unfortunately, I actually need to have a meeting with you, Vincent,” said the man with an odd smile. “You and all your senior people.

“Also... could... you bring any single Dryads as well? Just asking. For a friend.

“Okay, not a friend. For me. I have a strong interest in Dryads.”

Vince blinked several times, not really sure what to say.

“Name’s Ryker,” said the man, smiling wider now. “Some call me the Architect. Your big brother knows me as ‘Uncle’. That idiot named Runner is my friend.

“By the way, I’ve come to offer you a deal, Vince. Remember that favor Runner mentioned and the price he wanted to pay? Offer’s on the table.”

Immortality to Berenga.

“Get everyone,” Vince commanded.

Chapter 2

Vince was seated in the room with Ryker.

His instincts weren't telling him to run or shoot the man, which was a pleasant change. More often than not, when he'd been around Runner, Vince had the inclination to shoot him.

"If it makes you feel better, I want to shoot him, too," remarked Ryker with a grin. "Often. He's... he... my friend is an insufferable ass."

Blinking at that, Vince tried to shield his mind. To deaden it against the ability of others to read his thoughts.

There were few who could do it in the world. Vince could somewhat read thoughts if he tried hard enough, but more often than not it was just an empathic exchange.

He could feel what they did.

"Won't work on me, sorry," apologized Ryker, holding his hands up at his sides where he sat in a chair. "I'm not reading your thoughts either, despite the fact that I can. People just want to shoot Runner. It's normal."

There was a soft clatter at the door and several people came in at once.

Elysia, Eva, Thera, Caroline, and Yaris entered.

"Ah, the Elves," Ryker said with admiration. "You are all so beautiful. I often envy Vince."

Yaris was staring at Ryker now as the other three flanked her.

While Caroline and Yaris had been at odds for a while, that'd ended a short while ago. Them both being pregnant at the same time, seeing the same Dryad midwife, and ending up spending some time together, had warmed their relationship.

They were just as friendly to one another as all the other Elves were.

Caroline the Snow Elf, Eva the Wood Elf, Thera the Dark Elf, and Elysia the High Elf all shared similar attributes. Only the details really differed between them.

Caroline was a white-haired, black-eyed, sorceress. Her power was marginally better than Yaris, but she had little martial ability.

There was no contest between them as combatants.

Eva had the brown eyes and brown hair that were common with the vast majority of her people. She'd grown proficient with a sniper rifle, though her duties as of late were as a combat leader, despite her short height.

Thera also was a picture of her kind. Black eyes, black hair, and dressed in what she often wore in her role as a general.

Last and not least, was the tall Elysia, with blonde hair and bright-blue eyes. She could keep up with Caroline magically, but had also developed a great deal of combat ability.

"You know... if I could package you four as a group, I bet I could get you into a few countries as a band or girl group," Ryker mused aloud, tilting his head to one side. Then he waved at the Elves with one hand. "Hello, welcome to you all. Pleasure to see you.

"Are... there any Dryads out there... maybe? Just like... one? A single Dryad looking for love with the wrong person?"

"We... thank the god for his compliments," Yaris said, the other Elves clearly looking to her for a response. "May we ask your name?"

"Oh, uh, Ryker, sorry," said the man, getting out of his seat quickly. He pulled at his jacket once, then held his hand out to Yaris. "My bad. My wife would kick my ass if she knew I was being rude."

Yaris smiled at him and shook his hand firmly.

"It's alright. You're no worse than that man of mine over there," said the queen, gesturing to Vince. After they broke the handshake, she and the other Elves took their seats. Yaris was directly to Vince's right.

A second after that, Meliae came into the room.

"I'm so sorry, I wasn't able to get ahold of Green, Blue, Karya, or Daphne. We'll have to start without them," Meliae said apologetically to Vince with a frown and a wave of her hand. Then she turned to Ryker. "I did, however, ask for several Dryads who are here to wait before heading to Wooden Heart grove. I told them a god wanted to meet them."

"You... you are so lovely, Meliae," Ryker said and held his hand out to her. The beautiful Dryad shook it with a warm smile. "Vince is

very lucky to have you. I'm going to make it my life's goal to find a Dryad just like you, though I think I'll fail. You seem quite unique."

"Oh, stop," Meliae said with a laugh and made a dismissive hand gesture at him. "Besides, if you're that interested, just go see my mom. She hasn't had a man in her life for a very long time. I was one of the last she had stored away. It's not like she looks any older than I do, either."

"Your mother is... free?" Ryker asked, extremely interested now. You could feel his attention being dialed in to the conversation at hand.

"She looks a lot like Meliae. It's rather remarkable," Vince offered helpfully.

"Yes, she's free. She hasn't found 'anyone interesting' as she put it, since my father. He was her first and only husband," confirmed Meliae.

The idea of his mother-in-law taking a god to task was appealing to Vince.

Very appealing.

"Just like Meliae, you say. No one interesting to her, hm?" mused Ryker, clearly intrigued. "I can be pretty damn interesting. Very interesting.

"I'll have to go visit her. Her name's Mila, right? Yeah, it is. Named your daughter after her. Lovely name. Oh, she's an apple tree. Delightful."

Wandering back to his chair, Ryker sat down, clearly lost in thought.

Vince had no idea how the man was randomly finding out this information, since it really didn't seem like he was reading anyone's mind. That meant he could access the information from elsewhere.

Meliae looked at Vince with a nervous expression, then stuck her tongue out and bit it lightly. Walking over to him quickly, she sat down in the spot two seats to his left.

Vince didn't know what to do about the situation other than to sit there. Waiting.

Petra and Fes came in next. They looked somewhat out of breath, but not unprepared.

“Couldn’t find Red, Leila, or Sam,” grumbled Fes, coming over to sit down next to Vince. “I left orders for them to join us when they can.

Petra didn’t like these situations and tended to become more akin to a guard.

Which made it very unsurprising when she came around to stand behind him, staring at Ryker.

“Yes, hello, Petra,” Ryker said with a nod of his head. “I’m glad you dodged all my people accordingly. You made a number of them fear for their afterlives, you know. You and Miu would be great pals.

“Buddies, even. Make a buddy cop movie about you two.”

“This one knows Miu very well and would inform you that she is already friends with her,” Petra said, looming over Vince. “Your people tried to take her away as well. They failed then too.”

“And failed miserably. Yes, I should have guessed you two were friends. This is what I get for not reading all your minds,” complained Ryker, turning to face them. “Sam, Leila, Red, Taylor, and Ramona may or may not show up. It depends. They’re going about other things.

“A couple will show up in the middle. Let’s get this going. I hate meetings.”

“Please, I despise them,” Vince agreed, leaning forward. Felix had dragged him into more than a few when they were working through documentation.

“Exactly. Runner and Felix... they like to talk. Schmooze. Work things around. I’ll pass on that,” offered Ryker. “I need you to do some traveling. You have a lot of options on what you do there, I’ll leave that up to you and your people to decide.

“Because of the treaties you agreed to, you can’t go to the Tri-lliance territory, so that rules out the south. The south all the way down.

“That leaves you with Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia, really. Those are the places where you could go to make this work.

“Of those, I’d suggest Europe or Australia. The other locations... aren’t... they’re still on fire, you could say. Problems aplenty. Going

to Europe or Australia would pretty much open the door for any activity you wanted to do.”

“Alright,” Vince murmured and then looked at the door. He really didn’t want to get this going or agree to anything until Felix made it here. He’d sent the code word to him via the Legion network designating a god appearance.

With any luck, he’d be appearing sooner rather than later. Though it was entirely likely that he’d have to move forward without him.

In fact, I bet Ryker planned it that way.

“Well, first, I want more information. I’ll be honest here, Felix prepared me for this,” confessed Vince, looking directly at Ryker. He couldn’t really stall anymore. “He told me that at some point, someone would come to me with a deal. They’d want something far more than what I’d want.”

Ryker let out a long, slow breath and nodded his head. Then he looked at the ceiling, nodded his head again, and then looked back at Vince.

“Yeah, that’s about right. Then I’ll lay my cards out on the table, we’ll go beyond direct and move to brutally rude, and not pull punches,” murmured Ryker and then leaned forward. “I need you out of North America for three years.

“I’m... willing to do a lot to get that. If you want to talk about your price first, that’s fine. I don’t mind at all. I can’t guarantee I’ll accept, but we can, of course, dicker.

“I’ll lay out my requirements now though and what I’m already offering. That fair?”

“Please, that’d be great,” Vince agreed with a grin. He already liked dealing with Ryker far more than Felix or Runner. He was rather simple to understand.

“Perfect. I need you to leave. Three years away. You’d leave next week by boat. You’re welcome to take as many people with you as want to make the crossing. I can guarantee your safety on two boat rides. One there, one back.

“I can also guarantee your landing and forty-eight hours of safety from that moment. After that, it’s whatever the world throws at you

depending on where you land,” Ryker laid out. It was indeed very simple. “Now, for the price I’m willing to pay. I’ll make that pretty Orc there immortal, restore her youth and strength, and fix that ugly mess of a thing she calls a reproductive system. It’s a miracle she had a kid at all once. Can’t do anything about the arm and leg though. That’s a... those... they’re more part of her than her old limbs ever were. I’ll just give them a nudge to make them more lifelike.

“We both know Felix already tried to fix that and couldn’t. Cost prohibitive and that sort of hogwash. Of course, it’s on his point calendar and all that, but... I can do it.”

Ryker took in a slow breath.

Vince couldn’t deny any of that. Felix had already tried and ended up with a point cost that was far too much for what he was trying to do. They didn’t have a reason or an answer for that, either.

There simply was no way of knowing when it came to Felix’s powers. Though there did seem to be some sort of link to Berenga already having a child.

When Felix had pushed into impossible hypotheticals that was the only change that made a difference. The cost had dropped entirely if she’d never had their daughter.

“That and he’s going to be traveling. Same as you. He won’t be around to do anything with those points,” admitted Ryker. “Now... right now, at this moment... it isn’t very prohibitive for me and I’m more than willing to pay the cost. I’ll have to fix a few things in... a different... way, but it’s a price I’ll pay for your help.

“Next, I’ll guarantee that any Dryad in your grove will be able to move freely. Anywhere, at any time. So even if you go all the way to Europe, your Dryads will never suffer for it. It’ll be as if you were standing atop them, at all times.

“This would apply to your Dragons as well, since I know they have an unspoken need to be near you. It also includes the pretty Dragonnewt who’s going to burst through that door right now.”

Vince turned his head to follow where Ryker was pointing.

A moment later, Ramona opened the door and stepped inside.

Her incredibly bright-blue reptilian eyes latched to him. Her short, silver hair framed her face and gave her a very unique look. Tiny blue scales lined her cheekbones, and her brows faded up towards her horns and elongated ears.

She had many traits she shared with Dragons in their human form, despite not being able to fully turn into a Dragon. That included both the strength and speed of one.

Surprisingly, she could almost compare to Taylor, who was significantly older than her.

“Are they in there?” asked Taylor from behind Ramona.

“Err, sorry,” Ramona said. Stepping to the side, she looked very confused.

Reaching back, Ramona slipped an arm through Taylor’s arm and pulled her into the room.

The Dragonnewt and Dragon had formed a very close bond that was more akin to sisters at this point. Taylor would often go down to where the Dryads were watching over Ramona’s eggs and warm them.

Literally becoming a broody hen and just laying with them for hours at a time.

Vince suspected it was her desire to nest while her vault was being finished.

“Oh, they are,” Taylor said as she came into the room fully.

Her black hair was worn in small braids that framed her horns and face well. Her black eyes weren’t as merciless as they’d once been. The Dryad children had worn that out of her very quickly and now “Auntie Tay” was a favored aunt. Two black horns that came out from her hairline and swept backward were etched and glittered with inset gems and small gold chains.

She had scales all over her body in the same places Ramona did, though they were all black.

Not all of it was visible due to the fact that she was wearing her very breezy and nearly see-through veils connected with gold chains.

Wincing, Taylor and Ramona both looked frustrated.

“We’re so sorry, Nest-mate,” Taylor murmured to Vince as Ramona nodded her head. The two went and took their seats quietly.

“You two... my... your scales shine,” offered Ryker, looking at the two Draconic women, his focus shifting from Ramona to Taylor as he addressed them each. “You have a glow about you. Did you recently lay some eggs?”

“And you, dear maiden, goodness. You truly need a nest and soon. You poor thing. May I offer some gold coins as a token to add when it’s complete?”

“And by the way, both of your horns are so lovely. Did you just polish them or are they always so lustrous?”

Holy fuck, he’s a bit smoother than I thought.

“I... why... thank you. Yes, I had two,” Ramona replied with a bright smile, looking quite pleased with the compliments.

“You... I... of course, and thank you for the donation. And no, we didn’t polish them. We’re just... we’re very well-cared-for,” Taylor said at the same time. She grinned at him as well.

“As you should be! Look at you two. You must have an entire wing of pretty maidens beneath you both,” Ryker said with a shake of his head, smiling at them.

Ramona and Taylor actually broke eye contact at this point, both all smiles and unsure how to proceed. That was the point when Ryker shifted the conversation back.

“Well, that’s what I want. Travel abroad, come back in three years, that’s what I’ll pay so far,” summarized Ryker.

Next to him, Vince had noticed a while back that Fes was holding her breath. That the moment the price had been stated, she’d practically gone rigid.

Also, her hand was quite literally trying to crush his beneath the table. He’d had the bright idea to hold onto it as Ryker spoke.

“And you really don’t care what we do when we get there?” questioned Vince. He had half a mind to try and takeover wherever they went. To add it to the Yosemite collective.

He wanted to smash it down into something manageable, then hand it off to his brother to deal with. While he got to run home and not worry about it.

They very idea of it sounded fantastic to him.

“Correct, I don’t care what you do there,” confirmed Ryker with a nod of his head. “Not at all.”

“Obviously, we’ll agree to this,” Yaris said and turned to almost completely face Vince. There was a no-nonsense look on her face. “Vince, Husband, my love, I want my Fes to be with us forever.

“I admit I planned on being Fes after she left this world, but... now... I would rather her as my Fes forever. I’ll be her Queen, she’ll be my Fes, and we’ll be with Vince until the end. Together. Right, Fes?”

It looked like the entire response from Yaris had surprised Berenga as much as the original price.

“I... Yarie, I really... but—”

“Fes, be my Fes? I’ll be your Queen?” prompted Yaris as Fes’ voice trailed off.

“Yes, I will. Fes to your Queen. Queen to my Fes,” the Orc said as her voice firmed up. There was something else on her face now.

To Vince, it looked like whatever reservation she’d had about Yaris trying to coax her into bed had vanished at that moment.

If he was being honest, he was happy about that. Elysia and Mouth were a lot of fun in three-ways, so he imagined Yaris and Berenga could be the same. Especially with him being gone for the next three years.

“We want more,” demanded Fes, turning to look at Ryker. “We’re not sure what else we want though. What can you actually offer?”

“Anything,” Ryker said with a shrug of his shoulders. “You name it, I can do it. Probably more efficiently than Runner, too.

“Who do you think set up the pretty Soldier-ant in that human body, then swapped it back after you cried at Runner about it?”

I... see. Okay. In other words, this is the brain, Runner is the one who does and moves things.

Similar to Felix and myself.

Probably why he’s here, as well.

Does that mean... Felix is getting a similar offer at the moment?

“I take it Felix is going elsewhere, too?” Vince asked after intuiting what he believed would come next.

“Yeah. He won’t be around either. Different reason,” admitted Ryker. “I’m sure your brother has all sorts of plans set up in case something like this happened though.”

Vince turned to look at Elysia.

“I... he does. Everything reverts to Felicity as an Empress and CEO for a time,” agreed the Elf. “We worked it out that way in case something happened to him. There’s a clause that’d allow you to step into the gap if you wanted, but... we only put it in there just in case.

“No one thought you’d actually want to do it. Felix insisted though.”

Vince smirked at that. He could easily see the man forcing that in. As a just-in-case type of thing.

“Nope, don’t want it. Okay. I want to know who you think I should take with me and who I should leave here,” Vince demanded, pointing at Ryker. “Because I bet... I bet you have an idea of what might happen here. I bet you actually know, in fact.

“So I want to know what you do, at least in regards to Yosemite. For the best outcome here at home, who do I leave behind?”

Ryker’s brows came together as he peered at Vince.

“Huh... I mean... yeah. We can add that in,” agreed Ryker.

“You said any boat I wanted to travel in, you’ll provide the boat. I want it to hold at least two hundred people and make the crossing at a reasonable speed. You can dictate it otherwise,” continued Vince.

“You’ll handle the transportation,” agreed Yaris.

“Err... okay, yeah, that’s fine, too,” Ryker agreed once again. “But I think that’s about it. I’m tapped out up to that point just for you to leave for three years.”

“One more thing. I want Fes pregnant,” demanded Yaris.

“Pregnant with a son from Vince before he leaves. Deny that at your own peril.”

Ryker looked at Yaris for several seconds before he started laughing.

“You’d like my wife, Shirley,” he murmured. “Okay. Pregnancy for the Fes if she wishes it before Vince leaves. Though... doesn’t that mean she’s not leaving?”

“She’s not,” Yaris agreed with a nod of her head. “Nor am I, I imagine, despite the fact that I wish to go. You’re going to tell us that Berenga, Meliae, myself, most of the Elves—if not all, most of the Dragons, and probably every single Dryad, can’t go. Aren’t you?”

Opening his mouth, Ryker kept staring at the Queen. Then he closed his mouth and nodded his head for a few seconds.

“I can’t tell you who to take,” he said instead. “But I can tell you who not to take.

“That list includes: Berenga, Yaris, Thera, Eva, and Elysia. Any Dryad may go except Meliae and Mouth, though I caution you to only bring one Dryad. Your Draconic ladies can’t join you. The only exceptions to that are Taylor, Elizabeth, and Ramona. Additionally, every single mage or sorcerer you have, minus Caroline, shouldn’t go.

“I cannot say why, but in accordance with the previous demand in the bargain, that is the list I can provide. In your own words, beautiful queen of Yosemite, deny that at your own peril.”

“We accept the terms. Please put my Fes to rights,” Yaris said with absolute conviction in her voice. “We’ll provide you with a list of people you can transport from here to the disembarkation point for your boat. You did say you’d handle transportation.”

Looking stunned, Ryker just once again stared at the queen.

Then he started laughing and pointed a finger at her.

“Mm, you... you... got any sisters? Cousins?” he asked instead, grinning at her.

“I do, but I can’t introduce you to them. Because you’re going to go fall in love with an apple-tree Dryad. My mother-in-law.

“You wouldn’t be able to handle both her and a relative of mine,” Yaris said with a polite smile. “Besides, it sounds like you’re already married.”

“Mm! Yes, yes. You’re quite right. Shirley wouldn’t mind the Dryad probably, but beyond that... unlikely.

“I forgot, thank you for the reminder, pretty Queen. I’ll make sure to give your current pregnancy a look over and make it a pleasant one. For now... the extra-super-milfy Dryad!” Ryker enthused with a snap of his fingers and vanished.

“I... need to go warn Mother,” Meliae got up and moved out of the room as quickly as a woman pregnant with triplets could go. She sounded both excited and panicked. “I gotta find Sam.”

Chapter 3

“Well, that was more or less what we expected,” Vince murmured and looked to Fes.

And froze.

Vince would never have admitted it, but he’d seen the march of time take its toll on his beloved Orc. The wrinkles showed around her eyes, mouth, and brow.

The slow pull of gravity on her skin had taken away the firmness of youth.

Her strength had most certainly begun fleeing her even before she’d been wounded, though she’d been by no means weak. Just no longer the Orc who could force even Vince to take her seriously.

There’d even been a strand or two of long gray hair in her very black mane.

That was all gone.

Sitting next to him was the very same woman he’d met in the wastes years ago.

She was a hearty, strong, and very fresh-looking young Orc, who was attractive in a wolfish kind of way. The woman who’d stolen his heart away and then tried to beat him to death with it.

Often.

“Fes, you’re a beautiful woman, but I had no idea that you’d looked like this in your youth,” Yaris said from Vince’s right. Apparently, she’d leaned over and looked as well. “I’m quite glad for the deal we made with Ryker, now.”

Fes blinked at that, looking from Vince to Yaris, and back again.

“What?” she asked.

Damn. Even her voice changed. It’s... just like it used to be when we first met. There was a little extra gravel in it just a short time ago.

“This one is very delighted to report to her Fes that Ryker paid out upfront. Just like he said he would. You... are as this one remembers you when we met,” Petra reported. She’d leaned down at this point and was gazing into Fes’ face. “This one and her Fes are now eternal, Fes. Just as we wished and spoke of.”

Letting out a nervous chuckle that was interrupted by a hiccup, Berenga clearly didn't know what to say.

Or do.

"He did?" she asked.

By this point, Caroline was standing near her as well. Holding her hands apart, the Elf had summoned an oval of ice in front of Fes. Vince wasn't sure what she'd done to make it as reflective as it was, but it was practically a mirror.

"Oh... oh... shit," Berenga said with a laugh. She reached up with her hands and gently prodded at her face. Then she looked at her prosthetic hand and touched it with her other hand, followed by touching her real hand with the bionic one. "I can feel that now. Not just the sensation of touching something, but actually feel it."

Laughing louder, Fes looked at Vince. Then something else clearly buzzed through her mind. Something that wiped the smile right off her face and left her staring at him.

Fes looked at everyone else in the room, then to Yaris.

"I've got it, Fes," replied the Elf with a wide smile. "We'll figure everything out and get it planned. You just go do what you need to."

"I... Thank you, my Queen," replied the Orc with a nod of her head. "Please... join us if you can, Yarie?"

"I'll do my best, but don't wait on me," answered the Elf.

Vince wasn't quite sure what they were plotting, but he had a suspicion. They were going to send him off with Berenga to a bedroom.

Because if Ryker had already done everything else he'd promised, that'd mean that Berenga's "mess of a reproductive system" was fixed, too.

Snatching Vince's hand, Berenga practically jumped out of her seat. Pulling him along behind her, she exited the room. She shoved the door open with far more force than was needed.

"I love our daughter," Berenga said, even as she pulled Vince through the house. "Love her more than myself. But I want a son. I want one.

"I know you don't care, but all other Orcs would hold me in even higher esteem if I had a son. Even non-Orc races would. I want a

son and I want him growing in me now.”

Dashing through a hall, Fes paused momentarily as they crossed over a hallway.

“Perfect,” mumbled the Orc with a smile. “Karya, Daphne, I... I need your help.”

Glancing down the hall where they were now stopped, Vince saw Karya and Daphne.

Daphne was several inches taller than most Dryads, though she did have a shape that was similar to them. In fact, Daphne came close to Vince’s own height.

She had an hourglass figure like Meliae, but her shoulders were broader. Her blonde hair hung straight and quite long. It reached halfway down her back.

Beside her stood her Grove-wife, Karya.

Karya had a narrower waist, but her bust was bigger than even Meliae’s. Her hair was dark brown with lighter brown streaks throughout.

Both Dryads had been resurrected by Vince’s brother, Felix. It was another debt in a long list that Vince felt he owed the man.

Both Dryads stared at the rejuvenated Fes for a second before they glanced at Vince and their eyes started to turn a glowing green. They’d already jumped ahead in what was likely coming.

“Can we have a turn, too?” Karya asked, moving forward. She slid right up to Fes and then wrapped an arm around the Orc’s hips.

“Pretty please, Fes?” Karya asked and laid her head on the Orc’s shoulder. “We’ll make sure you have an incredibly strong son. One that even your brother would lose to. Maybe even Vince.”

“Yes, you can have as many turns as you want,” Fes said quickly. Then she winced and looked embarrassed. “Though Yar-Yaris is coming later. You’ll need to leave when she does.”

“That’s fine. It’s good for you to have a Grove-wife. Yaris will be good for you. It makes the lonely nights easier. It does for us,” Daphne said and then moved off, heading toward Vince’s bedroom. “Now come on, Fes. Your son can’t be made just standing around.”

Fes nodded her head and then rushed after Daphne, dragging Karya and Vince along easily.

“Hello, Vince, my love,” Karya said from where she was practically being carried by Fes. “Last time I got to taste her on you, it was wonderful. It’s a pity Berenga really doesn’t go in for women. I have no idea how Yaris managed to sneak her way into her heart.”

“I... don’t like women. Yarie is... different because she— forget it,” growled Berenga, flustered. “You can clean him when he’s done with me if you shut up.”

“Oh, sure! You got it,” promised Karya quickly.

Karya grinned at him, her eyes now glowing and the pupils gone.

Fes rushed them all into the bedroom, Daphne holding the door open.

As soon as the Orc crossed the threshold and Karya had shut the door, Berenga started working on her clothes.

Karya and Daphne, however, went to Vince.

The two Dryads were completely greened out. He didn’t doubt for a second that the idea of being used to get someone else pregnant while not participating fit their needs just right.

Daphne dropped down to her knees and had Vince’s pants and underwear down in seconds. Then, just as fast, she had him down her throat.

She had her chin resting against his jewels, her forehead to his abdomen, and she was working at swallowing his very hard and erect self. Moaning around him even as her tongue scrubbed at the underside of his shaft, Daphne looked up at him. Her eyes displayed the Dryad green of “own me, Master” that he was quite fond of.

Laying a hand on Daphne’s head, he held her in place and began to thrust against her face a bit as Karya continued to work on undressing him.

“Oh, I can’t wait to clean you,” purred the beautiful Dryad. “Fes was delicious last time. Though I do still wonder what Petra tastes like. Daphne got that one and—”

Vince ignored her chattering. He focused on ravaging Daphne’s lovely mouth instead. His thrusts had become much firmer now, forcing her to go tip-to-hilt and swallow him down each and every time.

“Vince, come give me our son!” called Berenga.

Daphne turned her head to the side and his member slid free and rubbed across her cheek, leaving a saliva trail on it. At the same time, Karya had just gotten his undershirt over his head.

Spinning him around, she slapped him on the rear end, directing him toward where Fes was lying spread-eagle on the bed. Her arms were stretched out toward him, and she was making what he often called “grabby hands” that he saw his kids make toward food.

The smile on Berenga’s face was massive and she looked thrilled.

Vince didn’t jump on her immediately, however.

He was momentarily struck by the fact that she looked exactly the same as she did when they’d met. When she was all hard muscle, lean, and looked like she survived by her might alone.

Vince would never say that she’d become unattractive, nor that she’d been anything but fit, he couldn’t help but stare at the lovely specimen of Orc warrior in front of him.

“Damn it. She’s so hot,” whined Karya.

“I want her, too,” Daphne agreed.

Fes started to blush heavily at their words, her cheeks turning a very odd brown color that was always very obvious on her. It was also somewhat rare. She once more opened and closed her hands at him.

Moving forward, Vince quickly got on top of her. His knees came down right beside her hips. He eagerly pushed her thighs apart and then leaned into her and kissed her.

All his concerns for Berenga, his Fes, were gone. She’d be with him until the end now.

Pushing his tongue into her mouth, he reached up and intertwined her hands with his own. Pushing his fingers between hers, he then held her arms down against the bed. He shifted his hips back and forth until he felt his tip get caught in her entry.

Breaking the kiss, he leaned his head up to get a look at her face.

Her eyes were wide, staring up at him with a mix of fear and excitement. She was breathing hard already, her tusks visible as her mouth remained open.

“I love you, Berenga,” whispered Vince before he pushed forward. His tip pushed apart the pale-green lips of her womanhood and entered her.

Fes’ eyes closed partially and her brow wrinkled as she looked up at him. A low moan escaped her mouth as he filled her with his girth.

“Vince,” whimpered Berenga as his hilt pushed up against her entry. “I’m so excited, but scared. You’ll be so far away.”

“It’ll be fine. You’re my Fes, aren’t you? I don’t think there’s anything you and Yaris can’t achieve,” he countered, then silenced her with a kiss. He drew his hips back and then pushed forward again, stuffing himself into her.

Then again and again, working his iron-hard shaft through the moaning Orc as if it were his reason for existing. Rolling her hips back and forth even as he did so, Fes’ eyes had closed at this point, and she kissed him back hungrily.

She didn’t fight him in any way. Her hands gripped his and her ankles rested against his thighs, drawing him in with each thrust.

Vince felt it when Daphne and Karya laid their hands on Fes. Berenga hadn’t even responded to it, lost in thrusting her hips back at him as he pushed into her.

That and her tongue was currently in his mouth, kissing him in a way that felt hungry. At the moment, he’d wager Fes was very much lost in what they were trying to do.

“She’s ready,” Karya whispered huskily. “Didn’t even have to do much. Rather strange, but... clearly something happened, given she looks like she did when we first met.”

“It was all just... already all there,” Daphne agreed. “We’ll have to be careful in the future though, she’s more fertile than Meliae now.”

Fes let out a deep, shuddering moan and pulled at Vince with her ankles. She also flexed against his hands, though it felt like she was trying to get closer to him.

He wasn’t sure if it was what he was doing or what the Dryads had said.

Or more specifically, that she was more fertile than Meliae.

Pushing Fes down much more firmly against the bed, he continued to pump himself into her. The wet lava-like heat of her insides pulled and scraped along him. He could actually feel her squeezing her internal muscles down on him with every thrust, as if she could milk him with her body.

Once more breaking the kiss, Vince pressed his forehead to hers and started to thrust faster and harder. If he was going to finish in her, he'd do it right now.

Staring up at him from an inch away, Berenga looked completely and utterly lost. Her breath came in hard, fast gasps that washed over his face.

There was a clack behind him that sounded like Karya or Daphne doing something, though he ignored it. He was focusing everything on Berenga.

His Fes.

"Name our son," growled Vince as he wildly drilled himself down into her. His lap was now making a loud slapping noise with each thrust.

"I-I don't— mmmmn," Berenga's voice trailed off as it looked like she was about to fall into an orgasm.

"Name him," Vince demanded. He wanted to know the name right now, since he wouldn't know the boy. He'd be born while he was away.

"Miles," whimpered Berenga with a squeak a second before she clearly dropped into her climax.

Vince felt his breath catch and then pushed down hard into her as his girth spasmed. His lower body flexed and curled into her as he came.

Pushing up against the beautiful Orc, Vince pulled back, just to thrust into her again. All the while emptying seed into her depths. Her body twitched and shuddered beneath him as he did so.

Fes moaned loudly, her ankles pulling at him roughly even as he kept pumping more into her. It was obvious she didn't want him to stop just yet.

Except Vince was mostly spent. There wasn't much left for him to pack into his beautiful Fes. Obliging as much as he could, he gave

her several more thrusts before stopping atop her.

“Fes... I... can I please... have him now?” asked Karya from the side.

“Err, would you mind if I cleaned you, Fes?” Daphne asked from the other side. “I’ll just tongue the outside. Nothing inside.”

Opening her eyes, Berenga stared up at him. She didn’t respond to the Dryads.

She just watched him, smiling, as her eyes searched his.

Then she shook out one of her hands and laid it on his face. Her fingers moved across his skin gently.

“Vince. Husband. Never thought I’d end up like this when we met in the wilds,” she murmured to him. “The day you spared me and left me with your catch was the day I myself was caught.”

Chuckling, Vince rested his weight down on Fes and then kissed her.

She tended to get sentimental in lovemaking.

“Please, Fes?” whined Karya. “I’ll be your personal Dryad if you let me.”

“Let me clean you, Fes,” asked Daphne again. “Karya and I will make Miles be a match for anyone if you let us get to work.”

Chuckling, Berenga rolled her eyes, then gently pushed Vince off herself.

“You can have him Karya. But no, sorry Daphne, I’ll pass on that and— Yarie?”

Vince was quickly pulled to the side of the bed, and surprisingly, Daphne was there. She bent down low over his crotch and simply inhaled him. Moving right down to the hilt and sucking on him tenderly. Her tongue washed all over his shaft and head.

“What can I say, I love my wife. She hadn’t gotten to taste Fes. She doesn’t let us Dryads in often,” murmured Karya, who was next to Vince’s head. “She promised me she’ll work on getting Petra or Red to invite us in so I can taste one of them.”

Standing just at the inside of the door was Yaris.

She was grinning from ear to ear and had her hands in front of herself. The excitement on her face was incredible.

“I got here just in time!” she said and came over to the bed with a skip. Then she got down on her knees next to Fes and took her hand between hers. “I watched it happen! I watched as he gave us a son. You’ll let me be the second to hold him after you, right?”

“I made sure you were the second to hold Falaein, so you better let me hold Miles.”

Clearly still processing everything, Berenga just nodded her head a bit.

“Of course, Yarie,” she murmured.

Yaris leaned in and gave Berenga a quick kiss, then laid her cheek on the Orc’s brow.

“Good job, Husband,” offered Yaris, looking over at Vince.

Daphne was face first in his crotch and trying to coax anything else out of him that she could. To the point that he’d ended up putting his right hand on her head just to get her to ease up.

He’d long lost any semblance of caring for others watching him. There was nothing left for him to feel shy about.

Grinning at him, Yaris nuzzled Berenga, who just laid there and panted softly.

“Who’d you decide on?” he asked instead, starting to guide Daphne’s head up and down. He was rapidly coming back to attention from her working on him.

“Sam, Leila, Petra, Blue, Red, Elizabeth, and... well... a Necromancer, believe it or not. The Duke sent them over to serve you directly as a Necromancer. Apparently, you and he had talked about it once,” Yaris said, her eyes moving down to where Daphne was moaning around Vince’s shaft. “They arrive the same day you leave for Europe. Their name is Zathira.”

“Elizabeth?” Vince asked, somewhat confused. She was the Silver Dragon maiden who’d sworn herself to his wing. It’d been in the last days of the war with the Tri-lliance.

Taylor hadn’t known what to do with the woman in the end and had left her to her own devices.

The young Dragon had ended up wandering the vast expanses of the territories of Yosemite with two Dryad minders. They’d only returned a few days ago.

“She volunteered,” Yaris answered. Then she reached over with her left hand, grabbed a handful of Daphne’s hair and started pushing and pulling her up and down. The Dryad instantly responded to the rhythm forced on her.

It was Yaris’ own pace that she always performed at. One that Vince certainly enjoyed.

He’d never admit it, but Mouth and Red were his favorites for oral sex.

“Bed her if you can. Make her nest, if possible. Bring the children or eggs back when you do return,” commanded Yaris. “Bring back as many strong wives as you can, or the continent. Either way.

“Yosemite might serve the greater empire of Legion, but it never hurts to add more kingdoms beneath us. We should take over the world, if only to force it to stability.”

Yaris was watching Daphne as she spoke. Then she gently pulled the Dryad off Vince and smiled at her.

“Daphne, I’d really appreciate if you could get pregnant with a son. From you, Karya, I’d love a daughter. Both human, though, please. If Fes and I are going to have a second wave of heirs, they must have companions. I’d like your children to be their brothers and sisters,” requested Yaris. She’d been taking lessons from Elysia on how to cow, bribe, and make Dryads your best friends. “You may both mount my husband right now to get those going.”

Releasing the Dryad, Yaris went back to cuddling Fes, who was seemingly still coming down.

“I... I’d be very glad to, Yaris. This is really exciting,” Karya said, then promptly started kissing Vince.

“Of course, happy to do so,” promised Daphne, then she started to clamber up into the bed.

“Thank you, girls. I’ll let you clean me up later tonight after he’s done with me. Be sure to be on hand for us if you want that,” promised Yaris.

Both Dryads shuddered and looked even more excited.

“Bring Mouth and Meliae along, too. Bind them, gag them, and leave them on the ground like a discarded meal,” added Yaris. “They can watch everything. You two can direct how we use them, as well

after Vince is done with me and you've cleaned us up. Maybe we could all take turns on Vince after that."

Shit. She didn't just learn from Elysia, she stole the playbook.

Chapter 4

Standing near the shore, Vince felt rather... atypical. Something was nagging at his senses, but he wasn't quite sure what it was.

In the end, Ryker had confessed that he wouldn't be able to transport them to the boat. Unfortunately, he'd had to ask them to please manage themselves accordingly.

He did, thankfully, specify a location.

Or so Sam relayed to them all when she came back from Wooden Heart.

Apparently, Ryker had gone straight to Mila and had been wooing her ever since. The "other Overgod" hadn't left.

From what Sam had seen of it, Mila was very interested but was playing very hard to get. She was forcing him to stick around and introduce her to the others in his life.

Fortunately, since he couldn't complete his bargain with them, he'd promised a favor for them in the future. How far that went, Vince wasn't sure.

Looking out at the procession of people, equipment, and resources being set out and ready for loading, Vince was getting nervous.

Concerned, one could say.

He was about to leave for years.

On a mission to either conquer Europe or expand his harem. Yaris and Fes had both pressed that point until he knew there was no way to avoid it.

They expected him to come home with a new harem of women to hand over to them or a country. The in-between of those two outcomes wasn't something to be discussed.

I mean... I guess if I failed to take the country, I could just come back with a bunch of wives.

Though that just encourages me to take the country over. I don't need any more women in my life.

Fuck no.

Which left them here, with a literal boatload of equipment.

Everything needed to be loaded onto the boat that Ryker had provided for them. It was a large, strange-looking contraption that would make the trip in two weeks, which seemed impossible to him.

Supposedly, it was something that'd be easy to get moving and handled with incredible responsiveness. Vince had no idea about any of that, except that the pilot would need to be from Legion.

Standing on the newly-built Orc-made wharf, in a city under the domain of his brother-in-law Berten, Vince was just waiting.

Watching.

Though he was still surprised at how quickly Elysia had torn apart the secret of the sea-stones. Then she had gone a step further and created a single stone that could be carried onto a boat and used to protect it entirely. Allowing it to go across shallow waters without an issue.

There were a number of boats from Yosemite that were now prowling the gulf and up along the eastern seaboard.

A repeat of the Tri-lliance invasion wouldn't be tolerated. There'd been several times that the new Yosemite fleet, armed with Wardens as gun emplacements, had stumbled across Tri-lliance boats.

Those boats had fled very quickly back to their own waters.

There was a sudden feeling that spread out through his senses. He needed to flee, hide, or duck.

Immediately.

Spinning to the side and out of the way, Vince already knew what it was. Snatching at the woman's neck as she went by him, he managed a perfect grab on the back of it.

With a grunt, Vince jerked her to the ground and pinned her to the grass beneath him. Then he collapsed down atop her, putting his free hand on her shoulder.

Staring down into the brightly glowing eyes of Red, as well as her ear-to-ear and fang-showing grin, he couldn't help but smile back at her.

Long gone was the bird's nest of tangled brown hair. Her triangular ears, which stuck up from her head, were well-trimmed and groomed.

Her tail was always well-combed and brushed out now.

She was still as pale as when he had first met her, and just as cursed. Though this time by her own design. Her fingers, which ended in claws rather than nails, were curled possessively around his arm. They lightly grazed back and forth as she gazed up at him.

Dressed in leather armor, she was kitted out in a way very similar to a Dryad or a Wood Elf.

Red was clearly quite happy to have been caught like this.

Considering that she'd been traveling for close to three weeks with Leila—and likely eating the heart of anything that came at her crosswise—he hadn't seen much of her.

He'd missed her.

"My Red returned to her Bringer," Vince said, then leaned down and kissed the feral woman with need. Kissed her for far longer than he probably should have, considering there were a great many people around.

Before he could break away though, Red had wrapped her legs around his hips and was now clinging to him. She'd given up on holding his arm and now held him. Her fingers were digging into his back without using her claws.

Pushing down on Red's neck, he managed to get himself a little distance.

Gazing down at the very brightly glowing eyes now, Vince found she had a wondering and sweet look on her face. Like she hadn't wanted to stop kissing him at all.

"Red... Red missed Bringer desperately," she said breathily, looking up at him with a great deal of fear. "Red didn't know what to do. Red killed... killed our baby. Because Red didn't want to be the nasty woman she'd once been. Red wanted to be Red and... and Red k—"

Vince leaned down and pressed his forehead to the cursed Undead monster's. He smiled at her and gave her a brief kiss.

"Red, are you my wife?" he asked in a low tone.

"Red... Red is-is very much your wife. Red wants to mate right now, in fact. Doesn't matter if others are watching. Mating right now would be very nice. Bringer should take Red's clothes off and mate with her right now," confessed Red, her eyes glowing ever brighter

and brighter as she looked back into his own eyes. Her words came faster and faster as she spoke, only to suddenly break off. “Red is feeling v-very dizzy now. Red needs her husband inside her. Red can’t... can’t think good.”

Grinning, Vince leaned back a bit more to give the poor woman some space and then simply stood up. Red came along for the ride since she hadn’t released him.

Reaching down, he stuck his forearm under her rear end and simply carried her like that. He put his other hand on her side.

“Tonight, Red, I’ll be all yours. To show you that nothing is wrong. That you’re still my Red and the one I need beside me in any awful situation.

“I’ll feed you, love you, and then bed you. Because while we did lose our first pregnancy, that doesn’t make it your last,” assured Vince. He knew what he could demand as a favor from Ryker.

Red was panting as she stared at him, her hands pressed to his shoulders. She was looking at him in a way he’d only seen from her on the rarest of occasions and after coupling with her.

“Red loves you,” she said in a squeak.

“And I love Red,” Vince said, then kissed her chastely. Then he turned and looked at the Warlock he was expecting to be there.

He was surprised to find not only the Warlock he expected, but also a Dryad he didn’t, as well as a very large Fae.

Looking at Leila, Vince smiled and tipped his head to her.

When she’d fixed Red, Leila had unfortunately suffered a miscarriage as well. Neither she, nor Vince, nor Blue, had told anyone. No one at all.

Instead, they waited for a better moment, further away from what she’d done with Red, to announce the loss. So that the poor Beastkin wouldn’t suffer even more.

Standing at about four feet tall, Leila the Gnome was his Warlock.

He wanted to dive into her incredibly large and beautiful purple eyes.

Glittering sparks lurked there that fluttered through them the longer you stared into them. Such beautiful and unique eyes were

set in an elegantly sculpted face with very clean features. She had a sharp jawline and delicate cheekbones.

Her hair was dirty-blonde and was quite obviously cut recently. It was styled and pulled back from her face in a ponytail.

Grinning, Vince set Red down and then moved over to the Gnome.

“V-Vince, don’t you dare. There are people here and—”

He cut her off by picking her up off the ground, hugging her, and then kissing her. Leila responded to all his actions quite eagerly, despite her angrily growled words.

When he finished, he kneeled to set her down and caught her eyes.

Before she’d left, they’d tried to get her with a child again. He wanted to ask her about it, but wasn’t sure how he could.

“She is,” murmured Blue, who stepped up to tap his shoulder while he knelt there. “As, of course, am I. And I deserve equal attention.”

Looking up, he saw a smile on the face of the beautiful and slim Elven Dryad. She was lithe to the point of what only an Elf could be, with a narrow waistline. Blue had somehow managed to have more than what an Elf would in the chest though.

Her name was given to her for the fact that she had one bright blue eye and one green Dryad eye. Though they both lit up as a Dryad’s eyes would.

Since her Dryad wife, Green, had died a while back, her entire personality had shifted. She now tried to squeeze every bit out of every moment in life that she could.

“Of course, of course. I can’t forget my beautiful Dryad wife, Blue,” Vince said and then stood up. No one would deny that Blue only came after Mouth in the Dryad hierarchy. And Mouth only came after Meliae. Blue had a position of envy amongst other Dryads.

Even Karya and Daphne had lost ground to her, although that was partially due to the fact that they’d died and he’d sought comfort with Blue for that loss.

Hugging her with one arm, he kissed her deeply.

With his other hand, he casually snatched out at Sam and caught her around the waist. He wasn't able to hold onto her as easily as he once had though.

She was only an inch or two shorter than Leila now.

"Vince!" shrieked Sam before he finally glanced her way, breaking the kiss with Blue.

Grinning, he looked at the Fae.

Every time he got ahold of her, he filled her up to the brim with magical energy. The process infinitely expanded her lifespan and forced her to grow in size. It seemed to him that he didn't have much longer to wait before she was Gnome-sized.

Her dark-black hair was cut short, but in a very stylish way. It made her hair flutter about her warm azure eyes. Her clothes looked similar to Leila's as if they were sharing a size now.

"I'm going to kiss you, Sam," Vince warned.

"No! Not big enough yet, you oaf," said the Fae as he leaned into her. She put her hands on each side of his face and turned her head away. "Not big enough yet!"

"Ah, but you look so pretty, my dear Fae," offered Vince.

Sam sniffed at that and slowly turned to look at him. Up close, she really was just as big as Leila now. There wouldn't be much time left at all on their deal.

"Pretty?" she asked.

"Very," he said, grinning at her, then moved in toward her again.

"Not big enough!" shouted the Fae, turning her head away again.

Vince laughed, pulled her down to his shoulder, and began discharging magic into her instead. She went limp there in an almost comically drunken way. Every now and then she twitched.

"Better her than me," Leila said, peering up at him. "I'm still filled to bursting from the last time you did it to me."

"Really? I can't smell any of his seed on you. Where are you keeping it?" Blue asked in a playful tone. "I always kept it in my mouth for Red when I could."

"Leila? You have Bringer-food? Give it to Red! Red hasn't tasted it in weeks!" Red said, quickly getting down on all fours in front of

Leila. It looked like she was about to kiss Leila and maul her mouth with her tongue to try and find “Bringer-food”.

“No! That’s not what I—”

Red ended the discussion by grabbing Leila and kissing her. She’d also quite clearly pushed her tongue into the Gnome’s mouth.

“Hm,” Vince said and then looked at Blue. “You did that on purpose.”

“Maybe a little,” admitted the Dryad with a grin. “I’m so excited to be on this trip. I can’t believe I’ll have you to myself for so long. Your only Dryad. I can’t... I can’t wait to see how many pregnancies you give me. I have some eggs left. You haven’t gotten every single one yet. You need to work harder.”

Grinning, Vince nodded at that. He had his tastes, and his Dryads filled a vast majority of his strike zone now.

“Oh, there’s Petra,” Blue said, turning to look off to the side.

Petra was walking with Elizabeth, the Silver Dragon maiden. They were having a discussion amongst themselves.

The beautiful silver-horned woman with long, dark-gray hair, always looked somewhat forlorn. Sad but determined. Her incredibly luminous silver eyes flicked his way.

Vince felt an odd connection with her whenever she looked at him. One that felt very strange to him.

Then she looked away, moving with Petra onto the ship. Behind them went the squad of “heavies” Kitch was dispatching to guard him. They were a group of seven that would be able to handle many things.

Added to that squad were two squads of Orc “light infantry” soldiers who also reported to Kitch. They were there to help bring flexibility to her soldiers, even though they were kitted out in the heaviest gear that any army could field if you excluded the Ogres and Trolls.

Behind them were two squads of Frit’s mixed cavalry with Ratkin riders.

Another several squads of mixed-race groups were in line. They came from the infantry of Yosemite. From across the many different cities, tribes, and villages.

Blended down into one very cohesive and highly-trained unit.

After that came several groups of Dwarves and Elves. They were craftsmen, recruited to help in case anything needed to be built or fixed.

There was a platoon of people who were coming that hadn't arrived yet. Roughly four squads of people all trained for something similar to where they were heading.

That was the extent of who and what they were taking.

Everything else was supplies and resources. A great deal of it.

The idea was that with enough wealth, or equipment, Vince could carve something out for himself. Then begin taking over, just as he had with Yosemite.

With any luck... I can buy slaves by the bushel again.

Then free them.

Best thing that ever happened to me was setting so many people free.

All starting with a mischievous little Dryad that my Fes wanted me to buy so she could get pregnant.

Looking at said people, Vince found them standing side by side, directing things onto the boat. Fes was acting as a support crutch for the very oversized Dryad next to her.

Yaris was on the other side of Meliae, ready to act as the other crutch should it be needed.

Daphne and Karya were right behind Fes and Yaris. They were now personally responsible for the next generation of heirs that were coming.

Which included Caroline's and was why she wasn't going with him. On top of that, she was quite busy at the moment finishing the vault for Taylor. In fact, almost everyone with any magical ability was assisting to finish the vault immediately.

The poor Black Dragon was going mad with the need to fill a nest with her young. Vince had apparently done his job too well with her and she was quite heavy with eggs and desperately needed to lay them.

Alice, Taylor's second, was only a few weeks behind her and in the same condition.

Having only just gone through her own nesting phase not long ago, Ramona had been their only saving grace and had helped the two of them keep it under control.

Vince had been informed in no uncertain way that when he returned, he would be required to decorate all three women's horns with bridal gold.

Apparently, after she'd finally laid her eggs, it'd been expected that he would give that bridal gold to Ramona, but she'd held off on that out of solidarity for Taylor.

He didn't know what that was, but he wasn't going to deny them anything. His Draconic women were important to him.

He identified with them a great deal. More than any other group in Yosemite.

"Looks like it's time to go," Ryker said a second after simply appearing beside him.

Turning his head, the man regarded everyone standing there.

"Good group. I'm glad you listened to all my advice," Ryker murmured, his eyes focusing on Red. "Oh, well that's no good. That won't fit my plans at all."

Lifting a finger, he flicked it at Red and then to the side.

"There, all better," he said and looked out at everyone getting on board. "No need to ask me for that favor now, Vincent.

"Consider it a repayment from me to you and Meliae for introducing me to Mila. She's... a very interesting woman. Shirley warmed up to her pretty quick. Though... wow... Adele is fucking pissed at me right now. Like... angry-cat-hissing furious at the sight of me."

"You probably deserved it," offered Blue in the silence afterward. "Especially if you didn't ask for permission first. Even Vince knows better."

Ryker froze, then turned and looked at Blue. He stared at her for several seconds.

"Hm. Elven Dryad. So very curious. Green is the Dwarf Dryad. I thought I'd find your wife more attractive but... I like your spunk. You're right, of course, Blue. You're right," he confessed and looked

ahead again. "I could have handled it better. Could have handled a lot of things better.

"Oh, well. All I can do is march on and try to make changes on the fly. That's all we can do, right? Ah, I should let you know. Felix is already set up and doing well in his new world.

"Though he kinda picked a bunch of women who are going to ride him like a merry-go-round. I have no idea what was going through his head when he did that but... it's Felix. He'll succeed."

"Course he will," agreed Vince. It'd been surprising to find out Felix was offered a deal at the same time he was, but then it also wasn't at all. It felt exactly like what Felix had warned him about.

That they'd be worked in such a way as to get the best deal from them, while giving them as little as possible. Felix had prepared him well.

"The fuck is that?" Ryker grumbled as two top-of-the-line Wardens marched past them and onto the boat. Mr. White was walking along behind them with numerous chests. Likely all filled with his inventions and equipment that would be needed.

Older, with a bit of pudge around the middle, the man looked out of place in many situations. He was bald from hairline to crown, with only the sides of his hair left.

He wore thin, circular glasses, but smiled with a clear confidence in his own abilities.

It was the same smile that he always wore. One that told Vince everything would be fine, then he had made it so.

A smile that told the world he was just here to have fun and thought it was all a game.

At his side was a young, beautiful Orc woman from Berenga's own tribe. A distant relative of hers who'd somehow managed to steal Mr. White's heart away in a wild, whirlwind romance that culminated with her proposing to him.

Unfortunately, the miraculous man wouldn't be coming with them, though he was sending his son along. The younger man was a chip off the old block and had inherited his father's penchant for being a "mad scientist" as it were.

If Vince didn't miss his guess, it was the young man walking alongside Mr. White. He looked a lot like him, although with a full head of hair.

"Equipment," Vince said around a massive grin. He looked forward to seeing what the young Mr. White could pull off.

"Personnel."

What Ryker hadn't seen yet was that just behind that was the Sword of Yosemite. A specialized Warden that Felix had cooked up specifically for Vince. Apparently, he had a similar one that'd been made for him called the Fist of the Legion.

That'd spawned an idea to have one made for Vince since he got into fights so frequently.

"Felix prepared for this moment. Did you forget?" Vince asked with a chuckle.

At the same moment, the stomp and crack of boots marching in unison drew the eye to the road. To the road and a short way down it.

Marching their way was something Felicity had promised to send him. A fully equipped and outfitted platoon of Legionnaires. Armed, armored, and ready for warfare.

They were led by Julia Crawford and her husband, Steve Middleton, and the couple were wearing two more of the newest Warden armors. The soldiers coming along behind them were all trained by Ioana and Petra.

It was a group designed to lead a fight in the Wild Wastes of this world, with gear that could survive an unforgiving climate with few resources.

One of the first groups to graduate from that training was, in fact, this very platoon.

"They won't even know what hit 'em," growled Vince with a grin. He was looking forward to getting a chance to do it all over again.

This time, though, he had a lot more resources at the start.

Chapter 5

Looking out in the distance, Vince couldn't hold back his excitement. They were what was likely a minute away from landfall. The sun had risen not long ago, and they'd have the whole day to run around.

The vehicle Ryker had provided them had come with a number of smaller—and just as strange-looking—boats that would be used to ferry things to and from the shore. This was the moment the journey across the ocean had been for.

Standing in the back of one such boat with his group, Vince was quite eager.

They had forty-eight hours of guaranteed protection once they landed.

That would be the perfect time to scout the immediate area, choose a location, and begin building their fortification. A place to defend, hold, retreat to, and launch missions from.

Given that they actually had a very large ship that could be utilized in both shallow and deep water, Vince was betting on Petra wanting a coastal location. One that they could build into a harbor, then begin using.

And all the little boats can be used to scout the coastline and shores. I'm sure she's already planning this all out. She won't need me for that.

"Twenty seconds!" called the Legion pilot who was controlling the boat.

Feeling his blood pumping harder and faster, Vince was eager. Almost too eager.

"Red wants to run. Run and sprint and jump," hissed the Cursed One next to him.

"I'm looking forward to having hard ground beneath me as well," murmured Blue. She'd done as well as a Dryad could do on water. It wasn't a place Dryads were supposed to be, though.

"Yes, this'll be enjoyable for all you poor landbound—Eeeee!" squeaked Sam as Vince snatched her out of the air. Holding her to his side with a hand under her bottom and across her legs, he wasn't going to let her go.

He was enjoying teasing the nearly Gnome-sized Fae.

“I’m-not-big-enough-yet,” she growled, then gently thumped a fist against his shoulder. “Now let me go, Vince. I need to scout for you. You can be your awful self later and I’ll even let you kiss my cheek if you’re a good boy.”

Snorting, Vince acted against his wishes and released the Fae.

She darted in and kissed his brow, then slapped him on the back of the head. Flying away like a shot, she vanished out ahead of them.

“Red likes Sam. She’s funny,” chuckled Red from his side. “Sam bullies you. Red wants to do the same.”

“Liar, we both know Red wants a scritch-scratch and then mating,” argued Vince. He reached down to start really digging his fingers into the fur on Red’s rear end. Right above where her tail intersected with her body.

The sudden smash of her hips into his side in response to his touch was all the confirmation he needed. She was rubbing hard up against him now while looking up at him with eyes that glowed like flaming coals.

“Disembark!” called the pilot.

Vince grabbed Red around the hips, looked to the shore that was nearby, and then threw her mightily. He figured she wouldn’t want to get wet but also wasn’t going to ask him to help her.

Red made a single surprised yowl before twisting herself over. Coiling herself up for a split second, she then spread her body out. Her entire self was ready to land on all fours.

“Carry me and I’ll make it worth your while later, Grove-husband,” asked Blue in a sweet, warm voice as she moved right up to Vince. She held her hands up at her side, her iron-shod staff slung through straps on her pack.

Considering that she was his only Dryad wife with him, there was no sense in not doting on her. There’d be no one else to be jealous of it.

Picking her up, and getting a handful of her rear end, Vince hopped off the side of the strange boat. A number of the Orc heavies disembarked at the same time. All moved to the shore with him.

Petra, Leila, Elizabeth, and Zathira would be in the next wave. This wave was all scouts and some landing forces.

Trudging through the water as it broke across his lower legs, Vince was glad that he'd pulled his boots off and stuck them in his pack. Walking in wet boots would be terrible.

He imagined the Orcs wouldn't be having a fun time with that in the near future, but they had their own orders from Petra. She was his general, after all.

Reaching the shore, Vince went to where Red was giving him a sulky glare, even though she was quite clearly keeping out of the water. Her bare feet and hands were dug into the dry sand.

"I'm glad you didn't get wet, Red," Vince offered by way of explanation. "We don't have your brush with us at the moment and I think you're so beautiful with how trimmed and brushed you are lately. Please consider this as your husband just being selfish."

There was a beat where Red was clearly contemplating his words. Then her eyes shone even brighter still, and a smile curled her lips.

"Red is indeed quite beautiful. She had many men pursue her while she traveled with Leila and Blue. Blue, Mouth, and Meliae have helped Red a great deal with Red's looks. Red is now quite proud of how she looks," said the Beastkin.

"As you should be, my pretty kitty," Vince murmured and set down Blue. He took a second to hold onto her shoulder just to make sure she was stable.

He knew she was a combat-oriented Dryad, but he still felt protective of her. They'd invested deeply in one another after Green, Karya, and Daphne had died.

There was an ugly truth in him that he preferred Blue to every dryad other than Meliae or Mouth in his grove. They'd spent nights making love to one another and crying over their losses together.

"Red... Red is a pretty kitty," repeated Red with a nod of her head. "Yes. Okay, we should go! Let's run! Red wants to run with Vince and Blue! Run, run!"

Looking at Blue, Vince gave her a grin.

The graceful, beautiful Dryad was actually able to keep up with him in most physical endeavors. It was one of the reasons he was so glad to have her here.

"I'm quite ready," Blue said with a grin as she reached out to gently rub at the base of Red's ears. "Red, if I start to tire, will you help me out? I don't want to look bad in front of our husband."

Red nodded her head quickly, pushing her head into Blue's hand. Then she turned partly sideways and gently rubbed her hip up against Blue's side.

"Red will protect Blue," agreed Red. After several seconds, she turned and started to move off. She'd moved into a bipedal jog and was already looking back at them. "Go! Go, go, go! Let's go!"

Sam zipped past them overhead in a corkscrew spiral and flew off in the direction they were now heading.

Grinning, Vince decided to leave his boots off. He wanted to feel this new land against his feet.

Sam came in and landed atop Vince's shoulders. She was riding him as Berest often did, with her torso behind his head, hands in his hair, and her legs dangling down in front.

Leaning over him, she kissed his temple once.

"Petra is already setting up on the peninsula," reported the Fae. "She plans on creating a fortress at the tip of it and a guarded bay. Then slowly moving inward and taking the peninsula as Yosemite grows.

"They found a sign that named the place Ria de Ferrol. Mr. White Junior said that the name was Spanish. He's preparing skill books for several languages, he said.

"He's not as confident as his dad, but he seems a bit more skilled. Just untested, but I think he'll be fine."

"Anything else?" Vince asked. They were currently overlooking a city laid out on the coast. It had a large number of people moving about the surrounding plains, as well as going in and out of the city itself.

“Only that Petra asks that you don’t engage the locals as of yet. She’s concerned about alerting them to our presence. She’d prefer to send you out as an emissary first, rather than as a foreigner,” relayed Sam. “Anything for me to report back to her?”

“Pretty sure we’ve found two cities, this one, which honestly she can probably see at night if she looks to the southwest. The other one we think might exist, but we’re not sure. It’s named Lugo and is to the east. Southeast from where we’re setting up,” Vince answered in a quiet voice. “We came across a dead caravan. A number of crates had ‘Lugo’ written on the side. Looked like import-export branding.

“Found a partial map on someone. Most of the names were in a different language, but we did find one city on the map that was listed as Lugo. To the east of us. Would really appreciate it if you could come back with some of those language books for myself and Blue.”

And another tally mark for big brother.

I’ll catch up eventually.

Vince looked down at his pack with a smirk. He felt like he was always going to be indebted to Felix. Rifling around through his gear for several seconds, he pulled out the map.

He’d already read it over enough to know which parts were useful to him. To Petra, it would be very useful, he imagined.

“With my regards to the general,” he said and held the map up to Sam. “Now, can I fill you up?”

“No, I’m not big enough yet,” replied Sam, taking the map from him with one hand. The fingers of her other hand were gliding through his hair. “Though you can certainly recharge me. I knew I was almost as tall as Leila, but it was surprising to stand next to her earlier.”

Vince snorted at that and then laid a hand on Sam’s thigh and began dumping the power of his grove into her. Between her, Leila, and the so-far-unmet Zathira, he’d only have a few that he could empty his power well into.

He didn’t force it all into Sam at once, however. She needed to be able to fly afterward.

“What do we do, Bringer?” asked Red, looking up at him. “If Petra wants us to be goodie goodies, then we can’t do much, can we?”

Vince frowned and chewed at his lip.

“Blue and I will go into town and start getting a feel for the situation,” answered Vince. “She and I can pass for human and pretend to just be a traveling husband and wife. I can get a feel for people with my gifts, but probably won’t be able to figure out their thoughts.”

“I can do some of the same, just not as well as Meliae or Mouth. I’m sure we’ll be fine,” agreed Blue, then she looked at Red. Reaching out, she cupped the Cursed One’s face in her hands. “Red, will you help Blue?”

Red smiled at the Dryad and then moved forward and began nuzzling her. The two of them were far friendlier than Vince had realized.

“Red will always help Blue. Blue has been a true friend to Red,” said the Beastkin.

“I need you to start looking for signs of Wasters,” asked Blue. “This is a human settlement from what we can see. I imagine Lugo is the same. This area had to have been affected just as everywhere else was. That means the Wasters are hiding in the countryside, have their own cities, or are in a different country altogether.

“Will you meet up with us back here at midnight tonight? That way we can feed you and make sure all is well with both of us.”

Red’s smile grew even wider at the request and she nodded her head quickly.

“Yes, Red will do all of that for Blue. Red loves Blue as she would a friend,” crooned Red as she continued to nuzzle and rub against Blue. “Besides, Red loves to hunt. Red will hunt, stalk, chase, and discover the Wasters.”

“Good, thank you. I love you, too, Red,” Blue said, releasing Red. She had clearly, and deliberately, left the statement somewhat open.

Pausing only to steal a kiss from Vince and give him a smile, Red was then off in a blur. Sprinting away on all fours at full speed.

She moved far faster than Vince ever could run.

“She can cover a lot more ground than us,” Blue said to the unspoken question Vince did indeed have. “No reason to ask her to sit here and be miserable. She’d just complain about it when we picked her up later. This is better for everyone.

“Now, shall we go? Because I’m betting the grove will cut you off at any moment.”

There was a slowing of the power that was draining into Sam from the grove over the next several seconds that led to it cutting him off completely.

“Because I’m the only Dryad near you for miles and miles and miles that’s part of your grove,” Blue answered his thought as he had it. “If you feel out to your grove, you’ll realize all the trees are there. All of them. Just somewhat dormant. They still generate the same power, but it’s like... they’re sleeping.”

Vince didn’t have to think very hard on that to know she was absolutely correct.

Taking her hand in his own, Vince released Sam, the Fae not moving away.

“When... I’m as big as you are, can I hide my wings with a coat and go into town with you?” asked Sam in a very peculiar tone. “Like... like what you’re doing... with Blue?”

“Of course. You’ll be a ridiculously big Fae at that point though. Is there such a thing as a half-breed Fae and human?” Vince asked as Sam lifted off from his back.

“No, but I guess we’ll find out. If you’re a lucky man,” Sam said, then flew toward him upside down. She put a peck of a kiss across his lips, pulled his ear, and then zipped off into the sky.

“For someone we captured, threatened with torture, and then indoctrinated, she’s very happy to be with us,” Blue muttered, then she squeezed his hand. “Let’s go! Travelers from abroad, we came down from Francia and have been on the road for a while.”

“Uh, Francia?” repeated Vince.

“The trees have told me many things. Mostly about the areas around here though. They don’t have many trees that connect in a line to other areas. Lots of bare spots,” Blue explained quickly, dragging him along toward the city. “Travelers come down from a

war-torn location called Francia though. Refugees. They speak a language that is different than here, but some also speak English. Or at least, a form of it.”

In no time at all, they were on a road heading straight for the city.

Vince had already been surprised at the fact that there were no stone walls surrounding the city here. All they had was a very flimsy looking wooden one that he could probably climb over in only a few seconds.

He had no idea how they were expecting to survive an attack from the wilds, or elsewhere, with such meager defenses. Which really only left him with the answer that this was deep in the heart of another territory. That the coastline had been such a long-forgotten concern of anything other than sea creatures, that this was considered untouchable territory.

Doesn't that mean it'll be even easier for us? Not expecting us to land, not just on their doorstep, but in their backyard. I can kick the door in and make off with the china before they even know we're here.

“Wipe that evil grin off your face, Grove-husband,” warned Blue with a chuckle, adjusting the scarf that covered most of her head and face. Then she wrapped her arm around his and patted the back of his wrist with her fingers. “We’ll not destroy this country for no reason. For all we know, they’re an extremely warm and open government and we have no reason to be hostile to them.

“We might even get an ally out of this, you know? This could be beneficial to us and we won’t even have to pay anything at all in that case. And fix your headscarf. If I can see your face, anyone else can, too.”

Wandering up to the gate, Vince reached up and tugged at his head covering with one hand. However, he found there wasn’t anyone there to hide from. There were no guards, no citizens, nothing. Whoever was in charge didn’t seem to care one whit about watching the entry point.

That felt incredibly strange to Vince. To the point that he could feel his paranoia ticking up by several degrees.

Slowly, they began making their way into the city and the feeling actually began to grow worse. There were very few people out and about, and the ones Vince did see, were all rushing off.

Each and every one seemed to be heading toward what was likely the center of the city. Some were moving much quicker than others, but they all had a determined look to them.

More than a few had fear rolling off them in waves. Those that did looked like non-humans to Vince. Or more specifically, felt different than humans would.

They didn't carry themselves or move in quite the same way.

While not outwardly distinct, they didn't quite fit in with humanity.

Hm. I wonder if this is like the emperor in the west, or the kingdom in the east. Are Wasters slaves, or just second-class citizens?

If the numbers difference is just as bad here as it was at home, Wasters were outnumbered at the start. Did they have a chance to breed-up like they did back home?

Curious. Very curious.

Suddenly, Vince saw where everyone was heading, as there was a very large crowd gathered. The crowd surrounded what looked like a raised platform with several men atop it.

One was on his knees in front of a headsman's block.

It looked to be a Lion-type Beastkin. One who'd been severely mistreated before their execution.

Vince wasn't sure, but he and the Beastkin were likely of a similar height, though the Lion was somewhat overweight. Given the amount of chain they'd laid over his shoulders and arms, there was a good chance that the prisoner was deceptively strong as well.

There was a litany of what were likely accusations being yelled out by one of the men on the platform. He had the air of a puffed-up political appointee there to make a point.

Swinging his arm to the side, the man pointed at the Lion Beastkin who was clearly about to be executed. Most of what he said didn't make a lick of sense to Vince.

It all ended with the man stating the name "Scott Hank" with a spiteful glare at the Lion and then he spat at him.

Given the way he'd said it, Vince assumed it was the name of the Beastkin. It also sounded very normal, and given the names he'd seen of cities, that meant that this person was likely a foreigner.

One of the other men shoved the Lion down upon the block, another raised the axe, and then brought it down.

The Beastkin had his head removed with a single chop and that was the end of the display.

Vince could feel a multitude of emotions flood through the area. Joy, anger, fear, hate, and a whole lot of paranoia.

Seems like we ended up dropping into something.

Again.

Though... that makes it easier if they're not a kind government. Much easier.

In fact, I welcome them being as evil as possible.

That way I can kick it all over and take it for my own.

Chapter 6

Vince and Blue turned away from the rather macabre sight and moved off. Blue began pulling at his arm after they'd cleared the immediate vicinity but hadn't left the very large plaza.

"This way, very old tree," she advised, leading him around a bend in the pathway.

It led them to a partially enclosed section that had a tree in the center of it.

To be honest, it was rather hard to miss, given the size of it. Vince just hadn't realized it was as close as it was. It'd looked a bit further away and as if it were growing out of some mansion's backyard.

Surprisingly, or at least to Vince, was that it looked to be a type of tree Vince was familiar with. An ash tree of some variety.

Growing out of the center of the area provided for it, this wasn't just an old tree, but one you could call ancient. With branches and boughs that strained up into the sky above, reaching out for every inch of sunlight it could gather.

"Oh, goodness," Blue said and then laid her right hand on the bark of the large specimen. It stretched what clearly had to be over sixty feet tall. "Hello. You... had a Dryad once."

Looking up to the branches above, Blue looked very curious. Curious, but also forlorn.

"He's lived a long time here. A very long time. His Dryad was the city's... trasgu. Or... something like that. I don't really understand. She was revered and... she had wings. She was more akin to a Sylph than a Dryad. How very strange.

"She spoke out against the violence occurring. Against the civil war that was tearing the country to pieces. They killed her. Right here. At the base of her tree.

"Her blood soaked the ground and fed her tree, and now he lives on. Living for both of them and wishing to see her again. To... live... with her again? It's hard to make out.

"He's not very fond of the Dryad that's... that's living... in a pot? In a pot, yes. Living in a pot at the back of the city."

Shaking her head, Blue looked like she didn't even understand what she herself was saying.

"I have a Dryad by the name of Meliae," Vince said, looking up into the tree's foliage. "She's an Ash Dryad."

There was a strange hesitation in the air, followed by what felt like the tree reaching out to him. To the grove inside him.

Lifting his left hand, Vince placed it on the tree as well.

There was an instant connection between himself and the tree. One Dryad tree, to another.

Vince heard what sounded like static electricity. The type you'd hear when you pulled certain clothes apart on an extremely windy day. Followed by a rustling through the tree.

"He... welcomes you," Blue whispered. "Welcomes you and wants to know if you'll take a seed from his Dryad. The last he has.

"He's old and very tired. He can't... can't finish... he can't finish something. I can't understand what he's trying to say.

"His life is very weak. I don't think he has many winters, if even one winter, left. The soil just can't support him anymore."

Now that Vince was looking, he saw a number of spots on the tree that didn't have bark coverage. Where it'd been shed and nothing new was growing back.

On the ground around them were a great many broken branches. As if they weren't strong enough to endure the wind and storms anymore.

Looking down to the base, he even saw new shoots growing up from the base of the tree.

None of these things were signs that this tree was in good condition.

"Yes," Vince said simply, looking back up to the tree's middle.

There was a sharp crack as if something broke above him.

Fluttering down toward him came a flat-looking seed pod. One that reminded him of the one Meliae had put into him.

Catching it out of the air, Vince looked at Blue.

"He's... asleep. I don't think he'll wake again," whispered Blue, turning her head to meet Vince's eyes. "All he said was thank you and... that was it."

Frowning, Vince looked at the seed pod.

“Should I put it in me?” he asked, lifting his gaze back to Blue.

“I... don’t know. He’s a Dryad tree, but there’s no Dryad attached to it. It wouldn’t harm you at all but there’s no point to it.”

Vince looked around and then back to Blue.

Dryads were the backbone of his kingdom.

They were also the key to Felix defeating his enemies.

As a family, the Campbells owed a great deal to Dryads.

“Help me get this inside,” Vince muttered and opened his coat.

“When we’re done, let’s go find this ‘Dryad in a pot’ he mentioned.”

At his waist was the gifted pistol Felix had given him through Andrea. On his other hip was the energy-bladed sword he’d stolen from a dying superhero. These two weapons gave Vince a great deal of confidence.

Now just imagine when I get into the Sword of Yosemite.

“Wipe that smirk off your face, my dearest Grove-husband,” Blue said with a chuckle. She stepped up to him and then laid her hands on his chest. Standing there for a few seconds, she looked to be considering something.

With a quick shake of her head, she just pulled down the top of his tunic. Then she pulled the Legion’s small ballistic vest forward. She focused on his clavicle. The same spot that was opened up every time they planted new Dryads in him.

Without even touching him, the skin split apart and opened up.

Blue plucked the seed out of Vince’s hand and slid the very faintly glowing seedpod into him. Then sealed the wound with a fingertip.

Letting the clothes sit back on him in the correct way, she patted his chest and then closed his jacket at the front. There was no reason to advertise his weaponry.

“Alright, off we go,” she said and then hooked her arm with his once again.

As she pulled him off, he had a lingering strange feeling. That there was something else he needed to say.

Something to do.

An itching feeling that an action had been left uncompleted.

With a shake of his head, Vince cleared the feeling and let Blue lead him off.

Blue took him down a series of alleys, streets, and crosswise through intersections. It was somewhat of a strange scramble to move through the people around them.

A great many people were heading back to their homes, back to where they'd come from originally. There was an ebb and flow to it that Blue used to keep them moving quite fast.

In very little time at all, they came back out of the mass of people to a small, secluded area in the back of the city. There were a number of trees all around. And a great deal of grass.

Fountains dotted the landscape.

There were no people here, though.

Nor were there any guards.

It was an empty, almost-forgotten corner of the city.

"I... ugh... it's... it's awful," Blue said, recoiling backward several steps. Even going so far as to release Vince's arm in her retreat.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at the Dryad with some concern.

"A potted Dryad... living on the edge. Just like he said," Blue said with a shake of her head. "That's terrible. Absolutely terrible."

"Well, I can't see it or sense it, so you'll have to lead me there or elaborate," grumbled Vince.

Blue shook her head at first, then nodded it. Finally releasing a slow, forceful breath, she stepped forward again. Her whole demeanor seemed as if she wanted to turn and sprint away at full speed.

"Trees like a healthy distance from each other," muttered Blue as they started forward across the perfectly manicured green grass. "It's to try and keep themselves from picking up a disease. This... feels like that to me. That I'm walking into something diseased."

Eventually, the green walkway came to a curved path. One that led around to a different area entirely. A darkened hallway that led to a bricked-up park. Twenty-foot-tall walls with spikes along the top of them surrounded it.

Vince couldn't see it from here, but he'd bet there was a guard patrol who were kept around the outside of the walls here.

The area wasn't very large, perhaps fifty by fifty feet. It was filled with stunted trees and very sad and depressed-looking Dryads.

One and all, they also had the look of being very unhealthy.

It reminded him of when Meliae had been dying on the way back to his home.

There was no one else here, just the Dryads, trees, and the walls.

Looking at the trees, Vince saw why these poor things looked the way they did. They seemed to be on the verge of collapsing.

Their trees were mutilated.

Restricted to a certain size, it was obvious that they were frequently hacked at. Cut back at the first sign of any growth beyond a set limit.

That wasn't where it ended, either. Most of the trees had clearly had their bark peeled off, leaving almost the entirety of the tree bare.

Quite a few of them also had what looked like an endless number of taps driven into them. Sap poured from them, only to pool on the grass.

There was no desire to collect it, only to damage the tree. To make it harder for the Dryads to resist or do anything, he imagined.

At the back of the area was a larger tree. One that'd been hacked down from what had likely been a beech tree. One that'd grown magnificently and proudly once.

"This is hideous," Vince whispered. "Absolutely vile."

Slowly, the two of them kept walking. Past the living Dryads who looked almost like corpses. Their partly-tanned skin looked yellowish and hung poorly on their bodies. They had sunken eyes and wispy, dry hair.

Each and every one of them looked quite pregnant.

Okay. I'm burning this shit-hole city to the ground.

Anyone who can do this to Dryads... no. No, no, no.

Burning it all to the ground.

If the country behind it knew of this, I'll burn it to the ground as well.

Then piss on the coals left over.

Sitting in front of the large and terribly mauled tree was another Dryad. She sat there for all the world as if she were a stone.

One that neither cared, saw, nor heard their approach.

Her skin was the same light tan that all of the Dryads here had. Her eyes were Dryad green and looked empty. Her hair was pulled behind her head in a simple way that did nothing at all for her.

There was a diminished beauty to her and an echo of loss for it. It hung on her as if you were looking at a beautiful painting that'd been sliced from one corner to the other.

She was also so massively pregnant that she was even bigger than Meliae.

"You poor woman," Blue said in a choked voice as they came up to her.

The Dryad blinked, her eyes slowly moving up to Vince and Blue's. It was as if she'd been in a trance and unable to hear or see them until that moment.

"What?" she asked in a dry voice. It was also oddly accented in a way he'd never heard before.

At least we can communicate.

"Who did this to you?" Vince demanded before Blue could say anything. There was a growl in his voice that he didn't expect.

The Dryad looked from Vince to Blue, then back to him. She looked confused and shocked. As if she wasn't sure what was going on.

"This?" she asked.

"Imprisoned you, butchered your trees, impregnated you," hissed Vince. He could feel his hands flexing into fists and the creak of his leather gloves as he did so.

The very idea that someone could do something like this to a Dryad was terrible to him. They were a species that just wanted to live in harmony with wherever they were, have a lot of sex, and have more Dryads.

They only wanted things to live and breed. That was it.

"Did they rape you? Or are these pregnancies you wished?" Vince added when his mind caught up to it.

Blinking rapidly, the Dryad slowly tilted her head to the side, gazing up at him.

“You’re not from here,” said the Dryad with a wasteland of a smile. “Northerners. Verdad?”

“Let’s just say... we’re from somewhere you’ve never heard of,” offered Blue, pushing in closer to Vince’s side now. It looked like she wanted to curl up into him and hide in her own clothes.

“You’re... a Dryad,” said the woman, her eyes slowly losing the confusion and lack of awareness. It was as if she were waking up. She gazed at Blue with something akin to shock and awe.

“Yes,” whispered Blue. “He’s my grove. Who... did this to you? What’s the government of this place? Where are we? What’s the name of the city and country?”

Looking rapidly between the two of them, the very pregnant Dryad levered herself up to her feet. She looked winded from the simple action.

“I’m a prisoner,” said the Dryad firmly. “I am held against my will, as all my daughters are, as well. Those who can receive a man are here, or sold to other cities.

“Those too young are held in a prison beneath the city-lord’s castle. Close enough to be part of my grove, far enough away to keep them weak and tired.

“The day they can plant a tree, they are forced to do so, then sold, or... bred. This is one of three Dryad-breeding cities.”

That was all Vince needed to know.

All he would ever need to know.

To Vince, Dryads were one of the very few species he respected. No one garnered the same respect from him at any level.

“How can I free you?” Vince demanded. He wanted to know what it would take to make this happen. “Do I just slaughter everyone? Do you have seeds?”

“I... no. We don’t. It’d cost too much for us. We spend too much just trying to survive and care for our daughters,” lamented the Dryad.

Gritting his teeth, Vince looked down and to the side.

A single thought came to him.

Charging the Dryad up with his own grove. To give what power he had to her. He imagined it wouldn't be very much at the moment, but he could probably come back the next day and do it again.

And again.

Until they had enough power to have seeds ready. Then he'd break them out as well as their daughters.

"If we were to escape, we'd rather not... not interact with anyone. We know a place we can go where we could retreat from the world," voiced the Dryad.

"That's fine. As long as you'd be safe," confirmed Vince, then he looked around himself.

"We can't leave this area. They don't need guards. No one comes to see us," offered the Dryad with a small shake of her head. "The city-lord discourages anyone from coming to see us as well, though he doesn't prevent it.

"No one has come to see us in a very long time. Months upon months, really. The only ones that come... come to harm our trees."

"Right... well... that's done now," Vince hissed.

Reaching out, he laid his hand on the Dryad's shoulder and promptly tried to empty what little he had of the power of his grove into her.

There wasn't much power available, given that he'd emptied it recently into Sam. Though he did believe there would be some available.

He was finally near the level that he'd used to be at with only a handful of Dryads in his grove and them as individual trees. Except, with so many trees providing him power, he could recharge rather quickly.

In the next moment, there was a steady, powerful discharge exiting from him. All of it entered the poor, withered, partly-dead Dryad.

There was a shocking change in the woman, as she transformed from a hunched-over and meek-looking creature to a Dryad that Vince could recognize. As if she'd just arrived from the wastes and wanted to know where she could go to join a grove.

As quickly as the change had come on, it fled again.

The Dryad once again withered, wizened, and looked drawn. Exactly as she'd been when he'd first met her.

When the power ran out, Vince let his hand fall.

"I... thank you, outsider," whispered the Dryad, looking up at him. "That... that was far more than I expected. I've given much of it to my daughters.

"Those behind you, that is. They weren't as strong as I was and were succumbing much faster. I've strengthened their roots to prepare a seed. When... can you do that again? Next week?"

Flexing his hand, Vince looked at his palm. He could feel the newest seedpod that'd joined his grove growing now. Shifting about inside of him in a panicked yet incredibly excited way.

Finding endless Dryad trees to mingle with and be a part of.

I'll become the damn Lord of the Dryads. This sickening display will end. I'll let Blue do the... Dryad invitations. I'm sure she, Meliae, and Mouth worked out what'd happen if I found more Dryads.

No need to worry about it.

"In a few hours. I'll have most of it back. How many more times do you think it'll take before you're all ready to move? Also, where are your other daughters? I'll need to make sure we can get them out as well," he said, looking back to the Dryad woman.

"I... that... two times I'd say," she said in a near whisper. "As to my daughters... I don't know. I can find out though. If... you can fill me with power again, when the city-lord visits me tonight, I can take the information from him. I'll know tomorrow."

"Then tomorrow, if I get permission from my general, your imprisonment ends," promised Vince. "Do you have a human name, by the way?"

One way, or the other.

I'll either break you all out and give you your exit... or I'll kill the city-lord, all his damned people, and turn the city over to you. You can be the Duchess here in this place.

This little walled-off courtyard can become your throne room.

Give you full run of the damn city.

The Dryad gave him a sad small smile.

“I’ve most unfortunately been known as Firewood for a long while now,” she said softly. “My... mother once called me Flora.”

Kill them all.

“I’ll return, Flora,” promised Vince.

Turning away, Vince left. He’d come back in a few hours to recharge her once more, then leave. He still needed to collect what information he could here as a scout for Petra.

Chapter 7

Walking into the bar, Vince wasn't quite sure if this was the best move.

In the end, they hadn't really been able to figure out which way to go, or what to do. Most of the city spoke or wrote in their own language.

There was no real way of telling what was going on without talking to someone.

In the back of Vince's head, that meant going somewhere that travelers would go to talk. Where others might talk.

People love to talk when drinking.

Blue was right beside him as they came through the door.

Inside was a common room that he'd seen the like of a number of times before, back home. This one was just decorated and laid out according to whatever the local custom was.

It being early afternoon meant that there weren't a huge number of people here, but there were more than enough to talk to.

Walking right up to the bar and the bartender who stood behind it, Vince nodded his head at the man. Leaning up onto the bar, just as he used to back home, Vince coughed once and shook his head.

"New to the city," he said by way of introduction. It would also let the man know he didn't speak the local language.

Given that the sign out front had actually contained the word "bar" written in the bottom corner, Vince was hopeful that he'd be understood. Or at least tolerated.

There was no way of telling how much or little of this city would be wary of outsiders.

His personal experience back home was that if you didn't speak the language, you might as well have been a Waster.

"Well, you managed to find the right place then," murmured the barman, meeting Vince's gaze. He had a wide smile on his face now that looked tired and forced to Vince. As if the man were living the mask he'd forced himself to put on so often that the mask was now the life.

His brown eyes were flat and reflected a weariness that had invaded his soul. He had short brown hair and looked fairly mundane otherwise.

“That’s wonderful,” Blue added and pushed up to the bar as well. “Can I get a beer? Anything or whatever you’ve got?”

“Actually, first... do you take all coins here? We’re from really far. Beyond the northeast and to the far, far east.”

Blue had already pulled the coin out before asking her question. Setting down the standard in front of them, she gave the barman a helpless smile.

“Not sure if we can use our currency here or melt it down at a jeweler,” she offered up to the man.

“We get a lot of foreign coin in Iberis. Looks kinda like a lesser Franc,” said the bartender, picking up the coin. He gave his head a slow shake and tapped it on the bar top. “Can’t really take it cause I don’t know what the hell’s in it, but I’ll trade you. You let me keep this one, I’ll give you four beers for it. Two bottle, two tap.”

“That’s about what it’d be worth, so that’s fine,” Blue chirped happily. “What other coins do you get a lot of? Are there any we should be wary of? We’ve... only really dealt with our own, and we’re a long way from home.”

The barman had pocketed the coin and came back up with two mugs and two bottles. He chuckled even as he poured a golden-brown liquid into the two mugs from a wooden barrel behind him.

“Well, wouldn’t take any kings. Looks just like a la general. Has the old royal family arms on the front, crown on the back,” advised the barman. “Get yourself mistaken for a royalist if you do. Get your head struck off like that poor bastard today. He was actually guilty though.”

“Not that I blame him. More than once, I’ve thought about breaking my contract and fleeing. Getting right out of here.”

Hm. Alright.

Two opposing factions.

A royalist faction and something else. We can assume it’s an upstart noble family, random warlord, or elected type of leader.

That means we can play one off of the other. Take the royalist faction in and turn them into a puppet state. Another duchy for Yosemite.

All while absolutely crushing this place.

“—mean by contract?” Blue asked curiously, taking a sip from the mug the man had presented to her. “By the way, I’m Blue Campbell. Nice to meet you. This is my husband, Vince.”

Laughing, the barman leaned against the bar top behind him and folded his arms in front of himself.

“You really are completely new here. I’m Chris. Chris Merkle,” answered the barman. “Contract... ah... I’m supposed to stay here in Coruna. I rent my home from the local lord and I can’t leave. Mine’s actually pretty good. Don’t have to work the land or do anything like that. Pretty blessed, actually.

“A lot of people don’t have a good contract. Can get bought and sold as the landowner wants.”

“Ah,” Vince said, then realized he’d actually need to find a suitable response if he wanted more. Blue had already spoken more than enough to make this subject move along. If she did more, it’d look weird. “What about this... uh... royalist... group? What’s the difference between them and the government?

“Not trying to find them or anything just... want to know what the divide is. Stay clear of it and not get involved.”

“Who’s in control, really,” Chris answered with a shrug.

“Otherwise, they probably have the same policies.

Right. So... they’d probably do the same thing to the Dryads.

Same awfulness, different name.

Sounds like this whole country needs to get bulldozed to the ground and handed to a Dryad. They can turn the breeding cities into seats of power.

Back it up with Yosemite might while pushing the whole thing forward.

I can do this.

“—slaves? Or is that not a thing here?” Blue questioned.

“Slaves? No, not really. Though depending on your contract with your landlord, it might as well be. Some of them can buy and sell the

land to others, and that'd include you if your contract went that way.

"Some even have limitations in their contracts that say that they can't marry without permission from their contract holder. Just all depends on the contract you got. Most of those are set up by your parents when you're born."

"I could theoretically purchase land and get all the people on it?" pressed Vince.

"Uh, yeah. You'd have to buy it from the city-lord. He's kind of an ass though," complained Chris with a shake of his head. "Won't sell any of his Dryads to anyone but friends or lords. Even if you do manage to get one from him, he'll just make them pull out their own guts so they can't have kids."

Vince gave Chris a cold smile at that, doing his best to not go on a killing spree.

"Let's talk more about the city-lord. I figure I'm going to have to learn the ins and outs here if I want to survive," Vince said and pulled out two standards from a pocket. He put them on the countertop.

"Call it a tip for tips because I appreciate your words."

Vince and Blue exited the city just before sunset.

They'd stopped over to fill the poor Grove-mistress once again after speaking to Chris for a while, then left. There was nothing left for them to learn or ferret out here.

Walking down the road leading back out of Coruna, Vince held Blue's hand in his own.

"Vince, why don't you get your left hand fixed? I think... our friend from above would have done it for cheap. Even Felix could technically do it now," asked Blue.

"Hm? Oh. Eh," Vince profoundly expanded upon. He lifted up his left hand in front of himself. He had a glove on right now, but he gave his fingers a twitch.

The bottom portion of his hand and a couple of fingers were gone entirely. Lost in a foolish incident that nearly cost Daphne her life.

She wore a scar that'd never truly fade because of him.

“Because it wouldn’t be fair to Daphne. My Dryad nearly gave her life for me,” Vince informed her. “She bears the scar she earned for me. I’ll bear the loss I paid as well. It’s a reminder to trust in those who trust in me.

“That, and to rely on my Dryads in all things. I love my Fes. Love my Elves. But... my Dryads... my Dryads are my true source of power.”

Letting his hand fall back down to his side, he looked at Blue.

“We... we know,” she whispered, gazing up at him with slightly widened eyes. “We know you treasure us all. You resist more wives, but always take on more Dryads. You struggle to remember our names and children, but you do your best. You memorize all that you can.

“We know you love us all. That you... want us exactly as we are. We hold a special existence in Yosemite now. Looking at Flora and her daughters... it’s... it’s hard to even think that just six years ago, Dryads in our homelands experienced very similar issues.”

Vince nodded his head. He couldn’t deny what Blue said.

As Fes pushed for more wives, Meliae just brought him ever more Dryads. He never denied her and wouldn’t complain about it, but did his best by them.

“How many Dryad wives do I have now, Blue? I lost count a while back... I try to show them all I care but... it feels like there’s so many.”

“You... I... mmm... we try not to talk about it but... you have eighty-six Dryad wives. All who love you desperately,” confessed Blue. “We’re trying to be extremely picky now with who we invite in. Meliae regrets pulling in so many, but she wanted to empower you.”

With a snort, Vince couldn’t doubt the words. There was no hesitation in him whatsoever to admit that the power given to him was what he needed. He wouldn’t be here now without what’d been forced on him.

“None of them... feel... left out? I know I don’t see some of them except once or twice a month and—”

There was a presence behind him. Lurking at the edge of his awareness.

It felt similar to when Red was hunting him, but it lacked all subtlety and ability. There were people following them from the city itself.

“Not at all!” Blue promised him. She squeezed his hand between hers tightly. “We all know you care, worry, and fret over us. I promise that not one of us thinks you’re doing poorly by any means.

“We’re all very happy and feel cared for. I admit some of us get a little lonely, but that’s why we have Grove-wives. It helps us balance out when you’re busy. It’s also how we can get invited into three-ways when you visit us or our Grove-wives. Then we just— Oh, we have company, don’t we?”

“You have that excited look on your face that you get when you corner one of the Dryads and we’re not expecting it.”

Vince couldn’t deny he did love catching Dryads unaware.

“Feels like a group. Either want you, our possessions, or both,” he answered. “Contemplating when and where to kill them.”

“Uhm,” said Blue helpfully. She looked to a somewhat stunted tree they slowly walked by. “Oh! Thank you.

“She said that there’s a small gully off the trail up ahead. Most people avoid it because it’s hard to get out of once you get in. A few people have even gotten trapped at the bottom of it and had to have help.”

“Perfect. That’s... where we’ll bury them,” murmured Vince.

“Guide us, my beautiful Blue. Then you’ll be helping me with Red tonight. I’m afraid I’m going to need to work off some frustration, and she’ll want to be fed.”

“How delightful,” purred Blue. Pulling on his arm, she started to move them forward a little quicker. She got them to where the road turned off, and she went to the left instead. Pulling them into some brush and beyond.

It didn’t take long for them to find the entrance to the canyon. It wasn’t very large, but certainly more than large enough to be a problem for people.

Especially given that the drop off from the ledge leading into it had to be at least six feet off the ground. That alone would give pause.

Blue stepped right off with a little hop and landed at the bottom.

Stepping off after her, Vince found that there was a small overhang here. Looking at it, he saw that he could likely wedge himself into it and use it as a means to surprise their pursuers.

“Go forward. Make a small camp that’s visible from the entrance here. Try to make it look like I’m lying down. Don’t unpack or anything. Just make it look like it’s where we decided to stop,” Vince said and then pulled off his pack. He handed it over to the Dryad who took it with one hand.

He often forgot how strong she was compared to how she looked.

Dryads are amazing.

Pulling out his pistol, Vince checked the safety, pulled the slide to confirm it was chambered, then pushed up to the wall. Holstering his pistol, he unsheathed his sword and held it to the side. Then he unholstered the pistol again with his off-hand.

Hiding there, he was ready for anyone to come down. If he could manage it without firing a shot, he would. There was always the possibility of someone hearing the shot, of course.

Blue wrinkled her nose, smiled at him, shook her head, and then went off. Deeper into the canyon.

She didn’t go too far, but she also made sure the location wasn’t perfectly visible. She chose a position that would shield her from anyone above Vince, but where they’d still know where she was.

Smart woman there. I didn’t even think of it, but they could just as easily shoot at her from up there, rather than confront her.

Standing there, Vince breathed slowly. He kept his thoughts on the situation and did his best to not lose himself.

Unfortunately, he could feel his anger rising.

Anger at what was being done to the poor Dryads. That someone would abuse them so terribly.

A red haze began to creep in at the edges of his vision. One that threatened to overrun him and send him rushing toward the enemy. A need to kill them violently and painfully.

He heard a quiet voice then. Someone above him speaking in the language of the area. Another person responded, followed by a

question.

There was a response, followed by someone dropping down into the canyon.

“Uhm? Hello?” called Blue. The sound of the drop had been loud enough that she couldn’t pretend she hadn’t heard it.

In front of Vince was a man wearing what looked likesome sort of uniform. It was yellow, with black as its accent color. The man held a rifle with a bayonet affixed to it.

It was unlike any firearm Vince had ever seen before.

Something akin to the rifles of his home, but not quite either. It looked heavily modified or even manufactured.

Did they keep making guns and ammo here? That’s disconcerting. I didn’t see any firearms on any of the guards we spotted.

Does that mean that these people are actually far more than just the city guard?

They’re not rabble looking to rob us?

Could they be from the city-lord?

Frowning, Vince wasn’t sure how to proceed now.

They’d clearly been followed here, and these people were looking for him. If he took the wrong course of action here, it’d leave lasting repercussions.

Whatever. They can all die.

Everyone in this shit-hole can be dumped in a shit-pit.

Five more of these men had dropped down into the canyon after the first. They were all looking toward where Blue clearly was but said nothing. No one responded to her call.

“I’m sorry, we... don’t want anything to do with you. We’re just simple travelers and—”

One of the soldiers checked his weapon, then worked a handle. He cycled what looked like a bolt to put a chamber into the round.

They were most definitely not here to talk.

Vince could practically feel the cold, empty feeling of death on these people.

They can all die.

Spare the officer, get information, and then kill him.

Lifting the pistol with a smile, Vince lined it up on the back of the closest man's head.

Stepping forward with his right foot, Vince threw out a slash at the second-closest man's neck. The blade slipped through the flesh, bone, and muscle neatly and without too much resistance.

The man Vince had been aiming at hadn't even noticed.

Pivoting, Vince brought the sword around and then slammed the tip of it through the back of the man's skull. There was a wet-crunching noise followed by him sloshing to one side, then dropping to the ground.

Letting the fall pull his blade down and to the side, Vince took a step forward. It'd let him pull his arm back without any issue and prep the swing he was about to throw out.

Coming out at a low angle moving to high, it caught the next soldier just under the ear and exited the top right of his skull. Part of his head bounced off to the left as the rest of him fell to the right.

The remaining three soldiers had now turned to face Vince and looked very surprised.

Blue dashed forward in that instant, her iron-shod staff coming out like a spear. The tip of it smashed home into the back of a man's neck. There was an ugly crunch and it looked like the strike had broken his neck outright.

Vince had raised his blade in a defensive position, causing all three men to focus on him even as one died. Blue took a step to the left, bent her body with the attack, and lashed out horizontally.

The staff zipped through the air and caught the next soldier on the jaw. His jaw, cheek, and part of his face appeared to collapse under the weight of the blow.

Along with the entirety of his head bending at a strange angle.

The last soldier standing, the officer, glanced back to Blue and seemed surprised to find he now stood alone. His hands were frozen on his weapon as he considered the situation.

Vince took a step back to increase the distance between himself and the man and aimed the sights of the weapon between his brows. He was at a distance where he couldn't miss, as well as at the point

where the man couldn't make a silly "wannabe hero" move on the weapon.

"Good evening," Vince said with a dark smile. "Let's talk about the city-lord, the Dryads, and what the hell is going on, shall we?"

Blue had moved backward and to the side several steps. From behind her had sprung a small pistol. It looked to be well-maintained and provided to her by Legion.

Which was obvious by the Legion symbol on the side of the barrel, right next to the word "Dryad".

Oh, Felix. You even armed my Dryads personally?

The officer let out a slow breath and looked to the ground.

"You kill me. I talk, you kill me. I don't talk, you kill me," murmured the officer with a shake of his head. "Knew order bad. Bad order from... urgh... from... boss? Boss. Bad order.

"Go get pretty woman. Bring back. Get special bounty."

There was no remorse in the man. No regret for this action.

Only anger for being caught.

Boy... they're just making this easy for me.

Though... ah... Blue forgot to adjust her face-covering after the bar.

She's very noticeable if someone saw her.

"Let's talk about your boss," prompted Vince as Blue realized the issue at the same time. One of her hands had gone up to her covering to discover it was around her shoulders. "Oh, and while we're at it... whatever problem you might have with casters. Like a mage, or sorcerer. After that, why a Necromancer or Warlock is hunky-dory. Because I'm getting some conflicting information here."

Chapter 8

Vince shifted against the rock and let out a slow and somewhat relaxed breath.

He was feeling incredibly wound up at the moment, but in a very good way. As if the tension he was feeling right now was entirely under his control.

Which it was.

Glancing down at Blue as she slowly and diligently tongued at his sack, both of her mismatched eyes glowed brightly from within and without a pupil. Her breath was coming out in soft huffs, which partially curled up and over his leg.

Her hands were tied behind her back, and her ankles were bound to one another. A thin line of pre-cum dribbled down from his very erect self and trailed down her cheek and face. There was already quite a bit of it covering her cheek and jaw.

She'd been working on him for the better part of thirty minutes. Vince had already gone from ready for action to deflated, and back again several times.

Blue would let it wilt, only to build it back up eagerly and with a hint of her personal Dryad magic. That and a lot of effort with her tongue and lips.

"You okay, my Grove-wife?" asked Vince. He asked her every ten or so minutes. Just to make sure she was alright.

He could guess as much from her eyes, but he wanted her to know that he was concerned for her.

"Oh, yes. This is wonderful. I'm having so much fun," she whispered in a husky whisper. Then she shifted a bit so that Vince had a perfect view of her chest. All the way down to her bare thighs.

Her tongue started to move up the base of his shaft and stopped halfway up. Using her lips, she nipped at him and then went back down to his sack.

Another glob of pre-cum dripped down from his tip and landed on the bridge of her nose. It oozed down and joined the rest on her cheek.

Have to take care of my only Dryad wife. Humiliation tuned to personality, sexually pleased and stimulated, though also mildly shamed with those they trust or care for.

All the things a well-cared for and loved Dryad needs.

That and a lot of personal attention.

Long ago, he'd discovered that Dryads thrived on just that.

Personal attention.

It didn't take much, or even that often, but it had to be something that showed care for them. Care, respect, and a little thought.

Presenting them with a flower, oil, seed, or scent that would match their tree in some way. A ribbon for their hair, a wooden ring, a simple carved amulet.

Charms and things made out of seed pods, branches, or roots.

"I'll brush your hair out later, sweet Blue," promised Vince.

Wrapping his fingers into her hair, he pulled her a bit closer to his privates.

Blue's eyes crinkled at the edges, smiling as she tried to take the entirety of his jewels into her mouth. Her eyes managed to actually grow even brighter.

At that moment, Vince finally felt what he wanted.

Red was here.

At the edge of the firelight, stalking him from where he wouldn't be able to see her.

"Red, my beautiful, feral Beastkin," Vince called. This wasn't the time to let her hunt. He needed to act on her immediately. "Perfect timing. We've spent some time cooking your dinner. Would you like to come over for a quick taste test? I think it's just about perfect."

Vince sunk his fingers into Blue's hair more firmly. He held her where she was even as another long drip came off his tip and fell into the large pool on her cheek.

As soon as he started speaking, Red's eyes flared to life. Glowing hot and bright. Then she obviously stood up as her eyes went from low to the ground to a normal person's height.

She'd been planning on stalking him.

Walking forward, she eyed Blue, then her eyes flicked to the bindings on her wrists and ankles, only to move back to her face.

“Come, take a taste, Red. We’ve been working on this for a bit. If I’m not ‘full’ I don’t know how else I could make it so,” offered Vince, easing Blue’s head back from his privates. The sticky mess of her face was extremely obvious now.

Pre-cum had literally coated her from chin to eyebrow.

Red took in a hissed breath and came over much more quickly now. She leaned in over the Dryad and then began licking everything off her face. Her tongue dragged across the Dryad’s skin one strip at a time.

For her part, Blue looked like she was getting more excited by the second. Gazing up at Vince as Red licked her face clean, her eyes were as bright as he’d ever seen.

Slowly, they started to roll back into her head as Red continued to lick at her repeatedly. Finally, she closed them and let herself be used like this.

“Red is... this... it’s delicious,” said the feral Beastkin finally after licking Blue almost entirely clean. There was a distinct edge to her voice that sounded like she might be out of breath. Her eyes moved to Vince’s tip where a glob was clearly there. “You... made Red dinner. Thank you, Blue. Thank you, Vince.”

“Red, you’re welcome,” whispered the Dryad and then let out a low, deep moan when the Beastkin licked the Dryad’s lips and up to her eyebrow.

“My pleasure, Red. Now, let’s feed you dinner. Put Blue down on her back, then get down on your knees on her face,” commanded Vince. “You’re going to get your first experience with a Dryad’s tongue, while I feed you. All you need to do is just kneel there and... receive.”

Vince handed Blue off to Red, who took the Dryad and laid her out on the ground.

The Cursed One stripped off her clothes in seconds, then awkwardly positioned herself over the Dryad’s face. Slowly she lowered herself down until her privates were resting on Blue’s mouth.

“Good. Perfect. Blue, can you eat her appropriately like that?” asked Vince, stepping up in front of Red. His member dangled before her pretty face.

She was gazing at it with wide eyes and an open mouth. She was clearly hungry for her meal.

“Yes, Grove-husband. May... may I? I want to eat it,” begged Blue.

“Enjoy yourself,” Vince allowed, then he grabbed Red by the head. He put his hands at the base of her ears and held her tightly. It wasn’t going to cause her pain, but he knew it’d hit a strange spot in her head.

Dominant but also intimate.

Taking in a quick breath, Red looked up at him with wide eyes that were lit from the inside. Then she opened her mouth wider and leaned toward him, all while letting out a squeak as the Dryad set to work beneath her.

“Good girl, Red,” murmured Vince as he guided his tip into her mouth. He let her close her mouth around it and gave her a chance to lick him clean. Then he began to thrust in and out of Red’s mouth.

“Mmooorhh,” moaned Red in surprise, her eyes widening further as she looked up at him. He had the feeling she was excited, incredibly turned on, and hungry all at the same time.

With a grin, Vince held her head still and began to pump himself back and forth. Slowly and completely, working himself from the tip to hilt and down until she had to hold her breath when her throat was filled with him.

As he drew back, Red would breathe in quick, let out a little moan, and look like she wanted to chase after him. Her hands were bunched up on her thighs as Blue worked expertly at her from below.

“Eed ooves et!” let out Red around his shaft and began to rock her hips back and forth slowly against Blue’s face. She was now very into this situation.

Vince started to thrust faster now. Pushing it down Red’s throat even as she moaned, swallowing at him as he did so.

“Hungry, Red?” asked Vince even as he continued working at her beautiful face. His jewels were patting up to her chin every time.

In fact, he could feel something dripping off his sack. As if there was too much flowing out of him or Red was drooling heavily.

“Mm, eeed ehd!” Red said in an almost pleading way. Her hands were now in Blue’s hair as she literally humped the Dryad’s mouth, rolling back and forth against the busy and happy Dryad’s face.

Glancing down, he saw a lot of what was dripping free from him was landing on the ecstatic Dryad’s face. She’d even been forced to close her green eye as there was a pool of something forming in the corner of it.

“Then swallow it all, you beautiful thing. My Red,” ordered Vince as he hit his peak. He pushed himself down past Red’s lips until his hilt was hard-stuck to her teeth. There was nothing left to get into her as the first wave hit, splashing down into her throat.

With a grunt, Red let out a hard and very loud swallow. Her eyes sparkled to life as she did so, little glittering freckles flying through her very red irises.

Vince drew back and then thrust again as he felt the next spurt, putting it down her throat and coating it again. All of which Red greedily swallowed with a moan, even as she ground her hips against Blue’s mouth.

The Dryad was also moaning now.

Holding the Beastkin’s head tightly, Vince kept thrusting as he came. Trying to time it so each and every spurt was put down the back. Giving her no chance but to swallow everything, including his tip.

When he finally ran out of seed to give her, he eased back and began to simply thrust himself through her mouth. Enjoying it for pleasure now rather than anything else.

He finally stopped after ten or more seconds, during which Red had just looked up at him and made little whimpering moans while swallowing.

Pulling himself out with one hand, he pushed his jewels up to Red’s face. His saliva-coated member rested across her nose and one eye.

The Beastkin happily began to lick at what was there, as if she might get just a little extra.

When it felt like she was done, Vince sat back down and looked at Blue.

The Dryad was only licking very slowly at Red now. Apparently, the Beastkin had climaxed as well.

Letting out a breath, Vince smiled at the pair.

“Good meal, Red?” he asked.

“Best... best meal Red has ever had,” whispered the Cursed One, who shuddered suddenly. She couldn’t seem to handle Blue’s ministrations anymore.

Delicately, she pulled her hips off Blue and scooted away a bit. It was obvious she didn’t know how to feel about what Blue had done to her. “Red would like... that is... ah... Red requests Blue and Bringer feed Red like this when... when they’re willing. Red will repay the favor in whatever way she can.

“Red would do to Blue what... what Blue did to Red. Red’s heart feels weird but is happy. But not... not others. Blue is special. Mouth and Meliae were just... food trays,” said Red with a very relaxed tone, though she sounded confused. “Red might love Blue like Vince. Red is... very satisfied but confused. S-sorry, Blue. Thank you, Blue.”

“It’s okay. I love you too, Red. And yes, please, more three-ways and you can use your mouth on me,” offered Blue, breathing hard. “I’d love that. I can barely handle you two, but I want more of you both.”

Reaching down, Vince gently dabbed at Blue’s face with a handkerchief he pulled from a pocket, cleaning her of the run-off.

“You okay, my love?” Vince asked sincerely.

Blue looked up at him and it was like staring into the sun.

His words had touched off something inside her at a deep level.

“Mount me and love me,” she whispered in a very uncharacteristically Dryad way. Her arms flexed against her bindings as if she wanted to hug him

It was absolutely sincere and she needed him to do just that.

Love her.

“Of course,” he agreed easily and with a smile.

Walking up the road, Vince could see everyone had been incredibly busy.

A wooden palisade and fort had already been put up. All the trees in the area had been brought down, piled, and utilized. There was no approach that could be made without being spotted.

Petra was clearly utilizing every single word that Felix had sent over in that tactics and strategy skill-book he'd given to her.

Long before he was close enough to actually hail anyone, Vince could see Petra heading his way at full speed. Scuttling across the ground at a speed that was akin to a cavalry officer.

I... wonder if I could find a Soldier-ant colony.

Shooting along right above Petra was Sam, who was clearly starting to outpace the soldier.

Surprisingly, there was a third person heading his way.

Someone Vince had seen only in passing a few times.

Zathira the Necromancer.

A Lamia species that Vince had never heard of.

He'd been told that she was an Apophis or more widely known as a Dark Lamia. A type that had an extremely venomous bite that could kill within minutes.

Vince had never actually met one and had wanted to talk to her, but she'd been sick the whole ride over. Lying in her room, unmoving.

He couldn't deny that watching Zathira move was actually rather interesting. Watching how races moved in the world always made Vince wonder about how different they all were.

Right as they were meeting up in the middle, Vince grinned at the three of them.

"Good morning. I'm glad to—"

Sam slammed into him at maximum speed. She smashed into his chest and caused him to actually take a step back.

"I'm so sorry! I couldn't find you! I had the book and everything, but you weren't where I expected you and when I got close to the city, they could have seen me and—"

Pulling the rambling Fae away from his chest, Vince held her up in front of himself.

She was red-faced and had a look of absolute panic. Dark bags under her eyes and tear-stained cheeks gave him all the context he needed to know that she'd been up all night.

"Not sure how you would have been able to find me while I was in the city. If anything, it's my fault for not leaving someone behind to communicate with you," stated Vince when Sam took in a sudden breath. "Didn't do anything wrong. At all. I promise. We got caught up in a few things."

Sam curled forward and pressed herself to the front of Vince. Her small hands clutched his jacket.

Petra and Zathira were quietly watching him, as well as Sam.

In the back of his head, he was wondering if he'd screwed up and was going to be getting a lecture. As far as he was aware though, he hadn't done anything the matter.

Vince paused to look at the Lamia for a few seconds. He hadn't actually been able to see her up close like this.

Her hair was as dark as midnight without a moon. It was as if light entered it, but never escaped. An inky dark that spread out without there being any reflection to it.

Inside that curtain of dark hair, he could see long patches of red hair dotted throughout.

Surprisingly, her eyes were a burnished orange that bordered on yellow, with thin slits for the pupils. They were tight and quite narrow at the moment, and focused on him.

There was no revealing of whatever emotion lay behind those eyes as she was as blank-faced as Petra at the moment. Though surprisingly, she did seem attractive to him. She fit somewhere more on the Draconic side of things, though not exactly.

Her lower body was that of a snake, though it didn't seem as huge or muscular as the constrictors he'd come across in his past. She seemed far smaller and more agile, as well. Her serpent body was a mottled-black with dull-blood-red sections running along the sides, as well as yellow bands that crossed over her. Her scales were as brilliant a warning as could be that she was lethal.

However, her underside was a very pale white. What he'd call fish-belly white, in fact.

“Petra, Zathira, you both look lovely,” Vince said, looking between them. Then he decided to focus on Zathira first. He’d certainly picked up a valuable lesson from watching Ryker and his flirting. “You look like you’ve either just given yourself a thorough scale cleaning and check, or you just shed. There’s no way you’re naturally that iridescent.”

Nodding his head to the Lamia, he then moved on to Petra, walking up to her. Standing in front of her, he gave her a wide smile.

“And you, my beautiful soldier. My Petra. I wish there were an entire colony of Soldier-ants just like you. I’d take the world in a flash,” he lamented. “Perhaps I’m not allowed to meet any more like you, as I’d become a threat to the world. Though maybe I already am with just you at my side.”

Petra’s mouth tightened up and he saw she was clearly battling a smile that threatened her face. Complimenting her prowess in battle was always better than her looks.

“This one... this one appreciates your words,” murmured Petra. “Though this one must ask her master for her report first before responding as his wife. Her duties take primary interest.

“She would also ask that you please do not attempt to woo the Lamia any further. She will likely try to bite you regardless of how you succeed. It is in her nature, just as it is in this one’s to sting.”

“I mean, she can try. Venom doesn’t do anything to me. I bet hers would be a good tingle, but that’s it,” Vince said with a quick look to the Lamia in question. Her eyes were pinprick slits at this point, and she was looking at him a bit strangely. “Actually, Zathira, show me the fangs? They as big and lovely as Petra’s mandibles?”

Both Petra and Zathira looked rather shocked now.

The latter seemed unsure how to take his words.

Slowly, she opened her mouth in a way that was a lot like her jaw unhinged. Just as Petra’s did, in fact. There was a wet swishing noise followed by two very large fangs being moved forward. They jutted forward out of her upper jaw and had a clear hook to them which would make it hard for something to escape once she’d hooked in.

“That’s impressive. I think Petra’s a bit prettier when she throws out the mandibles, but that’s not bad either. Rather attractive, honestly,” Vince murmured, impressed with the look of her. He turned and handed Sam to Blue since the Fae was now sleeping.

Working his jacket off, Vince tossed it to the side and then rolled up the sleeve of his shirt.

The Lamia reared up slightly at his approach and gazed at him in a way he recognized. It was right before a snake would strike. Building up energy in their body so they could lash out.

“Right here please,” he said and held up his forearm.

As if the instruction was all she needed, Zathira lashed out at him. Her mouth slammed into his forearm and her fangs sank into him.

Grabbing her by the back of the head, he held her in place against his arm even as she jerked to break away from him, as if realizing what she’d just done.

Vince ignored it and turned to look at Petra.

“She’ll feel better after she gets that out of her system,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “In fact, can I milk your stinger later Petra? We haven’t done that since just before we boarded. You could use it, I imagine. Probably feeling like you want to sting someone and eat them.”

Petra, Red, and Blue were all staring at him while an extremely venomous Lamia was latched onto his arm. He’d already felt her try to jerk away one more time, then go still after realizing she wouldn’t be escaping.

Instead, he felt her gnawing at his arm now. Pumping ever larger amounts of venom into him. Her hands were locked onto his arm at the elbow and wrist.

Holding onto him.

“This... ah... yes, please, husband. I’d like that but... err... wait, this one must ask for your report,” demanded Petra, looking somewhat unnerved at what she was seeing.

“Simple answer and a stupid one,” Vince answered. “Bunch of shitty people abusing Dryads that need to die. Dictatorship overthrew the royalty, now there’s an ugly behind-the-scenes civil war going on.

“Magic and sorcerers are considered unclean and unwelcome. They’re frequently hunted down. Those who use aspects of life, death, or curses, are allowed. Nature types, like Dryads, are property. It’s all a serfdom otherwise, with contracts from the peasants to the landowner. Very... disreputable, all in all.

“Red found a few very small enclaves of Wasters but most of them live in the cities or villages. All beholden to landowners like the humans. Everyone’s treated quite terribly at an equal level.”

As he spoke, Vince moved his hand around behind Zathira’s head and forcefully bent her neck slightly. Forcing her jaw to stretch a bit further and her head to tip backward. Then he moved his hand around to the side of her jaw and started to actually massage the venom gland there.

He’d helped his mother do this sort of thing a lot with regular snakes when he’d simply drink the venom for breakfast. All part of her somewhat sociopathic testing on him.

“Ah,” Petra said with a nod of her head. She looked very thoughtful. Reaching behind herself, she stuck her hand in the pack that she carried with her. Pulling something out, he realized it was a language skill book. Two of them, in fact. “That does make it easier. If we don’t have to fret over destroying a nation, then this one need not spare them. We’ll need to scout much further afield and find military installations. Take this and learn it when you need to. I’m sure it’ll help. There are only two copies there at the moment, so you’ll have to decide if Blue or Sam reads the second one. Zathira and I already took one each.”

Blue stepped forward and took the books from Petra.

“Not a lot in this area. Red found a few, I forced an officer to tell me of others,” Vince responded and then reached around Zathira’s head to begin massaging the other gland. Her eyes were locked on him and watching from only a foot away. She looked very happy with the situation at the moment and was even still gnawing at him. “Lean in just a bit, Zathira. I need to... there we go, thanks.”

Getting his fingers on the other gland, he started to rub it. She’d done exactly as he’d asked. Pushing in closer to him, she was

practically beneath him now. Gazing up at him as she gnawed at him and pumped whatever venom she had left into his arm.

“It’s because they have no other foreign enemies here. The coastlines are patrolled by sea-beasts and there’s only one way in. To the north, there’s a mountain range. It separates them from the war up there,” continued Vince, feeling like Zathira was finally empty. Putting his hand behind her head, he just hung onto her. She was gnawing at him and didn’t seem like she wanted to let go quite yet. Sometimes they’d just hang on for a while. “They use a lot of... a lot of sterilized Dryads as defenses up there. They force them to plant a tree, sterilize them, and then use them as a front-line defense.

“Like a living hostage wall. The city-lord of the nearby city is a real shit-heel. I’ve made contact with the Grove-mother, a woman by the name of Flora, who’s in the city. She’s asked for refuge. I think freeing her would send the city into disarray. I want to do this if possible, but I’m unsure what your own thoughts are. You’re the general, after all.

“So it goes back to you, Petra, my dear. What would the general feel is the best course of action? I await your command. And before you ask, my face was covered for the majority of the time. I only showed it to a bartender whom I asked information from. Though I’m fairly certain Blue was noticed. We were run down by a patrol of guards who wanted to keep her for themselves.”

Blue ducked her head at that, looking somewhat nervous and ashamed.

Looking back at Petra as Zathira practically hung on him like a coat over his arm, he waited.

“This one would order you back into the field. Split into two groups. Free the Dryads, leave a trail of destruction, make them look to the south and southeast,” ordered Petra. “From what has been gathered, his neighbors are most certainly not his friends.

“At the same time, this one asks that you entreat with the city-lord. Tell him we’re a band of refugees who were using a magical boat and arrived. We offer taxes and tribute if he’ll leave us to our own devices.

“If you can complete both, that would be ideal, but do not risk being caught for the Dryads. Take Zathira with you, as well as Sam for a messenger. Red and Blue will remain with you, of course, though this one would advise that you use them for the Dryad mission.”

“Great,” Vince said and then he looked back at the Lamia. Her eyes were just starting to open again and her grip on his arm was relaxed.

Pulling her head to one side and forward, he got her to release. Her fangs sunk back into her mouth and her jaw went back to normal.

Then she made a yawning motion as if settling everything into place.

“You ready to go, Zathira?” he asked, smiling at her. He gently brushed his hands over the puncture wounds. They were bleeding minimally and appeared to be sealing up already. “Ooh, you do have an itchy venom. I wonder if it’s as spicy as a copperback’s.

“It kinda went good with pork, honestly.”

“I’m... ready, yes. Thank... thank you. That was needed. I hadn’t bitten anything in a month or more.

“Though... my venom would be spicy?” she asked in a curious and cool tone. There was a slight sexy huskiness to it that made Vince want her to talk more.

Hm. Well.

They want me to bring back wives. No reason to not try my hand at snake-taming if it comes up.

Wow, that really is itchy. I’ll most certainly need to try milking her into something later and then adding it to some food. I bet I can gain from it.

“Well, most were. At least to me. Mixed it with a bit of salt and pepper and added it like spices. Anyway, off we go then,” Vince said and turned around.

He’d rather be traveling around anyway, honestly.

Sitting still in the fort as it was being built sounded incredibly boring.

A quick switch into the military uniform in my pack and we're good to go.

Chapter 9

Looking at the corpses in the canyon, Vince turned and looked at Zathira.

“Well, there they are. Can you do anything with them?” Vince asked.

“Most certainly,” replied the Lamia. She was already bent over the officer that Vince had interrogated. The fingers of her left hand were pressed to the dead man’s temple. “They’re quite fresh and will be easy to use.

“No reason to strip them of flesh. That’d just make them weaker. The flesh and muscle are like armor at this point,” she continued and tilted her head to one side. Her eyes began to darken until they became completely black and bottomless. “We can even use them for the city-lord. We found them on the way in.

“Stripped, naked, and left for the crows. They will be less likely to suspect us after the initial investigation into it. Since you were unseen, it’s even better. The Dryad will need to remain unseen.”

“Blue will be fine,” remarked Sam. She was perched on Zathira’s snake-like body. She didn’t fit the same way on Vince as she used to and was keeping her distance from him.

He got the impression she didn’t want him to dump the power of his grove into her at the moment.

He hadn’t planned on it anyway, he was reserving that for Flora. She’d need it so that they could begin getting seeds together. They’d have to escape and plant very quickly if they wanted to save their unplanted daughters and sisters.

A low whispering and guttural chant was audible just at the edge of Vince’s hearing. A call to the body rather than a demand. Zathira was asking for permission to use the corpses rather than simply taking them for herself.

It made his spine stiffen and his instincts started to rear their head. Like a dog might start looking around after hearing a strange sound or smell.

I’ll have to ask her about it later.

It always felt like Duke Gerard did it instantly.

That's very curious. I wonder if it's a difference in style?

Approach?

Is it akin to using a different type of sword, despite it being very similar?

The bodies began to twitch, shudder, and then rise from the ground. They were without souls, though they were acting the part of humans.

Breathing, shifting in place, and acting as they would in life. As if they hadn't been killed the previous evening.

Zathira watched the bodies for several seconds. Then she lifted her left hand and made a twisting motion with her wrist.

Vince briefly heard screams from what felt like beyond his hearing. As if it were a sound coming to him over a great distance or from another room.

Now his instincts were at full alert. Vince desperately wanted to draw a weapon and prepare. To be ready for battle.

All despite knowing that this was literally just Zathira working for him.

"I bind you for the span of a day. Until the sun rises again," hissed the Necromancer. Her fathomless eyes held nothing but the promise of despair. "You will answer my questions as needed. Then I shall send you to your rest. Beyond the veil and the call of others.

"Accept my request and need with grace, and I shall make sure that your crossing to the other side will be swift and merciful. Fight me... and you'll find out just how terrifying a Necromancer is."

There was a strange force that felt as if it were building. An angry lament almost at the world itself. A cold, dark hand stretched above to block out the sunlight.

"Poor choice," whispered Zathira and then closed her hand and let it fall to her side.

One of the corpses corkscrewed into itself and the body was turned into paste. Even as the eyes that had been dull and lifeless, suddenly were once again given intelligence.

The body kept winding into itself until it became little more than shredded meat. A pile of it that was revolving into a mound upon the ground.

Zathira made a flick with her hand and it stopped.

“Enjoy your resting place for the time,” the Lamia murmured then looked at Vince. Her eyes were still the black pits they’d become. “The rest have agreed. He did not. He’ll remain in his... meat... pile... for a time before he crosses over.”

There was a moment where Zathira watched him curiously, likely wondering what he thought of all this. It reminded him of when Petra had stared at him with her mandibles extended.

“If you can do the eye thing on command, I can think of some fun things to try out later,” offered Vince and then made a hand gesture back toward the city. “We ready to go? Sun’s already at the midpoint.”

Blinking several times and actually straightening upward, Zathira looked mortified and shocked. That hadn’t been an answer she’d considered.

“Really, Vince?” asked Sam, fluttering up from the Lamia and moving over toward him.

“I mean, it’d be interesting to try it once with her looking up at me with the ‘eyes from beyond the grave’ thing,” he said defensively and then turned around. Grabbing hold of the ledge, he pulled himself up and out of the canyon.

He’d taken care to not dirty his military uniform.

While Legion had hit a severe snag with their technology in having to start over, they were quickly gaining steam again.

One of the first things they’d set about doing was getting together a fabric mill. Apparently, it was the basis of a great many things, including ballistic armor.

Sam plopped down on his shoulders and rested her hands on top of his head. He immediately put his hands on her thighs and held onto her.

His first instinct was to start packing her with grove energy, but he didn’t. Instead, he started to release a slow trickle into her.

Exactly at the same speed that the grove was regenerating.

“You’ve barely known her for a day at most,” countered Sam.

“Pretty sure I don’t have to know her to have sexual thoughts about her,” Vince argued back. “I mean, I’m not saying I love her or

anything, just that she's pretty and it'd be fun. It's not like she said no and told me to stop either. If she had, I would."

"I... well... hmm... I guess— ergh. I don't like it," hissed Sam, her fingers tightening in his hair.

"That's because you're falling in love with me, my dear Samantha," Vince said and gave her thighs a squeeze. "Don't worry, you can look up at me, too. Your eyes are quite pretty as well, you know."

"Ugh. You're so stupid," growled the Fae, and then she thumped the side of his skull with a small fist. The force she put behind it was minuscule. It didn't do much more than express her frustration at him, rather than actual intent to harm him. "I'll bite you. Bite it off."

Sam seemed like she was beyond feeling like she was allowed to touch him. She was comfortable being physically playful and knew it was okay.

It was fun to him.

He liked the spunky nature she had.

Grinning, he kept walking toward the city.

Behind him, he heard Zathira join him, along with her freshly-made servants.

Sam had left his shoulders as they made it to the gate.

Someone had apparently seen their approach and called for people to be on hand. They were greeted by what looked like two patrols of soldiers or guards.

Vince couldn't tell which.

"Stop! Stay there!" called one of the guards in their own native tongue. Thankfully, Sam and he had both used a skill-book and could understand the man.

Unfortunately, Vince saw that more than half actually had rifles. They were quite able to give Vince a bad day if this went wrong.

Coming to a stop, Vince waited.

The soldiers waited.

Nothing happened.

“Uh, can I talk to the city-lord? Or be taken to him?” Vince inquired in English, realizing that these people had no idea what to do next. “I’m an emissary from a foreign nation. I’d very much like to discuss my situation with him and what we could do for one another.

“As well as the fact that I found these corpses. They were on the side of the road in the bushes on the way up. My Necromancer here sensed them and so I asked her to raise them. Our assumption is they’re probably from around here.”

The soldiers were now actually looking at him with more than just suspicion. Their eyes moved to the zombies, Zathira, Sam flying above them, and then back to Vince.

“Yes? Hello? Do you speak my language?” he tried, as if only now realizing they might speak something else. “Is there anyone I could possibly speak with to translate?”

Heads were looking this way and that amongst the soldiers. Looking for someone it seemed that they were expecting to be there.

In other words, there’s an officer or someone else they’re expecting, or asked for. Alright. I guess I just wait a bit longer.

Turning his head, he looked at Zathira.

“So, how much venom did you put in me? That itching was pretty crazy,” he asked in a soft voice. “I’m starting to wonder if when I... uh... filter that out later, if it’s going to burn.”

Zathira looked at him and met his eyes. Hers had reverted back to their original color, and she appeared normal again.

“Enough to kill a Dragon. Several of them,” she answered after a pause. She looked like she was still processing the fact that he wasn’t dead. “You aren’t... normal... at all. At any level.”

“If it makes you feel better, Petra’s venom just gave me a rash,” offered Vince with a shrug. “Yours actually made me itchy to the point that it was annoying. A truly unique experience.”

“Only a rash?” inquired the Lamia, her head slowly turning to one side. Her body shifted around, slowly floating closer to him. “A Soldier-ant’s venom was only a rash?”

“Oh, yeah. And she did it while we were fighting. So it wasn’t just for funsies. She was amped out and wanting to kill and eat me, I bet,” Vince admitted with a chuckle. “So yours was worse than hers.

Was mildly impressive. I did like the fang look and— Wait... can you do the sexy black-eyed thing and actually pull the fangs out?"

Zathira slowly began to blush dark red, and her mouth screwed up into a scowl. There was no mistaking the fact that she'd combined his question just now with his earlier comment about what he wanted her to do.

"And if I could?" she asked in a tightly pinched tone.

"I'd say I have a new sexual fantasy I have to explore with Blue later while pretending it's you," Vince confessed with a grin.

"You! You... you're... you're incorrigible and... and... jus—" Zathira looked like she was rapidly getting angrier by the second and had lost her ability to speak.

"If it bothers you, I can knock it off," offered Vince. He'd be the first one to back down if he found his advances made a woman uncomfortable. It's all fun and games until someone tells you it isn't.

"Yes! You-you-you will not-not proposition me again!" declared the Lamia.

"Alright, I won't," agreed Vince and looked forward again.

That'd be the end of that.

Standing there, there wasn't much more to say.

"Ahem," Sam said, coming down to wrap an arm around Vince's neck. Her other arm draped across his shoulder. "You can flirt with me, you know."

"Oh, I could, but then I'd try to dump it all into you as fast as I could," Vince complained while nodding his head.

"Not big enough for you to dump it in me, nor are you allowed to do it quickly. Both are out. But... we could fool around in other ways, you know. You'll just have to wait for the main event until you marry me and I'm big enough," offered the Fae, the hand that was behind his head tickling his neck now. "No reason to not flirt with me. I flirt back. I'm way more fun than anyone else. Even Blue, I bet."

All of the soldiers turned and looked backward. There was something happening back there.

A taller man who was comparable to Vince in height was moving through the guards. He had several others behind him as well who looked like they were forcing him forward.

He had an average-looking stature with scraggly sandy-blond hair. It partially obscured his face and he looked like he didn't want to be anywhere near here.

"Talk to them!" shouted a guard, pushing the man up to the front of the formation.

"Hello," Vince said with a smile. "We're an emissary group from a foreign nation come to talk to the city-lord. We'd like to discuss providing tribute to him as well as taxes.

"We also found these corpses on the road to the city. We're under the impression they came from here and weren't sure what to do with them."

The man looked up at Vince now and then brushed his hair back. His eyes were hazel, and he had a scar across the left eye. It gave it a somewhat lazy-eye effect.

"What nation?" asked the man in a voice that clearly spoke English, just not the English that Vince was familiar with.

"One very far away. Can you translate all that for us? We'd appreciate it," Vince asked again.

"You don't want to. He... won't be kind to you. At all. Foreigners... foreigners like me and you, we're just tools," grumbled the man. His hands flexed at his sides and Vince had the feeling that he'd once been in the military for some reason.

"Please translate. We'd like to speak to the city-lord," Vince tried for a third time.

The man shook his head and then looked to the guards.

"Foreign nation. Asking to entreat with the city-lord. They want to discuss tribute and taxes to him, with him," paraphrased the man. "I'd say take them to the city-lord before he finds out and you lose your heads."

As if a lightning bolt had struck them, the soldiers lifted their weapons up and shouldered them. They suddenly looked quite panicked, quite a few of them rushing around in every direction.

More than a handful began shouting orders, asking for guides to take the dignitaries to the city-lord, while others demanded a messenger be sent to the city-lord to warn him right away.

“That works,” Sam said from where she was hanging off Vince’s back. “Now... wanna chat with a single Fae looking for company?”

Vince grinned, rolled his eyes, and then reached up to lay his hand on Sam’s forearm. He began to once again trickle energy into her.

“I sure do. What kind of company were you looking for?” asked Vince. “Because I bet I could... really... get to know you. In fact, I wonder what you taste like?”

“You tell me. With how long I rode on your neck you probably got a solid whiff or two,” Sam mused. “I did make sure to bathe this morning in case I got a chance to... ride you.”

Snorting, Vince glanced over his shoulder.

“That was terrible,” he said.

“Eh, you’re not giving me a lot to work with here. I can get down and dirty and tell you to lick me from crotch to brow to find out what my bathwater tasted like, but where’s the fun in that? There’s no style in that.

“Eyes forward. They’re going to ask us in shortly, I bet,” Sam said and pushed on his face with one hand.

As if they’d been waiting for him to look their way, a group of soldiers came up to him. They were waving him onward and wearing smiles.

They weren’t even trying to coax him in their own language.

Vince nodded his head, then started forward.

The soldiers escorted them into the city. Taking them quickly down the street toward the back, towards the same area where the Dryads were held, in fact.

As he passed, Vince noticed that the gate which led to the Dryad’s enclosure was shut. Shut, barred, and barricaded with actual guards.

Something changed.

Damn.

Now I’m going to have to run them down and find them. There’s no way I’m leaving without making sure to top Flora off.

Though, I wonder if that happened because of Blue and Red. They should be around here somewhere looking at how to get the

Dryads out easily.

Maybe they were noticed?

Many more soldiers and servants were running back and forth ahead of them. They looked like they were panicking in every possible way and managing to only end up making more work for someone else.

Watching it, he really didn't know what to make of it. If he had Elysia here, Yaris, or Caroline, they'd probably be able to tell him what he was looking at. Unfortunately, they weren't, so all he could really do was watch it happen.

Scratching at his cheek with a gloved hand, he merely kept moving.

"They run about. As if they weren't sure what to do," Zathira whispered from beside him. She was moving along at his speed and seemed to be restricting herself to do it.

I wonder how fast she is.

"I'd almost think they don't know what to do because their leader rules with fear and chaos. His actions aren't something one can judge," continued the Lamia.

Oh. Huh.

Maybe she's my Elf counselor replacement.

Her or Elizabeth. She seems rather intelligent, and I know for a fact Elysia and Taylor were working on training her. Since she's with me for the rest of her life.

We'll have to see what comes first.

Me dying, or her opening her mouth to actually talk to me. Hasn't said a word since I took her into the wing.

Entering a keep, Vince, Sam, and Zathira were led down a hall to a large set of doors.

"Baron Mateo, we've brought the foreigner dignitaries," called a soldier who'd moved ahead. They were at the door and had it opened, calling inside while remaining outside.

"Yes, yes, send them in immediately. Ugh, of all the times this had to happen," said a voice from inside. "Any magic from them? Best to know upfront."

“No,” replied another voice. “Though they’re odd. One feels like a magical Waster, though no magic. One feels like a Spiritualist of some sort, and the third... nature magic.”

“Like a Dryad?” asked the first voice.

“No, as in they came from the earth. Not a Dryad,” corrected the second voice.

Sloppy, sloppy.

Arrogance.

They have contempt for their surroundings and are assured of themselves.

Vince and company were directed to enter the room with raised arms and pointed hands.

Entering, Vince found two people inside what by all accounts was an office space.

A short man who was narrow in the face, lightly tanned, and quite handsome stood to one side. His brown eyes and immaculately combed brown hair gave him an air of aristocracy.

Next to him was a much taller man. One who stood just over six feet, Vince would wager. He had brown eyes, a brown goatee, and was bald otherwise.

“Greetings!” said the handsome one in accented English. “I’m Baron Mateo. This is my Court Nullifier, Joshua Adams. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes! A pleasure,” agreed Vince with as much sincerity as he could muster, walking over to stand in front of the two men. He didn’t offer his hand, or incline his head. There was no way of telling what the custom was here.

Vince did, however, note that neither of their minds were shielded. He could get an easy sneak-peak at them without them even knowing.

Trying to get an idea of their thoughts was too much of a risk, but emotions and feelings were free game.

From Joshua, Vince only got back the normal things. Mild curiosity, boredom, and a general dislike for the situation.

In regards to Mateo, he got a much different feeling. The man had eyed Zathira with lust, then back to Vince with what was very

clearly greed. He wanted whatever Vince had and what came back to Vince was what he'd get from a fox.

Sly thoughts, curiosity, paranoia, skittishness, and what could only be avarice. A hunger for everything Vince had on his person, Zathira, and anything else he might have.

Oh? This might work.

You can trap a fox. You just have to be careful about it.

Could I take the Baron off the board without much effort?

Entice him with his greed?

"Greetings to you, Baron," Vince said with much more meekness than he'd originally planned on showcasing. Then he bowed his head to the other man, schooling his face to look much more subservient than at first.

After all, when the fox hears the rabbit scream, he comes running, but not to help.

Let's just... scream a bit. See if we can't get the fox excited.

Chapter 10

“My name is Vincent. I’ve come as an emissary to speak with you about our situation. We only arrived yesterday and wanted to make our presence known,” Vince declared and then lifted his head back up.

“Arrived?” asked the baron, looking understandably confused.

“Yes, we crashed upon your shores but a day ago. We were in the middle of a... a voyage, and were attacked. Our artifact failed, which let the sea-monsters get in close to us,” elaborated Vince. “We wanted to make sure you knew we were here and possibly ask for your assistance.

“We hail from a distant country. We set sail from the coast and ended up here without meaning to. The name of our nation is Yosemite.”

“Assistance? What could I possibly offer?” asked the baron. He displayed a look of curiosity as well as that of someone who had just heard news of good luck.

An eagerness to him that looked sinister to Vince.

“Security, honestly. We’re more than willing to pay you for your help. We just need a few days to put back to sea and we’ll be gone. No one the wiser,” offered Vince, doing his best impersonation of a trader suggesting a bribe, without suggesting one. “What would be the price to have you seal up the peninsula? Just for a few days as I mentioned. We were unfortunately a small convoy of three ships and the other two were lost.

“With no one to raise the alarm that we’re here, rescue won’t come looking anytime soon. We really do need your help, Baron.”

That... should be enough bait. Willing to pay, a queen that doesn’t exist for the prize, no one knows we’re here so there’s no risk, and that we have no way to actually escape if they pushed.

I might have played it a bit too hard with the “help us please” but he’ll probably overlook it.

Thinking that his troops are worth far more than they are.

Never knowing what we have waiting for him.

“I see, I see, well... let me see what I can do,” the baron assured him. He started walking away toward a desk that was in the corner. Joshua went along with him without ever saying a word.

Tilting his head to one side, Vince put his mouth closer to Sam as Zathira moved to follow the other two.

“Blab at some point that we were returning from collecting taxes from a colony,” Vince whispered to Sam then started forward.

Sam took the opportunity to take flight and then move away from him. Slowly moving off to a bookshelf and looking more like a curiously giant fairy than an intelligent Fae.

As if that was a prompt for someone to intercept her, Joshua turned in a smooth motion and moved over to the Fae. She was hovering in front of a small golden statue that looked a lot like some sort of horse.

Vince and Zathira were now standing with the baron at the desk. He was perched over a map of the area.

Mentally, Vince memorized a number of locations on it. They looked to be settlements and fortifications.

Shame I can't just take the map.

“I have six-thousand soldiers that I could easily send to the peninsula, though... could you perhaps confirm for me where exactly on this map?” requested the baron in the voice that made Vince’s instincts perk up. These were the honeyed words of a predator.

Zathira didn’t seem to notice it. She had a self-satisfied look on her face for what reason Vince had no idea.

“Uhm, where are we now?” inquired Vince with an uncertain tone.

“Right here.”

Vince didn’t even bother to look at where the baron was pointing to. Instead, he pointed to the exact point where Petra was setting up camp.

“We’re here at the moment. It shouldn’t take us long to repair the boat. It’s at anchor and partially working at the moment but the work teams will need time before we put to sea again,” Vince lied.

“Looks a lot like some of the work we got as presents!” asserted Sam behind him. Her voice was just loud enough that he heard her,

but he imagined the baron didn't. "Lots of stuff like that. It's all for the queen's birthday. Lots of pretty things like that.

"Though they had rocks on them. Sparkle rocks. I didn't think they were that useful. I got her a tree. A nice tree."

Ah... Sam... thank you for pulling out the Simple-Fairy act for me.

"That isn't an issue at all," the baron promised with a chuckle. "We could seal that rather cheaply. Though... I'm sorry... I don't think you have much in the way of coin that we'd likely see normally.

"How would you want to make the payment? Do you have anything we can trade in? Technology maybe?"

Ah... perfect. That's really set the hook then. He'll come looking so long as I can confirm it's here.

"Oh, certainly. We have more than enough to trade for it. I'd have to take the price back to my queen to confirm it, but I don't doubt she'd pay. We're just looking to leave as quickly as possible," promised Vince, once again lying through his teeth.

So far, it seemed to be working though, so he really didn't give a flying fuck about lying to this toad.

That and the way he kept looking at Zathira was rather slimy. He had eyed her coloring several times and looked somewhat unsure but still interested.

"That's fine, that's fine. You could always leave your attendant here while you take care of that," the baron suggested with a smile.

"Oh, I'm afraid the queen will need her Necromancer," demurred Vince and looked at Zathira.

"Yes, I'm required to be on hand. There're also the soldiers that we brought and—"

The interest in the baron's eyes died away instantly at the announcement that Zathira was a Necromancer. He was now looking at her with a very flat smile.

"Ah, I see. That's fine, that's fine. Don't worry about the dead, my people can take care of them from here and dispose of them," Baron Mateo interjected, interrupting the Lamia. "Also... out of curiosity, you're venomous, aren't you? That isn't just coloring for show?"

"No. I'm... venomous," clarified Zathira, manifesting a little annoyance in her tone.

Nodding his head, the baron looked back to Vince and seemed to have put Zathira from his mind completely. He smiled for Vince.

“I’d say twenty pounds of pure gold would cover the costs entirely,” the baron stated with an ugly smile. It wasn’t a small amount by any means. That kind of cost could keep the city of Yosemite operating for quite a while just on its own.

Robbery. But also a way for him to ascertain if it’s worth it for him to attack.

Do we even have that to begin with, in other words?

“I don’t see that being a problem,” assured Vince with a wide smile.

The Baron of course, smiled back.

Trap set.

It wasn’t until just afternoon when they’d made it back to the campsite. The point when they were supposed to meet up and discuss how their separate operations had gone.

Red and Blue were sitting side by side on top of a log. The feral of the two was somewhat hunched into herself. The Dryad was much more at ease with her arm around the other’s shoulders.

Undoubtedly, she was speaking encouragingly to Red. Showing a smile for the other woman and propping her up with words.

Then Red’s head snapped up and she met his eyes.

Leaping to her feet, she held his gaze, then slunk down on all fours and crept toward him.

It wasn’t in the way she moved when she hunted him, but as if she were afraid of him. Approaching him as a submissive animal might.

Reaching him, she flopped down on her back. Presenting him with her vulnerable bits.

Eyes, throat, stomach, groin.

“Red-Red fucked up,” declared the Beastkin, uncharacteristically using foul language. “Red was spotted when she and Blue entered the city this morning. Then the guards locked up the doors to the Dryads.

“We couldn’t talk to them. Red screwed it all up. Red didn’t listen to Blue and was... was cocky. Proudful.”

Looking at him with wide and pitiful red eyes, the cursed Beastkin looked nothing like her normal personality.

Vince had had a long talk with Leila about the current curse on Red. It was a very simple one that could be broken at will. Which would shatter Red's current personality and merge her original self with her current self.

So simple was the curse, that it would never actually break on its own. Though it did run the risk of Red changing to a degree since she wasn't as bound as she once was.

This display right now could very well be one of those changes.

"Blue says I'm wrong and that you'll forgive Red. That you won't be mad at Red. Red wants you to... punish, Red. Use her sexually in whatever way you want. Beat Red until you feel satisfied. Yell at her for being as stupid as she is," whined Red as she shimmied a little side to side on the ground.

Sighing, Vince reached down and laid his hand on Red's face.

"Just make it up to me later. We all make mistakes, Red," he said, gently stroking her cheek and jaw with his fingers. Tenderly, he ran his thumb over her lips. "Get up, Red, my love. We need to go back and report to Petra. Chances are that the Baron will be trying to pay us a visit tonight, or tomorrow morning in the pre-dawn.

"We set the hook nice and hard to bait him out of his keep. It'll give us an opportunity to knock him flat before he even knows it's a possibility."

Gazing up at him with eyes that glowed like coals in hell, Red held her breath.

Her hands suddenly locked onto his forearm and held tightly.

"You... you should punish Red. Not forgive her," whimpered the Beastkin.

"I'll do no such thing. You'll have to live with your mistake and make it up to me," countered Vince with a chuckle. He remembered his mother doing the same thing to him on occasion.

It was harder to deal with his mother's acceptance, forgiveness of him, and expectation to do better, than his father scolding him.

Red whined then kissed his wrist.

Letting him go, Red scurried away at a full sprint. Most likely going straight back to Petra to relay the information.

Perhaps she wanted to go alert Petra to the situation herself.

That or just get away from him for a moment to consider the situation.

“You faster than her?” Vince asked Sam.

“Yes. I’ll... go tell her to turn around and then go off on my own. Sounds like you have more work to do,” Sam murmured.

Lifting up from where she hung on him, she zipped off after Red.

“To be fair, she did make a mistake,” admitted Blue, getting up and walking over to him. “She wanted to rush inside rather than learn the patrol routes. Before I could convince her otherwise, she was off in a flash.

“Got spotted very quickly and the rest has been her moping and beating herself up. I’m afraid even as her Grove-wife I couldn’t convince her otherwise.”

“Grove-wife? You’re my Grove-wife,” argued Vince with a grin.

“Of course, I am. Apparently, she wants me to be hers as well. Just as Elysia is with Mouth and Meliae,” Blue reasoned more to herself as evidenced by not meeting his gaze. Then her eyes snapped up to his and she grinned. “You’ll always come first, and if you don’t want it, I’d deny her, of course. Just as Mouth and Meliae offered you in regards to Elysia.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’m just... just teasing,” relented Vince, holding up his hands.

Blue walked up to him and stared up at him for several seconds. Then she lifted a hand and made a crooking motion with a finger.

Vince leaned down toward her.

The Dryad laid a warm and very loving kiss on his lips before giving him a gentle pat on the jaw. Her other hand held onto the top of his tunic.

“Vincent Campbell, your grove is yours. We only expanded into your wives because you seemed to encourage it,” promised the Dryad. “We would burn the world for our Grove-husband. You treat us as if we’re better than the other races. Don’t think we’re not aware.

“You need only ask and we’d set to tearing the world apart if only to appease you. You don’t understand how fanatical your Dryads are. Though... if you think we’re bad... wait until you see your daughters.

“They’re very aware of who their father is, what the world thinks of them, and what you expect of them. They’re Campbell daughter’s through and through, don’t ever think they’re not.”

Blue’s eyes were glowing now even brighter than Red’s had. Then she sniffed once, gave him another kiss, and the lights slowly winked out.

“Burn the world for me, would you?” he asked, grinning at the Dryad.

“And salt the ashes just to make a point,” she confirmed and kissed him once more. Then she took in a short breath, let it out, and released him. Turning, she looked to Zathira. “Are you well, Zathira?”

The entire way back the Lamia had looked rather frustrated. Her countenance was reflective and her thoughts her own.

“I’m quite fine, thank you,” replied Zathira. She gave the Dryad a small smile, turned, and left. Slithering off in the same direction as Red and Sam.

“Well. She seems to be in somewhat of a mood. I thought she’d feel better after being milked,” wondered Blue. Then she shook her head and gave Vince a smile. “She can go sulk with Red. I’m going to run off with the prize. Shall my Grove-husband and I sneak into the city and see if we can’t find Flora?”

“Perfect,” he agreed with a grin for his Dryad. She was looking up at him with a wide smirk.

Me and my Dryad.

Vince looked at the wall and eyed the top of it for several seconds. There didn’t seem to be any guards, no soldiers, and no light. They were relying entirely on the guard patrols that moved about at the base and the pointed spikes at the top of it.

I can throw her over.

Not a problem.

Just need to make sure.

Reaching over his shoulder, he touched Sam and then pointed to the wall's top.

The Fae shot off his shoulder and blurred up toward where he wanted her. She vanished into the darkness completely after only going a few feet from him.

If she didn't want to be seen, she wasn't.

"Gonna toss me after all?" Blue asked, one hand of hers pushing against his crotch, the other on his side where she draped her arm across him.

"Yeah. You can handle it. Being a sexy Elven-Dryad, after all, right?" Vince asked.

"I sure can. I'm the best suited to be your partner in combat. Well... amongst the Dryads at least," Blue conceded. "Ah, she signaled there are no guards on the other side."

"Alright. Will you be able to get back over on your own?" he asked.

"Nope," Blue said, grinning at him. "You'll have to come fetch your woman. Problem with that?"

Vince snorted then shook his head.

"Not a concern," he said.

"F-flirt later," hissed Zathira. She'd come back with Sam in the end. Red hadn't come back at all. Likely still berating herself somewhere in the camp of Yosemite.

"Zathira," Blue warned in an odd way. She'd managed to get Vince to tell her what happened. The Dryad had found it rather humorous but hadn't said much about it.

There was something more going on here that he didn't understand.

"Flirt later. Work now," she said, her words seemingly now aimed at Vince, rather than Blue.

"Yes, yes. You're right, Zathira," muttered Vince with a shake of his head.

So boring for such a beautiful woman.

A waste.

Oh well.

Not everyone wants me, and there are those who don't. I just have to treat her like an equal and leave it at that.

Looking to the left, then right, Vince could see this was the gap they were looking for. The patrols would be moving to their furthest points now.

At the exact spots that would be the least likely to notice them.

“Stay here, Zathira,” commanded Vince. He grabbed Blue up around the waist and then dashed forward. Running across the grass at full speed.

“Oh my,” Blue squeaked and held onto him with a giggle. Her arms clasp around him tightly.

Rushing right up to the wall, Vince put his back to it. Grabbing hold of Blue, he stuck her up against his chest, then held her there.

The Dryad got her feet down on his thighs as he got a handful of her rear end. Bending low, she coiled herself up like a spring.

“Wait!” hissed Blue a second before Vince thrust her into the air. “S-Sam is signaling to wait. Repeatedly. Wait, wait, wait, wait. Danger.”

Vince was somewhat annoyed at the fact that the two of them could communicate with magical signals and he couldn't see it. There was no doubting or questioning either of them though.

He trusted them with his life.

“Flee, danger, danger,” Blue whispered and then hopped down out of his hands. Rushing back the way they came, she set off at a dead sprint.

Running after her, Vince caught her at the halfway point and scooped her up into a princess carry. To which Blue just smirked at him and held on.

Reaching the shrubs where they'd started, Vince set her down and crouched low beside her.

“What... what's wrong?” asked Zathira

“Sam told us to go back. Ah, here she comes,” Blue said.

The Fae reached them and came to a stop in front of Vince.

“They're massing!” she warned them. “They're going to march on Petra right now.”

“Damn it. Alright. We just ran out of time and timed it wrong. We knew that the Baron might act tonight anyway. Back to Petra then. Time to slaughter them all and hand it all over to Flora,” growled Vince.

Chapter 11

Vince's eyes blinked open.

Staring up into the pre-dawn gloom, he could see that the morning wasn't quite here yet. This was a time that was best used for an attack.

Especially a surprise one.

Which made it extremely surprising to Vince when he turned his head to the side and saw the rays of the morning sun just cresting the horizon.

"Huh?" he murmured, looking at the small Fae on his chest. Apparently, she'd fallen asleep atop him and was snuggled up in his jacket.

His arms were draped around her back and wrapped around her.

Lifting his eyes up from her, he found Blue at his shoulder.

Smiling at him, she held a finger in front of her mouth, her other hand was still on his shoulder. She'd shaken him to wakefulness since she'd risen with the dawn.

Much as a flower would.

"They're not attacking yet," Blue whispered, her hand moving from his shoulder to start moving through his hair. "They marched in formation, made a small camp, and went to sleep. Just as you saw.

"They... didn't wake up from that. They slept the night. Red came back just a few minutes ago to tell me that they're only now rising and getting ready. She left to go alert Petra, though I imagine she had her own scouts posted as well.

"I think Red's just trying to make up for her mistake still. She's fine otherwise. Before you ask, yes, she's avoiding you out of guilt. Not anger or anything like that."

With a small bob of his head, he acknowledged the statement. That was actually somewhat unexpected if he was being honest.

Then again, just because I know when I'd attack, doesn't mean that the baron knows it. For all we know, he has no military experience whatsoever.

Other than just strong-arming his peasantry or things of that nature.

We've been fighting everyone and anything for so long that... that honestly, it's hard not to imagine being at war. I'm sure Petra feels the same way but—

Blue had dipped her head down and was now kissing him. The hand in his hair smoothed it back and glided through it tenderly.

The Dryad didn't push her tongue in his mouth, which Vince half expected. Nor did she start fondling him with her other hand.

Instead, she only kissed him for several seconds more before moving back to a sitting position. Smiling down at him with only a faint glow to her eyes.

"I love you," murmured the Dryad with a wide smile. "Not just for what you are, but who you are. I just wanted to say that because things happen in fights.

"Even against those you're expected to beat, things happen. Yes, I know, I'm jinxing it, I don't care. I wanted to say it. Especially... after what happened with Green."

As she said it, Vince couldn't help but agree with her. There really wasn't any other way to explain it other than that.

They hadn't expected so many deaths and yet they'd happened. Without warning and no ability to really counter it.

"Love you, too," he replied, smiling up at her. There was an ugly ache behind his heart though. He knew they'd be gone for years, he'd done his best to resolve himself against it, but he ached. Ached for those who weren't here. "I miss everyone so... please... forgive me if I end up drowning in you, Blue."

"It's okay. We've drowned in each other before," answered the Dryad, still smiling at him. "We put each other back together. We can do it again. Besides, we have Red, Petra, and Leila here now. They'll help us as well."

"Me, too," grumbled the Fae, shifting around against Vince's chest. Then she flipped onto her side and stretched herself out. "Stop fondling my man, Dryad. I slept with him last night, not you, I get the morning cuddling. Comes with the package, I'm told.

"Besides, I helped plant the idea for them to attack yesterday. I pretended to be a dippy little Fairy with nothing more than fluff for brains."

Blue was laughing now, leaning back and looking out at the plain in front of them. She looked incredibly happy in the moment.

“Oh, yes. It’s most certainly in the package,” she agreed and shook her head. Her eyes moving across the horizon. “I might try to wife you, Sam.”

“You can try. I don’t really... not interested, sorry. I’m quite solid in that I want Vince and only Vince,” said the Fae, finally sitting up and rubbing at her eyes with her hands. “Alright. I’m going to go scout around. Someone wake up the big Lamia. Just remember she might bite out of reflex, which means Vince probably should do it, since she’s so hard to wake up.”

Sam’s wings unfurled from her back, and she shot off into the sky like a shooting star. Then she simply became part of the murky morning, nothing of her visible.

“Hm. Well, if she’s not interested, I won’t even try. People are what they are and that’s just the way it is,” murmured the Dryad, looking to Vince. “Go wake up the Lamia. She’s a heavy sleeper. She’ll probably try to bite you just as Sam said. I’m going to go see if the squad of Legionnaires is ready. Julia probably had them up with dawn, too.”

Grunting, Vince rolled over and got to his feet.

Off to one side, Leila was quietly talking with Elizabeth.

The Dragon had decided to join them in their mission to flank the enemy forces. Apparently, she wanted to demonstrate her worth.

She still hadn’t actually spoken to Vince, however. Which he found incredibly amusing.

Walking past the Dragon and the Gnome, he gave them a small finger wave.

“Morning,” Leila said quietly as he passed, smiling at him.

Pausing mid-step, he looked at her. Really looked at her.

She was wearing leather armor that fit her quite well.

The soft lack of muscle that’d been hers was gone. Her small body fit her armor and clothes quite well. He could even see some definition in her arms that had a little bit of muscle.

Now that I think about it, she’s almost never on her little cloud anymore. She’s been really working to improve herself.

“Leila, you’re looking amazing lately. You’ve really pushed yourself,” complimented Vince. “I can’t wait to get my hands on you.”

Turning a faint red color, Leila smiled at him and waved a hand.

“Go wake her up already. You can flirt at me later,” she admonished him, her lips still upturned.

“Maiden Elizabeth,” Vince murmured, holding his eyes on the Dragon’s face.

She’d been looking everywhere but him. Finally, after being directly acknowledged, she met his eyes.

“Nest-mate Vince,” she said and dipped her head to him. “As... as the leader of your wing, I will st- strive to conquer other Dragon Maidens and Dragonnewts... f-for you.”

“Oh? Thank you, then. I had no idea you’d submitted yourself to Taylor?” Vince inquired.

Elizabeth’s eyes dropped down to his boots and she said nothing more. Her body had become rigid and inflexible in that moment.

Ah. Taylor told her she’d kill her if she didn’t.

Well, that’s fair. About right for Dragon culture, too.

Just... don’t touch her and let that one go.

Letting the conversation die on that, Vince instead walked over to where the Lamia was sleeping.

He briefly considered letting her actually strike him with a bite, but she’d already told him to leave her alone. If they were going to have a purely business and equal relationship, he wasn’t going to offer something like that.

Her personal needs were not his concern.

“Zathira,” said Vince in a loud voice. He didn’t try to ‘get out of range’ of her as that wasn’t much of a thing. A Lamia could strike a considerable distance and quite quickly. If you were within ten to twenty feet, you were well in range depending on their length. “Time to wake up.”

The Lamia let out a gurgling groan and tried to roll to one side. Putting her back to him.

“Wake up. We have to get ready. We got more sleep than we should have,” he repeated. Then he got down in a squat next to her. He didn’t want to touch her unless he had to. “Zathira, time to go.”

Hissing, the Lamia suddenly lashed out at him, her fanged mouth opening wide. It'd probably been a bad idea to invade her space as he had, but he needed her up.

Her strike wasn't voluntary. It was reflexive action given her nature.

Vince leaned his body to one side and dropped his shoulder. The Lamia's fanged mouth struck nothing but air.

"Great, you're up," he deadpanned in a flat tone. "Time to move, Zathira. Get your kit sorted."

"I... what?" asked the Lamia, her eyes slowly focusing on him. Only now waking up.

"Time to go. Get your stuff together," he repeated and then stood up, walking away from her.

By the time he made it to the over-watch point, Sam came flying down toward him.

"They're already on the move, they're coming!" she said excitedly.

"Great, now... we just wait again," mumbled the once ranger. Getting down low in a squat, he made himself as invisible as possible. They had to wait for the enemy to completely pass first after all.

Looking at the back of the enemy group, Vince was impressed, yet also, disappointed.

The soldiers that the baron—or city-lord as his own people addressed him—brought were actually all outfitted. Each and every soldier was trained, armed, and armored to a standing army perspective.

Vince was disappointed because that meant one and all of them were here by choice. There were no conscripts here, nor was there anyone that didn't look like a professional.

In his mind, that meant the soon to be Duchess Flora would need to hire an entirely new army and equip it as well. She would have to start from scratch.

It would take her time just to get an army large enough to defend her own lands, let alone one big enough to assist Vince in any way.

There just wouldn't be much in the way he could provide her either.

Another mouth to feed, not an ally.

But that's fine.

Playing the long-term game here. I'm not looking for a quick turnaround from her.

"Sam just signaled the attack," Blue reported and then stood up. In her hand was her pistol. Her staff was slung on some type of attachment that went into her leather armor.

"I still think you should have brought out the Sword of Yosemite," she said for perhaps the sixth time.

"Can't risk it. If I reveal it now, and one of their soldiers escapes after having seen it... well, ruins the surprise. It's considerably more over-powered than just the Wardens," answered Vince yet again. He wasn't going to tell her to stop asking, either.

Blue's voice was calming to him.

"It makes sense," agreed Zathira. She was right behind the two of them. She'd been quietly adding the dead of the enemy to an Undead army as they fell.

They just hadn't risen back up yet.

"I agree with Lord Vince. His choice is correct. Still no losses for our side, by the way. The soldiers are mitigating everything with those portable shields," Zathira stated in that wonderful voice of hers.

A pity she just isn't interested. Such a unique lady.

Ah well. Already have more women than I know what to do with.

Withdrawing the pistol from its holster, Vince checked his sword to make sure it could be cleared from its scabbard easily.

"Julia?" Vince asked into the simple communicator at his wrist. It was disguised as a very simple watch, but would allow him to tap into a radio channel with nearby Legion units.

"Confirmed. General Petra has requested we advance," responded the woman.

She and Steve were his lieutenants to the Legionnaires. Steve was with Petra at the moment.

“On you, Julia. I delegate it all to you,” offered Vince and then looked to Blue, Leila, Zathira, and Elizabeth. “My team will focus on getting into their rear and trying to cause as much mayhem as we can. We’ll leave the crossfire to you and the Legionnaires.”

“I do love it when he gets into my rear as a punishment,” Blue suggestively murmured to Leila. Loudly. “And it really does cause mayhem a while after for me.

“Remember when you asked me why I eat so much ‘rabbit food’? It’s not the only reason, but it does help get everything fixed back there faster, too.”

The Warlock let out a guffaw, then started laughing.

Zathira looked annoyed at the banter but just stood there.

Elizabeth, shockingly enough, was plainly fighting down a smile. She was also standing there in only a greatcoat that hung on her shoulders. It could come off easily for her when she needed to change into her Dragon form once things started.

“I understand, five seconds,” answered Julia.

“In fact, I bet it’d work out better for you, Leila,” continued Blue in a conversational tone. “If you want, I can tell him to—”

There was a rapid set of beeping noises from Vince’s communicator, followed by the stomp and slam of boots rushing forward.

Vince started forward at a quickstep.

Even as he fell into a steady pace, Red appeared on his right side. She was moving on two legs at the moment. Dressed in leather armor with only her hands uncovered, she looked fit for combat.

“Red, don’t leave my side any further,” commanded Vince, not looking at her. “I need you. Do you understand?”

“But Red... Red... yes, Red will stay by her husband’s side. Which... which is where Red belonged. Red was foolish. Again,” lamented the Beastkin.

“Good thing I love you, Red. Now hunt with me. Just like when we first met. Alright?” prompted Vince, glancing over at her.

Her eyes started to increase in brightness, and she nodded her head.

Beyond her was Zathira, and then Elizabeth who was now running nude. Unfortunately, he got a good look at her amazingly lovely and brightly scaled body before he realized he was looking.

At his left was Blue, who was casually moving without a concern. To her left was Leila, who was finally atop a disk. There was no way she'd be able to keep up with them on foot.

Up ahead of them were soldiers, all dressed in a similar way to the ones he'd killed previously.

Off to the distant right, Vince could see the Legionnaires sprinting into place as well as the accompanying Wardens. They'd hit the side, set down, and then unleash into the soldiers with sustained fire.

Should even be a machine gun on a tripod in there somewhere.

None of the enemy soldiers noticed Vince and his group. They were all watching the Legionnaires or looking ahead.

Vince spotted what looked like the command group. A bunch of men on horses or standing around at tables and chairs. Loitering around with nothing much to do, and not really paying attention.

Unfortunately, the baron didn't seem to be amongst their number. Or at least, Vince couldn't spot him.

"Support break off," called Leila.

Blue, Leila, and Zathira broke off and came to a stop. This was as close as they should probably get. Blue would be acting as their bodyguard.

The naked, beautiful Dragon fell in at his side as Red ran along on his other.

"Elizabeth, do what you need to, but don't break away. We're just here to break their formation apart and try to play goalie," ordered Vince.

She grunted at that, her eyes flickering to life and beginning to glow.

Except, they didn't glow the same color as her scales. They were actually much shinier.

Then they were on the enemy group.

Storming into the camp, Vince lifted his pistol and began shooting at the closest people. They were all enemies and there was no need for prisoners.

Unfortunately, it looked like a number of the people in this camp were actually well-trained. Peacocks that didn't do much in the way of fighting, but still well-trained.

As one, they turned at the sudden blast of his pistol then began to form ranks. A number of them unsheathed swords, and two even unholstered their own firearms.

Those would have to be killed sooner rather than later, considering the lethality of such weapons. If Vince was struck in the head, that'd be the end for him.

Snapping his pistol down into the holster, Vince came to a stop and put his hands together. Without having to be told, Red stepped into him and bent low.

Bending low, then throwing his body forward, Vince aimed Red at the now fully Dragon-shaped Elizabeth who was rearing back above the camp.

As one, the officers focused fire and attention on the Dragon. So much that they didn't notice Red, who hit the Dragon's side and then ran up her spine.

Even as Elizabeth lowered her head to breathe a lake of fire onto the men, Red dashed over her brow and dove off the front of her snout.

As soon as Red passed near the fire, Elizabeth cut it off and then took to the air. Her work was done for the moment.

Screaming, flailing, and running about, the officers were quite lost in their attention. It made it easy for Red to pick out the ones who had weapons that needed to be removed.

She tore out their throats and then zipped away even as their enemies regained their senses. Quite a few had turned in her direction and were moving to engage her.

Vince had, by this point, unholstered his pistol again and begun unloading into those closest to him. Working back and forth with each shot that dropped an opponent.

Red returned to his side and stood up from her four-legged sprint. Holding herself upright, her bloody claws glistened.

Several purple blobs of slime landed in the massed ranks of soldiers. Disgorging their contents, they melted everyone they touched. Within seconds, the affected soldiers were all turned into shrieking puddles.

Even as the soldiers fell, they rose back up and turned on their companions.

All the dead that'd fallen previous to this point rose up as well, clawing, biting, and attacking their one-time comrades. The entirety of the situation was rapidly devolving into a mad scramble of screaming, battling soldiers.

Most of them did not understand what was going on.

Then the Legionnaires opened fire. A steady staccato of rifle fire being dumped en masse into a mob that couldn't really move away.

Whumps of plasma balls started to detonate in the ranks. Washing over everything they could.

The slide on his pistol slammed backward and remained there.

Stuffing it into the holster, Vince pulled out his blade and brought it up as the first officers made it to him. Deflecting a blade to the side, he snapped off a swift thrust at the man's forward leg.

It cut off the lower part of it at the knee, sending the soldier to the ground.

Moving his weapon to the left, Vince intercepted a second attack, then launched an attack at a third officer.

All it managed to do was force the man backward, staying at a perfect range to threaten Vince but remain outside of a rapid engagement.

A fourth came at Vince from the right, just beyond where he'd dropped the first officer.

Red caught the strike with one hand, her clawed fingers catching the blade and stopping it. Her other hand came out and broke the weapon off near the hilt, shattering the steel outright.

Holding onto the broken blade, she flipped it around and then hurled it in an underhanded pitch. It embedded itself into the guts of another enemy who was heading their way.

Several black arrows slammed into the soldiers in front of Vince and then they began to violently wretch. They threw up blood and black bile all over themselves.

Zathira?

Glancing back, he found the Necromancer standing there with a number of dark arrows in front of herself. Ready to be cast as needed.

Blue was fending off a handful of heavily armored men who had come their way. Her staff came out in a vicious thrust and made one man's knee buckle inside out. Bending the wrong way and sending him to the grass.

Only for her to step back and bring the rear of her staff down in an overhead slash that landed atop another man's metal helmet. There was a pinging noise as she literally rang his bell.

Though his neck bent in a grotesque way, and he collapsed.

Sweeping her weapon to the side, the Dryad took another step back, grasped her pistol from its holster with her left hand, sighted it on the last officer, and fired. A single shot going through his head dropped him.

Sliding the pistol back into place, she grasped her staff with both hands and looked for more enemies.

Damn, she got better. A lot better.

Returning to his own task, Vince grinned. His little strike team was looking incredible.

I just need Petra back. After the fort is up... I can probably steal her away.

Vince moved around Red's back and casually hacked off the wrist of a man who was trying to flank her.

Then skewered him through the guts.

Elizabeth passed by and laid a long line of fire down across the soldiers. She turned a great many of them into human torches.

Fight now, think later.

Chapter 12

With a grunt, Red slammed her hand through the head of a soldier.

When she pulled her hand back, his body came with it. He was quite literally stuck around her wrist. Dangling from it like a grisly bracelet.

It reminded him of meeting Ramona.

“Grruuhh, get-off-me,” growled Red as she shook her hand around. Then she grabbed the dead man’s remains and shoved with her other hand.

He came off with a splut noise.

Looking around, Vince realized that they were amongst a field of corpses now.

The slaughter had lasted a while. Enemy soldiers without the benefit of their leaders never questioned their standing orders.

They fought until people began to route through fear and loss of morale.

At which point the Yosemite soldiers were unleashed in full. Running the enemy down and killing them in the field. Elizabeth had made several passes as well. Snatching up soldiers with claws, jaws, or ending them with fire.

Heralded by thinking of her, Elizabeth swooped down from the clouds and came across the field quite low to the ground. Her head snaked out and she snatched up a man who’d been hiding in some grass.

She lifted her head and began chewing at the man. Several powerful bites and she launched him out of her mouth, banking hard to one side, and lashing out with her tail.

It slammed through a small trio of trees and obliterated someone hiding there. Vince only saw them for a brief second before they were broken in half at the waist.

Huh. She... seems almost at Taylor’s level. How strange.

Sheathing his sword, Vince let out a slow breath. This part of the fight was over. Now they’d have to head over to the city and dig out the baron if he was hiding there.

Removing the magazines that he'd used from his vest, Vince got down next to a freshly made corpse. He began dipping them one at a time into a dead man who'd had his chest ripped open by Red.

"What... what... what are you doing?" panted Red, standing over him. She was breathing hard and looked rather winded.

She was also covered in blood from her hairline down to her knees.

She'd remained at his side except when he'd unleashed her on a specific target.

"Refilling the magazines. My dear brother of mine apparently figured out I'm... not gentle with things," explained Vince with a chuckle. He popped the magazine filled with blood into the pistol, racked a round, then waited a beat.

Pressing the release, he retrieved the magazine and peered into it.

It was once more full.

Putting it into place on his vest he stuck another magazine into the body.

"Oh. Red... understands. Maybe... Red should learn to use a gun. It would make Red far more useful in these kinds of situations. W-wouldn't it?" asked the Beastkin. She was now squatting next to him.

In that small space of time, it sounded like she was recovering quickly.

"No. You were right where I needed you, and how I needed you, Red. At my side and ready," argued Vince.

He glanced up as a bright, fluttering light came his way.

Jamming the magazine in, he waited for a three-count before removing it. It was also full and ready.

Sam appeared in front of him, then settled down onto the ground and let out several rapid breaths. Then she stretched herself backward with her arms, bending at the waist.

"Uuugh, flying that long takes it out of me. I could use a recharge. Or... when you're done filling those up, wanna fill me up?" asked Sam with an evil smile. "I could moan for you while you do it if it helps."

Holding her hands up, Sam she made an “I surrender” gesture and then slowly wriggled her fingers.

“You sound like Blue, Sam,” Red muttered with a chuckle.

“Maybe I’m taking lessons from her?” Sam asked and then ran her tongue tip across her teeth. “So, give me a quickie? I need to go report to Petra that you’re done.”

Glaring at the Fae for several seconds, Vince then reached out and wrapped his hand around her shoulder.

“If you’re going to choke me, get it nice and firm right... right here,” Sam directed and then moved her head, putting his hand right up in her throat. Then she unleashed an even wider smile at him.

Vince actually didn’t know what to say.

This really was a lot like Meliae, Mouth, and Blue. So much so that he didn’t know how to respond.

Other than to start filling her with power from his grove.

As soon as he started, Sam let out a low and guttural moan. The type Meliae often made when he really had her going.

“Okay, that’s all I needed!” Sam panted out after thirty seconds of non-stop moaning. She gently pushed his hand off in such a way that it slid down her chest. “Off I go!”

A second afterward and Sam was buzzing off into the sky.

“Ha. Red thinks this is funny. She got you flustered, Bringer,” crowed Red. Then she leaned over and kissed him once. “Thank you for having Red at your side. Where Red belongs. Red will check in with Leila and get ready. Red thinks we’re going to the city next.”

Hmmm. Yeah.

Find the baron, since it seems like he’s not here.

Kill him, hand it all over to Flora.

Vince jogged into the city without anyone even trying to stop him. In fact, it seemed more like everyone was doing their best to avoid him and his people.

Citizens, what soldiery might be in the city, and even the animals. There wasn’t a living soul on the streets.

Nevertheless, Vince could feel eyes on him. From everywhere. The masses were staring at their procession even as they made their way.

Petra's orders had been simple.

Move ahead as swiftly as possible, secure the keep, lock down the treasury, and halt any destruction that might be ongoing. She wanted the city intact.

Needed it intact, in fact.

For it to be unscathed and to be utilized as it was immediately.

Letting it fall into ruin would only make their own situation worse.

He'd managed to find a squad of Frit's and recruited them to join him. They'd be able to keep pace with him and the others and still be ready to deploy afterward.

That and they'd blend in better with the city. There was no telling if anyone had escaped the massacre with news of the Legion soldiers, but there was no reason to make it more obvious.

"I sense death," warned Zathira as they made their way down the street. Up ahead, the fort sat forebodingly in their way.

"Death?" inquired Leila, moving along on her disc. "Yes. Perhaps we've already missed a purge of the citizenry. That's a shame."

"Maybe the baron left as soon as he saw what was going on and came back here?" proposed Blue.

With a shake of his head, Vince was starting to feel somewhat nervous. He really didn't like this at all.

"Sergeant, spread out, secure all the exits you can," Vince ordered. "Ratkin are to disembark and survey and scout.

"If possible, see if there's a local Ratkin population. There almost always is. Meet and greet and pump for information.

"Sam, provide oversight and keep them in communication with one another."

The soldiers melted away in every direction. Needing no further orders, they went about their business.

Sam launched off his back where she'd been lounging and zipped over to the sergeant. Hovering over his head, she moved with him as they went.

Swiftly they slid along the street like a river flowing its course. Moving inexorably to the end with nothing in the way.

Elizabeth shot ahead of them and jerked the large wooden door open. There was a crackling noise from inside and a wooden security beam swung brokenly out of the slot.

Strong as Taylor if not more. There was also something very strange with her coloring after that fight. I should... ask her about it. If she's willing to talk, that is.

On the inside, Vince saw the same entry area he'd been escorted through last time.

It didn't feel as large as it did previously. Though that likely had to be due to the fact that there were a great number of soldiers throughout it.

They all had raised rifles and looked to already be set to fire.

Shit. Walked right into this one.

"Shield!" Vince shouted and then pushed at the magic inside him.

Reaching out with that power, Vince attempted to recreate what he'd done with the artillery pieces. To get a hold of the ammunition and detonate it prematurely.

He couldn't do much with all the loaded rounds, but he was actually betting on something else there. He was betting that one of his supporters had enough time to put up a shield in front of them.

With a bang, every single rifle in the room went off at the same time.

Several layers of magic were interwoven in front of Vince.

A green one, a purple one, and a black one. They were all fritzing and throwing off sparks at the same time as they tried to all inhabit the same space.

There was so much energy crossing from those magical constructs that it made Vince feel like his hair was standing on end. Should he touch someone, it'd dump a static charge from him to them.

He couldn't see anything beyond the magic. It was simply putting out too much power.

On top of that, it seemed like they weren't using very good gunpowder for their ammunition. There was far more smoke than he

expected spread throughout the room.

Red dashed forward into the haze followed by Elizabeth.

Vince went to join them and found Blue's hand had snapped down tight around his wrist. He hadn't even noticed she'd taken hold of him until that moment.

"Let them do their job," she advised him.

A stark and painful memory of not trusting Daphne came to his mind.

Standing there, he did just as instructed. He let those who would likely be better suited to this handle things at this moment. Those two could regenerate from wounds far better than he could.

I'm strong, I'm durable, and I have incredible stamina.

I can still die and had to have Mouth healing me constantly for a while there.

"I'm not just a ranger anymore. Not just someone who can risk themselves. Even more so here," he murmured as the sounds of battle reached him. There was a loud roar as it sounded like Elizabeth began stomping about in her Dragon form.

"You really were just a ranger?" asked Zathira who stood beside him now. Her left hand was raised up and she was clearly holding the shield in front of him active. "I've... heard the rumors, but I thought it was just fluff and puffery.

"To better connect you to the citizens themselves. That... well... maybe you came from some rich merchant family and just made it all up."

Laughing, Vince could easily see how someone might come up with that idea. Especially given how he exploded onto the scene.

Reaching into a pocket of his vest, all the way down under his armor in fact, he fingered out his ranger identification. Holding it out to Zathira, he smirked to no one and at nothing.

"I still carry it with me. After doing the job for a few years it felt weird not having my identification on me. Used to get carded a lot at checkpoints," explained Vince as Zathira took the ID from him.

"You... really were. But— oh, Dryad and an Orc. They really were originally registered as your slaves. Oh... oh, sh...shit," muttered

Zathira, a second before his identification was pushed back between his fingers.

Glancing at the attractive Lamia, Vince gave her a strained smile, then looked back ahead. The smoke was slowly clearing away now, and he could see what was going on.

Red was currently disemboweling a man while Elizabeth was chewing what had to be four or five men at the same time. In her mouth was a crunching, screaming, popping mass of bodies and parts that was splattering blood all over the ground.

Grinding her molars back and forth, Elizabeth tilted her head one way, then the other, as if testing to see what was going on in her mouth. Snapping her head to one side, she opened it suddenly.

A mass of what had once been men slammed into a wall and splattered across the area where it'd struck.

Oh, I was wrong. That was like... ten people. Her entire mouth was full.

Swinging her large horned head to one side, Elizabeth spotted him, then suddenly looked at him fully. Her eyes were glowing a bright, shiny version of silver that Vince couldn't identify.

"You're beautiful, Elizabeth," declared Vince loudly and held her eyes. "Beautiful and deadly. Amazing. A gorgeous Dragon. It's hard to believe one such as yourself is in my wing, but I'll just consider myself fortunate."

Elizabeth let out a snort, but he didn't miss the fact that it looked like she grinned at him. Her Draconian mouth angling upward at the point where her jaw hinged.

The Dragon didn't say anything.

Turning to the side, she moved back toward the rear of his group and shrunk down into her humanoid self. Her horns were as bright as her eyes had been, and she didn't look like she was hiding herself either.

She boldly walked to Leila who was holding the greatcoat for her. Even going so far as to meet Vince's eyes as she passed by him bare naked.

Sniffing the air as she passed by him, he couldn't help but turn his head slightly, following her as she went with his eyes.

Smells like violence, sex, and fun.

Mm. I miss Taylor.

He didn't miss the point where her head turned fractionally and her shoulder shifted. As if she was about to look back at him but had managed to catch herself doing it.

As if maybe her Dragon wanted to engage with him right now after the violence.

A Dragon was a Dragon, of course. While she might be bashful around him, and somewhat quiet, she was still a Dragon.

Really miss Taylor and Ramona. My dear Dragons.

Looking ahead, he found Red was heading his way.

"Thank you, Red. That was perfectly done with Elizabeth. You two are like my hands in these kinds of situations," he said before she could even begin to get hurt.

He had noticed that Red was somewhat still unsure given her recent actions. Both in regards to her curse, and the Dryads.

Grinning and showing off her fangs, Red began to prance toward him on all fours. Moving up to him, she slammed her hip into his and then suddenly stood up to her full height.

"Red was good?" she asked.

"Yes, but we need to go forward. Otherwise, I'd stay and give you a scratch-scratch. We need to move ahead and find the baron, then Flora. We need to install her as the duchess after all," prompted Vince.

"Yes, yes. Red will be happy to do this," agreed Red. "Then... then we can go and meet the populations Red found? There's not many, but they seemed friendly."

Walking ahead, Vince did his best not to look at the gore and bits that were spread out in every direction. Red and Elizabeth had been akin to an inferno in a forest made of pitch-soaked matches.

Meat grinder.

Moving through the entry, Vince kept going. Heading straight back to where he'd met the baron previously. It was as good a place as any to start.

"Oh," Zathira said suddenly, grabbing hold of Vince at the shoulder. "Hold on a moment, Lord. I... I was interrogating the dead."

The baron is... he's in his bedroom. He's been there since he sent his soldiers out. Those that were waiting for us were sent there by the Court Nullifier.

"Then the man fled. Leaving the baron here and... and I don't think we'll be able to make Flora a duchess."

There was an ugly question in the back of Vince's head. One that felt a lot like it would be answered with, "because he killed them".

"And why's that?" he asked, meeting Zathira's eyes.

"Because I can tell you that she was killed this morning according to the dead. As she wasn't truly a mortal, her spirit passed on already," answered Zathira. "All of the planted Dryads except one were murdered to the last. The last one is in his bedroom and... being held captive so that the unplanted Dryad girls can be kept in thrall."

Taking in a slow breath, Vince let it out with a great deal of fury attached to it.

Given all that the baron had done, this didn't seem that surprising to him.

It infuriated him to a level that he couldn't likely express, but it wasn't really that surprising to him. The man had clearly viewed the Dryads as little more than possessions.

Or a pedigree show animal. Bred to perfection and then selling its children off once grown.

"Where's the bedroom?" asked Vince in a hiss-like whisper.

"I'll... lead the way, Lord Vince," offered the Lamia, moving ahead of him into the corridor.

I'll strangle him to death. Strangle him to death after dismembering him.

Or maybe... stuff his dick and balls down his own throat and hold his nose shut. Let him suffocate on them. That'd be delightful.

Very delightful.

Chapter 13

Zathira glided up to a rather ornate door that stood out. There was even an inlay in the material that looked like some sort of glittering substance that probably cost far too much.

“Knock it down for me,” growled Vince as his heart pounded in his ears. His teeth were clenched together and felt as if they might crack against one another with the force he was exerting.

Elizabeth advanced to the door, lifted a bare leg, and then put it through the door with a massive wallop. The great coat that was covering her shifted with the movement but didn't reveal anything of her.

With a wail of metal tearing loose, the door came off its frame and slammed into the ground on the other side. Not waiting for Vince, Elizabeth walked into the room followed directly behind by Red, then Zathira.

Apparently, Vince was being given the “important person” entrance and wouldn't be allowed in immediately.

Seems more fitting for a man with a grander name. Like... Alexander.

I'm just an ugly little bastard.

Nasty thing that I am.

Vince.

Kinda like... Steve.

Vince lingered for several seconds before entering.

Stepping into the bedroom, he found the baron.

He was sitting in a chair at a desk, half-naked, and looking very angry. He also had a hand towel in his lap that had what looked like blood on it.

Already well past angry and in “rage” territory, Vince jumped further than he wanted to with his thoughts. That maybe this man had already slaughtered all the unseeded Dryads as well.

As if drawn by his thoughts, Vince's eyes flit over to the corner of the room.

Curled up there was a very dead Dryad woman. Her eyes were open, empty.

Vacant.

Staring into nothing.

“You? What are you doing here! How dare you come into my private chambers and—”

“Kill him and pull his soul out for questioning,” demanded Vince through clenched teeth, now ignoring the baron. “I want to know where every single Dryad corpse is. We’re going to plant them in the roots of their own trees.

“They might not ever come back, but we can at least give them that chance. Once you’re done with his soul, Zathira, turn it over to Leila. We’re going to have some long-lasting fun with it. There’s no point in torturing his body when we have his soul.”

The entire time Vince had been speaking, the baron had been babbling at him. Demanding one thing or the other, accusing him of being impertinent and oafish, and a slew of other things that were ridiculous given the situation.

Red zipped forward and caught the baron around the throat. Lifting the handsome man out of the chair, she carried him over to Zathira.

Struggling against the Cursed One’s might, he fought for all he was worth. In spite of his struggles, there was no escaping Red.

Zathira laid a hand on the man’s head and her eyes became an abyssal black.

The baron went limp instantly, his body slack in Red’s grasp.

“I’ve plucked his soul free, you may dispose of that,” Zathira breathed with a low hiss. “The... unplanted Dryads live, yet are dying. They need a grove to power them since they... don’t have the ability to seed yet.

“Though... there... there is one that can seed. The baron decided to slaughter them all because of the one in the Dryad dungeon that can still be planted. She was to be the new Grove-mother. She’s a daughter of Flora.”

“Perfect. We’ll make her the duchess, bury her family accordingly, and let her tend to her family,” vowed Vince. “I’m going to go start digging the graves. Please... bring their bodies to me when you find

them. I'll need several planks of wood, several feet of copper wire, a bell, and a stake. Per body, that is.

"When you find Flora's daughter and her sisters, please assist them to the location. We'll... make it a dual ceremony for them all. Burial and bestowal of rank."

Pivoting on his heel, Vince exited the room and then paused in the hallway.

Standing there, he wanted to slam his fist into something. Wanted to break things and then burn the wreckage to ash.

It felt like his throat was dry as he stared into the void.

Distantly, he could hear a crackling noise. He couldn't identify it, and he didn't care at the moment. All he could see and hear right now was a very sad Dryad named Flora who lived and died as a prisoner for no reason other than what she was.

Standing in the courtyard where the Dryads had been held prisoner, Vince waited.

Over time, servants began carrying out bodies to him. They were always wrapped in linen and hidden from sight.

Vince uncovered each one. Making sure to strip them of clothes as well. Just as he'd done for Karya, Daphne, and Green.

He arranged their bodies appropriately, where sometimes he had to put a body part close to where it should be, then interred them into the earth making sure to put their bodies directly in line with the roots of their tree.

Either the tree would integrate its Dryad back into itself, or assist in regrowing them. He knew without asking that Blue would vehemently deliver prayers for the fallen Dryads that they might regrow and return to life.

She was a priestess of Yosemite, after all. Her words carried a weight backed by thousands upon thousands of believers back home.

Reaching out, he adjusted the small bell on the stake.

“Not going to let what happened with the others happen again,” he muttered to himself.

Looking at Flora’s corpse, he winced, then reached down and gently moved her index finger. The wire that was tied around it pulled at the bell and it made a ringing noise.

“There. When she wakes, she’ll have a little time before the earth just takes her life away again,” he said with some satisfaction. Then he grabbed the two small enclosures of wood he’d made and laid them atop her.

One over her head and face, the other over her chest.

It’d give her a chance to take a few breaths and then try to move. Only for the bell to sound and whoever was on duty to notice it.

After that, it’d just be a matter of retrieving the Dryad.

They’d been deliberately buried in a fairly shallow grave for easy retrieval. A guard would need to be present to listen for the bells as well as to discourage scavengers or grave robbers.

“May you return quickly, Flora. I hope that your afterlife, and the life after your death, are kinder to you than they were previously,” offered Vince, then reached out to gently press a hand to her shoulder.

He passed a small amount of power into the corpse after thinking over what he’d learned from his own Dryads about their experience with death. That they were indeed not mortal and theirs was a domain that was unknowable in many ways.

There was a shuddering noise from the tree and then several roots grew down to spread out over the corpse. They didn’t enter the body but simply moved across it. Covering one arm from shoulder to fingertips.

“Hm. Well. I’m betting I’ll see you sooner than I think,” Vince said with a chuckle.

Standing up, he turned away from the grave.

He’d felt the approach of others. The arrival of Blue, Red, and Sam, to be accurate. They were escorting a gaggle of young Dryad women.

They were all standing before him.

On each side of the greenbelt were graves dug by him, filled with Dryad corpses. They were only waiting for him to rig up the bell system for them, and then to be buried fully.

Only one of the Dryad girls looked mature.

In fact, she looked to be Meliae's age when he first met her. She'd been on her own journey with her first seedling, in fact.

Standing at about five foot five, with a full Dryad physique with tanned skin, radiant hazel eyes that shimmered to a sparkling green color in the light, and long black hair, she was decidedly different from what he'd expected.

Frighteningly pretty, as well. Very different from every Dryad he'd encountered so far.

"You... are Lord Vince?" asked the woman.

"Indeed. May I ask your name?" he replied and inquired in turn.

"I am cal—that... Flora, my mother, named me Leandra," whispered the Dryad. Vince only could guess at the hesitation, but he imagined she probably had a derogatory name she'd been called.

"Ah. Well, you named your daughter beautifully, Flora," offered Vince, turning to look into the grave. "I will now appoint her in your stead as the duchess."

Turning back to look at the young woman, he found her eyes were glued to the corpse.

"Would you like to tell her goodbye for now?" asked Vince. "She'll be coming back, you know. It might take a little time but... she'll be back."

"She... will?" asked Leandra.

"Guarantee it. I apparently have already regrown one Dryad all on my own. The other two were well on their way as well. I just screwed up the execution. My brother had to help me out with it, but I learned from it. I've learned many lessons," Vince promised with a smile. "So yes, she and all your sisters will be returned to you. I can't... guarantee their pregnancies though. Those might all be lost. They didn't have trees."

Leandra hesitated for only a moment then moved forward. She got down on her knees and then reached into the grave, laying her hands on the Dryad's bare torso and shoulder.

“Mother... we thank you. You weren't here to see it, but you gave us the freedom we all begged for,” whispered the Dryad in her own language. “You bartered with an avenging angel to deliver us to sanctuary and lost yourself in doing it.

“May you rest eternally and at least watch over us with joy in your heart.”

Leandra kissed her hand and then pressed it back down to her mother. After a few seconds more, she stood and looked at Vince.

“She won't rest eternally,” countered Vince in her own language. “She really will rise again. You Dryads are far more hearty creatures than anyone suspects. Now... will you become the duchess of... what's the name of this area?”

“Galicia. It's... you... understood me. You can speak Spanish?” she asked with surprise.

“Indeed. Do you accept?” Vince said, continuing in English again. “To be my duchess? Of Galicia? You would only be beholden to me and no one else.”

“Yes, of course, I do,” Leandra answered in English and stepped up to him.

In her hands, she held a small seed pod. It was cupped in her palms and held up to him as if it were an offering.

“Please, plant me into your grove, my Lord Vince,” she pleaded.

Frowning, Vince turned and looked at Blue. The only one who would have told her about this would be his own Dryad.

“It's fine,” Blue said with a wave of her hand. “Besides, she'll need to be able to travel about a bit further than you think. Meliae needed a great deal of travel that we didn't expect, you'll remember.

“Her sisters can all plant themselves here with their mothers and aunts. It'd be best for her to be apart from them as well so she can provide them with power, too.”

Staring at Blue, Vince knew there was more to this.

He suspected that his little Dryad had already converted Leandra into his service on the way up. That the Dryad would, in fact, be a Grove-wife to Blue.

Except he didn't want that.

Not right now.

This young woman barely knew her asshole from a hole in the ground and had a lot to do.

“She’ll be fine planting it here,” countered Vince and threw a thumb to Flora’s tree. “If she needs to move around, we can change some things then.

“Sorry, Leandra. Just... not the right time or place. You need to grow roots and become the strength for your family. I don’t know where I’ll end up, but I can guarantee you now that it’ll likely be far from here.

“I formally declare you the Duchess of Galicia. Hold it firmly and with care in my stead. Now... if you’ll excuse me, I need to go tend to your aunts. They need to be interred.”

Stepping away from Leandra, Vince moved back to Flora and grabbed the shovel. He needed to fill her grave and move on.

There was work to do.

“Ah, there is this one’s master,” came a quiet voice followed by the click of ant legs moving across stone.

Looking up from the tree of the unknown Dryad, Vince found Petra was indeed on her way toward him. She was wearing a broad smile and her arms and armor as well.

“My dearest soldier, general, and wife,” Vince returned with an equal smile to hers. “You’ve found me. Which means you wanted to talk to me or to ask me questions, I imagine.”

“Maybe this one just wanted to see her master?” argued Petra as she came up to him.

“Oh, I’m sure you did. But that’s not the reason you’re here. See... I know you, Petra, my dear,” answered Vince, reaching up to lay a hand on her cheek. He was always surprised to find her looking as young as the day he met her. He’d grown used to his mature and beautiful Soldier-ant. “You are a consummate military leader, and my wife second to that.

“I do not fault you for that, but instead I would encourage that. I have many wives, but only one General Petra. Only one who I trust

the entirety of my world to.

“In fact, even Felix entrusted it all to you, Petra. Do you think my brother, who at times is even more ruthless than I, would ever do that if he had a single smidgen less belief than I did in you?”

Petra’s eyes had slowly widened at his words. She stared at him as if he were laying out the secrets of the world to her.

“He... would not,” she said after digesting his words for several seconds. “Felix would’ve demanded someone else take control. Like Ioana. He would never have let me take the leadership role if he doubted it.

“This one... believes you’re absolutely correct and... and will reflect on your words deeply. My role isn’t that of your wife, but your general who happens to be your wife.”

“Yup,” agreed Vince and he patted her cheek twice. “Though I really look forward to making you squeal like my wife tonight.

“You’re mine, Petra. I demand that you join me in bed tonight. I’ll milk your poor full stinger, pump you full of my own ‘venom’, and then let you melt away in a tub while I work over your chitin. I bet you’re littered with dirt and gravel, aren’t you?”

“I-I... yes please, Husband. I could use your care,” mumbled Petra, her eyes closing and her face nuzzling into his hand. “I’ve earned it as well. We took no losses in the fight, though we did have several wounded. Mr. White Junior injected them with a ‘project’ he’d been working on. They were back in action within minutes and returned to the fight.

“He... he’s very good. Just like his father, just not very confident. Yet.”

“Wonderful. Good job. You’re a spectacular general, Petra,” complimented Vince. His fingers moved across her jaw and cheek. “Now, what else needs to be said? What can I do for you? What do you need from me?”

“We’ve sealed off the keep and this plaza,” whispered Petra, her eyes closed and practically hanging in his hand. She was an incredibly affectionate and cuddly woman when they were alone, and this was just ever more proof of her heart having changed

considerably after her death. “Tomorrow we announce to the population that we’ve formed a new colony.

“A colony from the Empire of Yosemite, founded in and amongst Dryads. Due to the terrible conditions laden upon the Dryads of Europe, we’ve brought cleansing fire and shot to their shores to sweep the field. None will be left who profited from the harm of so many Dryads.”

Ah.

I forget that she and Meliae share a deep bond.

When Petra died, it was Meliae who swooped in and took care of her children. Who mothered them personally and without missing a beat. Treating them as her own children in all regards.

It was Meliae who took them all to Petra’s monument to thank her for her life and her death.

She likely feels the same way I do about how the Dryads have been treated.

“—push them all to the north. Right out of their own country, or into the sea,” Petra continued. “As to the royalist faction... from what thi—I can gather, they’re no better. Perhaps even worse, in some regards. They’ve taken their war to the citizens and left it at their doorstep.

“They will slaughter anyone who supports their enemies. Doesn’t matter who.”

“I see. Well, we’ll have to sweep them out as well,” murmured Vince. “Thoughts on the Dryads here? Duchess Leandra?”

“We need Dryads to help us. Leandra and her sisters will be fine here,” Peta mumbled in an almost sleepy voice. “You must accept Dryads into your grove. They will need to travel with us. Blue cannot do this alone.

“She will approve those who wish to join, you will accept them, and you will grow your grove here. Just as you did in Yosemite.”

Sighing, Vince wasn’t surprised by that. He knew he’d sidestepped Leandra, but not the actual issue. They did need Dryads.

“I understand and... will comply with your will, Petra,” allowed Vince.

“I thank you. Leandra will be joining your grove tomorrow. Blue had orders from me to not let her accept a refusal from you,” continued Petra. “Several of her sisters will also join your grove tomorrow, they were able to make seeds with some help. I’ve also sent out messengers to all Dryad populations that are in hiding. Red and Sam found several of them.

“I’m sticking with Meliae’s original requirements as I felt they produced the best candidates for what we wished. With any luck, we’ll have twenty or so Dryads for the grove by the week’s end.”

Laughing now, Vince wasn’t surprised in the least. Petra was a very smart woman and had foreseen him stalling. Denying Leandra.

“I understand,” he confirmed, still laughing. “Before you say it, I get it. I won’t fight it. You’re... you’re Fes, here. Fes Petra.

“You have to manage our family. You’ll put strong women in front of me that you want in our marriage. I won’t fight you, Fes Petra. You won’t make Berenga or Yaris look at you poorly.”

“G-good that you know it. I’m... Fes here. Europe Fes Petra, while Yaris is the North American Fes. Berenga is our spiritual Fes,” Petra summarized as if reciting something that was told to her. “I’m still surprised that I lost to Yaris. That Berenga did as well. Then she promptly made Berenga Fes again and told me I was the European Fes.”

Vince wasn’t surprised that Yaris had beaten both Berenga and Petra. His spunky Royal Elf wife could even land a strike on him at times.

If ever there was a woman to leave Yosemite to, it’s Yaris.

“I... need you. Here. Now,” whimpered Petra. “You can collect my venom later. After. When you’re cleaning me.”

“Sure, Petra,” agreed Vince, then kissed her.

Chapter 14

Before he could even move away from Petra, he felt someone move toward them. Several someones, truthfully.

It only took Vince a single second to understand the situation.

Breaking the kiss, Vince sighed and looked at Petra.

“General first, Petra Campbell,” he lamented, his words snapping right through Petra’s clouded mind and waking her. Standing upright, she rose up imperiously and then began to look around. Her body turned with the motion.

“Ah, this one... sees them. It is very regrettable,” despaired the ant-soldier with a tired voice. “As this one’s master said though... a general first. For that is what he needs more than anything else.

“Before this one leaves, she must confess something to you. Something that she has been contemplating since she found out.”

Coming back down to a height that was relevant to his own, Petra gave him a curious and concerned look. Her delicate brows slid closer to one another.

“This one has discovered a wood-ant colony. They are... red in color. In the past, this one has heard mention of them from the Elves in Yosemite, but has never met one. If this one can incorporate them into Yosemite, would... would the master welcome them?”

There’s more to that question, isn’t there?

Vince could feel like there was more there. Lurking beneath it, but he couldn’t tell what it was. For the life of him, there was no knowledge in his head about a “red wood ant”. It was something he’d never experienced.

Waster ants only had come in the “soldier” variety that he’d known of. This sounded more like something Caroline had told Petra about. Snow Elf clan stories, perhaps.

“Petra, do what you feel is best for us here. We’re a... crusader kingdom, at this point. Our government will be one of might makes right for quite a while. Until we can get Elysia over here, or someone from Legion to smooth out the government side of it, we’re operating as an invading force,” suggested Vince. “If you feel we should bring in an ant colony, I won’t say no. Just... promise me you won’t make

me bed an entire colony of women like yourself. I don't think I'd survive it."

Petra gave him a grin then, showing her teeth.

"This one understands. She will go see her people now and arrange things for tomorrow. She... this... I'll see you tonight, Husband. I look forward to your attention," promised Petra, and then turned and moved off.

Her people had kept a respectful distance after realizing she was with him.

Sniffing once, Vince decided this was a good time to address the peeping toms.

"Leila, Sam, don't you have work to do?" Vince asked, watching Petra interact with those in her command.

They obviously viewed her with a respect that bordered on worship. Eyes that held awe in them as they gazed at her, waiting for any order at all.

"I... well... see, I told you he'd notice," whispered Sam accusingly.

"Fine, fine, you were right. What do you think—Sam! Where... coward," grumbled Leila as Sam zipped off at high speed.

Coming down from above, lost in the dark sky and likely blending in for everyone that wasn't Vince, Leila descended on her disc. Stopping at a reasonable height, she hopped off it and stood in front of him.

"We just wanted to watch if possible. Or at least, I wanted to watch how you'd... do it... with Petra. It seems somewhat awkward to manage in my head, but I'm not a human, nor am I as big as you are," offered Leila by way of explanation. "Sam was... probably just being voyeuristic. I think the fact that she has a sex drive is more of a surprise to her than anyone else.

"To be fair, I don't think Fae, or any fairy species actually, have coital relationships. That'd be an interesting thing to watch, too, now that I think about it."

"Oh? You need a demonstration? Shall I give you one? A hands-on one?" leered Vince, getting down in a crouch in front of the Gnome.

“I... err... yes? Yes, please?” answered the Warlock with a smile. At this distance, her eyes were amazing to look upon. Large, glittering, and filled with what looked like magic. “We haven’t done it since you knocked me up. I’m more than ready and willing. Right here is fine, in fact.”

Leila was working at the leather straps and buckles of her armor. She was trying to undo them and get them unwound even as she spoke.

When Vince thought about it, he realized he hadn’t lain with Leila in a while. She’d mostly been gone for weeks with Red and Blue. They’d only had the one chance to couple after breaking Red’s curse when they’d stopped briefly in Yosemite to get supplies.

Which’d been fortunate since she’d caught a child then.

Since then, he hadn’t had a chance with her.

On the boat ride over, Blue had been so sick that he’d relegated himself to tending for the poor Dryad. Her only comfort had been when he was near and shared grove energy with her.

“Really ready for this,” Leila continued and managed to unhitch her armor finally. Shucking it off over her head rapidly, she dumped it on the ground. Then she looked at him. “What’re you waiting for? You made the offer. Hurry up and strip.

“Not letting this chance go. We’re alone, we’re outside, there’s some nice grass here, and people won’t come looking for us.”

Vince nodded his head and then began undressing.

Managing it with some speed, he caught up to Leila just as she’d flung her padded leather pants down to her ankles.

Not bothering to hide it, he gave her a really hard once-over. He let his eyes roam over her from head to toe and back again.

“Leila, you really put on some muscle there,” he remarked and then reached out to lay a hand on her hip. She actually had a bit of a womanly figure to her now that she’d lost some weight.

He didn’t miss the fact that she’d lost some of her bust, but that tended to happen as one grew fitter. Athletic women were naturally slimmer in all things.

“Thanks. I worked hard at it. I felt like a worthless slug when I couldn’t even keep up in the bedroom when all I had to do was lay

there,” grumped the Gnome.

Then she was on him, kissing him hungrily. She had one hand behind his head, her other grasping his semi-erect shaft.

Her fingers curled tightly around him and gave him a small squeeze as her tongue pushed into his mouth. She kissed him far more ardently than he'd thought her capable of.

“Mm, mm, yes, Vince,” Leila got out in a squeak after breaking the kiss. Her hand squeezed him twice more as he rapidly grew firmer in her grasp. Then she kissed him again, her tongue once more forcing its way into his mouth.

Before he'd really figured out what was happening, Leila had eased him down onto his back. Kissing him all the while, one of her hands was stuck down between her thighs. Rubbing, pulling, and caressing the head and underside of his member.

Easing back from him, she leaned into his lap.

In one smooth and experienced motion, she set his head to her entry, and kept going until she was sitting down in his lap. His hilt wedged against her lips and his hard tip pressed to her depths.

“Devils,” moaned Leila in a low voice. She leaned her head back and stared up at the sky above them. She put her hands down against her own ankles and then began to bounce up and down on him. Sliding him from tip to base in and out of herself. “It doesn't feel like I'll burst anymore, but it still feels too full.

“Wouldn't—nnnnnggh—trade it for anything, though. Love it. Love you. My human husband.”

Leila continued to grind, bounce, and thrust her hips at him. Riding him in the grass where she'd planted him. After a minute, she finally looked down at him.

Her beautiful eyes were wide open and glittering. He knew what she was about to ask of him. She always hit a point where she was done “warming herself up” and wanted him to take over.

“Hands and knees, lover of mine. Ride me like a human woman,” demanded the Gnome as she came forward toward him. She kissed him once as he slipped out of her.

Scooting forward, she got closer to the tree and then got on her hands and knees, raising her rear end as high as she could into the

air.

Not one to deny a beautiful woman, Vince rolled over and came right up behind her. He put his left hand on her hip, grabbed his tip with his right, and then lined himself up at her entry.

It did require spreading his knees out a bit to get to the height of her waist, but it wasn't terrible. Most certainly, it was worth it when he pushed forward and speared himself into her.

The slick, tight warmth of her left him wanting to get as deep into her as he could.

"Uuunnghhh, Vince, I need it," groaned Leila, slowly letting her shoulders droop down to the grass. Her rear end was now flush to his lap. He started to draw himself back after getting settled.

"Nnnmm... been too long. Let's not wait so long next time. Even if —mmmm, others are watching."

Goodness. Leila hasn't even asked for any magic yet to send her into a different universe. She's really into this.

Pushing and pulling on the Gnome's hips, Vince steadily ran himself through her. Holding her tightly and grinding at her to really push everything in.

Just the way she liked it and had told him so repeatedly.

She liked the feel of it all being in her, but not slamming her around.

"Shit...nnngh, fu-fuck," growled Leila and she started to push herself back up against him. Adding far more force to it than she usually did. "No magic this time. N-nnnnuugh not yet. Use me like a f-fuck doll."

He didn't have to actually tap into her with his gifts to know what she wanted. Leila wanted him to use her just a bit more than usual, which was pretty vanilla.

There was no way she wanted him to abuse her like a Dryad, or Berenga. She just happened to have a fun and dirty mouth on her.

Reaching down, he took her wrists in his hands and then pressed them into the middle of her lower back. Holding them tightly there with one hand, he placed his other back on her hip.

Leaning into her, he bent her slightly, forcing her shoulders further down and her rear end a touch higher. Drawing back, he

started to push into her once again.

He moved without any extra speed, but with all the force he could give her without harming her.

“Nnn! Y-yes, use me up. I’m your Gnome f-fuck mmnnnggh fuck doll!” demanded Leila, her hands flexing open and closed in his grasp. She was also trying to squeeze him for all she was worth with her insides. He could feel her clenching down with the muscles in there.

“Ah... ahh!” squeaked Leila as she began to shudder beneath him. She bucked against his hands even as he continued to slowly and powerfully push into her. Giving her everything with each stroke from tip to hilt.

Quivering and gasping, Leila convulsed around him as she fell into a deep orgasm. Her first she’d had without magic influencing her.

“Uuuunnn mmm, o-okay. Give me a f-few moounnnnn... more pushes, then let me eat it,” begged Leila even as her orgasm continued. He wasn’t about to stop until it felt like she was done coming down. “Dump all your mmmmm magic into your seed and feed it to me. I wannnuugh uuuunn want to eat it.”

Huh, that’s different. Won’t say no, though.

Haven’t come in her mouth yet.

Holding the Gnome tightly, Vince didn’t let her go. He just kept riding her into the grass until he knew for certain she was finished.

“Ready?” he asked and then gave her a final thrust and buried himself up to the hilt in her. He knew he wouldn’t last long.

For whatever reason, dirty talk always got him going better than anything else.

“Nnnmmm, yeah. I wanna eat it. Eat your dick and your seed. You better feed me it all,” demanded Leila. “Give me my damn dinner like I’m Red. I hunger for it.”

Very turned on by this point and ready to go, Vince let her go and then sat back.

Leila practically fell over as she pushed herself up quickly. She had turned to face him so fast, she’d ended up putting one hand atop the other.

Managing it quickly, she then practically fell on his lap. Her mouth came down atop his tip and she took him down to the hilt on the first go.

Her beautifully large eyes flicked up to him and she stared at him as his girth stretched out her lips and mouth. She looked like a small animal trying to pack down something too big for her.

“Mmmmm,” moaned Leila around him. Her tongue pushed at the bottom of his shaft, and she began to slowly bob her head up and down.

She did it slowly and always from top to bottom, easily guiding him down her throat each time. Her cheeks were just slightly hollowed as she sucked at him, her hands coming up to grasp his sack and his thigh.

“Ahhw yoo mahit,” she said around him and raised her eyebrows at him. She began to actually pick up some speed now, pushing him down and back up fluidly every time.

Mouth or Meliae gave her lessons.

“All of it,” Vince agreed, understanding she wanted all his magic.

Focusing on what she was doing, he didn't have long to wait. He did what he could to gather the power of his grove down there. In the exact same way he often did when he was going to feed Red directly.

“Here it comes, Leila,” warned Vince.

The Gnome smiled around him and then pushed him much further to the front of her mouth. She kept moving her head, but only to the halfway point now. He could feel her tongue pushing and washing all over his tip, as if to stop him from shooting it down her throat.

Then he hit his peak and his body flexed and pulled.

“Nn!” squeaked Leila as she kept going even as he came. Her tongue tip pushed greedily at the entrance. “Mmhmm, mmhmm, mhmm.”

Unable to help himself, he laid a hand on Leila's head as she kept humming encouragement at him. With several final spurts, he felt himself finally empty, even as her fingers pulled and pushed at his jewels tenderly.

She was working to get anything out of him she could.

Then Leila leaned back and took a slow breath. Opening her mouth, he could see she was literally filled to the brim with his seed.

Leaning her head back as her eyes watered, she swallowed loudly.

Her throat constricted and he watched as she literally ate it.

She managed a second swallow, but then gagged on the third and coughed. Unable to help herself she turned to the side and spat up at least half of what'd been in her mouth into the grass.

Coughing repeatedly, she knelt there.

Vince reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, gently stroking her between the shoulder blades.

"You okay, dear?" he asked, concerned.

"Yeah," she said, then coughed twice more. "It tasted sweet. Was really full of magic. I think I'm going to end up kinda drunk off it in a few minutes.

"It was so thick, though. Really hard to swallow. I'll do better next time."

Running a finger over her lips, Leila then stuck it into her mouth.

Sitting back, she gave him a look and then smiled at him.

"So, how's a really fit Gnome in the sack?" she asked.

"Great. So great I'm going to keep you in a sleeping bag and play with you in the middle of the night," Vince teased, his hand coming over to caress her cheek.

"Oh? Alright. That's fine. Just make sure you snuggle me lots," she demanded even as her pupils started to expand further and further. "Oh... I think... the magic is kicking in."

"I mean, I doubt you'd agree to be my personal body pillow otherwise," admitted Vince.

"I don't mind it. I love sex. Magic makes it fun, but without it, I can really feel it," Leila murmured and held up a hand. She wriggled her fingers. "Okay. Take me to bed and then have me again, Vince.

"As your Gnome body pillow, I demand it. Take me away and then... take me again."

"Can't. Petra has my evening," apologized Vince.

“That’s fine. Have me before her, then use me to clean her off, and have me again. It’ll be fine, Petra won’t even argue,” Leila slurred as she got up to a standing position. “I’m a wife, she’s my Fes. She’ll barter with me.”

Trundling off, completely nude, Leila began wandering away toward the keep.

Vince grabbed up both sets of clothes and went after her.

He did his best to not let on to the fact that he’d known Zathira was watching the entire time. She’d been hiding in the brush long before Petra had shown up, in fact.

Just watching him as if he were prey.

He found it fun.

A new challenger wanted to see if they could haunt him. Someone else wanted to play with him in a game that he’d been trained in as a ranger, then excelled in as he grew in power.

I do love a good challenge.

Let’s hope she does better than my poor Elves or Red.

Her approach wasn’t bad to start with, so... it could be fun.

Chapter 15

Walking up to Flora's grave, Vince came to a stop next to it. Staring down at it and the bell there.

"Come on, Flora," Vince whispered with a smile. "Ring the bell. Wake up and surprise everyone. Make Blue look like a priestess of unmitigated power and give these people some faith."

Getting down on his knees, he laid his hands on the grass.

Closing his eyes, he reached into his grove.

All his trees were dormant except for the old Dryad tree, which was much like a newborn. Eagerly running amongst the dormant Dryad trees like a kid sprinting through a forest. Only for Blue's tree to corral it briefly, make sure it was fine, then send it off again.

Reaching down into the shallow grave, he found Flora there. The roots of her tree hadn't moved away from her, though he did notice that her body had shifted. It was displaced and seemed to be much deeper in the grave than it had been.

He couldn't sense anything wrong, though, so assumed the only thing he could.

That everything was fine.

Pulling at his grove, he dumped a portion of the power from it into Flora's body. Letting it soak into the soil, her tree, and her, all at the same time. He'd repeat the process for the other Dryads as well. Each of them would get a share of the power he held to help speed them along.

He'd continue to do this every chance he got until he left.

Because he knew Petra would send him out soon. He even suspected that he knew where she'd send him, in fact.

Straight to the ant colony.

Standing up as he reached the end of the power transfer, Vince brushed his hands on his pants.

"You... visit her often for someone you barely knew."

Turning his head, he found Leandra behind him. Her hands were held in front of her, clutching her glowing seed pod. Behind her were several other young women who looked to be very close to her in age.

None of them looked like Leandra, rather, they shared more traits with Flora. Each had a seed in their hands, though none glowed as brightly as Leandra's.

Did... Flora give them what power I'd given to her? I bet she did.

Transferred it all to her daughters rather than hold onto it herself.

Blue practically materialized at his arm, having been quietly standing by for him. Likely for this moment, in fact.

"Petra set this up?" Vince asked, looking at the beautiful Elven Dryad. She was even now unbuttoning his armor and working at peeling down the front of it so she could get to his chest.

"Of course," admitted the Dryad with a smile. "I need Grove-wives to help me. Priestesses of Yosemite.

"Leandra is my first wife and extremely important. I need her. Desperately. I'll be teaching and training her as fast as I can.

"Most especially in magic. She has a far greater aptitude in it than I do.

"Her sisters will be allowed to enter but... not yet. They can plant their seeds in you, but it'll be a while before they can take on Dryad duties. They'll mostly help Leandra with ducal duties until then."

Checking a sigh, Vince instead turned a smile on Leandra.

"Do forgive me for denying you yesterday. I... felt like I was stealing you right out of your cradle. I've been reprimanded," he apologized.

"It's... no, I understand. If you took me quickly and without concern, I think I'd be nervous about it," admitted Leandra as she stared at his chest. Blue had drawn a finger across the entry point and his skin was splitting open. "The fact that you didn't want it, tried to force me to grow on my own first... I appreciate it. I can trust my sisters, and eventually our children together, to a man like you."

Leandra moved forward and gently pushed her seed pod into him. It slipped inside just as all the others had done.

Blue's tree latched onto it and drew it into the mass of others. Into the grove.

Stumbling to one side, Leandra had the look of a drunk. Then she collapsed to her hands and knees and began to shiver uncontrollably.

“It’s-so-much,” she got out between her teeth.

“Yes, I did tell you it would be this way. Lay down on the grass and just let it pass,” advised Blue, waving on the next Dryad with a bright energetic smile. “Come along, future priestess of Yosemite, Calia. It’s time to join the ranks.”

A young and perky Dryad bounced up to Vince and promptly popped her seed into his chest. Her hair was almost as black as Leandra’s but not quite. She also looked just a bit younger than the other, though her eyes had a very similar hazel color.

Before he could register that, she leaned up, kissed his cheek, and then dove onto the grass.

Falling flat on her face, she then laid there with her eyes closed. And promptly passed out there, growing still.

“Next,” Blue murmured encouragingly, waving on the next Dryad.

Leandra had managed to stay conscious, though she trembled like a piece of trash stuck on a tree branch in a high wind. Like she was holding onto the ground just to stay where she was.

Several more Dryads came, planted their seed into him, each giving him a kiss on the cheek, and then laid down on the ground. Each and every one passed out right then and there, even as Leandra fought for her own consciousness.

“You-didn’t-say-it’d-be-like-this,” hissed Leandra, her fingers dug into the ground and her back arched. “Want-sex! Really-bad! Need-Grove-husband’s-seed!”

The beautiful Dryad pressed her forehead to the grass and then let out a low, guttural moan. One that sounded a lot like when he really got into Mouth.

It straightened Vince’s spine and made him want to pin Blue to the grass.

“It’ll go away in a few minutes. We all feel it when we join,” offered Blue in a helpful way. She’d gone over and was now kneeling next to the other Dryad, one hand patting her back. “Quite a few just pass out. You’re rather strong mentally to stay awake.

“I almost passed out myself, but I joined when it wasn’t... as large a grove. There are a great many trees in our grove now.”

“Seed,” whimpered Leandra and then began to thump her forehead repeatedly against the grass. “Need-seed.”

“Later. You need some time to adjust before that. I’ve had to cure a few Dryads of being a Seed Zombie. We’ve learned how to cope with our overly-strong grove. I’ll not let you turn into one,” soothed Blue, stroking her back.

Leandra let out another shaft-stiffening moan and continued to gently thud her head into the grass.

Seed Zombie? Hm.

Mouth mentioned that once. I thought she was just teasing.

I’ll have to really be more careful with my poor Dryads.

“I want to know more in the future, Blue,” requested Vince. “Dryads are... my everything. I need to know everything that happens with them.”

“If you want, dear, that’s fine,” promised Blue, still tending to Leandra. “All a Seed Zombie was, was a Dryad who just wanted sex. They didn’t do anything else other than try to bed you.

“I’m sure you remember a few aggressive Dryads who only took no from you as an answer. No one else could convince them otherwise.”

“Oh. Oh! Ha... Francine was a lot of fun. I miss her,” reflected Vince.

Francine had given him a multitude of children and had literally chased him down any time he was alone to bed him.

He’d been flattered by the attention.

I miss everyone.

Standing beside Leandra, Vince was staring out at the population of the city.

There’d been an ugly and terrible realization from them as they figured out that they were no longer being led by the baron. That they were, in fact, under the rule of a Dryad backed by what they had termed a “warlord”.

Nor did it help when they were told that the majority of the soldiers who had marched out, would never be coming back. That by and large they'd been cut down to nearly a man.

Those who had friends and family amongst the ranks were grief-stricken and understandably so. Vince, of course, allowed them their anguish.

Regardless of how they treated others, they still had family. Those who cared for them.

Even a villain would have a family, of course.

What did help the citizens, though, was that Petra and her people were spread throughout the city. Mr. White Junior had mass-produced language books for everyone.

Apparently, they could make books like that on-demand through some type of gizmo Felix had made. Vince, of course, didn't care so long as they could have everyone speaking the lingua franca of this part of the world.

Ha. Lingua franca... I wonder if they still speak French in Francia. Sounds like it's a really different world up there, too.

Not for the first time, he realized that his father had spoken in a way that didn't fit this world at all. With anecdotes and sayings that didn't really fit the area.

Lingua franca was a very good example of that.

“—to restore a fair and balanced lifestyle to you, the people. The Duchy of Galicia, under the Kingdom of Yosemite, shall not entertain either side of this futile and pointless civil war!” declared Leandra.

“They've spent long enough bleeding our people and resources dry. They murdered our noble and esteemed mother who had lived here her whole life.

“We don't even need to discuss the legend surrounding our poor tree either. Everyone knows the fate that befell her for standing up to this bloody race to the end.”

Leandra held a hand out toward the old, drooping tree that wasn't far away.

Surprisingly, Vince had noticed there was actually new growth on it this morning. Buds that could be new branches as well as a great

deal more green in it than he remembered. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it and wanted to ask Blue about it later.

"We'll not allow them to take from us any longer! They can all leave us to our own lives as we'll leave them to theirs. We have no need of them any further," stated Leandra with fire in her voice. "The laws have been posted at every gate and public place. If you cannot read them, speak to any guard or soldier you see. They know all the laws and will gladly speak with you about them.

"Beyond that, we'll be a bulwark against the madness that's going on in our homelands. This must end and we must—"

There was a sharp crack of a rifle going off, followed by the black shield of Zathira coalescing into view. She'd kept it up in front of Vince from the moment he'd gone into the public view.

If he had to guess, she and Leila had already begun questioning the baron's soul for information. They likely had found enough proof to suspect that there'd be an assassination attempt.

Leandra only flinched, then pointed forward towards the back of the crowd.

Vince followed her arm and could see the man who'd fired the shot. A simple-looking man in plainclothes who'd blend in anywhere in the city.

Save for the rather well-cared-for rifle in his hands.

"You see? They would attempt to kill us even as we promise you all freedom!" she cried, forcing the skittish populace that was about to flee, to look.

At the same moment that the crowd turned, a purple blob the size of a rock smashed into the man's head. He fell to the ground and a ghostly-after image remained standing where he'd been.

A pink lasso landed around it, a lasso that trailed all the way back to Leila.

"Bastard," she hissed, and then jerked on the pink line that led to her hand.

Shrieking, the soul sped toward her along the line.

Using her right hand, she pulled out two vials from a pouch. Her eyes flicked over both, put one back, and held out the other in front of herself.

The soul of the man was pulled into the vial which was stoppered by the pink magic that followed him in. Nodding her head, Leila stuck the vial into her bag.

After a second, she pulled out the other vial and started moving to Vince.

“—let us be pushed around!” called Leandra. She’d been speaking the entire time. “We will build walls that were torn down by those distant lords who think us nothing more than a resource! We’ll build it up bigger than it was before and force them to acknowledge our presence even as we slaughter them!”

Holding up the vial in her hand to Vince, Leila gave him a smile.

“We’ve pulled almost everything we needed from him. Not much left. We just gave it all to Petra,” explained Leila as Leandra continued. Zathira’s shield slowly boiled away, though it wasn’t actually being canceled.

Merely removed from visibility.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to know anyway and would just tell us to tell Petra,” continued the Gnome with a wide grin. “What should we do with him?”

“And by the way... did we have a three-way with Petra last night or something? I remember swallowing some of you then... it’s all a blur. I didn’t expect to wake up between you two.”

“No, no three-way. Petra just used you as a bit of a... err... you warmed me up for her, then took the rest of my attention after she was worn out. You uh... went for quite a while. Kinda like a Dryad,” admitted Vince.

It’d been impressive, to say the least.

“That’d explain why I’ve had to change my underwear several times,” complained Leila and then shook her head. “Well, at least, I’m only a little sore. Anyway, what do you want to do with him?”

Vince thought about that for a moment.

“Curse him into a boulder. Put it right at the entrance to the city,” he decided. “Call it the worry rock and invite everyone to unleash on it. Have anything they do to it be transferred to his soul. Tune it up so a four-year-old kicking the thing would be like an Ogre punting him.”

“Oh, I like that. I’ll curse the boulder as well so that it grows in durability the more people unleash on it. Fun. Leandra will like that,” finished Leila, looking at the fiery Dryad.

She had both her arms up now and was yelling at the crowd.

Her eyes were greened over and glowing brightly. Apparently, you could make a Dryad angry enough to the point that it set them off.

Neat.

Vince remained quietly at Leandra’s side for the rest of the rousing call to arms. He had no doubt most of it had been written with and for her by others.

Petra had brought people for every situation, including those who were skilled at flowery words. Those who could “fight with pens” as she’d called it.

Stepping off the quickly-erected platform, Vince wasn’t surprised when the Ogres and Trolls of his personal guard stepped in around him. They formed a bracket with their lighter Orc comrades.

He needed to get out of sight and find Petra. This would be when she’d ask him to go out on his next mission.

Because as much as she likely wanted him to stay with her, or to go with him, he was an extremely valuable asset to her. His track record with mission success was near perfect with hardly a blemish.

“Den master!” called a voice.

Vince snapped his head around and found the speaker immediately.

Not far away were Gert the Wolfman and Set the Ratkin.

Grinning, Vince went straight over to them.

“Gert! Set! It’s good to see you two,” he said and meant it. He hadn’t realized the two of them were here with him. They’d gone on many an operation with him and he’d come to trust them implicitly.

“Packmaster,” rumbled Gert, then crossed his arms in front of himself. It was a salute any Waster could theoretically perform regardless of hands, claws, or otherwise.

Set, who was perched in his saddle on Gert, performed the same gesture.

To which Vince gladly returned it to them, then grabbed Gert by the forearm.

“I wish you two would have told me you were here. I would have dug you out sooner,” chided Vince, reaching up to offer a finger to Set after shaking the Wolfman’s arm.

The Ratkin shook the finger as if it were a hand and nodded his head.

“Denmaster, we are just... pack. Gert, tell Den master. Yes?” asked Set, his small hands coming up to rub nervously at his whiskers and then run back over his head.

Despite being dressed in leather armor, wielding a spear, and having a number of confirmed kills, the Ratkin always looked nervous to Vince.

“Set is right, Packmaster. Packmaster is... our Packmaster. We are just pack,” argued Gert.

“Hush, no more of that. Did Ris come, too?” he asked, looking up and around them. He couldn’t see the fairy.

“Yes, Set’s wife is here somewhere,” said the Wolfman with a wide grin.

A... Fairy and a Ratkin?

Wow.

Alright, well, so long as they’re happy.

“Gert’s wife is here too, Denmaster. You should go speak with her sometime. Tell her what I tell her. That he’s a hero who has done more than just serve at your side,” requested the Ratkin, looking like he was getting worked up.

To which the Wolfman only shook his head.

“I will. In fact, let’s get lunch. I’m sure Petra will send me off shortly. Probably to the redwood ant colony, I’m guessing,” admitted Vince. “Though... I asked someone to find me the Ratkin in this city.

“Did that ever happen? Have you heard anything Set?”

“I... they were exterminated. All of them,” mumbled the Ratkin with a slow shake of his head. “As if they were vermin. We’ve sent a small group to find Ratkin in the wild. We will bring them here. Balance the city.”

“Good. All Yosemite cities need Ratkin and Dryads,” Vince assured them. “Now, let’s get going.”

Leading the two off, Vince was feeling pretty good about everything.

It felt like it used to when he’d first started Yosemite.

Much better leaving all the government stuff to Felix and the Elysia types. Much... much... better.

Curiously, Vince noted that Zathira was hovering in his periphery, but she was only trailing along. She wasn’t going to seemingly insert herself, but she didn’t want to get too far from him.

He imagined there was a sphere of magic around him at all times now.

I do miss my mages. They made it much easier to not worry about being shot. Need to find some.

“Master!” said Petra as she appeared above him. She was dangling off the side of a very surprised-looking Ogre. “This one must ask you to leave immediately. The colony is under duress and this one wants to use it as a way to make an alliance.

“Take this, it’s what you retrieved from this one the day previous. Speak as our leader and emissary, present them with this jar.”

Skittering down from the Ogre, she came up to his side and held a glass jar out to him. It was indeed the same one he’d used to milk her.

“This one begs her master to bring the colony into our domain. Either through... either through slaughtering the queen and raising up a princess, or simply through diplomacy. This one must deeply beg her master to make sure it happens.

“Otherwise, the food supplies will become an issue and very quickly.”

“Of course, General Petra. You’re our guide in this and I respect and follow your orders,” Vince murmured and bowed his head to her, taking the jar.

I guess I don’t get a moment after all.

Chapter 16

Moving at a distance-eating jog, Vince moved with as much conservation of energy as he could. He didn't exaggerate his stride or let his arms windmill. His steps were always the exact same length, or at least, as much as he could manage, considering they were running across open terrain.

They had gone southwest since the moment Petra had dispatched them.

There was a body of water ahead of them that the colony was using as their source of drinking water. Otherwise, they were deeply entrenched in the area.

Well-known to the settlements around and generally left alone.

Nonetheless, the lords of Espana and their despot had made several overtures to incorporate them. They had all been declined, though politely.

The government had responded by sending armies at them. Which only ended up grinding out a number of deaths on both sides, gaining nothing, and losing resources.

Both sides were quick to sign a white peace and go back to the stalemate they had developed.

Or at least, that'd been the case on paper.

One of the reasons that Petra was sending him off so rapidly was that the baron had sent some troops to reinforce an engagement down this way. The Prime Minister—or so the title the baron had ascribed to the man— had sent troops to handle the ant colony.

Without handling them directly.

They were trying to destroy the colony without engaging it directly.

Attempting to cause floods in the nest, dump poison into it, and lure other predators into the area. Unfortunately for the colony, the last of those tactics had actually yielded results.

Land Wyrms—essentially Dragons without wings—were now preying on the colony. They attacked often in small groups.

They would eat a good number of the ants, then retreat to their den. The Prime Minister's people had originally led them here from

the northern border and all the way down to the colony.

Though, I do wonder what they're going to do when the Wyrms run out of ants to eat. Or if they suddenly lose their appetite for ants.

That or they considered it and just didn't care.

"Up ahead!" called out Sam, swishing by him and then landing on his back. She'd found a way to hang onto his armor that supported her and didn't bother him. "Hi there, handsome. Going my way? I'm sure I can pay my way if you let me join your little caravan, though I'm short on coin. Whatever shall I do, mister big bad scary ranger?"

Vince nearly tripped over himself and had to take an extra step to smooth out his gait.

"That was terrible," laughed Blue from beside him. "But it worked, so I can't really fault it."

"Right? I'm really getting a handle on this big lug of mine," crowed Sam while reaching up with one hand to run it through the back of his hair. With how big she was, her little hanging position likely wouldn't work on anyone other than Vince. "No one actually pursues him. You Dryads make a show of it and then just fall to pieces and stick your rear end in the air. The Dragons do it, too."

"They're up ahead?" growled Vince, wanting to change the subject.

"Yes. Two Wyrms. They look like Greens, but I'm not sure. They're just... beasts... when compared to Dragons," Sam noted. "It looks like there were two more, but they've already left. There are also a lot of dead ants. Most of them have clearly been eaten at but not all of them.

"Probably losses from fighting the Wyrms, but couldn't be devoured due to... well... fighting."

With a nod of his head, Vince acknowledged that. It sounded about right.

"I want one," declared Elizabeth, running along his right side. She was wearing the same greatcoat as she always did. Right now, she was wearing it correctly and it was buttoned from neck to knees. It covered her quite well, unfortunately.

"Fine," acquiesced Vince. "For the other, I—"

“Zath and I want to try our hand at it. Supposedly, a Land Wyrms is immune to magic. As well as elemental attacks and even venom,” requested Leila. “No one said anything about curses or death magic.”

“Okay. I’m going to step in the moment I think it needs to happen. Red will be my second,” commanded Vince.

“I’ll try to blind it with Elizabeth,” added Sam. Across her back was her ever-present pack. It also had a medium-sized spear for her attached to it. Petra had been working on giving her some basic instruction with it.

Glancing over, it looked like the Dragon wanted to argue with that, but she didn’t. For whatever reason, it felt like she wanted to prove herself by fighting the Land Wyrms on its own.

Maybe her Dragon is getting bitchy.

Taylor was a lot easier to handle and far less prickly after I told her I wanted her to sit in my vault. Maybe I could throw that at her?

I mean, I know I’m essentially proposing but... no, we’ll hang onto that. Not yet.

Too soon.

Much closer than he expected it to, the battlelines resolved themselves.

They were running through a slight depression one moment, and then over a rise that he didn’t even realize they were on. Once they passed over it, within seconds, everything was suddenly visible.

A line of ant soldiers had spread out amongst two different Land Wyrms. They were working with spears, shields, and swords to push them away from what was likely the entrance to the colony.

“Blue, see if you can’t go save a few,” he commanded and began peeling off to the side. There was a group of ants who looked to be treating injured comrades.

“Of course!” Blue said happily and began heading off that way. Red and Vince were moving to the space between the wounded and where the battle was raging.

“Red thinks that they must defend. If the Land Wyrms gets into their hive... it would be the end. If Red were a predator, she would

want to get into the nest to eat the young,” growled the Beastkin, running along beside him on all fours.

“True. I’d do the same,” Vince concurred.

The ants defending the entrance made more sense now.

By defending out here, they could gang up on a Land Wurm and fight it more cleanly. If it managed to get into the hive, there’d be a lot fewer ants who could engage it at a time.

Elizabeth had stripped off her coat and let it fly off her, running nude straight at the Wurm now. Roaring, she leapt into the air and transformed into her glowing, shimmering Draconic self.

With a few flaps of her wings, she gained speed and momentum. Her legs drew up close to her body as she sped right toward the target.

The Wurm had noticed her and had given up on the ant it was trying to corner. Instead, it focused on Elizabeth and her approach.

Slamming into it at full speed, Elizabeth knocked it backward and tipped it over. It was sent rolling sideways.

It’d managed to grab ahold of her as she struck and had sunk its teeth into her upper shoulder. Rolling her along with it as it tumbled across the ground.

Damnit. She wanted to get this done so quickly that she put herself in harm’s way.

I guess this is the difference between a mature Dragon like Taylor and an inexperienced one, like Elizabeth.

Vince ran up to the ants as they watched the Dragon and Wurm roll around on the ground. He unsheathed his sword and remained still, watching, ready to intercede.

“Red thinks she rushed it,” muttered Red as she came to squat next to him.

“She did,” agreed Vince.

Zathira and Leila had already moved toward the second one. They were launching spells at the beast, causing it to be considerably more distracted than it had been. While the magic didn’t seem to be doing much to it, it was doing just enough to break its focus.

The ants were quickly working to gain ground and weaken the monster. Spears and swords were used to their best effect when the big Wyrms' head had turned to look away from them.

Sam came over then, unable to do anything given the way Elizabeth had engaged with the enemy. For one reason or another, the Dragon maiden had let her emotions get the better of her.

Darting in, Sam planted her spear right in the Wyrms' eye and slipped across the bridge of its nose, moving to the other side as it reflexively jerked away.

She ended up being forcefully ejected with the motion and it gave her a great deal of space to get away from the Wyrms. Which, apparently, had been her goal.

Flipping over in midair, she spun off and began to circle around behind the big creature.

Laughing, Red gave her head a shake, making her slightly wind-blown hair tremble.

"Red likes Sam a lot. Sam is becoming a good hunter," complimented Red.

Looking back to Elizabeth, Vince saw that she'd managed to break free of the Wyrms' grasp, but there was a sizable bite left on her upper arm. One that was bathing her arm in blood down to her elbow.

Her wing also looked like it was slightly bent at a weird angle.

Probably when she slammed into it. Didn't tuck her wings in soon enough.

The Wyrms had wounds on it as well, but it didn't seem any worse than Elizabeth. The two large beasts were warily eyeing one another.

Without warning, the Wyrms lashed out and snatched up a dead ant. Crunching it up in its jaws, it began running off, quickly distancing itself from Elizabeth.

The Dragon was simply not able to catch it on the ground, given her wounded arm. Nor could she pursue by air if her wing was damaged.

"Red, don't belittle Elizabeth when she comes back," requested Vince.

“Huh? Red wouldn’t. Red... has made mistakes. Red is likely the reason the Dryads were killed,” whispered the Beastkin with a shake of her head. “Red makes many mistakes, but is learning. Learning from each.

“Red will be the perfect wife to you as a huntress. Bringer the ranger, Red the huntress. We will roam the wastes together.

“Until then, Red has much to learn and will... will strive to learn from her foolish actions. Red will make amends to the poor Dryads when they come back.”

A roar to the side caught Vince’s attention.

The other Wurm was currently trying to back away from the noose of ants who’d encircled it. Sam kept at its face, trying to get the other eye, while Leila and Zathira continued to distract and torment it.

Their magic had to be doing something to it, given that it was seemingly trying to avoid the spells. It was more than willing to dodge into ants, rather than be struck by the spellwork of the two.

The ants grew bold and began to climb up the sides and back of the Wurm. Several of them went straight for its head and attacked it at the base of its neck.

“Identify yourselves to us!” demanded a voice from behind him. The language was, of course, Spanish.

Looking over his shoulder, Vince saw a group of ants standing there and watching him with suspicious eyes.

Looking at them closely, he saw that they were as different from Petra as he was from Leila.

They shared a similar body type as Petra, but they were all considerably smaller. Less in both stature and in size.

Where Petra could reach up to an incredible height when she pushed herself up, these ants looked like they’d top out at six feet.

They had smaller proportions to their bodies that made them look a bit like late teenagers on the verge of turning twenty. A body that wasn’t quite fully developed yet, but not far off.

Their eyes were a bit bigger, and their antennae were slimmer and far more delicate-looking. Surprisingly, they also seemed to run the full range of hair and eye colors.

The armor they were wearing appeared to be handmade out of metallic ores. None of them wore armor that looked like it was made of fallen companions and foes. Nor were their weapons anything special either.

Just how unique were the Soldier-ants in my neck of the woods? Petra seems... very different.

From what he could tell, those in front of him were all male.

“We asked you who you were,” stated another ant.

“Answer us, who are you to our colony?” asked a third.

Huh. No ‘this one’ but a community-wide royal we? Curious.

“I’m Vince, the Lord of Yosemite. My duchess was just installed in Coruna,” explained Vince. “And I’ve come to speak with the redwood ant colony.”

Collective heads were turned to one another, then back to him.

“Uh... take me to your leader?” he tried instead.

Once again, the heads came together and then looked back at him.

“We will convey your wish to our queen and us,” said one of the ants.

“Yeah,” Vince murmured, then looked to one side. Blue had abandoned her efforts with the ants and was now tending to Elizabeth who wasn’t far behind him.

Elizabeth was naked and looked very downtrodden. Her great coat was held between her hands as she stared at the grass in front of herself.

She did glance up once and caught him watching her. Her face blushed a deep scarlet and her eyes whipped back down.

He knew for a fact that she wasn’t ashamed of her nakedness, but her poor combat prowess in this fight. She’d fought a Wurm, that’d already been fighting before she arrived, to a draw.

One could even argue that perhaps she lost, all things considered.

Zathira and Leila were on their way back to him, chatting happily with one another. Sam was fluttering between them, looking quite proud of herself.

“You three did well,” said Vince in English. He saw no reason to give away information if he didn’t have to. The ants could wonder at what he was saying.

“Thank you!” squeaked Sam, and promptly sparked off toward him like a lightning bolt. She fluttered directly in front of him, her arms dangling down in front of herself and holding her spear. She was grinning at him and looking rather sprightly and cute. “Say it again! Say it again and I’ll use my mouth to show you how appreciative I am. My tongue... my lips. Say it again, Vince.”

Blinking, Vince took a breath and then grinned.

“You three did well, and you came at that Wyrms in a very impressive way, Sam,” he got out, suddenly wanting very much to get some alone time with Sam.

“Well! What can I do other than carry out with my promise,” announced the Fae. She lifted up a hand and pointed to her mouth. “I’m very appreciative of your praise, Vince. Thank you so much for noticing my efforts. I simply cannot begin to express how much it means to me.

“There, I showed how with my mouth. I made sure to emphasize it particularly well and enunciated it perfectly with my lips and tongue.”

“You’re terrible,” Leila got out with a bout of laughter.

“Ah, my poor Grove-husband. I’ll take care of you later. I’m not Sam but I’m sure I can hit any needs you have,” promised Blue.

Sam watched him with a playful smile and her tongue stuck out between her teeth. Her eyes were glowing with mirth.

She made a small spin in the air, stashed her spear into its place, and darted in next to him.

“Fret not, I’ll give you everything in time. We’re just in the playful, flirting, dating stage,” she promised and then bit his ear rather roughly. Only to zoom away before he could grab her.

Slipping away, she went over and landed on Zathira’s coils. Crossing one leg over the other, she watched Vince imperiously.

Grinning at the situation, Vince shook his head and looked back at the ants. They were all staring at him in a similar way. They didn’t look very bright and had a hollowness to them.

As if they really were just drones and little better.

Actually... maybe that's exactly what it is.

Petra, for better or worse, never was part of the collective. Not in the same way.

Maybe even the way she speaks identifies her as that. A special Soldier-ant who the world almost lost.

“Are there any weird ants in your colony?” asked Vince to the closest ant. “Any of the royal progeny speak a bit oddly. A little strangely.

“Like they weren’t as well suited to the colony maybe? Like they didn’t quite belong, but they did because they were an ant?”

“We don’t know?” said two ants at the same time as a third simply shook their head. “We are only us and have no knowledge of the we that is the royal family.”

Right.

Drones.

“Ah, hello?” called a feminine voice.

Looking at the speaker, Vince found a redwood ant sticking up from the burrow. She looked just like all the other ants, though she had the upper body of a woman, rather than a man.

“Oh, would you be the guests come to see us?” asked the woman with a warm smile. She appeared to be older now that he could see her more closely. Perhaps in her late forties, with brown hair that was starting to grey at the temples.

There were lines at her eyes and mouth that spoke of smiles, laughter, and care.

“Indeed. My name is Vince. I’ve come to speak with your queen,” Vince summarized. “I’d like to speak to her about our two countries.”

And bring you all into the fold.

Either through murdering your queen and installing a princess, or simply talking the queen into it.

“Wonderful! We welcome you, of course. There are so few people who come to see us with kindness. We’ve been at war for so long,” the woman prattled amicably. “Oh, don’t let us stall you. We should bring you down to see our daughter. We’re waiting for you, of course.

“Don’t mind the soldiers. The we of their caste have work to do and we would speak to you otherwise.”

Suddenly, I miss the way Petra talks.

This is annoying already.

Chapter 17

Vince entered an interesting antechamber. The walls were carved and smoothed out perfectly. Everything was clean and smoothed over where there was no decoration. Yet the parts that were carved were done so finely.

As if someone had spent hours with a small infinitely sharp chisel knocking out tiny chips. Inch by inch, section by section, meticulously worked.

“Seems like a lot of time invested,” grumbled Vince, lifting a hand and running his fingers over an image of what looked like a winged Waster ant.

*Their queen arriving here, maybe? Birth of this colony?
Makes me curious where she came from. Likely couldn't have traveled too far, I imagine.*

“Thank you so much for waiting for us,” called a voice from inside the room beyond where they were. There was no door that blocked them, though there was a curtain that'd been hung.

It was split in the middle and would allow someone to move easily between the two halves of the fabric.

From what Vince knew of colonies, they didn't have the same views on privacy that other races did. The curtain was there entirely for non-ant visitors, which was abnormal all on its own.

Vince took that as a request to join the queen.

Moving forward, he simply passed through the slit in the curtain.

Stepping into the area beyond, he found it was very similar to the one he'd just left. The walls were etched and carved with what looked like stories.

A visual history of the colony worked into the bedrock itself.

“We greet the visitors from outside,” said the same voice as earlier.

Following the sound of it, Vince saw an unusually large, winged, and decidedly unhappy-looking ant-queen. Her upper body, face, arms, and stomach were all much larger than the ants he'd seen so far.

This Queen would easily be larger than Petra, in fact. Though her abdomen was also considerably larger, as well. What she gained in size and strength, she likely lost in speed and agility.

She was resting upon a stone plinth that likely served as her bed, throne, and resting place all at the same time. Sweat rolled down her face and she looked uncomfortable and frustrated.

“Forgive us, as we’re in the middle of an egg-laying cycle. We must-nnggh-must replenish our losses. Our colony is dwindling faster than I can replace them,” apologized the queen-ant.

Right, we’ll make this quick then and get out of her way.

“I’ll be direct then, your majesty,” said Vince. He’d been disarmed by several large Soldier-ant versions of this ant colony earlier. They hadn’t been as large as Petra, though were larger than the other castes.

Vince was still curious where those soldiers were and if the workers, or drones, had been fighting the Wyrms on their own.

“I’ve come to offer you the chance to swear fealty to me,” he said, getting straight to the point. “I’m going to take over this country and crush it beneath my boot heel.

“They’ve offended me at a level that I simply won’t allow. So they all have to go. There won’t be anything left of them once I get my way.”

The queen’s brow creased and she let out a low breath. Her face was bunched up in pain and visible discomfort.

“And who are you to we?” asked the queen, her head tilting to one side.

“King of Yosemite, Vincent Campbell,” Vince declared firmly. Moving forward, he held up the jar of venom and most definitely pheromones that Petra had given him. “This is my ant-queen. A Soldier-ant of the North American wastes.

“She has given me young and leads my forces in combat. She can nearly compete at a level with larger Dragons, though can easily defeat a Red Dragon if she could catch it while landed.”

The queen’s eyes had moved from Vince’s face and to the jar in his hand.

A slack-faced drone scuttled over and took the jar from him without an order from the queen. It opened the jar and then quickly moved over to the queen, holding it up to her.

“I would have you as my duchess. Just as I installed a Dryad as my duchess in the city of Coruna. You would be the duchess of the surrounding lands, towns, and villages and be my vassal. You would follow the laws and rules of Yosemite, though I can promise you that they are most... suitable... to living with mixed races,” stated Vince. “I would owe you security and protection, while you would owe me soldiers, taxes, and obedience.”

The queen had taken the jar at this point and lowered her head down over it. Her antenna bent delicately toward it, recoiled, then slowly eased back down again. She didn't seem to be interested in smelling it, but was clearly scenting it in a way only an ant would.

“Your queen promises... death, if we do not obey,” murmured the queen with a grimace and a shake of her head. “This is very potent venom. We of this colony have a stinger but no venom of this potency, though we know of other colonies that do. They are most... aggressive, and combative.”

“We can't leave anyone behind that could harm our colony. Our kingdom,” Vince explained with a shrug of his shoulders. “You may serve as my duchess and receive my protection, or perish as my enemy along with those who have been trying to kill your colony.

“I will sweep this land free of any who oppose me. Any who would harm a race as carefree as Dryads need not be suffered.”

He hadn't intended it, but he felt like the last part of his answer had come out in a growl. The very idea of what'd been done to the poor Dryads still unnerved him. It kept his anger hot and fresh in his guts like a coal that'd been swallowed.

The queen's eyes had moved back to him as he spoke, even as her antenna dipped all the way down to the point that they might touch the contents of the jar.

“We will submit to you and your queen,” murmured the ant-queen and then let the jar come down. “Though we have one condition beyond simply killing the Wyrms. They will likely return tomorrow with their full brood.

“That other condition is that you will take our daughter with you as an envoy.

“Our daughter was... damaged in her youth. She cannot become a queen, though she is yet a queen. We would have her taken in by you as an envoy to protect her life.”

Ah... she can't remain here as she's not the queen, but she would have queen-like instincts, and others would see her as one.

Sending her out in the wastes alone would condemn her in the same way Petra was nearly sentenced to death. I understand.

“I will agree to this. She can go to Coruna and—”

“Is that where you would be, our king?” inquired the queen, interrupting him.

“Ah, no. I'll be in the field. I will most likely need to go see where those troops went that led the Wyrms here,” admitted Vince.

“That is unacceptable. She will remain with you as our envoy. She will not be a hindrance,” promised the queen, her face bunching up in sweat and pain. “As she could not be a queen, she was trained in the caste of soldiers. The we of them respects her for her ability.”

“Fine. I'd rather have her go to where my queen is though. My Soldier-ant queen,” countered Vince.

That gave the queen pause. A look of thoughtful introspection flickered across her face.

A small nod was all she did afterward.

“We will ask our daughter to go to Coruna to speak with the queen of our colony. It would do well for our we to meet and understand the queen,” replied the ant-queen. “We are named Redata. Our daughter is Cristina.”

“Great. Okay,” accepted Vince with a nod of his head. “I'm going to take my group above and wait for the Wyrms and exterminate them. Then I'll be leaving to find the soldiers who caused this... then probably take care of all that as well.”

“We thank our king. The we of the royal caste shall perform our duties perfectly for Yosemite. We will summon our daughter and send her topside. You must—”

The ant-queen let out a low groan. Turning away from him, she raised herself up, then bent forward. At the same time, her abdomen

swung out beneath her and pointed before her.

Her stinger shot forward and she made a curious thrusting motion with it. Stabbing nothing but the air itself.

Several drones scurried over and gathered up around her, blocking Vince from the view of what was happening.

Seconds ticked by and the queen let out several low groans, only to relax after one particularly loud one.

All the drones moved away from her quickly. In their arms were soft white ant eggs. Vince saw at least eight or nine before they were gone from view.

Panting, the queen looked back at him and let out a slow and low breath.

“We apologize to our king. We must birth more soldiers for our colony. For our kingdom, now, we suppose,” mumbled the ant-queen. Her face had already started to show pain again. “We will lay another six groupings today and then rest. We will depend on our king to eliminate the Wyrms.”

Vince nodded his head, then turned away from the queen. There was nothing more to be said.

“They shoot liquid from their... rear,” drawled Sam. “Now, I’ve heard of squirting from Blue. Also, that you apparently have turned a number of your Dryads so inside out that they tend to do that, but this seems a bit much.

“The ground looks like it’s melting. Almost like it’s... acid.”

She was hanging on his back, but her head was turned. She was watching several large ant-soldiers being trained off to one side by drones.

From what he could gather, the Wyrms had attacked so often, and so determinedly, that they’d wiped out the majority of the original Soldier-ants. Their replacements were all fresh and with little to no training.

We arrived just in time.

“It isn’t like acid, it is acid,” countered Leila from where she sat next to Vince. She’d been quietly working on building several new focuses. “They’re redwood ants. They can shoot acid a short distance.

“It isn’t as powerful as they’d want, but it’s more than enough to blind anything it strikes. What do you think they made all those beautiful etchings with?”

“Oh. Oh, they use the acid to eat at the rock. Got it. Huh, that’s rather curious,” murmured Vince. He had a feeling that the Wyrms were coming.

Like two cats realizing they’d both entered the same room.

Need to make sure Sam doesn’t get involved this time. While she did really well this time, she could easily get caught up in magic being thrown about.

Reaching up, he grabbed Sam around the throat. Right where she’d tell him to if he did it.

“Oh? Is it time already? Going to fill me up so I can’t argue about it?” asked Sam in a sultry voice. “Careful, Vince. I might go full bratty on you and you’ll have to deal with it. Now, remember to squeeze just a bit so I can get diz— ahhhn!”

Vince had opened up his power source and tried to drop it into Sam in one go. He did comply though, and gently curled his fingers around her neck with just a smidgen of force.

Lifting her up from his back, he grabbed her side with his other hand, even as he kept filling her up. Laying her down on the grass next to Leila, he continued to hold onto her.

Gazing up at him with wide eyes and a flushed face, Sam’s mouth hung open. Her brows were partly furrowed and she was letting out little whimpering moans now.

Damnit, I can’t tell if she’s doing this to get me going or if it really does excite her now.

Sam stuck her tongue out and ran it along her upper lip, then lower lip, and gently bit down on it afterward. Moaning loudly at him, she pushed her hips up at him, pressing her breasts up on either side of his forearm.

Fuck.

Thankfully, the grove cut him off at that moment and Vince stood up, releasing the Fae.

Leaving her as a puddle of happy goo next to the Gnome, he started off at a walk.

In a single second, Red had joined him on all fours along with Elizabeth who was already pulling off her greatcoat. The other two predators had clearly noticed the change or felt it as well.

Moments later, Blue, Leila, and Zathira joined in. Flanking him on the other side.

“You all take the little ones,” Vince commanded.

“Little ones?” asked Blue. She’d pulled out her pistol and held it in her dominant hand. Apparently, she’d be operating as support completely this time.

To be fair, she isn’t quite suited to fighting a Wurm and her powers are more suited to assistance.

“Two Wurms of the same size from yesterday,” answered Elizabeth. Her eyes were better than his. He could only feel that there was a greater presence coming their way, not see them. “There is a third that is... much larger. Perhaps a parent?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Gonna kill it, eat its heart. I expect you to kill the other two,” commanded Vince. “Work together with everyone and make it happen. Blue’s in charge.

“Red, assist them in my place. I’ll be too busy to help them.”

“Yes. That’s not a problem. Red will do that. Red will protect our Grove-wife,” growled the Beastkin and promptly smacked her hip into his side, only to then turn and move over to Blue. She practically curled her tail around the Dryad protectively.

“Blue?” asked Elizabeth. “I’m much stronger than her. I should lead.”

“You’re certainly stronger, but there are other reasons,” said Vince charitably. He didn’t want to call her to count here and now. It wasn’t the place or time.

“I’ll handle one myself,” hissed the Dragon and then started off to the side. She morphed into her shining Dragon form and didn’t look his way.

“From stuttering and not wanting to talk to me, to arguing and being headstrong. I’m going to have to break one of her horns off or something,” muttered Vince.

He didn’t have the time or luxury of dealing with her right now. Blue wasn’t someone who could fight a Dragon or a Wyrms, but she could easily direct a battle for them. Make changes on the fly and provide them with a course of action.

“Her Dragon is combative. It wasn’t fully subdued,” advised Leila.

Sneering with a roll of his eyes, Vince pivoted and went off at a run. Straight at Elizabeth.

There was no hiding his approach and the Dragon had seen him coming. She squared up with him at his approach and pulled her head back.

Expecting the incoming bite, Vince welcomed it. This would make it all the easier.

Snapping out at him, Elizabeth’s tooth-lined mouth came for him.

Vince stuck his left hand up a nostril as the other reached up and snatched the end of her horn. Jerking on it while pulling at the inside of her nose, Vince upturned her head.

Just as he’d done to her previously, he flipped her head over and buried her horns in the earth. This time, he wasn’t as gentle with her.

Releasing her horn and lifting up his fist, he slammed it down onto the top of her head. There was a loud hollow conk noise, followed by Elizabeth groaning.

“Listen here, you scaly idiot,” Vince said and got down on one knee in front of her glittering eye. It was fully focused on him now.

His left hand was still up her nose in what he imagined was uncomfortable and painful.

“If you ever disobey me again, I’m going to cut your damn chest open and eat your heart. I’ve tolerated your nonsense up to this point because you were obedient, if disrespectful,” he threatened while staring into her eye. “Now you’re being disrespectful and disobedient, and I’m done with it.

“Do you understand me, Maiden Elizabeth? Because at this point, you’re not qualified to lead my wing. You’re a bumbling child

who thinks she's an adult. If Taylor were here, she'd have already killed you."

Vince pulled his arm back and slugged her in the skull again. Once more the wood-on-wood noise was quite audible.

"Ow," whined Elizabeth. "I'm sorry, N-N-Nest-mate. I apologize and w-wish to be given a chance I'm n-not worthy of."

"How can I be your Nest-mate if you don't even listen? Hm?" he asked in a deathly whisper.

"I w-will listen. I'm sorry. I... just... I want... I want to kill you and eat you but there's another part that... that w-wants to beg you to ask me to get into your bed and I don't know what to do and everything is kind of scary and—"

Elizabeth ran out of air and took in a gasping breath.

Ah... she's still very young.

There are no other Dragons here to advise her on what's happening.

Got it.

"Then do what I damn well tell you. Do you hear me, Maiden Elizabeth? Now I wish I'd brought Ramona here. She could have advised you about this better than Taylor," Vince snapped off sharply. "Now go apologize to Blue, ask her for her forgiveness, and do what she fucking tells you. Then you can talk to her about what you're feeling, and then I'll talk with both of you after that."

Retrieving his arm from her nose, he shook off what looked a lot like snot. Shaking his head, he started moving to catch up to the others.

"Y-yes, Nest-mate Vince," Elizabeth whined, lifting her head off the grass. She slunk away from him and crept over to where Blue stood. Her head was held very low to the ground.

Angry, frustrated, and brimming with a need to punch things, Vince sprinted ahead. Running straight at the three Wyrms.

The largest one in the middle was his target and destination.

Around the edges of his vision, he could feel his rage creeping in. His vision started to tunnel in on the large Wyrms, even as the periphery of his vision became black and a subtle red tint started to obscure his view.

His heart pounded in his chest and a vein in his temple throbbed in time with the beat.

Stupid, fucking bullshit that this is! I should be at home playing with my kids, not dealing with this shit!

Getting angrier by the second, Vince felt his feet carrying him further and farther with every step. Propelling him at an impossible speed that made him feel like a bullet shooting from a rifle.

The entirety of his world was hard focused on the massive Land Wyrms.

Now that he was so close to it, he could easily see it was identical to the ones he'd seen previously, just much bigger.

"Imma kill you and fucking eat you!" screamed Vince as his mind boiled over. He lost all sense of reason and his mind more or less shut off the thinking parts.

Rushing headlong at the monster, Vince took a step to the side and ducked low a second before the creature's massive tail came at him. The incredible amount of air it displaced made his hair ruffle and his clothes flutter against him.

Turning hard inward, Vince started toward the creature's chest and stomach. Unsheathing his sword, he jumped at the beast.

Slamming it home into its shoulder with the blade pointing toward the sky, Vince jerked upon the blade. He put so much force into it that a part of his mind noted that he could have broken the weapon that way as his feet went upward and over his head.

He'd held onto the hilt so that he was forcefully flipped upward.

Releasing the hilt, he landed atop the spot where the monster's neck met its shoulders. Pulling his arm back, he blasted his fist down into the base of the Wyrms' neck.

There was a hideous crunch that sounded like a tree trunk breaking in half in a monstrous wind. Before the Wyrms could react, Vince put his hands together and drilled them into the same spot.

The Wyrms' neck bent grotesquely, and it fell forward, its neck at a strange ninety-degree angle from its body now.

Growling, Vince scabbled across the monster's shoulder to its side. Jerking his blade free as he went, he slashed at its quivering chest with the blade.

With a wordless shout, he carved a massive hunk out of the side of the Wurm. Many of its ribs broke and shattered apart with the blow.

Vince could see what he wanted just behind the lungs. Crawling partway into the beast's chest, he slashed out with his sword.

Its heart fell away with a splat as it rolled across its other organs. Blood began to spray and flow in every direction even as he grabbed the boulder-sized treat.

Sitting down on the leg of the creature as a river of blood rushed from the corpse, he took a giant bite from the pulsating heart.

Vince stared at nothing and enjoyed his meal.

Chapter 18

“Red wants to sit with you, move over,” grumbled the Beastkin.

Blinking, Vince felt like he'd just woke up. Looking around, he found he was sitting on the side of the Wurm. His hands were covered in blood and bits of what looked like red meat.

Red stood in front of him with a massive chunk of heart from what was probably one of the other Wurms.

Shifting to one side, he made room for her.

“Red thanks her husband,” she said and sat down right next to him. She leaned in and started eating from the lightly-quivering heart. “Mm, gritty, but good. Reminds Red of the Dragon you shared with her, Bringer.”

Nodding his head, Vince really didn't know what to say.

He still felt like he was waking up from a dream.

The last thing he truly remembered was yelling at Elizabeth.

Looking behind himself, he checked to make sure he wasn't sitting on the Dragon. Finding it to be the large Wurm, he checked his surroundings instead.

The other two Wurms were dead as well.

Leila and Zathira looked to be prodding at two souls that were held up before the Gnome. Likely both Wurms.

Elizabeth was laid out on her belly next to Blue and seemed to be conversing with the Dryad. She didn't look wounded but was still cowed from Vince yelling at her.

Not too far away was a group of ants. They were eyeing the corpses with what Vince could only assume was disbelief.

Coughing, Vince shifted around where he sat. His sword lay on the grass not far away. He'd apparently dropped it after getting what he assumed he ate.

The heart of the Wurm.

“Red wishes you were drunk from the heart and would mate with her. Caroline said you practically savaged her all night long after you ate a Dragon heart,” complained Red, chewing loudly. “Red thinks she's a bit like the Dryads. Wants you to show your interest in her physically. Red just likes mating.”

With a sniff, Vince nodded his head and then coughed again.

“I enjoy doing it with you too, Red,” Vince confided. An odd thought popped into his head then about the redwood ants. “So I wouldn’t worry about it. Wyrms heart just wasn’t as strong as a Dragon’s. Probably the lack of magic.

“Though... hey... if you get a chance, think you can find a few ant corpses and pull out their venom gland? I want to eat a few and see if I can’t get anything from them. You manage to do it without getting caught, you and I can... mate a few times tonight.”

“Oh? Okay. Red can do that. You will include our Grove-wife, though, Bringer. Red must take care of her needs. Red is responsible for Blue,” asserted the Beastkin with a nod of her head. Blood dripped down her chin and splattered onto the dead Wyrms beneath them.

She was eating carefully which was interesting to watch.

“Red doesn’t want to make Blue wash her armor. Red is trying to be a good wife to Blue,” explained Red, apparently catching the way he was watching her. “Red is trying to be a better wife for you and Blue, both.”

Leaning forward again, Red took a bite out of the heart.

She’d actually managed to not get her armor, hair, or sleeves bloody. Only her hands and face were.

“Doing good, Red. I love having you as a wife,” Vince promised. “Now... we need to get going. Time to track down the soldiers who brought the Wyrms here. They might try again.”

“Our wife sent Sam to investigate. She will report to Blue, then to Fes Petra,” Red answered. “Our wife is impressive. Red loves Blue very much.”

Turning his gaze on the Dryad in question, he found she was closer, but still some distance away. She was blushing, smiling, and gave him a small wave with her hand.

It was obvious she’d heard it all despite the distance. Dryads had fairly good hearing.

Red apparently saw it, too.

“Red loves you, Blue!” shouted the Cursed One at the Dryad, waving her arm energetically at her. “You’re an impressive wife to

Bringer and Red!”

Blue became a sheet of red parchment now and her eyes started to glow. Turning, she ducked her head down and walked toward Leila.

Then paused and looked back at them.

“I love you both, too!” called Blue before moving again. Head down low, she moved quickly to Leila and Zathira.

“Mm. Blue is so good to us, Bringer,” Red said, nodding her head a few times. “Red thinks we should buy her a gift. She treats us well.”

We should. She does treat us well.

“Uhm, N-Nest-mate?”

Glancing at the Dragon who’d approached him, he found she was nude and in her human form. She held up a Wyrms heart to him.

“M-may I present you with the heart of my kill, Nest-m-mate?” asked Elizabeth. “I k-killed it on my own, but Blue told me how to do it. I wanted to give it to you as an apology.”

Vince felt full to the point of being sick.

“Red thinks you might be a good wife to Bringer, too. Offering a meal is how Bringer proposed to Red. Red is now feeling nostalgic,” said the Beastkin, eyeing Elizabeth with a wide smile. “As a senior wife to you, you should get in his bed soon. You smell like Taylor does now which means you’re ready. Red made the mistake of waiting too long to do it. Don’t be like stupid Red, younger wife.”

Even though he didn’t want to, Vince took the heart from Elizabeth.

Her eyes were sparkling. Watching him intently now.

Something had changed since he yelled at her.

Wondering if he’d throw up, Vince started to eat the heart. If he wanted her to respect him as the head of a Dragon wing, he had to meet a few expectations of hers.

Especially after what Red said. If I don’t accept it, that’d just send Elizabeth into a spiral.

Ugh.

So full.

“Thank you, Nest-mate,” Elizabeth said with small rapid nods of her head as he ate. A small smile spread across her face. “Please... please address me as Beth, going forward. Only my mom ever called me Elizabeth.”

Nodding his head in return as he chewed, Vince hoped Elizabeth would wander off so he could get rid of the rest of this heart.

Standing at the large wooden gate to the fort, Vince waited with his pistol in hand. They were in cover, hunkered down behind several boulders that Zathira and Vince had moved over.

Sam had found the garrison that'd dispatched the troops to lead the Wyrms to the colony. It was a stone fort that'd been several days away on foot to the east.

They'd traveled a long way dragging those Wyrms along behind them. From a garrison that supported a city by the name of Bilbao.

It was part of a chain of cities that ran from the northern edge of the country on the coast, down and to the southeast, stretching to a city named Barcelona. A wide line of fortresses, garrisons, checkpoints, and patrols.

Anything north of those cities was likely beasts from the Pyrenees mountains.

A wild no-man's land that no one dared cross except for along the old roadways that ran along the coasts on either end.

Elizabeth let out a loud roar and once more bathed the interior of the garrison with fire. The screams of the burning were loud in the quiet afterward.

Blue squeezed off a few rounds as several soldiers rushed toward them. She dropped two while the third had its head removed by Zathira.

Her black arrow had penetrated his forehead and taken most of the skull with it.

“Good shot, little miss sexy Dryad,” congratulated Vince. “You've gotten quite good at that. I've been meaning to ask about that weapon, as well. That a custom job from my dear brother?”

“Oh! Yes. He gave all of your Dryad wives one, along with matching magazines that we fill just like yours. He said without his Dryads, he wouldn’t be where he is,” confessed Blue with a happy giggle. “He even engraved all our names into each one and a cute little tree. We were all rather grateful. I never for a moment thought that the best thing to happen to my entire race would be meeting the Campbells.”

“Likewise, dear,” Vince responded and sighted his pistol on a soldier who was squirming around on the ground. Pulling the trigger once, he watched the man’s head jerk to the side and go still.

“Dryads are the foundation of my very existence. Need them all.”

Vince noticed Zathira was looking at him over Blue’s head now.

He found her predation of him hadn’t lessened at all. She continued to stalk him, yet nothing further had happened.

Amusingly, at least to him, he found she’d put herself in a position where he could offer to assist her with her venom. Or at least, a conversation that ended with her bringing up her venomous tendencies.

Sparing her only a glance, Vince focused back on the fort.

They were really only holding the gate so that Leila could drop a hell-portal on top of them.

At least, that’s what it looked like to Vince, spinning in a slow circle below Elizabeth, but above the fort. The Gnome was perched on Elizabeth’s back and casting a spell that would simply curse every person in the fort to death.

She was fueling it with one of the souls of the Wyrms.

The simple reality was that there were just too many soldiers in the garrison force for them to deal with easily. Right now, they couldn’t see out the front gate because Elizabeth was forcing them to keep their heads down. Nor could they really see above themselves.

When the soldiers made an attempt to come this way, Vince, Blue, and Zathira forced them to re-evaluate that unwise choice.

Something smacked into Vince’s hip and caused him to glance down.

“My wings feel like they’re going to break,” complained Sam. She was latched onto his side, her shoulder up in his armpit and her head on his chest.

Her left hand was stuck between his legs and fondling him quite openly. Her other hand was on his back.

“I have no idea how the Fairies did this so often without complaint. Or is that actually it? They’re so much smaller and... ah... yeah, that’s gotta be it,” muttered Sam, her fingers closing firmly around Vince’s hardening member in his pants. “Oh! I got it just like that. Nice. I’m a regular ol’ snake charmer. I have a message from Petra.”

She gave his shaft a squeeze and then released him. Reaching down to her messenger bag, she pulled out a sealed letter for him and held it out.

“Too long, did Sam read it for me’ version; crush the garrison, take Bilbao. Go no further, supply lines are crunched. Hold Bilbao until reinforcements arrive,” paraphrased Sam. She leaned in and kissed him at the corner of his mouth. She took the pistol from him, put the letter in his hand instead, and pulled two of his magazines free. Holding the weapon correctly while stuffing the loaded magazines into her bag, she moved over to stand with Zathira. “Hey there, Zath. How’s it going?”

“I’m quite... well. How are you, Sam?” asked the Lamia as Vince contemplated the letter now in his hand. He had a bit of a strange reaction when he read letters from Petra and he couldn’t help it.

“Good, I got him so hard just from giving him a tiny bit of my hand. I’ve got him hook, line, and sinker. Vince will be begging to get in my bed,” answered Sam, followed by a round of his pistol going off. “And check that out, I nailed that guy in the eye. Today is awesome.”

Flicking open the letter Vince began to read.

Dear Husband,

I’m gratified to be writing to you that Cristina has arrived and is already assisting me greatly. It’s wonderful to have someone so

similar to myself in age, view, and belief.

She has also been quite open in pursuit of information from me and is an eager student!

While I'm well aware this is incredibly soon, I want you to spend your owed favor from Ryker to make her immortal as I am. She will be my second, I'm certain already.

With her serving as my second to me as Fes, I can train up a replacement for myself in no time at all.

The fact that she can fly makes it even better.

Frowning, Vince glanced away from the letter.

She can fly? Neat. Her mom did have wings, I guess.

Wouldn't be bad to use the favor on that either.

I'm glad he fixed whatever was wrong with Red on his own volition.

With a nod of his head, Vince went back to the letter.

Yes, I know what I'm asking of you, but you're... attracted to me... so I don't think you'll have issues with Cristina. Despite me being grotesque and hideous to others, I'm glad you can see beyond that.

That you see me as I am, as a woman. That you judge me on my heart and mind, not only the terribleness of my birth.

Next, this one would order you to destroy the garrison Sam reported. Then please proceed to Bilbao and claim it. Proceed no further as this one cannot stabilize the resources of the kingdom quite yet.

A month or two is required for the new farming tools to begin showing a difference.

Take the city, hold it, strike at our enemy, and earn allies if possible. This one will send a relief force at that time as she cannot leave you there. You are too great an asset with your team to let you idle there too long.

Lastly, this one's second has dispatched a double-strength squad of Soldier-ants that she trained, to your location. They should be arriving a day after this letter.

With all my love as your wife, and respect as her master's general, I place this task to you.

*Sincerely,
Fes Petra Campbell*

Vince shrugged his shoulders at that and then refolded the letter.

Keeping himself crouched low in a squat, he shuffled over to Sam, who was perched against the rock and sighting his pistol against it. The weapon looked fairly ridiculous in her hands, but she'd already demonstrated she could use it.

Reaching around the front of her, he let his hands cup her breasts, slide down her front, and come to rest on her hips. It all caused the Fae to shiver from head to toe.

"Next time, give 'em a squeeze, Vince," whispered the Fae followed by a trigger pull a split second after a soldier ran out from around the corner. "My boobs aren't made of glass you know.

"Now, you gonna get a good feel or just put the letter away?"

Once more, Vince didn't quite know what to do.

Putting the letter into the messenger bag, he rested his right hand atop hers and held the pistol. His left hand snaked up under her blouse and he moved it all the way up to where her bra started.

Curling a fingertip around the edge, he brushed his fingers against her skin.

"Fondle me or move on, lover boy," grunted Sam. "Not the place for flutter-fingers, alright? You can do that later when we have a bed and the like."

Er... right.

Vince did as suggested and pushed his hand up under her bra, squeezed her firmly once, and then took his pistol from her. The Fae laughed and then scooted off to the other side.

"Nice. Your hand was way too cold for that, but whatever," said the Fae, pulling the magazines out of her bag. She stuck them back into his harness and then pulled out a pistol of her own.

It was much smaller, looked like something he'd never seen before, and actually fit her. Moving to the other side of Blue, she

aimed it toward the gate.

Huh. Someone's handing out guns to my people. Must be Mr. White Junior.

Sam's gun went off and sounded far louder than it should for such a small weapon. It sounded just as loud as his, in fact.

The brass casing that was ejected out the side looked a lot like one of his own as well.

"Hell, yeah. Got him on the hook, got a little second base, and got another headshot. Today is fan-fucking-tastic," crowed the Fae. "Maybe I'll let you get in my bed tonight, Vince. I could make today amazing if I got laid."

Leila's death spiral from the darkest part of hell slammed down to the ground in the next moment. Even the color of the stones, the green grass, and the red blood of the soldiers became gray.

Then a stream of souls began wafting up from the fort and toward Leila.

She dismissed them even before they made it halfway to her. Sending them on to wherever souls went. She had no wish to store them or utilize them.

In her own words, it was bad enough to kill them for simply being on the opposing side, using their souls poorly would be far too much. Turning a Wyrm into a spell focus was one thing, torturing soldiers for being the enemy was another thing entirely.

"Geeze, Leila," whispered Blue. "I know you wanted to show off for him, but that's a bit much, isn't it?"

"Time to go," Vince reminded them and stood up. "Take any resources and supplies we want, then we're gone."

"I'll go get Red," reported Sam, sticking her pistol into her bag and zipping off.

Blue let out a slow breath and then laughed, looking up to Vince.

"You know, it's kinda annoying how well she took my lessons to heart. Sam, that is," admitted the Dryad. "She's got you more worked up than Mouth often did, and she barely did anything at all.

"If I knew you liked being pursued like this, I would have done it myself and fought my own instincts. I just never really thought of you as the... chase me... type."

“Suppose neither did I. As to you, my dearest Blue, I dunno, I like you just the way you are,” remarked Vince, looking down at her kneeling in front of him. His mind went back to what Red had said earlier. He did need to give Blue a present. “I look forward to seeing you tonight. Quite possibly in Bilbao, in fact.”

“Oh?” she asked, her eyes moving down to his crotch and then back up to him. Her eyes began to glow softly. She smiled at him with what was clear anticipation. “How fun.”

Chapter 19

“Well, isn’t this just... nostalgic,” muttered Vince with a shake of his head, watching the entry gate of Bilbao. “Though it’s not quite the same.”

If anything, this could be worse.

Moving in and out of the city gates and onto the various branching roads that led up to it was a stream of people. Wasters, humans, wagons, and even carts all went through those stone gates.

Distantly to the northeast, he could see a wall that started in a flat spot. It ran to the south and east. If his information was correct, it ran all the way down to another city named Barcelona.

It was a wall built to block out everything from the mountains and beyond. The only two entry points were located at a checkpoint on either end of it that connected to an old human road system that ran along the coastlines.

And I’m on the side that’s easier to take control of.

Take Bilbao, eliminate the garrison at the wall, and then install our own troops. Hold both and wait for reinforcements.

Actually, I bet I could use the Soldier-ants for that when they arrive. Just let them defend a nice fortified position. I bet they’d love that.

“Are you s-sure this’ll be fine, Nest-mate?” inquired Elizabeth. “I don’t want to endanger you.”

“It’ll be fine. Don’t you see all the Wasters? We’ll just tell them you’re a type of horned lizard. They’ll leave it be at that,” argued Vince as he glanced to the side.

Blue, Sam, and Elizabeth were accompanying him into the city.

Red, Leila, and Zathira would all be conducting reconnaissance and information gathering. Leila could simply fly over, keep herself out of view, and lurk above, while the other two with her could stalk reasonably well enough that they could prowl around.

Even if they were spotted, it’d just be chalked up to “hostile Wasters”, which wasn’t wrong in a way.

“Yes, I do. I’m just... I’ve m-made many mistakes. I grew over-confident and confused and... and... I just want to fix things,”

grumbled Elizabeth.

“He understands. Leave it at that,” commanded Blue. She was walking hand in hand with Vince, looking quite pleased with herself at the moment.

Sam was hitching a ride on Vince’s shoulder again. Resting against his back and shoulders, her boots were hooked into his armor much more securely now.

She’d figured out how to use the harness that he’d originally made for Ramona to carry him, to her advantage.

“You know, I could probably hook myself into the front of this. Use you kinda like a swing,” mused Sam, veering the subject wildly away. “Fly up a bit, fall down on you. Fly up, fall, fly up, fall. That could be a lot of fun.

“I never realized being so much shorter would present itself with so many opportunities. Leila made it seem harder. I’m looking forward to riding you like you’re a big hunk o’fun, Vince.”

Vince could only forcefully manage to keep his steps even, despite the fact that it felt like his pants were rubbing at him in the worst way possible now.

At the same time, he swore he could suddenly feel every inch of Sam’s body against his back.

“Goodness. He really does respond to you and your pursuit,” Blue whispered and peered at Sam. “I think I’ve decided to be jealous and envious at the same time.”

“It’s great, isn’t it? I just had to turn it around on my sweet human,” asked Sam, and leaned forward to kiss Vince at the corner of his mouth. Then she reached up and stroked his face with her left hand. Her fingers lightly grazed back and forth across his jaw, chin, and up to his ear. “There you go. A nice little reward for you. Enjoy it.”

“It doesn’t look like Yosemite,” Elizabeth murmured as they got closer to the entry. “At all. No Dryad gate guard. No ballistae. No... unity of purpose.”

“Ah... I guess when I said it felt nostalgic, I meant in regards to other cities. Ones that had helped me realized how Yosemite could

thrive,” explained Vince. “Sure, there’s everyone and everything moving through here, but they’re very... not in it together.”

A group of humans was eyeing a mixed group of Wasters who were hauling along a line of what looked like prisoners or slaves behind them. A few even looked to be in some sort of uniform.

Reaching the gates, Vince looked at the guard, wondering if anything would be asked or said.

Yet nothing was.

The guards looked them over, then moved their focus to the next group of people.

Passing into the city of Bilbao, he was somewhat troubled by their lack of concern for his group. Whatever they saw in him was so mundane and commonplace, that they were let in without even a greeting.

Moving into the city, they slowly began making their way through the streets.

They had nowhere to go, nowhere to be, and were here just to figure out the situation. That left them with an open agenda and little to guide them.

“Just like last time?” Blue asked after they’d wandered up and down two different streets. “Because that seems to be very similar to the one we found in Coruna.”

Following the line of Blue’s arm, he saw she was pointing at a sign up ahead.

It had a bed and a mug on the sign. Along the bottom edge of it was written a simple pair of words.

“Inn. English,” murmured Sam, reading it aloud. “Sounds like a good place to poke into. Say, Vince, wanna poke yourself in? Just kinda... thrust up in there and see what’s going on? We could... unload into it?”

“Okay, before anyone says it, yeah, that was a bit corny. Don’t care. I find the corny stuff works just as well for him. Just gotta get his brain thinking about it and in regards to me.”

Blue laughed and began tugging at Vince’s arm, directing him toward the location.

“Good a place as any to ask questions,” Vince agreed, his eyes turned toward what looked a lot like the center of the city.

It was a large plaza where an open market was being held.

Maybe find a few things to pick up there. Just have to figure out if the coinage we looted from the garrison would be fine here. I can't imagine it wouldn't be, but... still don't have a firm grasp on the economy here.

Then his eyes landed on something he didn't expect to see.

A Dryad wearing the armor of a soldier was holding a very modern-looking rifle. She was standing off to one side, watching people move past her with a blank, flat stare.

As if all that she saw were bugs and creatures that deserved to be stepped on.

Her hair was long, black, and held behind her head in a tight ponytail. Her eyes were a hard hazel color with a dull, muted green shining through them.

Her face was beautiful, of course, but the lack of joy in it gave her sharp features a somber cast. Regardless of the fact that she had an obviously full and lovely figure under her armor, no one gave her a second look either.

Looks like Leandra in a way. I wonder if... is she a daughter of Flora?

She was clearly a known personage and ignored by the citizenry.

The conflicting image of a Dryad armed and armored with such a broken view of life in her eyes brought Vince up short. He needed to speak with this woman on the spot and find out if she was like Flora.

Learn if he needed to wipe out this city without delay.

Flora did say there were other cities that used Dryads, after all. Is this another?

“Get a few rooms for us, Blue,” he said giving her hand a squeeze.

“But I— oh... darn. Alright. Better I don't go with you just in case she recognizes what I am,” agreed Blue. She squeezed his hand in return and then moved toward the entrance of the inn. “Sam, with me?”

Elizabeth moved away from Blue even as Sam fluttered away from Vince.

Wordlessly, the two exchanged places. Sam took up residence on Blue's back, and Elizabeth moved to stand at Vince's side.

Her greatcoat was fully buttoned today, and she was wearing pants beneath it. He imagined there was nothing under the coat.

"That's not like any Dryad I've seen," whispered the Dragon.

"No, it isn't."

Moving over to the Dryad, Vince saw there was a spot where two people could sit down. It wasn't a bench, or anything made to accommodate someone sitting down, but looked more akin to a toppled column of some kind.

As soon as he'd stepped closer to the Dryad, she'd noticed him. Noticed him and stared at him for several seconds.

He caught it when her eyes barely flickered to life. A curiosity in her gaze that lingered on him and remained with him as he sat down only a few feet from her.

"Hello, there," Vince said while looking at Elizabeth. The Dragon looked confused but gave him a shy smile. Then her eyes moved past him and to the Dryad who was behind him, and she clearly realized what was happening.

Wrinkling her nose, the Dragon grinned at him.

"Yes, hello there," replied the Dragon.

"Would the name Flora mean anything to you?" he asked, still looking at Elizabeth.

"I'm sure it would if I were a Dryad," answered Elizabeth.

There was a scraping noise that sounded like a boot turning.

Followed by several steps as the Dryad moved past Vince and then stood closer to Elizabeth's back. Her head swiveled to the right, and she took a moment to meet Vince's eyes.

"Would it?" he asked, meeting her eyes directly.

The Dryad's eyes twitched as if they wanted to blink. Slowly, the Dryad looked away from him, her head moving in the other direction as she scanned the area.

"Yes," she whispered in a tight and strained voice.

“Wonderful. Then please follow me?” asked Vince and then took Elizabeth by the hands. Standing up, he guided her away from the plaza and toward a small alcove he’d spotted. It didn’t have anyone in it and looked like it might be avoided or simply ignored by others.

There was a small, stunted shrub planted there, which made it feel a lot like the alcove of the fallen Dryad in Coruna.

Once he’d entered it, Vince found that it didn’t just feel like the alcove in Coruna, but that perhaps they were meant to be the same. It had many of the same features and was located in a plaza as well.

A central design feature, maybe? How curious.

Does that mean this shrub isn’t a shrub, but a ... stunted tree?

Standing there, waiting for the Dryad, Vince stared at that tree. Wondering if it was perhaps linked to the Dryad he’d just invited over here.

“How-how exactly do you know that name?” asked the Dryad as she came around the wall that separated the alcove from the plaza. “Did my mother send you here?”

“Somewhat,” Vince murmured, suddenly feeling better. “Your mother is Flora? Leandra a younger sister?”

The Dryad let out a soft puff of breath, her eyes widening slightly. She took a step closer to him, staring at him hard now.

“Yes. Are they okay?” she asked. “I haven’t heard from my mother in a little bit. The trees that normally carry our messages have been silent.”

Err, I wonder if the old Dryad tree was one of those messengers. Might explain that, I guess.

“Your mother was killed by the baron. Along with all the... all the Dryads who were planted,” Vince answered honestly. The Dryad grimaced, her eyes scrunching up and her head turning to one side partly. Her mouth was a hard line, and her jaw was flexing. “I had the baron murdered, took the city under my protection, made Leandra the duchess of it, and then buried all the Dryads under their trees.”

“You... what?” asked the Dryad, her eyes set to Vince again. They were wide and almost unseeing as she searched his face.

“I killed the baron, buried Flora beneath her tree, and made Leandra the duchess. Your mother and sisters should be coming

back at some point, though I'm not sure when. They'll live again. I promise you," guaranteed Vince. Then he tapped his chest. "On top of that, I hold your sister's tree. Here. Inside me. I'm her grove. As well as the grove for many other Dryads."

Letting go of her rifle with one hand the Dryad put a gloved hand on his chest.

He felt a response from inside him at her touch. As if recognizing her.

"You... you do. You are. Oh... oh, my heavens," whimpered the Dryad. "Why are... but... what are you here for?"

"I've come here to take Bilbao and make it my own as well. I saw you while scouting the city and needed to speak with you. Find out what I could from you.

"That and tell you that... I don't know what your circumstances are, but I'll free you. If only because you look so... sad. No Dryad should look as you do.

"My Grove-wives would hound me to the ends of the earth if I left you here like this."

Blinking rapidly, the Dryad lifted her chin up, then began to sniffle softly.

"You can't free me. I was forced to plant in this city. My tree is... nothing more than a potted plant in the keep. I'm nothing more than one of many here in the city. Used as defensive forces. My tree is held hostage as well as my family elsewhere.

"Though... I suppose that's less of a concern now. Now that Mother... isn't there anymore."

"Do you have a seed?" asked Elizabeth, tilting her head to one side.

"I do, but it's... weak. It would never survive. Anywhere. Minutes after planting my tree they... they sterilized... me," the Dryad got out between sobs through grit teeth. "They—the baron took an iron and got it to a red-hot state and-and... put it in me and burned me out. I can barely go to the b-b-bathroom. It always h-hurts."

Fucking kill them all. All of them.

"Seed. Now. And what's your name?" demanded Vince, holding his hand out to her. "And are you dressed under the armor?"

Inwardly he was focusing the entirety of his being on a single idea. Taking her seed, putting it into his grove, and forcing it to a healthy state.

Then he'd unload the entirety of his grove into her. Take her back to the room and let her recuperate.

Tonight, he'd go slaughter this city's lord and everyone he could find in charge.

Pulling free his belt knife, Vince reached up with his other hand. Easing his shirt to one side, he simply pushed it into his chest. Right atop the same spot where every seedpod was put in him.

Willing the wound to remain open, but not bleed, he waited.

"I'm Antona. And yes, I have clothes on. But why?" she asked, holding her hands up.

As Dryads always seemed to do, the young woman pulled a seedpod out from almost nowhere. He hadn't even caught where it came from.

There was no glow to it. A faint darkness to the edges of it showed that it was dying even now.

Hesitating, the Dryad looked at the wound. Then she pushed her fragile seed into him.

Laying his hand atop hers, he held it to the wound. Staring into her face, he watched her eyes.

"Because you're leaving with me, Antona. Best you leave the arms and armor here, you'll stand out otherwise," he stated.

Turning his determination on himself, he asked his grove to seal his wound, then welcome its newest tree. To assist it and bring it fully into the grove.

The Dryad gasped sharply, and her eyes began to glow in a flash. Much as all his other Dryads did. Where this had knocked all the other Dryads flat, Antona seemed made of sterner stuff.

She stood upright, holding her breath, and gazing at him.

"It's... I'm part of a grove again. I can feel Leandra," she said in a whimper.

"Time to set you to rights, Antona," Vince murmured. "Armor and arms first. Get rid of it. No telling how you'll do after this."

Nodding her head, the Dryad pulled her hands back from his chest. The wound was now gone as if it never existed.

Antona began to pull off her equipment, dumping it to one side as she went. In no time at all, she was in a pair of shorts and a blouse. There was no way of saying it other than that she was now very underdressed for the weather.

But this was temporary, and Vince was in a hurry.

Grabbing Antona by a bare shoulder, he opened his grove and then dumped his power into her. He wanted her to be restored to full health.

To revert all the damage that'd been done to her. As she was his Dryad and her tree was in his grove, he felt this was a perfectly reasonable demand.

If the grove itself couldn't restore a Dryad, who else could?

Power began to flood into the Dryad.

Then her face began to darken, and she looked like she was in considerable discomfort. Her hands went down to her shorts, and she let out a low, pain-filled groan.

"Grab the rifle, hold it as if it were normal, Elizabeth," commanded Vince.

Stepping in, he picked up the Dryad and pulled her over his shoulder. All the while, he continued to upend the power inside of him into her. Wanted it to correct everything that was wrong with her.

It only took a minute for them to reach the inn. Upon entering it, he found Sam waiting for him, sitting on a rafter above. She flew down and then went up the stairs.

Following, Vince just continued to push power into the moaning Dryad. Although he noted there was a change in the timbre of the moans as well as the volume.

They were much lower now and reminded him of when he'd cornered Mouth or Meliae. Sam did a reasonable impression of it, as well.

As he headed up the stairs, the grove cut him off. There was nothing left to give Antona.

Sam waited in the hall at the top of the stairs in front of a door. She pushed it open as soon as he was visible.

Walking to the door, he entered as well, followed by Elizabeth.

“Oh, that was— goodness, you poor dear,” Blue murmured in a soothing way. She came over and gently pulled Antona down from Vince’s shoulder. “I felt you join the grove, but I didn’t realize there was more to it than just your seed being damaged.

“What... did they do to you? Did... oh, my word. This is disgusting. What foul creature would do this?”

“Dunno, he dies tonight though,” growled Vince. “They all die tonight.”

Blood was running down Antona’s legs and had stained her shorts badly. It was obvious her body was working to repair what’d been done to her, but it wouldn’t be easy on her.

Elizabeth was quietly going over the rifle that she’d been ordered to take. Checking its operation.

“They’ll know...I’m gone soon,” whimpered Antona, her hands still pressed down on her lower abdomen. “Tree will-die in its-pot. Will send-soldiers to-investigate.”

“We’ll be d-done here tonight,” Elizabeth promised with a nod of her head as she removed the magazine at the bottom of the rifle. “It won’t matter if they investigate.”

“Yes, we’ll rest for the time,” stated Blue. “We have two rooms, but only two beds. They didn’t have any multi-party rooms available.

“We can leave Antona in here and let her sleep in the bed. She’ll need the rest. We can go to the other room.”

Why would we... oh.

Yes.

I told her we’d have fun tonight. She won’t let that get away.

Not to mention Red said we needed to give her a present.

Time to let the Dryad demon out.

Chapter 20

“I think she’ll be alright,” Blue reported as soon as the door was closed. “It’s... the damage done to her is extensive. You might need to repeat the process a few more times, but she’ll heal.”

“Though honestly, I think it’d heal even if you did nothing. Being part of your grove is just that beneficial that her body would respond all on its own.”

“Even as she was, it could have eventually healed. Though that depends on how they handle her tree. It’d take a century or so, I’d bet but... it’d happen. We Dryads are hardy, you know?”

Blue had held up an arm and flexed at that, giving him a grin.

Dryads would ever and always look like sex monsters given flesh to Vince. They held strength and stamina that wasn’t normal, considering the way they looked and the lack of definitive muscle they had.

He’d never doubt them though.

Vince had sat himself down in a chair and was watching Blue with a smile.

Elizabeth and Sam were near the bed, watching Blue quietly. He’d already told them he’d be giving them a display of Dryad nature.

He hadn’t said it was voluntary for them to watch either.

“Yes, you’re very hardy, my Grove-wife,” agreed Vince. “Now... lock the door then... take your clothes off for me.”

Blue blinked several times. Her pretty mouth formed an “o” of surprise as she processed what’d been said. Given the way the beautiful Dryad looked at the moment, he’d done this perfectly.

In the next moment, her eyes began to glow from the inside out. One was a glittering blue and the other a sparkling green.

“Of course,” she said in a husky voice. Once the lock on the door was secure, she returned to the same spot in the room. Reaching down, she started to work at her leather armor. Unbuckling it and peeling it off.

Slowly, her beautiful and full-bodied figure came into view.

She was very much an Elven Dryad. Just with proportions that were much greater in the chest, hip and waist area than any Elf could ever wish for.

When she was naked, she held her hands up at her sides and bent her wrists delicately. As if she were surrendering to him.

Slowly, she did a spin, taking a full ten seconds to do so.

“Ladies, any questions for my Nymph before I move on to the next lesson?” Vince asked, taking a second to look at Elizabeth and Sam.

“Yes. Can you change your figure, Blue?” asked Sam with a curious look on her face. “Can you make your boobs bigger or your waist smaller if you wanted?”

“Certainly. I can modify any part of myself that’s flesh, or muscle. Not bone, though,” purred Blue, her eyes stuck on Vince. She had an extremely excited cast to her features. “It happens over time based on what... ah... my man would want. Typically, at least.

“I don’t let that happen. No Dryad in our grove does. We just slowly... tweak things all on our own. See how he responds and then adjust.

“We’ve all found things that work for us. Little areas of his... libido, to take over.”

That explains almost too much.

Ha.

“Are you in love with him? I mean... if you weren’t in his grove, would you love him?” asked Elizabeth quietly.

Blue’s picture-perfect face become thoughtful for a fraction of a second and then she laughed. She nodded her head, still gazing at him.

“As if I could ever answer that. That’d be like asking how you would feel if you lost your lower half and were told to walk around on your hands. It’s just part of who I am,” Blue dismissively answered.

She began to slowly saunter over to him at this point. Her unblemished, beautiful body made him want to snatch her up.

On top of that, she wasn’t hitting him with the Dryad sex magic at full power. Instead, he could feel it slowly rising, like a fire in the corner of the room raising the temperature.

“Is... are you really into being used? I know you’ve said it, but... it’s still weird,” muttered Sam.

“I want to be used all the time by him. I wish he’d use me up and nearly break me,” Blue whispered and slowly got down on her knees in front of him. “I’d beg him to do it. To burn me up and take all of me. Part of a Dryad’s nature.

“Only with those we choose and care for, though. It isn’t just directed at anyone. Though I especially wish he’d do it. To really use me badly. Because then he’d tenderly bring me back to health.

“He loves me.”

Grinning, Vince nodded his head. He’d never deny that.

“I do love you, Blue,” he said, sliding a hand through her hair as she began to carefully work at his belt and pants.

“Uhm, how pregnant are you?” Sam threw out even as Blue maneuvered Vince’s pants and underwear to the ground. His member was pointing straight up to the ceiling.

“Very. When I met him, I’d never been with a man,” breathed Blue, her mouth coming down until her lips were tickling at his tip. “I have nothing left to give to anyone else. I have... nothing left. I can’t get any more pregnant than I am now. Forever going forward, I’ll only be growing less pregnant.

“Vince took everything from me and I love it. He’s nearly taken everything possible from every Dryad in his grove, in fact. Only the newer girls have any viable eggs left that he hadn’t captured.”

Taking in a breath, she inhaled his shaft and eagerly put him down her throat. Taking him down to the base, she began to suck gently at him. Leaving him wedged deep and tight in her mouth.

“Now... Dryads are very sexual creatures,” Vince started when no one asked anything further. The hand in Blue’s hair had tightened as he laid the other on her shoulder. “They want direction and will fight just a little. Never much, but just enough to make it fun.

“At least, for me. I’m sure they’d adjust to whoever they’re with but... that’s just my experience.”

Blue eased her head back and came off him with a heavy exhale, followed by a gasped breath.

“It’s all Dryads, my love,” she said quickly. “Just how we are.”

Moving toward his crotch, Blue managed to get her lips around his tip before he pulled her up short.

Whining, her lips pulled at him, and then she opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out. Licking all around the edge and rim of his head.

“I’ve found that my Dryads like it best when I give them a little, then take it from them,” Vince continued as Blue struggled to get at his privates. “Only to force something else on them.”

Pulling Blue’s head to one side, he bent her sideways.

The Dryad let out a throaty moan and went with his hand. Moving at his direction until she was perched in his lap, facing Elizabeth and Sam.

“Put it in my sweet,” commanded Vince.

Blue’s hands dove down between them and caught his shaft with her fingers. She shifted against him, thrust her hips forward, and got his tip into her entry.

Her hips rolled from side to side once and then she sat down, pushing him all the way up and into her. He felt her whole-body clench around him as she did it.

“See? Now she’s happy. I’m inside her. Except she’s going to realize what this looks like even as you watch her do it. Especially since this has nothing to do with impregnation. You heard her, this is only for fun for her now,” informed Vince. His left hand was now moving down between her thighs. His fingertips began to lightly play with her hood and the tops of the lips. Moving his right hand across her front, he began to cup, fondle, and grope at her chest. Only for Blue to let out a loud and very needy sounding moan. “In a second, she’s going to turn bright red, and her eyes will shine like a lightning bolt is behind them.”

“Damn,” Sam mumbled as she and Elizabeth watched.

Vince imagined it was exactly like he said.

“Bounce, my Dryad. Ride it and show me you want it,” commanded Vince.

Groaning, and then with a whimper, Blue began to hop up and down in his lap. Her thighs flexed as she pushed off the ground and let herself fall into his lap.

“D-don’t look at me,” begged Blue, her head slowly turning to one side.

“Ah, see, this is her lying. She wants you to stare at her now,” argued Vince. He moved his left hand up to grab her jaw and force her to look ahead. “Tell them the truth Blue.”

“I want you to stare at me and wish you were me,” declared the Dryad after several more bounces. “To wish you looked like me. Pray to your deities that you could be me. To see that this man is so invested in me that he knows me completely and you wish you had that.”

Blue’s voice trailed off as she started to thrust herself down even harder into his lap. Spearing him deep into herself.

“You wish-nngh-you were-mmm-me!” accused Blue.

Moving upward, and forward, Vince pushed Blue down into the bed. He grabbed her behind the head with one hand and her right hand with his. Twining his fingers into hers, he began to thrust himself into her, plunging deep into the beautiful and sexy Dryad.

“Admit it,” demanded Blue, gazing up at Elizabeth and Sam. “You wish you were me! To be so honest with what you want and let him have it all. Nnnnggaaahhh, Vince. Harder, my love.”

Not wanting to disappoint her while she was receiving her present, he began to pound at her. His lap clapped her ass with loud smacks.

“Ahh, ahh, yes!” called out Blue as her legs began to tremble.

Not wanting to hold back, he kept pumping at her until he hit his climax a few seconds later. He began to drown her insides with his seed, trying to push it nice and deep with each spurt.

“See?” asked Vince with a pant. Then he began to pat Blue on the rear end as he continued to thrust into her, though much slower now. “In about an hour, she’ll come to apologize to you. Her human side pops out a bit more after sex. She’ll get bashful and try to brush it off.

“Just remember her as she is in this moment and hold it to her. Don’t let her forget it. Tell them again, Blue.”

“You wish you were me,” moaned the Dryad, her face pointed toward the other two women.

Perfect. She'll never live it down and she'll love it.

Pulling out of her, Vince took a step back.

Only for Blue to sit up, drop to her knees, and skillfully swallow his manhood in one go. She began to suck gently at him, swallowing at his length. Her hands came up to masterfully squeeze and fondle his jewels.

That was great.

Looking down, he found Blue gazing up at him with the brightest eyes he'd ever seen from her. Smiling around his girth and having the look of a Dryad in rapture.

Holding on to Zathira tightly, Vince was feeling a lot less sure about what he'd asked her to do.

"I'm going to climb now," she warned him.

"Yup," he managed to reply.

Staring up at the walls, then the keep behind it, he was starting to think that maybe having Elizabeth do this would have been better. That the possibility of someone noticing the Dragon flying overhead would be better than letting this happen.

Zathira moved out from the darkness of the nearby homes and then up to the wall. They were at a tower that'd been planted in the wall and served as a lookout point.

They'd let the houses almost come right up to it, which left them with little room to work with for seeing people approach. Given that it was a fairly curved wall, Zathira was confident she could climb up it.

In her own words, she wasn't a constrictor, but she was still a Lamia. Climbing something like this wouldn't be too hard according to her.

Pushing up against the wall, she began to go straight up it. Her coils moved along the stones as she went. She began to curl up and around the rounded wall now.

Glancing back, he saw that her back half was almost off the ground now, though it was all wedged in tight to the wall and pushing against it.

Oh. She pushes in on both sides and moves upward. Got it. Smart.

I guess she really can climb up a great many things.

Lifting her hands up, Zathira gripped and pulled at edges and crevices as she went. She leveraged herself further and moved her coils as she did so.

With a soft grunt, she pulled them almost to the top of the wall now. They were an easy thirty feet off the ground.

Lifting her head up, Zathira peered over the wall's edge. Going completely still, she hesitated for several seconds.

A second later and she was a blur of movement. Quickly hauling them over the top, and then speeding off along the wall. Her coils glided whisper-soft across the stones.

They reached the point where the wall came too close to the keep, or at least so Vince thought, and she kept going. Right off the edge of the wall.

She extended her body out over nothing as her rear kept them counter-balanced on the wall. Just as it felt like her weight was shifting forward and they were going to fall, she grabbed a windowsill.

This was where he took over.

Climbing up over Zathira, and doing his best to not grab her inappropriately, he got up to her shoulders and was practically lying against her back.

His head was just behind hers as he reached up with one hand to the window.

Grabbing hold of the exterior of it, he pulled until there was a pop.

The point where the wood crossed over opened to them.

"Sorry, Zathira," Vince whispered and started to move around on her shoulders. He needed to get up and over her now.

"It's fine, Lord Vince. Do as you must, I'll not fault you for it," whispered the Lamia. "Thank you for your concern. As... as well as thank you for not pushing me away after I rejected your advances."

"I mean, I can have women who are friends," Vince murmured even as he ended up with a hand on her upper chest. Thankfully, he didn't end up touching anywhere actually sensitive.

Pulling his knee up, he got it on her shoulder, and then pushed forward into the window.

Getting inside, he turned around and grabbed the Lamia by her arms. Bracing his feet against the interior of the window frame, he began to pull.

“Lord Vince, I’m far too heeeeeeaa—” the Lamia’s voice ended in a soft squeak as he physically drug her through the window. Letting go of her arms, he grabbed her around the middle and rear end, and started pulling her once more.

No sooner than some of her coils had made contact with the frame, he found he didn’t have to haul on her as hard. After he got a few more feet of her inside, he found she was rapidly entering all on her own now.

Waiting until she pulled in her tail completely, Vince shut the window and looked around at where they’d entered. From what he could tell, it was a dining room.

“You’re far stronger than I considered, Lord Vince,” murmured Zathira, lifting her chin up a bit and exposing her very pale and lovely neck. As if she didn’t want to really meet his eyes.

Her hands were in front of herself and she was touching her fingertips together in an almost nervous way.

Then they closed tightly and opened after a brief instant.

“Zathira,” Vince said, seeing her physical distress was obvious.

“Yes?” she answered immediately, her eyes darting up to his face and then away.

Shit, she’s all nervous I’m mad at her for the rejection. Need to nip that one in the bud.

“It really is okay. I get it. You’re not interested. It’s fine. Relax. Now... let’s get going,” promised Vince and then started off toward a door.

Opening the door, he found it led into a hallway. It was quiet and there didn’t seem to be any noise at all.

He had no idea which way to go from here.

“Up,” Zathira quietly said from behind him. “Antona said his bedroom is... at the top. That was where he sterilized her. We talked briefly when I brought her dinner.”

“Thank you, Zathira,” answered Vince through clenched teeth. He really wanted to slaughter this fool. “Up it is.”

Really making this almost too easy.

Comically evil, in fact.

Though... Felix had a saying about this kind of stuff when it came up. Especially when we talked about the Emperor and how ridiculous he was.

Clichés are typically born out of a kernel of truth.

Evil and fear will surround itself with evil and fear.

Chapter 21

Well.

Already got myself two new Dryads. One... very lonely tree as well.

Starting to feel a bit like a grove again.

Didn't realize it at the time, but I never felt alone with all the Dryad trees inside me. When they went dormant it was like standing in a room that had suddenly emptied.

Zathira leaned down from the ceiling and peeked out of the stairwell they were in currently.

She'd used her body to push herself up the wall and to the top. Then eased forward until she could see what was going on.

Given the height of the ceiling, people would be less likely to spot her there. Or so she reasoned when she explained what she was doing.

Hanging there improbably, Zathira hesitated for a handful of seconds before she came back down. Her eyes had an odd glint to them, but she looked unconcerned.

"One guard," she whispered. "Sleeping. Clearly the right room. The door has a gold handle."

A gold handle... right.

Ugh.

"You're not a constrictor, but... you could wind him up. Right? I can tie him together while you keep him immobile. Then we move on to the city-lord," Vince thought aloud.

Zathira's brow creased for a moment and then she nodded her head.

"I can manage that. You go on to our target. I don't think one guard will be troublesome for me. If he resists too much, I'll just bite him," concluded Zathira.

"Try not to. We've already devastated the population with how many soldiers we've wiped out in the last month. If we can spare some people, I'd love to. We've made our point and people should be surrendering to us rather than fighting," lamented Vince.

There were those he would be happy to kill. Evil people who would follow orders that were terrible.

That wasn't the only type of person serving as a soldier, however.

A small nod of her head was the only response Zathira gave as her coils began to bunch up below her. Her upper half then moved away from him and vanished around the corner. Her snake tail caught up much more slowly.

So... strange and interesting.

Maybe I should try to find a Lamia who's interested. Could be fun.

Vince heard the sound of someone letting out a soft groan. It would be almost imperceptible unless one was listening for anything out of the ordinary.

Standing up out of the crouch, Vince entered the hall and went the same way Zathira had.

He found the Lamia had wound up the guard, who was already turning a dark red color and was working at tying his hands together. A sword and a pistol were on the ground nearby.

Apparently, he'd managed to get his hands on his weapons, but not to do anything with them at all. He fell victim to the Lamia too quickly.

I wonder how strong a constrictor would be.

Vince went to the door and grasped the handle. It felt odd in his hand. As if it were in truth partly made of gold.

Twisting it, he found it to be locked from the inside.

Not stopping at the locking point, he kept pulling. There was a clack and snap that came from inside the lock. As if something had sheared clean off.

When the handle met the door frame there was a clang and then the door began to open inward. Whatever he'd done to the lock, it'd been enough to break the locking function.

Pushing it open, Vince entered and then drew out his belt knife. Sweeping his eyes through the room, he found it was a waiting room that could double as a study and entry.

Dismissing it, he stormed forward and began going room to room.

Nothing interested him except his target and the bedroom where the man was likely resting.

At the back of the suite of rooms, Vince found what he assumed was what he wanted. There was a door with a lock on it, though it wasn't engaged.

Opening the door, he entered and found his target. A man slept peacefully in the bed in nothing more than a simple nightshirt.

Vince hadn't even bothered to register the man's features or details before he noticed a few things in the corner of the room.

A wooden table of sorts. It had straps in four locations with a large gap in the middle at the bottom. Near that and leaning against the wall was a large phallic-shaped iron. One that looked to have been used a number of times, given the odd flecks of charred material stuck to it.

This bastard.

Lunging at the man in the bed, Vince ripped a pillow out from under the man. Jerking the pillow out of the casing, he upended it and slammed it down on the waking man's head.

"Wh-what?" stammered the man while Vince slammed a booted foot into his chest, pinning him into the bed.

Grabbing up another pillow while the baron coughed and sputtered, Vince really only wanted it to rip it apart. He needed something to tie around the man's throat and keep his hood in place.

"H-how dare—" coughing twice, the baron ended up with only a wheeze as Vince pushed down with his boot.

"I need information. You're going to give it to me," stated Vince after tearing the pillow casing apart. Wrapping a long strip of it around the man's neck, Vince looped it into itself. Then he pulled it back the other way and wound it twice more. Tying it in place, he gave it a solid jerk. "If you don't give it to me, I'm going to make you wish for death.

Snatching one of the man's wrists, Vince dragged him over to the table where he clearly crippled Dryads. Tossing the stammering man onto it, Vince quickly set to buckling him down.

"I can give you information, yes!" agreed the man in a high-pitched squeal.

Picking up the iron rod the man had used to torture Dryads, Vince casually stuck it into the fireplace that was smoldering nearby. Then

he added several logs and a handful of twigs.

“Great. First, what’s the second closest garrison to here, and how many soldiers are in it?” demanded Vince.

“Laudio! It’s a river city! We use it to transport goods! There’s about four thousand there!” squealed the man, pulling at the bindings that were holding him down on the table. “They’re all just recruits! We were going to train them up and send them up against the bugs!”

Bugs? I— oh. The ants.

I see.

They really wanted to crush them.

“How do you summon the Dryads here? Do you have any prisoners in the city? Where are you keeping them?” asked Vince, looking into the fire as the iron heated up.

“Trees! All their trees are on the roof. Go break a branch off each tree and they’ll return here!

“Prisoners... yes, I do have some. They’re all in the dungeon. A couple of heathens, but the rest are just criminals. Supporters of the failed king.”

Vince clicked his tongue. The idea of summoning Dryads by harming their trees would certainly make sense to someone like this.

Vince was fairly well aware of the fact that all you have to do is ask the tree to tell the Dryad. Dryad trees were quite aware of what was going on and weren’t normal by any means.

“Great. Any treasures or vaults not in the city? You could pay your ransom with that,” offered Vince in a plausible lie. A man like this would most certainly think that a very valid answer.

“Not in the... no. I keep everything here. Everything is here in my keep. I can easily pay you with anything you can carry out. You can keep anything you can hold. It’s yours!” promised the baron.

“Right. Any enemies you have here? Any people you would want to vanish? Or places? Organizations?” inquired Vince.

The iron was starting to look rather warm now. Roaring merrily in the fireplace, the wood was burning brightly, and it wouldn’t take much longer.

“The magical heathens to the east,” spat the baron. “They’ve turned that damn valley into a death trap. Actually, I can pay you!

You can go kill that bastard Gibbs!”

Gibbs... magical valley... hm.

Maybe those heathens in the prison can give me some better information about that. I bet they can. Then I can see if we can make an ally or... if I need to go stomp some more people out.

“Great. Now... anything else I should know? Anyone else I should worry about? Anyone in the service of the great prime minister that could be an issue for you or me?” Picking up the smoking and sizzling iron, Vince moved down to the bottom of the table.

“No? No! There’s a small skirmish down in the south between two dukes. You could probably go kill one of them for money from the other!” offered the baron. It was obvious he was just spouting out anything that came to his mind anymore.

He wasn’t really worth much more from an information point of view.

Vince figured if there was anything else, Leila could summon up his spirit since they’d have access to the corpse. Which meant the man was no longer needed.

“Time to return some things to you,” murmured Vince.

“Return... return things to me? What things?” asked the baron in an odd voice.

“Pain,” answered Vince, aiming at the baron’s tightly puckered sphincter with the intensely glowing iron.

Standing in front of the keep, Vince realized this wasn’t something he wanted to deal with. Not at any level, shape, or form.

It was entirely the reason he had given all of these duties to those he trusted. Giving them the brunt of such duties and letting them do with them as they saw fit.

“I wish I had my Elves,” he muttered under his breath.

Dryads filled the keep grounds.

Armed, dangerous looking, and every one of them with a face filled with anger and curiosity.

Anger he imagined for what'd been done to them over their life, and curiosity over the fact that they'd been asked to return. More so as they all noticed the Dryads, Blue at Vince's right, and Antona on his left.

The latter looking much renewed and with a vibrancy to her that Vince expected in Dryads. There was still a far more serious cast to her than his other Dryads, but the change in her was night and day.

"Hello," Vince said to the fifty or so Dryads. "My name is Vince Campbell. The Lord of Yosemite. The king of it, in fact. I'm here in Spain to take these lands as my own. They will come under me in their entirety. I will bend this land to my whims, or it'll break.

"After I've broken it, I'll put the pieces back together in the shape I see fit. There is no in-between area in this matter. I will not be deterred."

Elizabeth appeared from around the side of the keep, dragging along behind her by an ankle the charred and blood-splattered corpse of the baron.

She pulled him up to the front of Vince and dropped him there. Between the Dryads he'd tortured and the man who'd killed him.

"I've already gone ahead and... taken care of the baron. I'm going to have his corpse thrown into the midden heap where the night-soil goes," explained Vince with a dismissive wave of his hand. Every Dryad there had dull-glowing eyes as they stared at the corpse in front of them. None of them missed what'd been done to the man. "After returning to him what he'd done to you, I broke the iron rod off. Inside of him. It'll be buried with him.

"No Dryad will be harmed here again. In fact, nor will a Dryad be harmed in Coruna, either. I've already taken it for my own. While I couldn't save Flora or the other already planted Dryads, I did install Leandra as my duchess there.

"Before you have any regrets for those in Coruna, I retrieved their bodies. I planted them at the foot of their trees. I instilled them and their grove with power. They'll return.

"I'll tell you why as well. My country is not one from your continent. We come from a different land. Far to the west. My Dryads are revered as priestesses who can bring a Dryad back from death.

They hold great healing power and can commune with all of nature there.

“And because I know you’ll ask, I’m their Grove-husband, and grove. Inside me are their many trees. Leandra is also here with me. As is Antona, now.”

All the eyes there were moving between Vince, Blue, and Antona. There was a communal shuffling of feet and anxious hands.

Eyes that’d been hard moments ago were softening as they listened. Hope coming back to them once again.

“Now... your part in this. I relieve you of your duty, you poor... scorned Dryads. I formally end your suffering in your forced obligation,” offered Vince. He’d spoken with Blue at length about how to handle this.

Once he was done inviting all the Dryads into his grove, he’d need to move on the prisoners. Sam was busy flying back to Petra even now to relay the news and information they’d gained.

Leila and Zathira were actively torturing the dead baron for information. His soul had been easy for them to hold onto since he’d managed to live until Leila showed up.

“You may end your watch and I welcome you to my grove if you wish it. I would —”

“I’m whole,” Antona interrupted in a loud voice. “I joined his grove, and I was made whole. I’m... I’m me. I’m still healing, and it will likely take me a week more, but I’m whole.

“It doesn’t hurt to soil the ground anymore. I don’t fear changing my undergarments for fear of what I’d find there. I don’t... I don’t hate seeing children anymore. For the bitterness that was in my heart is gone.

“I’m whole. The Lord of Dryads made me whole. He gave it all back to me. I’m free.”

As she spoke, Antona’s eyes began to violently glow. Almost as if sparks were cascading across the pupil-less expanse of her iris.

“You should all ask the Lord of Dryads to accept you because every word he’s said is the truth. He only brought one grovewife with him,” Antona continued, pointing at Blue now. “He has eighty or so back home. They are the backbone of his kingdom.”

Several Dryads raised their hands to him. He saw in each was a tired-looking and beaten down seedpod. Some had more life than others, but all were visibly sickly.

“As the Grove-mistress, I welcome you all,” Blue declared and then reached up to gently pull Vince’s shirt away. This was further down in the script, but it seemed like it was time to speed things up. “I would also ask that you consider taking up your arms and training in defense of Yosemite.

“Because even if you fall for V— the Lord of the Dryads, you will be called back later. So long as you wish it, you’ll always come back.”

Blue had deftly split open his skin and the entry point for Dryad seedpods was available once again. Dryads began to form up in front of him with eyes that glowed dully and hope on their faces.

Lord of the Dryads, huh?

I suppose it’s not wrong. They really are the backbone of my kingdom. They bound everything together underneath me and hold everyone together forcefully.

“I’m not a Dryad, can... can you still make me whole?” asked a woman who’d stepped ahead of the rest. In fact, she’d moved even before Blue had asked for people to join him.

In her hands wasn’t a seedpod from a tree, but a handful of what looked to be dirt with a few blades of brown grass in it.

“I’m... I was a small deity. A goddess of a field. It wasn’t a big one, but enough that when I came here, I could retain myself. Remain a small god. I didn’t need any worship to exist.

“They... took me from my home and burned it... the field... to the ground. Everything was scorched and turned to farmland. They treated me like a Dryad no matter how much I said I wasn’t. They... burned me... inside, too.

“I pretended to be a Dryad and agreed that the tree they brought from my valley and the dirt with it was mine. This is all I have with me that I stole from that pot. I haven’t... touched any of my earth since. This is all my grass. There’s nothing else.”

Looking at the woman, Vince found she really did look a lot like a Dryad.

Her hair was a rather attractive bright-red color with flowing curls. It was a very similar shade, in fact, to Green's hair. She was much taller though and came up to Vince's height.

Eyes that were a pale blue, the color of a sky after a rain, peered into his face hopefully. Her figure was far more akin to a normal woman's, though she did have a little more in her dimensions than the average.

She was no way near what a Dryad was in form or shape, but there was a similar vibrancy of life and nature to her.

He could tell at a glance that her nature was quite similar to a Dryad's as well.

Beyond all that, he was somewhat surprised though. He was well aware of deities. He knew that you inherently didn't want to make deals with them. That unless you invoked them, or brought them up, they had no power or real influence.

The fact that she was supposedly a small goddess was a bit of a shock to him.

Except he felt her words were true and honest.

Maybe there were different types of deities entirely that he'd never met before.

What if I can... add a deity to my grove?

"What's your name, my little valley goddess?" asked Vince with a smile.

"I'm... that... my name is Dea. Just Dea," answered the woman with a smile in return for him. She looked nervous but excited. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "You really are a Lord of the Dryads, aren't you? You feel a lot like those I knew from my old world. Decades ago. I've... been here for so long. I never thought I'd escape this hell."

Taking her hands in his, Vince simply guided the dirt into the hole in himself rather than respond to her depressing words.

He was already pushing his trees to please gather it up and incorporate her into themselves. To let her be the soil for their grove and cherish her.

As she was no different than them. A Dryad of a field, rather than a tree.

Greedily, the roots of the trees accepted the dirt and grass as it was passed into his chest. Even going so far as to briefly appear at the edges of the wound to scour any smudge that'd been left on his skin.

Dea looked shocked for a second, then promptly fell backward. She collapsed to the ground even as her skin began to glow.

Almost like someone had stuck a miniature sun inside her.

"Well. That's our first goddess," murmured Blue and then motioned to Dea. Elizabeth was there to gently scoop up the woman. She then carried her a short distance and laid her gently out on the grass. "To those who would wish to join us, please... come forward with your seeds."

Inside himself, he could feel a drastic change occurring. The trees were busily forming a ball of roots around the remnant of the goddess and shielding it.

They pushed power into that soil and incorporated it into their grove. To make it a tiny valley in a grove, all the size of a single man.

Even as that happened, the deity named Dea lay on the ground radiating enough light that he could actually feel some heat from it now.

Changes. Always changes.

We'll go get her soil in a bit. Add it to the rest in me.

After this though, the dungeon.

Or... actually... we can have the prisoners brought to the roof. That's easier. I can get Dea's dirt there and replant the trees elsewhere.

They'll all likely die without their Dryads but there's no sense in not at least trying.

"Blue, please make sure our poor goddess is cared for. She's the only one I have," murmured Vince, wondering what kind of power-up he'd get for such a thing.

Chapter 22

“This one, isn’t it,” he murmured, looking at a tree in a pot. He’d never seen such a thing like this. If it wasn’t a Dryad tree, it’d likely suffer quite a bit and die in a situation like this. “It looks terrible.”

“Yes, that’s most certainly not a Dryad tree,” agreed Blue, leaning down next to him. She stuck a finger in the soil, then touched it to her tongue. She chuckled and shook her head. “It’s Dea. This soil is full of life. The only way she kept the tree alive, and pretended to be a Dryad, was keeping all she had of her valley here.”

“Ugh, I have no idea what putting all that dirt in me is going to do but... whatever,” growled Vince. “It’d empower her, right? The more I put in?”

“It’ll empower all of us. I’m certainly feeling much... stronger... now that I have soil for my tree. A goddess’s soil, too. We’re all very possessively hanging on to every crumb of her earth.”

“Fine... ugh. Okay. I’ll just... lay down, I guess. You can start shoveling it into me. I’m not going to get sick from this, am I?”

“Not supposed to be putting shovels full of dirt into my damn body. Sounds like the opposite of healthy.”

“Vince, honestly, at this point your body isn’t even human anymore,” Leila murmured as Vince took his shirt off and then sat down next to the pot.

“She’d know, she got drunk off you like you were a really high proof alcohol,” Sam laughingly reported from where she sat on the edge of the tower. She was panting and catching her breath.

The note she’d brought back from Petra had been very simple.

An acknowledgment that she had to move forward and to return in two days with a new report.

“We need Fairies or Fae. We can’t rely completely on Sam,” complained Vince and got comfy against the ground. “She’s being overworked.”

“Oh, relax. We already have a way to spare your beloved Sam,” teased Blue, one hand gently patting his chest.

“Good. She is beloved,” argued Vince, glaring up at Blue. He knew she was teasing him because of what he’d done to her. “Just

as you are, Blue. Mind giving me a kiss from that pretty mouth of yours?”

Blue grinned, sighed, and shook her head. Leaning down, she gave him a tender kiss and stroked his cheek once.

When he countered her teasing romantically, she often gave up the tactic.

“You know me too well,” she admitted and then gave him another kiss. Reaching out with her hand, she opened his chest up again. “Cristina and some other winged Ants of the royal family will be assisting with messenger duties. She’ll be here tomorrow.

“Sam and Cristina will alternate days on messenger duties.”

“That works. Prisoners?” he asked as Elizabeth came over with a hand shovel. She gave him a smile and nodded her head.

“I used a few of the Dryads to help out. They’re bringing up the prisoners now,” answered Elizabeth. “I’m going to lead the Dryads. Blue feels it’ll be a good... learning experience for me. To help satisfy another’s needs and wants.

“I... I chose Antona to be my second for now. I’ll... I’ll evaluate them and make changes as we go.”

Huh. Alright.

Elizabeth was down on her knees next to him now and shoveling dirt into his chest. In response, the trees miserly snatched at every speck as it fell in. Only to add it to the rest of Dea’s dirt. It was a very strange feeling for Vince.

Turning his head, he looked at the unconscious Dea not far away. She’d been laid out and was still unconscious.

Thankfully, she’d stopped doing her own impression of a lightshow.

“Dryad Lord, we’ve brought the prisoners but... we didn’t bring them all,” reported Antona, coming into view. Unable to help her suddenly reborn Dryad nature, she gave him a wondrous smile that made her eyes glow faintly. As if coming back to herself, she blinked twice, and the smile lessened considerably.

“You look lovely, Antona. You’ve perked right up. Tell me, what kind of tree are you?” asked Vince, not wanting to let this moment fade. He needed to push these poor battle-broken Dryads back to a

bit of normalcy. “Actually, wait. I’ll guess. Now... given who you are as a person and how you’ve thrived... you’re an Evergreen, aren’t you?”

Antona opened her mouth, closed it, and then nodded her head with a grin. Her entire face lit up again and she appeared genuinely curious how he’d guessed.

“Just felt right. That’s all. I’m glad you look as well as you do, Antona,” Vince answered before she could ask. “Now, my wonderfully pretty Antona, pack those pretty green eyes back in your head and tell me about the prisoners.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Antona nodded her head fractionally. Behind her, he could see several other Dryads, all very curious, and also all smiles. His banter with her had likely eased some of the burdens in their own hearts.

“My Lord, they’re prisoners who broke laws that were... unjust or... dumb,” elaborated Antona. “So I’ve brought you three who were accused of magical maleficence.”

Turning his head, Vince looked to where Antona had directed his gaze. Two men and a young woman were there.

Fairly standard-looking for humans, they didn’t elicit anything out of the ordinary from Vince. Their eyes were stuck on the dirt being poured into him.

They’ll serve my purpose just fine.

“Are you from the magical community?” he asked them directly.

“I... yes,” answered the man in front. He gestured to the young woman next to himself. “We’re from Magi Vale. We came here to get Daniela.”

“Great, you can return. Please take a message for me to your leader,” Vince said with a small nod of his head. This would be perfect. “Vince Campbell, King of Yosemite, will be coming to speak with them.

“This would be in regards to the possibility of an alliance against... well... everyone. I plan on taking this land for myself. All of it. Right up to the end of the mountain range. My understanding is it’s a no man’s land no one wants.

“I want it. I want all of it and everything south of it. It’ll all be mine. After that, I’m not sure. We’ll see who is north of us at that point.”

Smiling to himself, Vince really did enjoy this sort of work better.

It’d taken him a while to realize his calling in life hadn’t been that of a ranger.

But instead to be a Warlord with a team of special operatives.

“You can go. That’s all. I have no price for your freedom otherwise, just deliver the message,” Vince finished with a nod of his head.

Elizabeth was still pouring dirt into his chest and the trees were gobbling it down faster than his Dryads did him when they got the chance.

He’d also noticed Dea had a bit of a shiver every time more of her dirt was added to him. He truly was clearly her receptacle and valley at this point.

“We thank the Lord of the Dryads,” said the other man. “We will, of course, relay your message.”

The Dryads left, following the magicians back down the stairs.

“They weren’t very strong,” offered Leila. She was here to monitor what was happening with Vince as he took in Dea’s dirt. “Any of our Elves could overpower them with only a thought or two. The magic of this continent is stunted or... they just were really weak.”

“Dunno,” mused Vince, staring up into the sky above them. “Antona seems a lot better.”

“She really is,” agreed Blue from where she was tending to Dea. “They’re all better. It was good you divided up the power like that to jump-start them all.

“I think it’ll only be a month before you have to seed them all. Though Antona will be more likely in a week or so. At that point, we’ll need to get Leandra in front of you as well.”

Blue looked thoughtful as she stared at the valley goddess, then she grinned and clapped her hands together twice.

“Oh! We can have a Dryad wife ranking party again! I remember it like it was yesterday. You knew just who I was without even seeing me. You can rank Grove-wives like that,” Blue announced joyfully. “I

wish I could relieve that moment. I still can't believe I was chosen so early and quickly. That you knew right where I was."

"I wanna watch," demanded Sam.

"Yes, as do I," chimed in Elizabeth, packing another shovel full of dirt into him.

"It'll be fun," Leila added. "I'm sure I can learn a lot about grove magic too, seeing them receive him the first time."

Vince shrugged. He saw no reason not to.

"Lord, this is the point where they let people in for trading," Antona called out and turned her mount toward him.

They'd all taken horses from the city and ridden out this way. Moving on foot was apparently a good way to get caught by bandits or worse.

Red, Elizabeth, and Leila had all declined. They had faster and more secure means of travel at their disposal.

Vince had assumed this was the location given the ephemeral plane of magic he could see. It was shaped in a massive dome that started here and went all the way into the distance. Likely where the city was.

"You don't see this?" he asked, indicating the magic.

"I— no, Lord. I'm... I don't know any magic. None of us were allowed to be taught. To see it, I'd have to... to understand a little bit of magic," Antona answered.

"Blue?" Vince started.

"Already have a training course planned, my dearest. I'll have all our Grove-wives whipped into shape in no time," promised the spunky Dryad.

"Thanks, love. You're amazing," murmured Vince and then reached out to lay his hand against the magic. It felt quite solid against his hand. It was a near straight upward and flat surface for quite a while before it began to curve away.

"Dea? Do you see it?" inquired Vince.

"Of course, my Lord. Errr... master. My go—"

“Vince is fine, Dea. You’re my goddess, are you not?” he reminded her and then tapped on the magic with his knuckles.

“I’m... your goddess. Yes. The Goddess of Yosemite and all its lands. You are my lord. The Lord of Dryads,” murmured the lovely valley goddess.

She’d woken up the next morning as if no time had passed. She’d also been completely restored to full health, unbelievably.

A goddess full of power and vitality was a very attractive woman, it seemed. Especially so when she was the proclaimed goddess of all the lands of Yosemite.

She’d been little better than a Dryad one day, then had the strength of a Red Dragon the next.

On top of which, her bust and hips had expanded, even though she had no idea why or even how. Vince believed it was the Dryads messing with her proportions, but he couldn’t prove it.

Dea hadn’t complained about it either and had quickly run Blue down after she woke up.

Getting down off his horse, Vince stood in front of the magical barrier. He lifted his hand and knocked on it several times.

He knew the magicians had already made it back here, as he’d sent Red to track them.

The feral Beastkin was currently searching the areas around them for any type of ambush. Along with Leila and Zathira.

“Hello?” Vince called out after knocking. “My name is Vince Campbell. I’m here to speak with your leader.”

There was no response.

“Uh-huh,” he muttered and turned his gaze to Leila. “They can hear me through this, right?”

“Yes, there’s a spell inside of it that seems to give them limited visibility but full hearing,” concurred Leila.

“In other words, they don’t want to meet me. They’re rejecting my overture to talk,” Vince conjectured, looking to the dome. “They treat Dryads alright in there?”

“Uhm, I don’t know,” answered Antona. “My Lord, I... I’m very... I’m stupid. I can’t read. I can’t write. I barely know what’s going on outside the city, let alone the world. I’m—”

“Going to be taught and trained,” Blue soothingly interjected. Apparently, she was playing mother-hen to all these poor battle-hardened Dryads. They didn’t understand any of the feelings they were having and were all trained for violence and combat. “Vince just wanted to know if he should attack them outright.”

“I’ve never heard anything bad about their treatment of non-humans, Lord,” offered Dea.

“I’ll knock one more time, then... then I’ll really knock. When they’re all scrambling to offer me everything, they can regret not answering the door,” Vince hissed. “Maiden Elizabeth, give them a good Dragon knock for me?”

Elizabeth moved forward and shrugged off her greatcoat. Her wings popped up behind her and spread out. They were often slung low across her back to hide under the coat. She was easily confused with other races so long as the wings weren’t visible.

Pulling her arm back, she rocketed it into the dome of magic.

There was a pang noise that resounded throughout. A ripple of magic sent out shockwaves across the transparent surface.

“I still can’t believe the Lord has a Dragon-wife,” Antona whispered to what Vince suspected was Dea.

“He has twenty of them,” Elizabeth contradicted them. “I am but one of many and the least worthy of him. I’m earning my place and my mistress, Taylor, commanded that I lead this wing as if I were her.

“It will take time, but I will endeavor to make it so. Other Dragon Maidens will come as soon as they understand Vince’s greatness. Or at least... as soon as I am not as much of a failure.”

Frowning, Vince looked at Blue.

As far as he knew, Elizabeth wasn’t on his list of “wives”. Which meant something had changed in the background.

The Dryad gave him a look that promised him anything he wanted as long as he agreed for the moment. That any wish he wanted was his, so long as he played along.

“You’re doing fine, Elizabeth. And I’m not going to call you Beth. Your name is too pretty to shorten it,” he grumbled, realizing he didn’t want to disappoint Blue. “Alright, they’ve had their chance.”

Stepping up to the dome, Vince flexed his right hand, and then gave it a shake. Staring at the magic in front of him, he could certainly understand why they thought it'd stop him.

It could potentially stop a Dragon, after all. Depending on how long it was before said Dragon got bored or tired.

Vince was most certainly as weak as a Dragon.

"Lord, won't you hurt your hand?" Antona asked in a nervous voice.

Aww, she's worried for me.

She really is starting to show her Dryad side.

How lovely.

A Dryad can't be anything other than a Dryad, it seems. Even when you train them up in combat. I wonder if Betty's Dryads are the same.

"He's fine, dear," Blue said with a wave of a hand.

With single-mindedness, Vince put his goal firmly in his mind. To focus his power into his arm and fist. To puncture the dome in one go and bring it crashing down.

Lashing out with a single punch, he put his body and weight into it as well.

There was a crunching noise that sounded a lot like bones breaking.

Several seconds after that and the magical dome collapsed into itself. The entirety of it broke apart as if had been crafted of brittle, poorly-made glass.

"Hm. That took a little bit more than I expected," complained Vince, examining his hand. There was some redness along his knuckles that looked like they had been rubbed against a stretch of rock.

Opening his hand, he gave it a shake, then closed it and made a fist.

Flexing it to see how it felt.

Nothing had the feeling of being wrong and everything was as it should be.

He had the distinct impression that it would have been much worse for him if he hadn't eaten so much Wyrms heart. Maybe being

forced to eat the second heart was far more beneficial to him than he'd considered.

"Wing Leader Elizabeth," Vince began, looking over at the Dragon.

"I— that is... y-yes, Nest-mate?" asked Elizabeth in a tight voice.

"Let's discuss my requirements of your Wing later. What you expect of me as your Nest-mate. Needs for a vault and how much gold you'll require," he laid out, remembering all the things Ramona had coached him on. "As it would appear you're ready to move ahead. Is that fair to say?"

"Very fair! Yes, please. I would... would like that. As well as to talk more about me and... well, me," Elizabeth answered quickly. She'd picked up her greatcoat by this point and was pulling it back over herself. Her wings moved around beneath it and shuffled into place.

"Great. Let's go have a talk with the Magi Vale morons and find out why they didn't want to chit-chat with me. Because honestly, I'm fucking adorable and they should have wanted to chat me up," Vince growled and clambered up onto his horse. Grabbing the reins, he pulled the animal around and started him down the road again.

Chapter 23

There was a clatter and pop as something came toward Vince at a high speed. Incredibly, it sounded akin to a bear racing through brushwood. Snapping off branches, saplings, and anything else that got in its way.

“Must be Red,” muttered Vince and pulled to the side of the road closest to the small copse of trees.

“Red is... terrifying,” answered Dea, moving to keep at his side.

The valley goddess didn't like to be very far from him, it seemed. She was practically living in his shadow. On his other side were Antona and Blue, his Dryad attendants as they were.

“No, she isn't. She's absolutely lovable,” argued Vince. “Here, I'll help you with her.”

Blasting through a bush at high speed, Red popped out on the other side. Her eyes were already locked onto him.

“Bringer! Red found soldiers! They're not those we've been fighting. Their uniforms are different. It's a dark brown and Red has never seen it before,” reported the Beastkin. “Leila is watching them now while I report back. They saw her, so she can't leave easily.”

“Makes sense. Anything else?” asked Vince.

“Mmm, Red saw magic people forming up outside the wall. They ran back inside after the magic wall went boom. Red was climbing on it and fell,” said Red with a chuckle. “They were very concerned that Red wasn't sliding off.”

“I mean, I'd be rather terrified, Red,” Blue said and smiled at the Beastkin. Vince had been quite clear with Blue that Red had been the one to suggest she needed a present. “You're such a noticeable and unique person. For those who are your enemy, it's right for them to be afraid.”

Red sniffed, grinned at Blue, and nodded her head.

“Red loves you, Blue. Just as Red loves Vince,” grumbled the Beastkin, moving along with the horses easily. She was distinctly ever unsure of what to do with her feelings for him and Blue.

“I know you do, sweetheart,” Blue answered with a wave of her hand.

“Alright. Will we run into them if we stay on this road?” asked Vince.

“Yes, you will end up between them,” Red confirmed.

“Great. I need you here. Will you do me a favor, my darling Red?” asked Vince, guiding the horse into a bit faster of a pace.

“Anything for Bringer! Red’s husband deserves everything!” declared Red.

“Dea is a little nervous and was wondering if you would sit with her. She was concerned about bothering you though,” lied Vince. “She didn’t want to disturb your duties.”

Red’s head snapped to Dea, then gave her a wide grin.

“Red will sit with Vince’s goddess wife,” the Beastkin stated. Moving over, she clambered up into the saddle behind Dea even as the deity stiffened up and stared straight ahead.

“You smell nice, Dea. Like a field,” Red murmured and stuck her head into Dea’s armpit, inhaling deeply. “Smell good. Dea should brush Red’s hair later for her. You’d make Red’s hair smell nice if you used your hands.”

“I... uhm... yes. Yes, I will, Red,” agreed the deity, still staring straight ahead. Red’s arms had come up under Dea’s breasts and she was now hanging onto the other woman. “Not a problem.”

“Good, good. Red likes Dryads. You’re not a Dryad, but you feel like one. Red thinks she’ll like you a lot,” said Red as she began to rub her face back and forth against Dea’s back.

“See?” asked Vince, catching a fleeting look from Dea before she looked ahead again.

He’d suspected Red would like her. She was a goddess of nature and Red was a Cursed One. She’d be inclined to feel something she hadn’t in a long while.

Dea nodded her head fractionally, still quite stiff.

“Red, can I give her some ribbons to put in your hair? Nice black ones? I got you some in Bilbao and I think they’d go really well with your hair color,” asked Blue.

“Red would like that. Thank you, Grove-wife. Amazing wife. Red doesn’t deserve you,” noted Red as she began to rub herself against

Dea's back much more forcefully. "Don't worry, Vince's goddess wife. Red will protect you as well."

Vince cut the chat short and got his horse up to a full gallop.

He wanted to see what was happening ahead. It sounded like exactly the type of situation he wanted to insert himself into.

As they rode down the road, Vince could see what Red had been talking about.

There was a battle line drawn up facing the wall of a very large castle-like city. One that was as large as Yosemite and then double that. The wall was a massive structure that rose as high as some of the biggest buildings he'd seen.

"Red, where's Zathira?" asked Vince. He'd forgotten to find out where his Necromancer was.

"Red doesn't know," mumbled the Cursed One as she continued to nuzzle and rub all over Dea. Her hands were pressed firmly against Dea's front as if not wanting to let the goddess escape. "Red never saw her."

"Damn. Alright. I'll just assume she's working on my behalf. Somewhere," complained Vince.

"Most certainly," Antona stated with a sharp nod of her head. "She knows her place, Lord. Do not doubt her. I've only known her a short while, but I've spoken with her several times."

"Don't worry about her," agreed Blue. "Just use our dear Elizabeth for whatever you were going to ask. She's more talented than you think."

The Dragon who was moving at a smooth and languid run turned her head fractionally. She looked toward Blue as her name came up.

Wincing, Vince didn't want to actually give this task to Elizabeth. Her track record as of late hadn't really been to his liking. While she was clearly trying, she was still struggling.

"Elizabeth, any type of rifle or weapon likely to break through your scales?" he asked. "Or magic? I know most Dragons are very resistant to magic, but... Leila can exterminate Reds fairly easily."

“No, Nest-mate, nothing they have could harm me, I imagine. As to magic... well, I’m not a Silver Dragon. I’m a Platinum Dragon. There is very little that they could throw at me that could... harm me. Beasts like the Wyrms are far more likely to injure me, rather than what humans or humanoids could do to me,” Elizabeth said as she ran along, the greatcoat’s arms flapping behind her.

Vince knew of a number of differences in Dragons and what they could do, but he didn’t honestly know what was different between a Black and a Platinum.

“Okay. Get ahead of us and land in the middle. Between the wall and those forces. I’d like to have a chat with both of them,” ordered Vince. “Antona, I need you to stay here. Leila and Zathira could more than likely join you here, as well.

“Dea, Red, Blue, you’ll be with me. I’ll need you all for this, I imagine. Likely someone will need to be taught a lesson and I’ll use you to make that point. Red, you’ll handle those with the guns. I can’t imagine them actually catching you if you didn’t want to be caught.”

“Red won’t be caught. Red has been shot at a lot and is used to dodging them. Bullet wounds heal easily, too,” called Red over the sound of the horse hooves slamming into the ground. Her face was partly pressed into Dea’s armpit still.

“Dea, you’ll be dealing with the magic. You ready to flex those goddess powers for me?” asked Vince.

“I’ll do all I can, Lord,” responded Dea.

“I expect you to succeed, Goddess of Yosemite, Dea. If you don’t, you and I will be having to dodge a lot of magic attacks, I’d bet,” pointed out Vince.

“I will succeed,” Dea clarified.

Running ahead of the horses as if they were moving slow, Elizabeth pulled her coat free. Tossing it over her shoulder once it came undone, she took off into the air. Her wings flapped behind her rapidly as she began to grow in size.

It didn’t take long for both sides to see her coming. No one did anything, but each combatant fixated on her.

I mean... all she has to do is go by in a pass and turn them all into a barbecue, right? Just light'em up.

*So it was probably the right choice to send her out first.
Maybe.*

“She really will be fine,” promised Blue. “She’s just very young and... uhm... dumb. She’ll grow in wisdom with time.

“That or I’ll beat it into her thick skull. I’m fairly certain I won’t have to do that. At least... fairly certain.”

Young and dumb.

Been there.

With a roar that reminded Vince of Taylor, Elizabeth spread her wings and let loose a massive jet of flame into the air. It was an eye-catching demonstration of power that no one could miss.

Pulling her wings in sharply, Elizabeth then sped toward the ground like a meteor. Flame and smoke trailed out behind her as she went, giving her a rather hellish appearance.

“Oh, good. She listened,” Blue exclaimed. “I was trying to tell her that sometimes showmanship is better than aggression!

“I used Sam as an example. She doesn’t have to get aggressive with you, for you to notice her and want more of her.”

“If you turn Elizabeth into Sam part two... I’m going to do my best to never embarrass you again,” growled Vince as they drew ever closer.

“She won’t!” promised Blue.

Elizabeth smashed into the ground, a cloud of dirt and dust creating a geyser of debris in the air. Several breaths and riding onward later, it started to clear away.

Standing in the middle was Elizabeth. Her wings were spread wide behind her, her head raised up, though her body was positioned so she faced neither side.

She had one eye on each side and was watching them.

Perfect.

That’s... actually well done.

Hm. Maybe I’m only thinking poorly of her, when in reality, she’s learning as quickly as she can. I’ll have to really speak with her after this.

Sam flew in low at that moment and plunked herself down in front of Vince on the saddle. She leaned back against him and cleared her

throat.

“I let Leila know what you were doing. I could tell without even talking to you,” shouted the Fae. “You’re going to make one ally with you, then destroy the other, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Vince agreed with a smirk.

One side or the other would become his ally, and he’d crush the other.

What Sam hadn’t said was that it mattered who treated Dryads better.

If they both treated them poorly, Zathira would be adding even more corpses to her collection with this.

Because Vince wouldn’t suffer anyone to survive who could treat a Dryad poorly. It was the very same reason he knew for a fact that Thera would be pushing into the west and east of their own continent. Taking all the lands for Yosemite and leaving nothing behind.

Soon the Emperor would be little more than a city-lord without any lands to rule.

Mr. White and Felix had put the Emperor on the wrong side of technology.

Vince had ended up reaching Elizabeth while lost in his thoughts.

Dismounting from his horse, he carried Sam with him as he walked right up to the Dragon.

“Elizabeth, please inform both parties that I need a representative to come speak with me, and who I am,” he asked, looking up at the bright-eyed beast of destruction. He knew firsthand a Dragon could be loud to the point of it being impossible to comprehend.

Putting his fingers in his ears, he turned and looked at everyone else.

They quickly all repeated the same action, stuffing fingertips into their ears.

“The Lord of the Dryads demands an audience!” shouted Elizabeth at a volume that made Vince wince. Even with his ears plugged, it still made his head ache. “Send a representative forward!”

Vince grunted and nodded his head, then pulled his fingers out.

There was most definitely a ringing in his ears.

Making eye contact with Blue, he made a finger looping signal and then pointed at his ears.

Blue just gave him a wide smile and then began moving from person to person. For each, she laid her hands over their ears and paused for a moment.

Dea stepped in front of him and put her hands on his ears.

Her eyes were wide, and she was staring at him as if she wanted to bolt off and run. To flee into the woods and hide away.

“There... better?” she asked after a few seconds, letting her hands down from the sides of his head. Her hands had felt warm and soft.

“Much, thank you, Dea,” he answered and gave her a grin.

“Ready to be the Goddess of Yosemite? Would be good if you could step up and really make yourself known.

“You’re the second deity I’ve met, so I’m not really sure what to expect from you here. I mean... I think I’ve already done all I can with declaring you as the Goddess of Yosemite this morning. I did try to pass the message along to my Dryads just after that through their trees in me but they’re dormant. Not sure if it made it.”

“You’ve met another? Another deity?” Dea asked curiously.

“Ferris, goddess and mother to the Dragon race. Met her. Pretty sure our Elizabeth there is her daughter. Since she called her mom and all.”

“Yes. I’m her daughter. You... don’t care?” inquired Elizabeth from behind him. He got the impression her big scaly head was looming over his shoulder. “You knew and you still... kept me?”

“Sure as shit wasn’t going to give you up. Sorry. You’re mine, Elizabeth,” Vince observed.

“Yes, I’m yours, Nest-mate,” murmured the Dragon, then laid part of her jaw down on his shoulder. “May I call upon my mother later to talk to her?”

“That’s fine,” acknowledged Vince, reaching up to pat Elizabeth’s chin. “Dea? What can you do?”

“I can do... a lot. I think. Maybe?” Dea asked almost to herself, then she sighed and shook her head. “I have more power now than

I've ever experienced before. I feel as if there's perhaps no limits to what I can do."

"Oh?" inquired Vince, stroking at Elizabeth's scales.

"Yes! There's so much faith in you. So much. And it's all bleeding off into me. Into my... my little valley inside of you," confessed the deity. She shook her head minutely at the same time. "I'll do all I can, I just don't know what I can do because this has never happened to me."

"Vince, Leila's coming down," Sam said from where she was in his arms.

Lifting his head, he looked to the sky above. Leila was indeed coming down on her disc.

"Hello there, pretty lady," he said as she descended. "Zathira alright?"

"Oh, she's just fine. Collecting corpses. Someone left a mass grave not far off. She was rather excited," answered Leila.

"Fantastic. We'll just wait here for their people and go from there," Vince laid out.

"You know, you should be petting me. Not the Dragon. Especially since, you know, you've got a hand full of boob," remarked Sam in a very dry tone. "Not that I'm complaining, but... it feels kind of depressing that you haven't seemed to notice. Or done anything about it."

Unable to help himself, he experimentally squeezed with his hand and found that yes, he did have a handful of Sam. As well as the fact that he hadn't realized he was doing it. In moving to pet Elizabeth, he'd removed the hand from below her. She was hanging onto him, more than he was holding her.

Rather than responding, Vince put his hand back under her rear end, grabbed it, and began to fondle her with both hands. Not responding verbally at all.

"He didn't know, damn it. Casually has me in his fingers and he doesn't know," complained Sam with a sigh. "At least you know how to caress a woman when you're paying attention."

Standing there, Vince put his mind to letting his hands and fingers roam over the Fae.

“Red sees someone coming from the soldiers. No one... is coming from the magic people,” growled the Beastkin.

“No? Hm. Let’s fix that. Elizabeth. Go get me a representative. If you have to kill a few... that’s fine. Last resort if possible, preferably.

“Ask them nicely first. From their wall. While perched on it.”

Elizabeth didn’t say anything, but she shot into the sky instead. Her wings cracking in the air as she gained altitude.

“Red thinks people will be catching on fire,” Red said. “Dragon wife is eager to show she can do it. Red understands.”

Looking the way Elizabeth had gone, while still doing his best to pay attention to Sam’s body, he watched as she slammed down into the wall.

“Send out a representative now!” demanded the Dragon at full volume as several spells all slammed into her face and head. She paid them no heed at all as the magical attacks slid over her scales or bounced off her. “You have ten seconds to comply or I’ll torch everything!

“I’ll present the Lord of Dryads the husk of your city and then take your corpses away so he can bring immigrants here! Immigrants that’ll... that’ll take your homes over and eat your food! Own your possessions!

“I’ll-I’ll chew you all up and spit you out where you... go to the bathroom! So the tiny rodents can eat you!”

Red started laughing, slowly tipping to one side. She began to roll around on the grass, snickering excitedly.

“Mm... she’s trying,” Vince breathed with a chuckle. “Elizabeth is trying very hard. And you’re right, Blue. She could never be like Sam.”

“Course not. I’m fun size and witty. She’s like a damn tree that you’d have to build a platform next to, just to have a bland conversation with,” interjected Sam. “Almost as bad as Zathira.

“Hey, switch boobs. That one’s a little too sensitive now. Work the nipple later this time. You had the first one all ready to go too fast.”

Chapter 24

“I think someone is finally coming,” Blue complained loudly.

Vince shifted away from Leila and faced the city of Magi Vale.

“We’ll have to finish this discussion later I suppose, my dearest Warlock,” apologized Vince. “Suffice it to say, I’m eager to see how you can enhance the Undead as you suggested.”

“Of course. Not a problem. I’ll just... move above if you don’t mind. Keep an eye on both sides,” answered Leila as she remounted her floating disc.

As soon as she had her feet firmly planted on it, it began to rise up into the air.

“Other side now,” demanded Sam as she snuggled into Vince’s shoulder.

As directed, he moved his hand to the other side of her chest and began running his fingers and palm across her breast.

For the last ten minutes, he’d been simply fondling her unendingly.

“Very nice, thank you. You’re doing much better,” commended Sam and she let out a happy sigh. “I just need to train you better. Let’s start working on your handiwork more often. Then we’ll move on to kissing. I bet you’re a bit too rough for my tastes. Alright?”

“I... err... okay,” murmured Vince. He really didn’t know what to say or do with Sam anymore. The way she was pushing and prodding at him was entirely unexpected.

He found he liked how different it was.

“Damn it,” muttered Blue, followed by a low chuckle as she lifted her head up. She’d been toying with a small spindly bit of vegetation sticking out of the ground. “Okay, you know what? I want to be involved. I will be there to help educate him on kissing. Fondling, as well. I’m now involved, Sam.”

“Of course, you are. You’re the lead Dryad wife. Why wouldn’t you be, Blue?” countered Sam, shifting in Vince’s arm and pushing her chest more into his hand. “Mmm, right there. That’s lovely.”

Clicking her tongue, the Dryad looked frustrated and amused in equal measure.

“Red will go get the soldier man,” stated the Beastkin. She’d been leaning against Vince with her head on his shoulder. For whatever reason, she’d gone cuddly on him.

Shifting away at a trot, Red eventually ended up in an all-fours saunter.

Not for the first time, he wondered how she managed to make it look fluid. He’d tried doing the same a few times just for fun and it always felt strange to him.

“I don’t get it either. It feels like something in the way she’s built or the length of her arms or legs,” murmured Blue, taking Red’s place. Apparently he’d been thinking out loud. “Well, whatever it is, she’s beautiful at a run.”

“Very. Love watching her move,” agreed Vince.

Red stumbled for a moment and then spun around, looking back at them. She gave the both of them a wide and brilliant smile.

“Red loves you two, too!” called the Cursed One before running off again.

“I forget how good her hearing is,” grumbled Blue. “Though... I do love her. Didn’t expect that to happen.”

“That’s just how Red is. Barreling through. Tearing through anything in her way. Then pulling out your heart and eating it,” summarized Vince.

Red reached the older gentleman in the soldier’s uniform and began escorting him back to Vince. The man and several of his people had come close, but hadn’t closed the gap. They’d apparently decided to wait for the Magi Vale representative to come as well.

“Someone else is coming as well,” Dea announced. Her eyes were tracking something behind Vince. Deeper into the Pyrenees mountains, in fact.

“I suppose we did invite all parties,” he admitted, glancing over his shoulder.

Three people were coming forward. Following the line of their travel, he spotted what could be a group of people in the low hundreds. All hidden and tucked away in some brush and trees. Far enough away that they wouldn’t be noticed unless one truly looked at them.

The first of the trio was an Elf, next was some sort of Fae who was nearly as large as Sam, and the last was a Minotaur of some type. The last looked to be a warrior, while the Elf was more than likely some sort of magician.

Rather than worry over it, Vince instead put his focus back on the situation at hand. Everything would be somewhat dependent on how they all came together here.

“Hail,” called the soldier as he got closer. At his side was a holster with the butt of what looked to be a pistol sticking out. On the other side was a belted sword. The rifle that looked to be standard issue for this group had been left with his compatriots.

He was a solidly-built man who was taller than Vince. His frame had the look of a man who’d been in the military for too long and didn’t know how to get out, but was starting to put on weight with the years and wasn’t quite as fit as he once was. Black hair, dark blue eyes, and a flat mouth gave him a distrustful look.

“Lord of the Dryads?” asked the soldier.

“That’s me. Vince Campbell,” confirmed Vince.

“Tim. Tim Krasson, Lieutenant-Colonel. Siege force for Magi Vale and border patrol,” the man introduced himself.

Vince nodded and said nothing.

Elizabeth landed with a thump ten or twenty seconds later and held her hand out. A man dropped from her grasp and hit the grass with a thud.

“He’s the leader of the city, he says,” Elizabeth got out in a grunt. She seemed frustrated though he wasn’t quite sure why.

“—terrible. Terrible and rude,” cursed the man even as he stood up, brushing his hands across his rear end. Sighing loudly, he stood upright and then looked at Vince. He was just a bit taller than Vince and was stocky with more pounds than he would likely need. His dark hair was pulled back behind his head and he had a small goatee. “Lord of the Dryads, huh? You look like a homeless man.”

Elizabeth’s head snapped down and she clamped her mouth down around the man.

He’d had a second to react and had put a shield around himself. Only for it to instantly break under the Dragon’s jaws as they slowly

clamped shut.

Then she had the man between her teeth and lifted him up. With a shake of her head the man vanished into her mouth.

“Elizabeth, I need him. Don’t kill him,” Vince warned.

Growling, the Dragon tilted her head to one side and her jaw shifted about. She winced and then her jaw flexed.

Continued screaming came from inside her mouth as she seemed to be working the man around between her teeth.

Pretty sure she just wants to bite him in half at this point. She’s holding back by sheer will.

“Maiden Elizabeth, thank you for the defense of my image. Please spit him out,” Vince tried again.

With a snuffling noise, Elizabeth eyed him, then leaned down and spat the man out onto the grass. Quickly rolling away from the Dragon, the man ended up on top of Tim’s boots. Standing up quickly, he stood side by side with the man, both of them staring at Elizabeth.

“Hello,” called a voice from behind.

Elf, I guess.

“What can I do for you? Wasn’t really expecting a third party, if I’m being honest,” Vince informed the man, looking away from the two he’d wanted to speak with.

“Not a problem, not a problem. I’m Colomnon Hyzing and these are my comrades, Nixie and Hilga. We’re from—”

“Don’t care. What do you want?” prompted Vince.

“Ah... yes. Err...” started the Elf, blinking rapidly. His hands came up in front of himself and fluttered briefly before pulling some of his dark and wavy hair back behind a pointed ear.

“We just want to move south, Lord of the Dryads. Take our caravan with us and go sell our goods. Maybe do some mercenary work,” said the cow-like creature. Vince hadn’t expected her to be the one to speak up given the large twin axes on her person. “We’d be happy to make a deal to pass through without trouble.”

“Fine. Pay me whatever a normal bribe would be, then get going. I recommend heading to Bilbao and mentioning my name. Vince Campbell. Can get mercenary work there, I can promise you that.

“Was that it?” demanded Vince. “If so, thank you for the bribe, have a safe journey, hope your sales go well.”

“Ah... yes. That’d be it,” answered the fairy-type creature. Her head bobbed up and down quickly which made her black hair swish about. There was an odd look to her green-eyes that made her look like she wanted to say something more, but didn’t.

“Best you don’t, Nixie,” growled the Dragon, her eyes turned toward the flying creature.

Whatever had been in her mind was gone in that instant. The winged creature moving down behind the Elf partially.

“Ah, yes! Thank you very much. We’ll just... be going now and hope you have a nice war,” offered the Elf. They were quickly moving at a perpendicular angle away from Vince’s group now and where they’d come from.

Heh, the caravan kept moving as they distracted us. Smart.

“Right. Anyway. You two. Dryads. Are there any in your city? Any in your battalion or country?” Vince asked, putting his attention back to the two representatives.

Tim nodded his head and glanced to the man next to him.

Who said nothing, yet was still staring at Elizabeth.

“We have a single Dryad with us. Dryads... help us maintain order. We’re a stationary garrison, so she was able to plant her tree with us easily. We hired her back in Paris, helped her dig up her tree, and brought it all the way here,” Tim explained, turning back to Vince. “More like camp mothers. They get to fraternize with whoever they want but provide some basic first aid, an ear to listen, and someone who can defuse a situation.

“As to Francia as a whole... Dryads are regarded as citizens but only so long as they’re born of a citizen to begin with. Foreign Dryads have to apply for citizenship, but... there are certainly cases where they’re abused. Abducted and turned into house guardians.”

Hm. Okay.

So... well... okay. Much better than I expected.

Providing it’s the truth.

What Vince got back from the man’s emotions and surface thoughts was that he was being perfectly honest. There was nothing

incorrect with his statement.

There was a muddled quality to the man's mind, however. One that made it harder for Vince to get an accurate picture with just scanning at a surface level.

Vince looked up at Elizabeth, who nodded her head as soon as their eyes met. Having a mind-reading Dragon certainly made it nice to cross-check his own insights.

"And you, Mr...?" Vince asked, indicating the Magi Vale representative.

"Thomas Gibbons," hissed the man, reaching up to adjust his rather expensive looking vest. He put his fingers into the sides of it as if it were somehow something to be noticed.

What Vince got from this man's emotions was anger. Anger, indignation, and disgust. An ugly emotion that felt like a run-on sentence of shrieking fury.

Directed at Vince and the women around him, more than Tim or his compatriots.

"And you, Thomas? How does your city handle Dryads?" inquired Vince.

"We don't have any," lied the man. Vince could clearly see several Dryads locked away in what looked to be a large manor. They were little better than possessions and meant to be used as such.

They were all hidden, of course, as were his opinions. Apparently, the city as a whole had no idea of this man's beliefs or desires.

The feeling from the Dryad question started to bleed over into other things. Like how the man felt about women in general.

Which had caught Vince's attention and held it now.

"I see. And... how are women treated in Magi Vale?" asked Vince on a hunch.

"Citizens. Just as a man is, of course," answered Thomas.

Even though his mind was currently raging at the idea that these women were treating him this way. That they'd all be better suited to simply sit there and do exactly what they were told to do.

To be puppets without agency or thought.

“Alright. Your thoughts have betrayed you. You’re not a good person, let alone a good leader. I have no use for you whatsoever,” Vince said and gave Gibbs a finger-gun point. “Elizabeth, go find whoever is second in charge. We’ll keep going until we find the right person.

“Dea... get rid of him. Someone this foul doesn’t... deserve to live. Tim, let’s have a chat about what you can do for Yosemite and the Lord of the Dryads.”

The valley goddess lifted her hands up suddenly while Elizabeth took to the sky, flying back toward the city.

There was a glowing spark in the center of Dea’s eyes. A very intense spark that threatened to burn the world.

With a roar of dirt and rocks being shoved around, a massive hand formed not too far away. Easily four times as big as an Ogre’s, the arm stretched impossibly over to the man.

It plucked him up by thumb and forefinger and brought him into the green palm. The fingers snapped shut around him followed by a crunch of bones and a strangled moan.

Then the hand slid down back into the earth and Thomas vanished.

Pulled into the earth with nothing existing where the hand had once been, except for a loose ring of stones where the arm had vanished back into the ground.

Tim had stood perfectly still during the entire exchange, his eyes watching as Thomas was simply taken away. Only for the soldier to slowly turn to Vince and offer a tight smile.

“May I... may I send word to my superiors that I’ve encountered a superior force that is taking over Spain as a whole? That it’s led by a man called the Lord of the Dryads with... with very strong allies, who has taken control of Magi Vale.

“As well as the fact that I’d very much like to negotiate with the aforementioned party in good faith and negotiate a truce. As I don’t think Francia would want to open up a third theater of war at this time.”

“That’d be fine,” Vince allowed. “I’ll be here for a time. Would you like to leave now?”

“Very much so, my Lord,” admitted Tim with a small nod of his head.

“Then go. That’s fine. Come back when you can, as you can. Preferably with what you can negotiate with,” offered Vince.

The entire time he’d been speaking with the man, Vince had found fear, concern, and a great deal of trepidation. Dea’s display had unhinged the man and left him with a fear that felt common to the man.

One that Vince couldn’t identify, either.

Tim didn’t look as if he knew how to say goodbye to Vince and settled for a hand wave. He turned and started back the way he’d come from.

Red watched the man leave, folding her arms across herself. She tilted her head to one side and had a curious look on her features.

“Red thinks the soldier man is afraid,” muttered the Beastkin.

“He’s terrified,” agreed Dea, her eyes still holding the same spark. She looked acutely introspective. Her hands slowly moved back and forth in front of herself. “It’s a fear I can identify as I experienced it a few times.

“He’s afraid of what his commanding officers will tell him to do. Afraid that they might tell him to do something incredibly stupid. Like, launching an attack on Bilbao or the Magi Vale.

“That’s just me guessing, but... that’s what I’d be feeling if I was him.”

Ah... that makes sense. Lines up with what I was getting from him, as well. Couldn’t read his mind that clearly, but could get a read on his feelings.

Well.

All we can do is get the Magi Vale as a neutral party, or an ally. If they don’t want to cooperate, we can annihilate the city. Though I’d rather not.

For Tim and his people, the same, if not worse. Because I won’t hesitate in this. I’ll gladly create a demilitarized zone again. Have small Dragon-soul type bombs set off at the foot of the Pyrenees mountains.

All the way across except for a single kill funnel that I’ll hold.

Yosemite will never let another Tri-lliance invasion happen again. In fact... that talk with Elizabeth needs to happen. Immediately.

We need more Dragons. Both for ammo, and support.

“Good thing Bringer wants you in his harem, Dea,” Red said with a chuckle. “Or Red thinks you’d be no different than the other Battle-Dryads. Antona only has a smattering interest for Bringer, no more than any other Dryad.

“Red will pity and invite her to take Blue’s place here and there. Red thinks Antona is quite nice, and she has a darker mind than most Dryads.

“Blue... wouldn’t mind, would she? Red doesn’t want to upset her... her wife.”

“I wouldn’t mind that, Red,” confirmed Blue. “I have a lot of work to do. I never appreciated all that Meliae and Mouth did, I’m afraid.

“I suppose... Antona can be my own Mouth, in a way.”

“No, that’s Dea, Wife. Dea is our Mouth,” argued Red and then walked over to said goddess. “Bringer likes her more and her mouth is nicer.”

Dea was blinking rapidly and looking between Red and Blue with a clearly nervous and confused look. More so as Red approached her and reached up to gently cup Dea’s mouth with one hand.

“This is Dea, she will be our mouth. Red thinks she’s quite pretty and will gladly use her if Red doesn’t feel like Red wants to earn her food. Husband is also very interested in her. Red can smell it. Can’t you, Blue?” asked Red.

“I... well, yes but... Dea... are you okay with all this? You don’t even know what this all means,” inquired Blue

“Vince is my Lord and everything,” Dea whispered, still standing there with Red tenderly cradling her jaw and chin. “I’m... stronger than anyone I’ve ever known of. I would deny him nothing for what he’s given me back.”

“See? Dea will be our mouth,” Red declared and then gave Dea a warm, tender kiss that lasted only a second. Blue just nodded her head with a smile at the other woman. “Red welcomes you, Dea the mouth.”

“I—okay. Thank you, Red, Blue,” said Dea.

Chapter 25

“—then hold it in your mouth, and give it to Red. It becomes a lot of kissing and making out. She won’t stop until she really has taken every drop of it from you,” Blue explained in a nearly inaudible whisper. They were off to one side discussing what Dea had actually just agreed to. “Are you really sure you want to be her mouth? She hasn’t done it in a really long time, she prefers to get her meals herself, but that doesn’t mean she won’t.”

“Oh... oh, I see. My— I— well, I wasn’t expecting that. It makes sense, though,” murmured Dea, just as quietly.

“You can just back out and no one will care at all. It isn’t like it’s a formal thing or anything. If Red really needed someone to get her meal, I’d be the one to do it anyway and I don’t mind at all. That or one of the other Dryads.”

Blue had asked her repeatedly if she was still okay with the situation as they continued further and further in the conversation.

“I can do this. I can. It isn’t an issue. I’m... interested in him anyway. There’s a strange echoing feeling whenever I’m near him,” Dea answered, tilting her head to one side and looking at Blue curiously.

Vince, for his part, was eavesdropping. There was no way to say it otherwise, because he was. He was also laid out on the grass with his eyes partly closed, relaxing in the afternoon sun.

Red, Leila, Zathira, and Sam were all out handling things now.

Tim had fled along with his entire battalion. They were most likely on their way back to speak with their command group to discuss Vince and Yosemite.

Elizabeth was waiting on whoever would be speaking on Magi Vale’s behalf. That’d been twenty minutes ago, which meant they were likely debating who to send next.

There was probably a rapid change going on in the leadership structure now that Vince had acted. Their leader had been killed outright, their magic broken apart, and the besieging force sent off like a child who’d been scolded.

“—I’m really glad to hear that. Red’s not wrong, you know. He really is interested in you. He was even before I... ah... meddled... with you,” confessed Blue.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. It’s just... weird. Still getting used to looking like a Dryad,” muttered Dea. “I didn’t realize he was that interested in me, though. He already has so many women.”

“More than anyone realizes, honestly. He has many Dryads as wives and is adding more.

“All the Battle-Dryads will be his wives as well, once they heal. If they plant a seed in his grove, they become his wives and take no other.

“But yes, he’s interested in you. You’re different. Unique. He’s attracted to different and unique,” explained Blue. “Still. I’m sorry. You’re like... a Dryad goddess now. From a field to a wooded plain. You needed to be more Dryad-like and... well... yeah.”

“It’s fine, Blue, it’s fine. Now... wait, can he hear us?” Dea asked suddenly.

“No? I don’t think so. He’s never been able to hear this far before,” Blue said quickly. “If you’re nervous we can go further.”

“Yes, please. I don’t... yes,” mumble Dea.

Dea and Blue got up and moved a short distance further from him.

Laying there, Vince was bored. He hoped he could give the Magi Vale representative his demands and move on. He had things to do, places to be, and land to conquer.

Well.

We’ll wait. Give the laws to the Magi Vale leader, force them into accepting me as their lord, and install a Duke or Duchess. Then it’s back to Bilbao and figuring out what to do next.

Petra just wants me to hold, but... that seems almost too boring. We’ve been here a month now.

A second month would... yeah, that makes sense.

I guess I really just need to hold. How droll.

We’ll get back, talk to Elizabeth, and go on.

Yawning, Vince let his mind wander.

Magi Vale was no longer an issue, they just didn't really know it yet.

"Nest-mate, I've brought the person who now leads Yosemite's Magi Vale," declared Elizabeth in a low voice. Her volume felt like it was just above a whisper.

It'd been enough to wake him from the dozing nap he'd been taking, but not to startle him. It was a surprisingly astute observation on Elizabeth's part that he'd been asleep.

Yawning, blinking, and smacking his lips, Vince stretched himself out on the grass. Clambering to his feet, he sighed and looked at the newcomer.

It was a man who looked to be in his late fifties. His skin had suffered from the pull of time and his hair had fled, leaving nothing but a bald pate and grey-colored eyebrows behind.

They sat perched above cold, steel-colored eyes that had seen a great deal of death. Eyes that felt quite similar to the ones Vince saw in the mirror in regards to how they saw the world.

"Hello," Vince grumbled as he stood up straight and then pushed his hands in behind his back. There was a satisfying pop that made him feel like some of the tension fled. "Care to guess why I killed your leader?"

"No," spat the older man.

"He has Dryad hostages in his home that he abuses. Supposedly, Magi Vale treats them as citizens but that apparently didn't apply to him," Vince answered, then sniffed. Reaching up, he scratched at an eyebrow with one finger. "Please go free them and give them something for their pain and suffering. I plan on checking in with them later, so you better be generous with them considering their circumstances.

"He also had a very... unfortunate view on women. I think he strongly believed that they were better off as pets or possessions. I'd rather not have someone like that in charge so... the Goddess of the Dryads killed him at my command."

The man who'd looked at Vince with anger now looked murderous. Though, his rage was no longer at or about Vince.

That hatred was where any reasonable person could bet on. The previous leader of the Magi Vale who had just been accused of being a villain.

Except the man hadn't been surprised or even defended him. In fact, he looked entirely sold on the idea to the point that he believed what was a stranger.

Then the older man's eyes flashed and he looked at Vince again with a hooded look.

"Goddess?" he asked.

Vince lifted a hand and pointed at Dea. She was walking back with Blue now at a quick pace. They'd noticed Elizabeth had returned and were now hurrying over.

"She's rushing because she's probably afraid I'm going to be mad at her for not being here. A silly goddess, but she's very useful to me," murmured Vince. "Your name?"

"Donahue. No last name," answered the old man, looking from Vince to Dea, then to Elizabeth. "Silver?"

"Platinum," Elizabeth answered as she finished moving around behind Vince. She put her jaw right over his shoulder again in a clear attempt to get him to pet her.

Complying, Vince reached up and started to rub his hand up and down along her chin and jawbone. He saw no reason not to give the Dragon some attention.

"We surrender," Donahue rumbled and shook his head. "Just spare our citizens. They're not all magically inclined."

"Spare them?" asked Vince with a frown. The emotions he was getting from the man were fairly jumbled and hard to separate. His mind was also clouded in a similar way that Tim's had been.

It wasn't a trained response to Vince trying to scan thoughts, but more like a scar. That his mind had been damaged and had healed over a bit better than it'd been previously.

"You're... you... I... are you here to kill us?" asked Donahue, his feelings growing flat and cold. He was strangling them out to nothing.

“No. I’m here to take your city and make it a part of Yosemite. I want it and its occupants to serve me,” explained Vince with a shake of his head. “You’ll be given a set of rules and expectations to follow, as well as tax rates, duties, and import-export legal briefings.

“I honestly don’t understand most of it, but I have others who do. Just make sure you follow all the directives in the packet and it’ll be fine.”

“Packet,” repeated Donahue.

“Packet!” Blue said loudly with an exhaled breath. She’d pulled it from her pack and held it out to the man. “Duke Donahue of the Magi Vale, here is your legal packet. I recommend reading it over and familiarizing yourself with everything inside as soon as you’re able.

“If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to reach out to me, Blue Campbell. I’m the Grove-mistress of the Lord of Dryads. I handle most of the kingdom work at this time until such a time as I can be replaced.”

Donahue took the packet and frowned, his lower lip pushing up and almost looking picture perfect. He looked at the top page and then opened it to the second page.

“This is in Spanish,” replied Donahue for the first time in English.

“Oh, uhm, I do have an English copy, if you prefer,” Blue replied happily and began digging in her bag again. She ended up pulling out another packet that looked identical to the first. Without waiting for the man to say anything, she took the Spanish packet from him and gave him the English one. “Better?”

Shaking his head, then nodding it, the man blew out a breath.

“Can I have both? We’re a dual-language city. We have... a lot of people who speak one language or the other. Few speak both,” admitted Donahue.

“Of course!” Blue chirped brightly and held out the second packet to the man.

“Great,” said Vince with a sigh. “We’re done here then. I want to get back to Bilbao and get ready for whatever it is Tim’s commanders order him to do.

“Which will likely be very stupid. Then I’ll have to kill them all.”

“Yes, I agree,” Elizabeth added.

“I’m going to head back toward Antona,” mumbled Vince with a flick of his hand. “Tell Leila and Zathira they’re staying here to provide assistance and answers for the Duke of Magi Vale. They’re to return once they feel the situation here is well in hand.

“Elizabeth, give him a ride back when he’s done asking Blue questions. Then let’s have that chat.”

Vince made it ten steps away before Dea caught up with him. She gave him a wide, pretty smile, falling in at his right side. No words came from her, and she seemed quite content to simply pace him as a companion.

Silence can be preferable in some situations. Especially if your company is pleasant and includes you with their presence, rather than zones you out.

“It’s done!” called Elizabeth from behind him. He’d felt her approach but had just kept walking. All the horses had been taken back to Antona as they couldn’t seem to keep still with Elizabeth going back and forth in her Dragon form.

“Dea, do you mind being involved in a weird conversation?” asked Vince, glancing over at the deity. “Because I need to talk to Elizabeth about her and what she needs to do for me. Chances are, it’ll get strange. You’re welcome to stay or leave.”

“I’ll stay. I need to learn as much as I can, as quickly as I can. I’m no shrinking violet, Vince. I’m not some naive virginal innocent, either. I’m just... off-balance right now. I’ll catch up to all of this soon and you won’t even worry for me,” promised Dea. “I just have to find my footing quickly. Fast. Before everything starts to shift again. I can be exactly what you need me to be. I promise it.”

There was a fervent determination in her words. A lingering feeling behind her words that had an unsharpened edge to it that only needed honing.

It reminded him of a woman he’d met by the name of Miu. One of Felix’s comrades.

With a thump, Elizabeth landed on the ground next to him. She transformed into her human form and began walking through the grass at his left.

She was, of course, nude and seemed unperturbed by it. Her nakedness didn't seem to bother her much at all.

I mean, it never seemed to bother any of the Dragons, now that I really think about it. They probably don't see their human form as really them.

Actually... after we started spending time in a bed, Taylor wanted more clothes. Clothes she could get into and wear comfortably between shifting.

I wonder if that's another thing that changes after mating with a human. Other than the humans-taste-like-mud thing.

"Your wing," Vince kick-started the conversation. "And you. Your Dragon. I know for a Dragonnewt, they feel their human side and their Dragon at the same time.

"You simply are the Dragon, are you not? There is no feeling it as a separate entity."

"Yes. I'm the Dragon. There is no humanity in me like a Dragonnewt. I... used to view them as weak for being part human," admitted Elizabeth. "After meeting Ramona and realizing she was as strong as I was... and could understand the human world better... I changed that opinion. I'm trying to... ah, I'm not sure how to say it. To... develop some humanity inside myself. I want to be more like Ramona.

"Taylor will just live by her Dragon. So will Alice and so many others. They'll think nothing of it and just be themselves. I want to be more than that. I'm a Platinum. My mother is a goddess. I'm... pledged to an immortal who can host a deity in himself. I must learn to be more."

Holy hell, I really undershot what she was trying to achieve.

Damn.

Alright.

"That's wonderful, Elizabeth," Dea offered as Vince chewed on that. "That's very human of you. I've only met Dragons before I was brought over through a portal, but they were always quite stubborn

and set in their ways. I can't see a Dragon wanting to learn how to be anything else."

"Yes. I realized that trying to be human, was in fact, not very Dragon of me. I won't lie, I felt quite prideful in that alone," Elizabeth confessed with a soft chuckle. "I'm learning that to have humanity is to always be faced with one's mistakes. Learning to learn, and adapting to adapt. An ever and always changing world where... where you have to constantly accept what's put in front of you."

"Well, I approve of it. I think it's a wonderful idea and I welcome you to it. Though... Elizabeth, how old are you? Are you a... well... whatever a minor would be for your kind?" asked Vince.

"No. If I were with my mother, I could still ask her for advice, but I'd be expected to begin looking for a mate this year or next," answered Elizabeth. "So you may not get rid of me just because you think I'm too young. I'm young, yes.

"But not too young. Not too young to... to breed and have a clutch of eggs. Though I refuse to become a brood-mare either. I'll give you Dragonewts and Dragons, Vincent Campbell. But I'll not do it single-handedly.

"My wing will assist me. I must find other Dragons who suit Taylor's requirements. They were perfectly crafted for what the wing needed, and I'll do the same. I just need to find them. I plan on looking for them while we hold Bilbao. Do you... is that okay?"

"It's fine, Elizabeth. Thank you. That'd be fine. Are you going to call to your mother for some insight later?" asked Vince.

"I already did. We chatted briefly while I was on the wall. She... wants to talk to you later. If you're willing. She was rather pleasantly surprised and wanted to ask you for a favor, I think," Elizabeth said in a way that felt almost like a question. "I honestly don't know. She was being somewhat cagey about it, if I'm really thinking about it."

"Is she like me, a physical deity, or a belief manifestation?" asked Dea.

Oh.

Ooooooh. Dea is a physical thing that became a goddess. Ferris could have been a spirit or something else that was eventually turned into a point of worship.

Got it. Got it.

Though... I wonder... where do I fit? I'm a demi-god.

“That’s... convoluted. She was a Dragon once upon a time. A Platinum, though she was killed in a great war between colors. She was respected enough to gain a following.

“Their belief empowered her spirit and revived it. In time, as more believed in her, and she was able to act more freely, she grew. To the point that she became a physical presence once again.

“Recently, though, the tri-lliance hasn’t been as strict with their worship of her and she’s been fading somewhat.

“I wonder sometimes if— oh, Antona is coming,” Elizabeth remarked, her head swinging from Vince toward the horizon.

He hadn’t even noticed the Dryad heading their way, but she was indeed. She had all the horses with her as well.

Additionally, she had what looked like Petra in tow with her, though her armor was differently colored.

That belief was shattered when the Waster Ant took to the sky, wings fluttering out from behind them and propelling them forward toward Vince. The only person that’d come to find him that had wings and was an ant, was Cristina.

The Princess who could never be a queen.

Half a minute later and Cristina landed in front of him.

She was nearly identical to Petra in every way in regards to her body shape and sizing, though she was a mite smaller in all ways. Her abdomen was significantly smaller though.

To the point that he imagined she could curl it up and easily fit in most human clothes.

She had four wings that were like a dragonfly’s.

Her red armor was clearly fashioned in a similar way to Petra’s, which meant it was segmented pieces of fallen brothers and sisters.

Pulling her helmet off, Vince found himself looking into a rather sharp, pretty face. With reflective brown eyes that held a light in them. Her hair was a pitch-black that was so dark, it was hard to identify individual strands.

“We greet our king,” said the Royal-Ant with a wide smile. She then moved in and kissed his cheek with her helmet held under her

armpit. “We are quite pleased to see how handsome you are. We stated you were quite handsome, but it’s hard to trust when we are in love.”

Wincing, Vince frowned and opened his mouth, and hesitated.

“What is it?” asked Cristina, giving him a bright and sunny smile.

“Nothing,” he murmured after a pause. It’d taken a lot to get Petra to speak more normally and that only happened in private. “What’s going on? You seem as if you’re on a mission.”

“We are! You must return to Bilbao. An army from Madrid has been sent and will likely have arrived this morning. We were sent by our caste to assist you along with a number of my retinue. They remain in Bilbao and hold the walls for you, our king.”

“Right,” muttered Vince. “Can you carry me, Cristina?”

“We are capable of flying with our king,” confirmed the Ant. “Would you mount us? Please hold on tight around our chest.”

“Okay,” muttered Vince. He needed to get back to Bilbao quickly. Turning, he looked at Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth, go find Red, Blue, and Zathira,” he said after a minute’s hesitation. He wasn’t sure about the Necromancer, but he might need her in this. “I have no idea how bad this is going to be, but I’ll bet on it being at the level of ‘Beautiful Dragon Maiden needs to burn them all’ bad. I’ll need everyone, too. Grab up Antona and anyone else we’ll need, as well. Just go straight to Bilbao after that. Dea, go with her.”

“Yes, Nest-mate,” responded Elizabeth, pivoting in place. She rapidly transformed back into a Dragon even as Dea began clambering up on top of her. A second later and the Dragon leapt into the air and began flying back to Magi Vale.

Vince got on to Cristina’s extremely reduced-in-size abdomen and put his arms around her. He didn’t feel as secure as he did when he rode Petra.

“You need a harness,” grumbled Vince.

“We would welcome very much a harness for our king. Though we wonder if it could be used for sex as well? We have no experience and we are relying on our cast for information,” Cristina

said, her wings sliding out from behind her. Then they were off in a flash, zipping past Antona as they went.

“Elizabeth will take you to Bilbao!” he shouted as they zoomed by her and away.

Chapter 26

“I want to circle them once, are you okay?” Vince shouted against the wind.

“We are... we are very tired, but we can remain in the air for an hour or two longer. We cannot engage in a physical fight should something occur,” Cristina answered.

“That’s fine, you’ll be using a rifle anyway going forward. Not a spear, or a sword. You need to get trained up on that as soon as possible,” Vince promised.

“We have already gotten used to a rifle. We were trained by our caste when we arrived in Coruna! We enjoy the weapon very much,” said Cristina as she began to bank around to the side.

They were now heading for the very obvious and visible mass of soldiers who were forming up around the south of Bilbao. They were equipped, armed, and even had what looked like siege equipment.

Thankfully, they had no artillery.

If they did, they were hiding it and keeping it out of sight.

Row after row of soldiers were arrayed out. Armed with rifles and spears, they were dressed in a mishmash of armor. A vast number of different types were visible, from ring-mail down to leather, or even nothing at all, it looked like.

They also were all equipped with shields that ran from full tower shield to little more than a buckler.

It was strange to look at such a thing and call it cohesive. This looked like a reserve force that’d been thrown together while the main army was being fielded.

“Nullifiers are shooting at us,” warned Cristina.

Nullifiers... can shoot? They shoot what, exactly.

I don’t see anything and there doesn’t look like anything that I can

A wave of disorienting nothing passed through Vince. One that caused him to momentarily feel quite weak. As if he’d caught himself just as he was falling asleep.

Cristina showed no reaction whatsoever and simply kept flying on.

“That was a Nullifier?” asked Vince, his arms tightening around Cristina’s middle.

“Yes, our king. We know that these are Nullifier’s attacks as they make our Ant skin tingle. It does nothing else to us. We have and hold no magic. There is nothing to nullify,” remarked Cristina as she began angling them back toward Bilbao

Ah... so... it really does nullify magic then. Spells, people, or... people who generate it.

Like me.

But it doesn’t last, and it just makes me feel a bit woozy for a moment. I vaguely remember being drunk once or twice before my body got used to it. It felt somewhat like that.

Hm.

Something to be wary of, though... if it makes Cristina tingle, what would it do to a Dryad? Dea? Or Elizabeth?

Is that why there’s a human dominance here and the Wasters are on the defensive?

How curious, and something to explore.

I wonder if it’s a mutation.

Could I... eat a human heart from a Nullifier and gain some resistance? Something to consider. Might have to test that.

“Should we spray them as we leave?” asked Cristina.

“No, you can squirt for me later,” remarked Vince with a smirk.

“Oh! Yes! We are very pleased that you’re flirting with us. Our caste told us that’s a good sign. A very good sign. We can also smell your sexual interest in us. Our caste promised us you weren’t repulsed by our... less than human looks. We’re very grateful,” cheered Cristina as she guided them toward Bilbao.

Huh. Well... Petra has said similar things, so I suppose that’s all well and good.

“We are pleased to see our retinue holds the walls,” Cristina said. “They are not of my caste, but those who serve our caste. They are all soldiers. Drones. They adhere to anything my caste tells them to.”

Leaning to the side, Vince peered out over Cristina’s shoulder, looking out towards Bilbao.

All along the walls were soldiers.

There were recruits from the city and very possibly some citizens who volunteered.

Spread throughout them were his Battle-Dryads, and a number of Waster Ants just like Cristina. The vast majority of everyone up there had spears, pikes, swords, and clubs. Those loyal to Yosemite, or Cristina it seemed, had all been outfitted with rifles and the like.

Chances are Mr. White Junior coded them all to the people as well. No chance of any of that working for someone else. That's good, at least.

"We like our new armaments very much. We believe the cast that is ours is vastly under-estimated by the others on the continent," Cristina said as she angled them down toward the wall. "We will find it very amusing when we go back to update mother later and inform her of our raised status. That we shall be royalty above our old caste.

"We must, of course, be kind with that we. It... she... she's my mom and... she kept me safe even when I couldn't be what she wanted."

Shit... she can break through that mental wall. Just like Petra did. Good. Good!

It'll just take time.

"You're fine, Cristina. I'll be kind to your mother, if only because she's your mother. I promise you," offered Vince.

The winged ant gave him a look out of the side of her helmet. Her antennae slowly bent down toward him.

Her head snapped forward again and she continued flying.

"We warned us that if we spoke as an individual that you would praise us. Do more for us. We... Petra was right. I can't promise anything, but we'll... I'll... try," mumbled Cristina.

Then she landed on the wall and moved sideways. Giving him a spot to dismount from her.

"Perfect," he said and then looked at the interior of Bilbao. "Did Petra send you guys with anything? Because if I don't miss my guess, she probably did."

"We brought the Sword," confirmed Cristina. "We put it in the entry audience chamber. We felt it a suitable focal point of power

given that only our king may use it. Mr. White Junior commented that it's code-locked to you. We understood this as meaning only you can utilize it."

Vince grinned at that and nodded his head.

Go get our Sword and then go greet our foes. Time to see what they think of Yosemite's technology, courtesy of our dear older brother and Legion.

Sitting in the middle of the audience chamber, which also would hold a throne whenever an audience was held, was the Sword of Yosemite.

While he regretted that there wouldn't be anyone else here to go out with him, he knew the Wardens were exactly where they needed to be. Because Petra would utilize them where they'd provide the best benefit.

Bilbao was his to handle and Petra would have written it off as such. Her commandment was the extent of what she expected unless he stated otherwise. What forces she expected him to utilize had been sent.

"We are ready to travel with you, our king," Cristina stated from behind him.

Glancing over his shoulder he found she was wearing a set of Legion armor. One that'd been designed and custom fit for her with a loosely-held battle rifle.

On her wrist was a very obvious shield generator, the same type he'd used against Taylor. These were very common amongst his forces as there were so many magic-users running around, they were easy to recharge.

But they're not magic. They're technology... does that mean a Nullifier could... nullify it? Good to test.

Stepping up to the Sword of Yosemite, Vince laid his hand on the Legion and Yosemite symbol emblazoned on the front of it. For all things Yosemite and Legion, this took precedence.

With a hiss, the armor's front snapped open. The coverings for the arms and legs unlatched and then unfolded as well.

Stepping up and into the armored suit, Vince leaned back into the harness.

There was a pop followed by a number of soft hisses, and the whole contraption settled down around him.

"Hello, Sweetling," purred the voice of Meliae from the suit speakers. She then laughed and seemed far too amused for the situation.

Around him, things were turning on and becoming active. He imagined that this suit had been somewhat annoying to bring here for him now that he thought about it.

"You always know how to really turn me on," growled the Dryad with another laugh. "Oh, time to get inside me. No rough stuff, just let me get in place."

"Oh, my fuck. They let her voice the whole thing," said Vince with a laugh. "I almost miss Andrea's voice. Well... maybe not."

Hearing Meliae's voice had an odd effect on him. It'd soothed a few rough edges he hadn't known he had. Like a cool hand sliding down the back of a sunburned neck.

The Sword closed up and popped, hissed, and settled around him.

Previously, he'd had to put it on almost like armor. This time it was all automated.

Even the helmet had come down over his head for him.

No sooner than the helmet settled in place than he heard Meliae make a curious sound through the speakers. Almost as if she were wondering what to say.

"It's alright, I'm here, Sweetling," offered the Dryad as Vince stood there in the dark. "I'll always be here."

Okay... uhm... okay.

It's okay. I'm okay.

It's fine. Everything is fine and—

"Even if you're off on an adventure, even if you're the furthest you could be, before you started coming back to me, I'm always with you. A sad little Dryad girl whom you picked up at an auction," continued

the Dryad. “Don’t fret. Just look inside. I’m there with you even now, am I not?”

“Now, this is your... first-time startup message. I’m told that this is going to take a bit longer than normal because it’s just testing your dimensions and making adjustments.

“Just look inward. You know where I am, after all. Focus on me and don’t worry about the silly stuff.”

Taking in a shivering breath, Vince was gnawing at his lower lip. He didn’t want to look inward. Her tree would be dormant.

Unable to help himself, he turned his attention to the tree that was Meliae’s.

It was dormant, quiet, and as if sleeping. Even still, he could feel the tree respond to his attention. As if he were lying in bed with the Dryad and she rolled over toward him, snuggling up to him.

That’s what it felt like the tree had done. Snuggled up to him even as it slept onward.

“All done! Good show, Sweetling. My big brave man,” praised Meliae. “Now, there will be a brief check of weaponry and armaments, and then you’re good to go!”

“You won’t hear any of this again unless you ask to repeat the startup message. I also made a number of little recordings for you. Just ask it to play Meliae One, or Meliae Two, or anything like that.

“I did ask a few of the others to leaves messages for you, too. Just say a name and a number. It’s all there with you! Just in case.”

“Oh, Meliae... you... adorable woman. I need to shower you in attention when I finally get home,” complained Vince, missing those he’d left behind a great deal.

“I also made sure to record some extra special stuff just for you. For when you’re feeling a little down or bored. They even have videos! I just stuck it on the tri-pod thingy and hit record!” admitted Meliae.

Then her voice went silent, the black screens in front of Vince’s eyes came to life, and he could see in front of himself. There were two windows at the top and bottom that presented him with his sides and rear views as well.

“Damn, Felix. You went all out,” murmured Vince and then laughed. Pulling up the rifle that he knew was there, and in the exact same way he had in the original Warden he piloted, he set off at a jog. The rifle felt comfortable in the grip and his footfalls were heavy, but quick. He felt agile despite wearing such a heavy suit of armor.

Remembering the last time he’d piloted one, he considered the voice commands he’d learned. Except he felt something strange happen the moment he considered the first command.

Systems check.

“All systems nominal,” reported Meliae with a smile in her voice.

Err... it’s... based on my thoughts now?

Armament status?

“Fully equipped,” Meliae said in a purr. “All weapon systems ready.”

Enemy and ally identification?

“Complete,” answered Meliae in a straight way.

Turning his head to the right, Vince found Cristina next to him. She had a blue square around her head that signified her as “Ally”. There were a number of people on the wall who were also classified as Allies but a greater number who were yellow.

Unidentified.

Got it. They need tokens to establish that they’re not an enemy.

Weapons, armor, or a tag.

I’ll have to send Sam back to Petra with that information so we can make this easier.

In fact... I’m sure she’s already on it. I just need to ask for a timeline.

Reaching the wall, Vince crouched low and then jumped and released the rifle. He knew it’d clack back into place on its own.

Except that, rather than hit the wall and climb up it as he expected, Vince went right over it. On the backs of his feet, legs, and back, he felt like something was pushing him along. There was also a small notification in the corner of his view, as well as visible flames behind him.

Jump jets activated. Right... okay.

So I can fly a bit?

That's pretty frickin' neat.

Clearing the wall completely, Vince landed on the other side. Several seconds later and Cristina had caught right back up to him. They started moving fluidly across the plain toward the enemy encampment.

Before he knew it, three squads worth of what looked like Legionnaires had fallen in behind him. They were all outfitted in Legion equipment and carrying full rifles, their wrists all loaded with shield generators.

Oh, Petra, you really did send me just enough to cause problems. I'm going to make sure I don't just hold Bilbao, but create a disturbance.

One big enough that they have to send soldiers up here to deal with me. More and more.

A second theater of operations to draw their forces away.

"BD-Squad One," panted a voice through his suit speakers as they ran. "With you."

"BD-Squad Two, here," came a second voice.

"BD-Squad Eight, present," responded a third.

Vince realized he was pushing them to a sprint with the way he was moving and slowed down. He brought his pace down to a normal human jogging speed.

All three voices had been female. Their naming convention also led him to believe these were the Dryads of Bilbao. The "Battle-Dryads" as they were called.

There were apparently a number of them still serving on the wall. Their trees were embedded beside it so that they could never truly leave.

Vince planned to go collect them all. He couldn't leave them behind, after all. He had a title. One that would hang on him like a medallion and a weight.

"Lord of the Dryads," he mumbled.

"Lord of the Dryads!" responded the Dryads to the words from his speakers. He even heard Cristina amongst the voices.

Clicking his tongue, Vince pushed down on his grove and then pushed out with the power there. Wanting it to flood into the Dryads

around him. He used the trees inside him as a starting point to figure out who was here, and who could be charged.

“White flag,” Vince called as they got much closer to the enemy army.

Cristina moved out ahead of him with her spear raised above her head. She’d preemptively tied a white banner to it at some point, guessing what his intentions were.

“Lord, do you think they’ll wish to speak?” asked one of the Dryads.

“Nope. They’ll probably want to after I tell you all to lift and let mag-dump once or twice. That or after the shields block every round and their Nullifier finds we’re not magical,” prophesied Vince.

“Something along those lines, I imagine.”

There was a loud slam from behind Vince. He flicked his eyes to the screens that’d show him what’s behind and he found Elizabeth, a tall Legionnaire with only a pistol, and what was likely another Dryad in full Legionnaire armor, though he wasn’t sure who. Dryads fit oddly in Legionnaire armor and stood out to a degree.

Blue wasn’t far behind the Battle-Dryads in competency, but she was more of a support role in things like this compared to them.

“I am here, Nest-mate,” proclaimed Elizabeth, her voice coming through the speakers. “I’ve brought Red, Dea, and your Dryad commander. Sam went ahead and prepared things for us so we could join you quickly.”

“Yes, yes. Red is here for you Bringer. Red must be at your side,” growled the Beastkin, appearing next to him. He hadn’t even seen her arrive.

She was decked out in Legionnaire armor as well, though her fingers and hands were clear of gear. She also had a pistol at her hip and was running on all fours.

“Antona, command the BD. Elizabeth, Red, with me and Cristina,” Vince ordered.

Even as they got closer, the enemy was forming into ranks. They were putting themselves together in what looked like a firing line.

Then everyone in the front row leveled their weapons at Vince and company.

“Shields,” Antona called firmly over the radio.

The Dryads all around him lifted their left arms up. The shields had already been activated just in case someone got a shot off, this was just to make them line up and present a unified front.

Vince followed the order, as did Cristina and even Red, who popped up into a standing position, her own arm brought up.

There was a deafening boom of rifle fire. Followed by a number of other shots. All of them were fired on, even as Cristina held the white flag aloft.

Well. That certainly gives me an idea of what to expect from them, doesn't it? Rather disappointing, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.

Only monsters would treat Dryads as they do.

“Mag dump,” Vince ordered.

Everyone lifted their rifle and supported it with the other hand. The gun barrel didn't extend beyond the shield.

Red and Cristina leveled pistols, though Elizabeth was crouched down low behind Vince's shield.

“Fire,” called Antona as Nullifier spells tore through Vince and his people.

The magic did absolutely nothing to any of them. Though it did give Vince a weird feeling of vertigo each and every time, but that was it.

Then everyone dropped their fingers down to the triggers.

Yosemite began to fire in the first real field engagement in the battle for Spain.

Vince pulled the trigger down, moving the rifle from left to right.

The magazine was empty in seconds, as was everyone else's.

Elizabeth lifted her head up partly from behind Vince's shield and took in a deep breath. He could hear the whoosh of what sounded like fire even before she'd breathed out.

Then she exhaled and a massive jetstream of flames washed down over the enemy combatants. Washing over everything.

Several Nullifiers' attacks smashed through Elizabeth's head, each of which caused her fire to diminish, but not stop. Eventually, she stopped and lowered her head back down behind Vince.

“Next magazine,” Vince called. “Empty it and prep the next, but hold fire.”

“Second magazine at will, hold on third,” answered Antona several seconds after.

They fired on a white flag. We'll make them try to raise their own.

Chapter 27

Vince noticed that just behind him was the Legionnaire who had only a pistol. They'd come up right behind him and were practically leaning against the back of his armor.

They were peeking out around him with one hand resting against his back.

I wonder who that is. Can't tell.

Across from his firing line, the enemy was scrambling amongst themselves. All of them were trying to get out of the front line, even as those in the middle and back worked to move forward.

The entire enemy position was in disarray.

Uhm... suit external speakers on?

Maximum volume?

I want to make an announcement.

"Complete," came the response.

"I am the Lord of the Dryads!" Vince shouted. "I came under a white banner of truce to discuss the situation with you, and you've fired upon me!

"Why shouldn't I exterminate the lot of you and wait for the next army? Maybe they'll be willing to talk with me?"

"BD-One, out to the left, prong. BD-Two, out to the right, prong," ordered Antona. "BD-Three, BD-Four, BD-Five, double-quick to the rear of the enemy. Line up on the path of retreat."

Ah. She's going to try and maneuver while I chat them up.

Makes sense. No reason not to.

It isn't like they respected the white flag to begin with.

No reason to respect theirs.

There was a pause as a number of confirmation messages came back.

"Make sure no officer survives," hissed Antona after the responses died off.

Vince felt a shuddering sensation in his grove. As if a great many Dryad trees had quivered in anticipation.

The enemy ranks were starting to form up in front of them. The panic they'd been under was falling away as the incoming fire died

away.

“Well? Last chance or I just mow you all down,” prompted Vince. “We came with a white flag and you still fired on us. You’re lucky I’m even trying.”

Heads turned, helmets shifted, people were looking around.

These individuals likely had no idea what was going on. They were the ones who’d suffer for their master’s mistakes.

Unfortunately, there was no way for him to be charitable to them. Regretfully, they were his enemy, despite never knowing what the hell was going on. Or even what they were fighting against, he imagined.

No one came to speak with him. Not a soul stepped forward to engage with him.

The enemy simply milled about.

Something shifted inside him even as this massive mistake on the part of Spain played out before his eyes. A strange feeling that felt almost as if he remembered something he’d forgotten.

As if he’d been searching for a particular word to say in a conversation, then remembered it five minutes later. To the point that you have to say it out loud just to taste that word.

That feeling spread throughout Vince almost like his body had been numb and asleep. He was suddenly filled with tingling itchiness.

All of the trees in his grove woke.

Meliae, Mouth, Daphne, Karya, Green, every tree was suddenly there. Awake, aware, and investigating all their new Grove-mates. Actively pulling at Dea and her earth and grass hidden away in the roots.

What... what’s going on?

The Legionnaire behind Vince moved out in front of him. They were trembling visibly. Shivering from head to toe.

The pistol in their hand dropped down to the grass and they stood there. Staring out at the enemy forces. Vince was starting to suspect that it was Dea herself, given the reaction to what was happening in his grove.

As all the Dryad trees became active, they all in turn pushed into Dea's soil and added to it. Growing it, expanding it, all while making sure their trees were all incorporated effectively.

Then Vince finally realized what was happening.

Here, in Spain, the day was approaching the end. The sun setting behind them.

Likely starting to rise in the far distant west.

Where Yosemite was.

Everyone was waking up to find a new command had been given. That Dea was the deity of Yosemite and that they had a new presence in their grove.

One that apparently granted them the ability for their trees to no longer be dormant.

"I hear them all," came Dea's voice across the speakers. "So many Dryads all call out to me with joy in their hearts. Even those not in my grove. They... recognize me as their goddess. There's so many. I had no idea.

"We must spread the word of the Lord of Dryads even further. To call them all to us and grow their will. To all support our Lord."

Dea shoved her arms up and a massive and terrifying power blew out of her. It was an order of magnitude several times higher than what he'd seen of her previously. When she'd made an arm of earth to kill a single man.

Giant walls of earth and stone rose up around their enemies. Thick and sturdy, they rose up to thirty feet and then stopped.

Dea stood there in her Legionnaire armor.

Unmoving.

In a single move she'd enclosed the enemy force completely.

"I... am the Lady of the Grove," she said suddenly in the microphone. "Lady Dea of the Dryads. A deity who serves the Lord of the Dryads. My true priestess is Meliae. In turn, her head priestesses are Blue, Green, Mouth, Daphne, and Karya.

"I see it all now. I feel it. It's... it's all there. I had no idea it was so vast. What I'd felt up to this point was just a small fraction of it all."

"Glad to hear it," Vince offered. He had no idea what to actually say at this point.

“Thank you, my Lord,” whispered Dea. Then she turned in place and looked to one side. “Commander Antona.”

“Yes, Lady Dea?” asked the Dryad.

“Begin processing the prisoners,” ordered Dea. “Simply command the earth to move for you and it shall.

“Report to your priestess when you’re done. You will serve her directly, as she is the Grove-wife of our lord here. All Dryads will be present for worship tomorrow morning at sunrise. No exceptions. Everyone will arrive before sunrise so we may prepare.

“Priestess Blue will guide you all on where to be and how to proceed. Do everything she tells you to, Commander. I’ll handle my own piece of it.”

“Of course, Lady Dea,” Antona answered.

Dea’s head moved, and the front of her helmet faced him directly.

“Lord, your goddess would ask you to please be present for worship tomorrow morning,” she asked.

“That’s fine. After we get that handled, we should go pay a visit to Madrid,” agreed Vince. It would take them days to process all these prisoners. Not to mention taking the dead and storing them for later.

“I, of course, will do as my Lord asks,” Dea promised and then performed what looked a lot like a curtsy. Just without a dress to spread apart.

Turning, Vince practically bumped into Elizabeth.

“Nest-mate, please speak with my mother?” asked the Dragon.

“I... know that you two didn’t start off on the right tone and... please... I need—”

Vince put his gauntleted hands on the Dragon’s nose and nodded his head.

“It’s alright. I’ll speak with her. We’re done here. We can go back to Bilbao. I’ll speak with her personally. Okay?” he promised. “I’ll do it if only because I don’t want to see you like this. Be my proud and fierce Dragon who promised death to an entire city on my behalf.”

“Yes. I... yes. I will do so. I’m... I’m your Dragon,” she agreed, her head lowering down to the ground and closing her eyes under his continued petting of her head. “I’ll be your proud and fierce Dragon.

I'll add more to the wing so that they may serve and worship the Lord of the Dryads."

Hm. I wonder if my Demi-God title is going to grow to an actual god. Definitely starting to shape up in a weird way.

Vince kept petting and stroking at Elizabeth's head as the Dryads moved to the dirt walls. They were discussing how to proceed with processing all the prisoners and what to do with them.

Stepping up onto the top of the keep, Vince looked at all the now empty space.

All the Dryad trees had been planted throughout the city. Placed in suitable places picked out by their former Dryads.

There was a lot more green in Bilbao now.

"Elizabeth, call your mother," asked Vince as he reached up to adjust his tunic. He'd had to change clothes after getting out of the Sword of Yosemite.

It'd been a very successful trial run. He was feeling keen on the idea of running off to Madrid in it. To lay waste to an army all by himself just as he'd once done in the past. This time with Elizabeth and Dea rather than Taylor and Caroline.

Glancing to his side, he found the Goddess of the Dryads beside him. She had an almost whimsical look on her face as she looked around. From what he could tell, she could hear all the Dryads who called out to her. If they invoked her name, she heard them.

She couldn't do much to communicate back with them, though she could send impressions or feelings to them. From what he'd gotten out of Blue, Dea was sending a great many warm, happy, and very friendly feelings out to all the Dryads.

"Oh! Yes, thank you again, Nest-mate. I'm really... thank you. You're being very attentive to your Dragon who was a very poor partner to you. I've failed you so much and—"

"And you keep trying," Vince said, interrupting her. "Call your mom."

“I— ah, yes. Yes, Lord. Yes... Nest-mate,” mumbled Elizabeth. Then she said something in a language he didn’t understand.

If he had to bet, it’d probably be Draconic.

There was a pause before a large, translucent form partly materialized in the sky above them. It had the look of a very large Dragon but was immaterial and without true shape.

“Greetings, Lord of the Dryads,” greeted Ferris. The voice was a bit deeper than his mind told him it should be. A bit more aged.

Though it was still the goddess of the Dragons as far as he could tell.

“Evening, Ferris. My Dragon Maiden tells me you wished to speak with me. I didn’t want to,” admitted Vince. “I had no intention to. She earnestly asked me to, and I do so now only because I wish her to be happy.

“That and she... seems intent on being more than just an underling. I get the impression I’ll be giving her a clutch and a nest. Wouldn’t be great to have a shitty relationship with my kids’ grandma.”

The large incorporeal Dragon let out a long sigh and then nodded its head.

“Then I thank you for speaking with me. I wanted to speak with you because I need a favor from you,” said the goddess.

“Tri-lliance isn’t worshiping you and/or blames you for the treaty they desperately needed,” guessed Vince. “That about right?”

“I... yes. That’s exactly it. Yes. They blame me for their unadvised war and the treaty I brokered for them,” agreed Ferris, sounding somewhat surprised. “Did my daughter tell you this?”

“She only mentioned the Tri-lliance wasn’t being strict with religious laws. That’s all. The rest was a guess,” muttered Vince.

He already had an idea of how to fix this. It wasn’t something he wanted to engage in though. Except it wouldn’t harm his prestige any and would give him more avenues to work with.

“Fine. Become a goddess under my purview, Ferris. I’ll be the Lord of Dryads and Dragons. I can offer the left hand that’s as warm as a mother’s hug, or the right, gauntleted in steel and backed with fire,” he said after a few moments and then shook his head. “We’ll

just phrase it as you were well-pleased with me due to the way I slaughtered my foes as a Dragon should. You offered me your daughter's hand in marriage, and I welcomed you into my pantheon as my mother-in-law.

"That makes it easier so that others can join without them only being my wives. Like the Dryad goddess right here. They worship her, and through her, me. Her Lord."

Vince tossed a thumb at Dea who was next to him. She'd been eyeing the Dragon goddess curiously. He also had the vague feeling that Dea was at parity with Ferris now. That although the number of her worshipers was significantly lower than Ferris, the depth of that worship was much greater.

Ferris had recoiled instantly at his suggestion. Her head shook rapidly from side to side.

After a pause, the motion had slowed, then reversed course. She was now making a small nod of her head.

"Your Dragons are rather powerful. The fact that Taylor, the oldest Black on this plane, worships you as she does is testimony to that. You even tamed Ramona," mused Ferris. "If Dragons and Dragonewts worshiped me, just to lay that worship upon you, then I would be stronger than I am even now.

"I could pull my broods up from the south and have them all move into Yosemite. They'd certainly be better cared for there. Taylor's wing commands great respect."

"Just put down a colony of Dragons for each city and ask them to serve as the garrison. Though be sure to check in with Duke Heint for his own city. He may want specific Dragons in his city," suggested Vince. "As to the hostages I have... well... I can free them all if you become the goddess of Dragons for Yosemite."

"No! No. If we did this, I would ask that you give them all clutches. It would be preferable for you to sire children among those Dragons I sent to you. They're... all my children. All of them. They're the only ones I could command as I did.

"It would be preferable for them to all become family to you. That would solidify my claims to being your mother-in-law. Yes."

Really? Huh. Alright.

“Wonderful. Go work out the details with Taylor. Have Elizabeth be your representative or champion here. You can have Taylor be your champion in North America,” Vince clarified. “Oh, and while you’re here, are there Dragons in Europe? Elizabeth wants to expand her wing, but we haven’t come across any yet.

“Is this like it was in North America? Where they were all in the south? Keeping to their own colonies.”

“Not quite,” Ferris said after a slow pause. “Many were hunted to the point of near extinction here by Nullifiers and magicians, all under the yoke of the Tribunal of Arraignment. The Dragons also worshiped a different Dragon god than I.

“They no longer do as that god failed their worshipers. To be direct, the god’s instructions weren’t very good and led to so many losses that it retreated from the world completely. Moved on to its own afterlife.”

Turning her head, Ferris looked to Elizabeth.

“Travel to the south. Cross the water and land immediately. Humanity and those of other worlds were entirely wiped out by a god of chaos. It wiped out all sentient life on that continent and began crossing into a new territory. There it was stopped and there it remains,” Ferris explained. “All Dragonkind of these areas settled that continent. There are few reds, no Primordials, and many Black, Blue, and Green. There’s a number of Gold, Silver, and White as well.

“Do... do as Taylor bade you. Collect them and promise them a Dragon goddess who will hear them. That has heard them and sent you to the south to call them north.

“That should be enough for many. Kill or conquer those who don’t listen.”

“Yes, Mother,” Elizabeth said and then dove off the tower. She transformed as she fell and started to wing her way off to the south. Flying straight away.

“She was never interested in anything,” murmured Ferris in a whisper. “Nothing. Now she wants to know how to please you. To give you more of her kind as presents. She even scolded me when I complained of how you’d treated me.

“My daughter is... all grown up. Thank you for giving her that chance instead of simply taking her life, Vince.”

Frowning, Vince shook his head, then shrugged his shoulders.

“She’s a good Dragon. Just young and dumb. Needs a few years to get some wisdom. She’ll be fine. Didn’t realize she was a platinum. Impressive of you to push out so many different colors, Ferris,” Vince said and then laughed. “You didn’t look like the type to have so many children. You were rather attractive in your human form, if a bit older than me.”

The Dragon goddess appeared to be shocked by his statement.

“Ah... I chose that form if only to... err... that,” Ferris coughed, and her voice changed considerably. It became significantly higher in timbre and sounded much younger. “You wouldn’t believe how often I had to force myself to look older, or sound older, to get respect.”

The insubstantial Dragon disappeared, and a young woman simply came into existence in front of him.

She was as young as Elizabeth, with white hair, and bright-blue eyes that were almost white in color. White horns stuck straight back from her temples and curled up around her head, almost like a crown.

Her figure wasn’t as out of proportion as Taylor’s or a Dryad’s. She was put together with more than a human woman had, but it wasn’t too much. Her face was finely featured and blessed with a grace to it as well.

“And to be honest, they’re not actually my daughters. Just those I’ve blessed with my essence,” said Ferris, giving him a curious look. “My children all died out thousands of years ago. I’m afraid I’ve been in a bit of a barren patch since then.”

Dea began to laugh at that and then looked at Vince with a grin.

“Maybe your pantheon will be all wives after all,” offered the Dryad goddess. “I can smell your desire for her from here.”

“Oh... really?” asked Ferris, sounding somewhat confused. She looked at him for a second longer and then laughed, presenting Vince with a smile that was truly a gift. It made her entire face light up and gave her a far more human look. “Goodness. I think... I think I should go. Now. But I’ll... I’ll discuss the details with Taylor.”

Moving forward, the attractive Dragon in human form came close and then gave Vince a kiss that lasted all of a split-second. It was a gentle brushing of lips that felt more familial than romantic.

“I pledge myself to you as your Dragon goddess, Lord of the Dragons. Lord of Dryads,” she said and gave him an enigmatic smile. The image he had of Ferris in his head had been irrevocably shattered now. “I’ll drop in if you call on me. I’ll go speak with the others for now.”

There was a heartbeat’s worth of time before Ferris began to splinter apart. Her body came apart in fragments of sparkling dust, faith magic, and smoke.

Vince was left alone with Dea on the rooftop.

That and an unmistakable desire to find someone to tumble. He really didn’t want to admit what he’d felt spark to life when Ferris got as close to him as she did.

It’s not like she was ever my enemy. She even advised the Tri-lliance not to go to war. In fact, one could argue she’s been an ally since the start.

I wonder... with her as a goddess, and her Dragon’s word pledged, does that break it so that I can invade the Tri-lliance?

Would she be able to invade the Tri-lliance for me and conquer it?

“Should we do it here, or in the bed? I’m okay with either, but... I’d prefer the bed,” offered Dea. Her words struck at the center of Vince’s libido, and he found himself nodding his head quickly. “I’m the Lady of the Dryads, but I don’t... really... share their want of shame or pain, I’m afraid. I’m your Lady and I do expect a modicum of respect and care.”

“Bed,” Vince declared and turned around. “I’ll give you all the respect and care I can, even as I hold you down in the bed.”

Chapter 28

There was a pulsating heat that had taken over Vince's mind. A strange heartbeat-like thing that wouldn't leave him alone.

Or more specifically, his libido, which was now flogging his brain into action. There was a desperate need inside of him to get deep into Dea and try his best to fill her up. To disgorge himself into her depths and stuff her full like a cream pie filling.

The way Dea's hands were constantly roaming across his rear end didn't help at all. The Lady of the Grove was clearly feeling a very similar reaction as he was.

Once more, Vince wanted to blame the Dryads for it.

"I want it so bad I swear I can taste your dick in my mouth," growled the Lady of the Grove in a voice that sounded very counter to the normally somewhat aloof but sincere goddess. "Rub the tip all over my lips so I can lick it clean as I do so. I can barely think straight."

Oh... dang.

First Sam, now Dea.

"If you put your load in me, expect kids. I feel so damn fertile that I could get pregnant from spitting your seed at my privates with my mouth," warned Dea.

That certainly didn't bother Vince. He was already going to be drowning in children. Not to mention, the idea of plumbing Dea's depths and leaving behind something of himself really hit an ugly and fun part of his brain.

"Not pulling out," he said even as the logical part of his brain turned off. "I want it. Want you. Going to have as much as I can."

"Good," answered Dea with a squeeze of his rear end. "I'm calling over as many Dryads as I can. They need to be present for this. To watch their Lady of the Grove receive her Lord."

Vince didn't respond. He just marched on.

He didn't stop or slow down until he made it to the door of his bedroom.

With a quick turn and a pull, he jerked the door open and wrapped an arm around Dea.

Kissing her hungrily, he pulled her through the door and shut it behind himself as her tongue pushed into his mouth.

“Mmm,” moaned the deity as her right hand grabbed his crotch. Squeezing him through his pants, her left hand roamed up and down his back.

She had also leaned her shoulders back from him, making space between her chest and his own. He quickly responded by fondling her heavy breasts through her tunic. His hands pressed into the soft flesh.

Dea began walking him backward toward the bed. She pulled at him with the hand on his back as she guided him ever onward.

At the edges of his awareness, he realized the bedroom was filled with Dryads. More Dryads than there was honestly room for, yet they'd arranged themselves so they all had a good view of the bed.

Dryads parted around them as they made it to the bed and encircled them once more.

Before Vince even knew what was happening, while still kissing Dea and wrestling her tongue with his own, hands were stripping him of clothes.

Other Dryads were busily pulling Dea out of her own clothes as well.

The only time the two of them broke their kiss was when tunics had to be pulled up. Their mouths came apart for a brief moment, only to immediately come right back together.

Vince took the offensive this time and pushed his tongue into her mouth before she could do the same to him.

A wet, warm sensation took over his member and he belatedly realized one of the Dryads had taken him into her mouth. He had no idea who, but it was obvious that's what'd happened.

Reaching down, he put his hand in her hair and began to thrust himself into her willing mouth. Holding her there, he pumped back and forth, getting his tip down her throat at the end of each stroke.

“Nnghhuuk, gukk, nnnnnguh,” groaned a Dryad who sounded a lot like Antona with each thrust. He had no idea what she was trying to say and also didn't really care.

Dea broke the kiss and then gently pushed the Dryad's head away. Vince only barely noticed it was indeed Antona who he'd been manhandling. Another Dryad had been licking at Dea's privates as well.

"Vince, I need it so bad," begged Dea, her eyes holding that bright spark in the center of them again. As far as he could determine, that was a clear signifier of her tapping into her divine center.

Pulling him to the bed, she paused and turned him around, and sat him down there. Before he could say anything, she'd dropped down to one knee and taken his saliva-covered member into her mouth. Sucking firmly on him, she bobbed her head up and down rapidly.

"Damn, Dea," moaned Vince, his fingers curling in her hair.

"Mmmooggh?" she mumbled around him. She kept it up for a few more seconds then popped off him with a loud exhale. "I want more but I need it in me first. Damn it."

"Antona, in the bed. I need you."

Getting into the bed quickly, Antona laid herself out in the middle. The beautiful Dryad looked incredibly eager, even though she didn't seem to know what was going on.

Dea got on the bed as well, putting her hips over Antona's face. She laid her pubic mound down right atop the bridge of Antona's nose

Dea got down on her hands and knees. She lifted her rear end toward Vince and gave it a small shimmy at him. Her left hand grabbed the headboard, and her right hand was splaying her very wet entry open.

"Vince, now, please," demanded Dea, looking at him over her shoulder with a smoldering stare. There was no arguing with her request.

Getting up onto the bed, Vince took Dea by the hip with one hand and his member with the other. Aiming, he got it lined up on Dea and then pushed forward, entering her fully in one thrust.

Dea moaned and pushed her rear end into his lap. Her arm flexed as she did so. To the point that he felt like she was going to

move him back a bit.

He could feel his jewels resting in Antona's mouth as well. The Dryad eagerly participated in whatever way she could, her tongue flicking back and forth and all the way up to his hilt.

Drawing back, Vince then pushed forward, running it deep into Dea. Keeping both hands on her hips, he began to pump himself back and forth. His girth squeezing into her and pushing apart her slick and warm interior.

Dea was loud, moaning and grunting as Vince worked at pummeling her insides.

Her shoulder dropped and he suddenly felt a hand gripping his ankle. Her fingers flexed and gripped him tightly as he kept pushing her forward.

Reaching up with his left hand, he put his fingers into her hair and held on, his right hand coming up to grab her shoulder. Pulling on her as he jammed himself forward and into her.

Taking in a long breath, Dea then held it even as Vince kept at her. He pushed hard and deep into her as he pulled at her body.

All the while, Dea's fingers pulled at his ankle as she pushed back with her left hand. Trying to get him deeper if possible, even as her insides spasmed, flexed, and quivered around him. Her whole body twitched once or twice as she quite obviously orgasmed.

Not able to keep up any longer, Vince started to peak. Leaning forward, he pushed Dea down into the bed a bit more firmly and crammed himself into her. Trying to get it as far down her channel as he could.

Dea let out a loud, long groan as he unloaded himself into her. Pushing up against her with each pulse of his member.

When he finally came to the end of it, he let out a long sigh, thrusting into Dea one more time. Slowly he came off her, his shaft sliding out with a wet swish.

"Nnnaahh... ooh... that... nnn," whimpered Dea, slowly sitting up.

And onto Antona's face. Her privates practically covered the Dryad's mouth.

“Okay, Antona. I need you to eat up everything you can, but don’t swallow. I’m sure I’m overflowing,” Dea said, fanning at her face with one hand. “When you’re done licking me clean, go take it to Red. Tell her I’m sorry I can’t be her mouth, but you’ll be, Antona. You’ll be her mouth.”

“Yensh yadee,” mumbled Antona, licking and lapping at Dea’s privates.

“When you’re done with me, go suck what you can out of our Lord, too. That’s all going to Red,” Dea said with a soft moan. “Then... then the Lord and I are going to go again. And again. You can feed Red all the leftovers.

“Then in the morning... Blue will have our Dryad seeding day for those who are healthy. I think you’re all healed up at this point. At least, as far as I can tell.”

“Yes, Lady,” Blue said from one side. She was apparently watching and sounded quite excited. “I’ll be glad to lead our... ritual.”

“Yensh yadee,” Antona said followed by a slurping noise as she sucked at the lips of Dea’s entry.

Fun.

Riding on Elizabeth, Vince felt annoyed.

He was currently in the Sword of Yosemite flying toward Madrid. They were about to present the enemy with an overwhelming declaration of force.

A Dragon, the Goddess of Dryads, and the Sword of Yosemite.

Hopefully, the enemy would take it as the threat it was and would simply surrender to Yosemite. If Vince was being honest, he didn’t think that was likely, but he had to at least try.

Obviously, the leader of Spain knew what was happening.

There wouldn’t have been an army at the doorstep of Bilbao otherwise.

What he’d heard from Antona, from the prisoners that they’d already gone through, was that they were sent there to pin Bilbao in. So that there was no possible way to reinforce Coruna.

The reason for his annoyances was that he was traveling in the Sword of Yosemite.

If he'd known he was going to be revealing it now, he would have used it in the first battle. To really put it through its paces and see what it could do.

Ugh.

Whatever.

Can't make perfect decisions. No one makes perfect choices every time.

Real life isn't like that. Mistakes are just that.

"I think the Dryads were behind it," muttered Dea from where she sat in front of him.

"Eh? What'd they do now?" Vince asked, somewhat startled.

He'd spent the evening and early morning turning Dea inside out. At her own request and persistence.

When the morning came, she'd presided over the "Dryad seeding" opening but then fled. Hiding away from everyone.

"I'm not... I've never been like that before. Never. Something was very different. I was... I've... never in my life. Never," grumbled Dea with a firm shake of her head. "I think the Dryads did something to us. I think they twisted their faith around both of us until we could only act. Flooding us with faith and... and Dryad magic.

"I'm not some easy woman that just threw it around for any man who crossed me. I'd only been with a handful of men before... before all the portal things happened."

Now that Vince thought about it, it had felt a little strange in retrospect. While he wasn't unhappy with having spent so much time with Dea, he did have to concur that something was off.

"Err... I'm not upset, you know. Not at what we did. It was actually a lot of fun," Dea said quickly, realizing her statement hadn't sounded very positive. "I've never had a man want me as much as you did and... yeah, it was a lot of fun.

"I'm just wondering if my personality is changing. I don't want to change. I want very much to be me and... and I'm afraid this is going to change me. Does that make sense?"

It did make sense to Vince. If he were in her position, he wasn't able to shake the feeling he'd probably have reacted worse than she had.

All the trees in the grove were aware and awake now. Every single one of them. They also tended to pay a great deal of attention to him, he noticed.

"I'd bet that they were just over eager having a Lord and a goddess to turn to. I bet their Dryad nature, Nymph nature, overran them. It would only have one place to go, after all. You and I," growled Vince, directing his demand at the grove inside him. He had no doubt that they'd instantly pass on his words to their Dryads. All of them. "I have no doubt... no doubt whatsoever, that they're not trying to change you, Dea.

"When we get back, let's have a conversation with our Dryads. I'm their Lord, you're their Lady, aren't you? They wouldn't go against your wishes. They want you to be happy, loved, and cared for. You feel them in a way I never could, even the ones who aren't part of my grove."

Dea took in a slow and low breath, then sighed. She nodded her head and then leaned herself back into him. Her hands held on to his armored thighs.

There was a response from the grove. One that felt like Dryads all scrambling to stop what they were doing and reverse course.

As if they really had been attempting to maybe influence Dea, and now they were doing all they could to halt that. To push it back to where it had been and make sure there was no trace of it.

Tricky Dryads.

I do love them all, but... sometimes they can be so mischievous.

"You're right, my Lord. I can't really expect our Dryads to not just... pump us full of what they are," Dea laughed warmly and then sighed. "Really was rather fun though, but I'm feeling incredibly shy about it. Don't be... upset with me if I don't come back to your bed for a little while.

"I'm feeling rather overwhelmed. I need a little time to really just... just process what we did. And... err... Blue already told me I'm pregnant."

“I understand. It’s not a problem,” soothed Vince even as he felt the Dryads working frantically in the background. At a fevered pace in fact, that felt like they were sprinting about and shrieking.

He couldn’t feel it, but he was betting that the Goddess of Dryads was sending out wishes of well-being and tender care to her Dryads.

Which probably was making them feel even guiltier.

“Lord, we’re there. It’s just ahead,” called Elizabeth. “They’re already readying Nullifiers to take me out of the sky. I need to put us down out of range and we can continue on foot.”

“That’s fine,” Vince replied. “I’ll not risk you now, Elizabeth.”

She’d returned in the morning with three Dragons in tow. A Gold, a White, and a Blue. All of them had quickly pledged themselves to him as a Wing. To serve the goddess Ferris and he, the Lord of Dryads and Dragons.

Though there’d been a brief discussion between Blue and Elizabeth if it was the Lord of Dryads and Dragons, or Dragons and Dryads.

The Gold and Blue had been sent back to Coruna while the White remained in Bilbao as a defender. Elizabeth was readying for another trip. This time to collect yet more and spread the word of the Lord of Dragons and Ferris.

Elizabeth had landed them even as he was lost in thought, shifting into her human form quickly. She turned to Dea who had been holding the greatcoat for her.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said, getting into the coat.

Vince began marching ahead.

Dea was at his right and pulled out something from a bag on her belt. She snapped it out to one side and Vince realized it was a telescoping rod. It wasn’t very long, but long enough to attach a white flag to.

Elizabeth was at his left as they walked to what could very well be a straightforward attempt to kill them. He wasn’t too afraid of what these people could do. They’d likely try to shoot them, at which point Vince, Elizabeth, and Dea would just leave.

“She really shape-shifted into her human form?” asked Elizabeth. “Mother, that is. She’s... only done that on a handful of occasions.

Never what she really looks like, either. I've only seen her like that once and that was because I asked."

"She did. I... uh... yes. She did," Vince answered honestly. He really didn't know how to tell her that he was positive she'd also come on to him. Or at least flirted with him.

Dea's comment at the time hadn't helped either.

"She's just as attractive as you are," Dea offered unhelpfully as she tied the white flag to the rod. "I could smell the desire on her for Vince. Which he also felt for her. I wouldn't be surprised if she tries to push it further in the future."

Elizabeth loudly sighed and nodded her head shortly.

"I can't blame her. Vince is very impressive. It's just... a bit weird. The idea of sharing a man with my... mother... fits in a strange place in my head. I can't really say I'm feeling great about it," grumbled Elizabeth.

"If it bothers you, I'll decline any offer she makes," promised Vince. "Right now she's talking with Taylor about details. I'll make sure she speaks with you afterward so you get what you want out of this.

"Even if that includes putting limits on her. You were rightfully here before her, Elizabeth. I won't discount you because she showed up."

"Ah, someone's coming," Dea announced as the doors to Madrid opened.

"Time for a show, I guess," grumbled Vince, coming to a stop.

Chapter 29

“I’m not sure,” mumbled Elizabeth with a faltering voice. “I don’t... want to try and limit her but it’s just weird. I want her to be happy and... you’re kind of amazing. I constantly want to tear your head off or just have wild sex with you.

“I’m sure Mother feels the same. If not more so. You bent a nation she was the overseer for over your knee and had a stranglehold on her. Then you decided it’s easier to put her into a prison rather than kill her, and let it end.

“I wouldn’t be surprised at all if she feels exactly the same as I do.”

Elizabeth shuffled her feet once or twice, then smoothed down the greatcoat over her body. Then pulled it closer at the front, making sure her body was suitably covered from prying eyes.

Then she let out a long sigh, chewed at her bottom lip, and even shook her head. It was the picture of a woman in doubt and feeling uncomfortable.

“Treat her as you would me. We’ll just... see how it goes. The humanity I’ve been cultivating wants you to myself. The Dragon I am demands that I assert dominance over Ferris if she joins us and makes sure she understands that this is my wing, goddess or not.

“I have no doubt Taylor is going to do the same. A goddess is a powerful thing, but only when you act foolishly with them,” worried Elizabeth. Then she straightened her shoulders and met his eyes as a large group of people headed their way from the gates. “Treat her as you would me. I’ll fight her directly for my wing if I have to. I’m a Dragon. One that’s smart enough to cultivate her humanity, but I’m still a damn Dragon.

“We often will kill, eat, or dominate our family. So... so I can just do that if I have to. I’m Vince’s European Dragon Wing Leader. I’m his Nest-mate. I fear nothing.”

Unable to help himself, Vince grinned at that. Reaching out, he began to dig his fingers into the base of Elizabeth’s right horn. Pushing roughly at the tough skin and scale there with his fingertips.

“Nnnnnuuuhh... thank you for the... nnn... affirmation, Nest-mate,” groaned Elizabeth in a very similar way to how Taylor and Ramona did when he’d done the same for them. Her head was tilted toward him, and she was entirely focused on his hand.

He imagined that he was able to exert a great deal of pressure with the Sword of Yosemite’s powered gauntlets. Digging his fingers in, he pulled and pushed at her.

“They’ve brought riflemen, Dryads, and heavily-armed soldiers,” muttered Dea, waving the white flag slowly back and forth. “Fairly certain the king is in that group.”

“Dryads?” asked Vince, putting his attention on that group entirely now. They were just close enough that he could see some of it, but not enough.

Need binoculars.

“Zoom activating,” reported Meliae, her ever-present smile in her voice. Then the screens in front of his eyes began to magnify the image, pushing in close and tight to the group.

He could indeed see Dryads being escorted with this group. They were all bound at the hands and each of them had a soldier with a gun jammed in their back.

Hostages? Shields?

Hm.

Must’ve been a spy or two floating around in Coruna or Bilbao. They’re aware of my fondness for Dryads and likely even my title.

That gives me an idea about what to expect from this man, though. What he’s capable of doing and will do.

Which... means I need to thank Ryker.

He dropped us down in a place where it’s easy to take over in the way that suits me best.

Pulling his hand off Elizabeth’s head, he went to a state of attention. At a thought, the view began to pull back away from the group.

“Pray to Ferris, not me, Elizabeth,” Dea whispered. “I’m the Dryad goddess.”

“I’m not going to pray to Ferris. Just consider me an honorary Dryad,” growled Elizabeth back. “Accept my thanks for Vince rubbing

my horns already.”

“Fine. You’re welcome. Shut up,” hissed Dea. “Don’t mention this to anyone else. Dryads to me, Dragons for Ferris.”

I... what?

Haha. She prayed to Dea rather than Ferris. That’s kinda funny. Can’t let that become normal for others though, just as Dea said. I’ll talk to Elizabeth after this.

Finally, someone in the approaching group hoisted a white flag. Giving them some room to breathe and feel less like they would need to open fire any moment.

Dea stopped waving the banner and instead rested it on her shoulder, letting it dangle behind her but still be quite visible.

“They’re all praying to me to rescue them,” Dea advised. “For the Lord of the Dryads to rescue them.”

“Oh, we’ll be doing that. We won’t be leaving without the Dryads. That’ll be the price of this meeting. I’d rather kill everyone here and try to regrow the Dryads,” drawled Vince, forcing his tone to be much smoother than he actually felt. “This bastard will get to walk away without me just mowing everyone down if I get the Dryads.

“Besides, his own people already fired on a white flag. So it’s not like we can actually trust or believe in them in any way.”

The opposing group stopped about twenty feet away and a man came forward. He was older, perhaps in his late fifties. Across his chest were a number of medals and he was wearing a military uniform.

A pistol was belted at his side, and it looked to be made expensively, rather than practically.

His black hair was shot through with streaks of gray and his long black beard reached his collarbone. Hard, dark-green eyes sat deep in his face.

Vince couldn’t deny the fact that this man had likely been handsome in his youth, given that even now he wasn’t unattractive.

“I’m Vincent Campbell,” declared Vince, deciding to get this meeting moving in the right direction. “My title is the King of Yosemite, Grand Marshal to the forces of Legion in the empire of Legion, the Lord of the Dryads, and the Lord of the Dragons.

“I’ve come to barter with you for the soul of this land. As well as my demands for my people that you hold prisoner and for the lives that you’ve stolen from them.”

“Is that so? Is that right?” called back the pompous man. His thoughts were a disjointed whirl of half-formed sentences and broken plans. He also seemed to be suffering from the same mental scars that so many did around these parts. That was the extent that Vince could get from him. “I’m somewhat of a lord myself, you know. A lord of many things. Just like my uncle, he was a lord, too. Went and did a great many things and came back a hero.

“A hero that the people needed and heralded. One that they wanted to champion them. That’s just like me. A champion to them. Here to be there for them.

“Those people, all of those honorable citizens, wanted me to take over for him when the time came. Rather than those nasty cousins of mine. Cousins who didn’t deserve a damn thing, who had no lordly business to rule them.”

Vince could just barely follow the train of logic but ended up shaking his head, wondering where this was going.

Holding up his hand, Vince decided to keep this straight and simple. There really was no point in beating around the bush.

“First, turn over those Dryads you have there. I’ll not let you leave with them. Even if I have to mow you all down right now. I will gladly unleash the goddess of the Dryads on you, as well as let the Dragon loose to do what she wants,” threatened Vince. “I’ll kill the Dryads before I let you escape with them. I’m sure they’d prefer returning to the earth from whence they came rather than me leaving them with you.”

Dea stepped forward and held her arms up at the same time that a rumbling and grinding noise was heard.

Appearing out of the sky was a large, white-scaled Dragon. It thumped down onto the ground just behind Elizabeth and Vince. It flared out its wings, leaned back, and let loose a massive roar.

Even as Ferris appeared—as who else would appear in such a situation—Dea had summoned up a massive golem of earth and stone. It towered above and behind them to a height of sixty feet.

It snapped its fist together with a boom that was a lot like two rocks slamming together.

Probably because it was.

The massive golem was shaped to look exactly like Dea, and it was an impressive and terrifying figure.

If far too attractive.

“Second to that,” Vince continued after the noise died away. “You should... just surrender. You should give over to me your lands and become a duke. The Duke of Madrid.

“I’ll let you keep that title and remain a lord of the city under the laws of Yosemite.

“Because honestly... there’s nothing you could say otherwise that would make me feel like you’re worth keeping around beyond that. Even the Dukedom is being generous, if we’re being frank about it.”

Elizabeth hesitated for a fraction of a second before she unslung the coat that covered her and transformed into her Dragon self. She wasn’t as big as Ferris, but was nearly as intimidating. Her scales had grown in brightness recently. They were now the same color as her eyes.

“I’ll give you ten seconds to decide, then I’m going to unleash this on your face,” Vince stated and then grabbed his rifle. Pulling it up in front of him, he put the barrel’s tip in line with the leader of Spain.

Whom Vince had never even actually learned the name of.

“Hey, what’s your name by the way? I need to know what to write on your tombstone. I can’t just write ‘old dead guy’ on it, now can I?” Vince added. There was a sudden flash from the man.

Thoughts of dying tripped through his mind unendingly. One after the other, after the other.

That the fact that he was sick would become public knowledge. An illness that plagued him for the better part of twenty years. Hounding him at every step since he’d found out.

It wasn’t terminal, nor was it even life-threatening, but it presented weakness. A constant tremor and shake that would show up if he didn’t have a Shaman he’d enslaved to maintain the appearance of him being healthy and well.

“You’re not... shaking... are you?” asked Vince, hitting the word quite hard. “It’d be a real shame if you started quaking.”

The dictator of the country, a man Vince still didn’t actually know the name of, was staring at Vince as if he were an omen now.

A very bad one.

“You will turn over my cities back to me!” seethed the man. “You have a day to comply. I’ll begin slaughtering everyone and everything after today. I’ll burn it all to the ground.

“And if you think your little pets will help you, better think again. Next time, I won’t leave my Nullifiers behind. Next time... next time I’ll just tear you apart and leave your corpse on the ground.”

“Great. Leave the Dryads, you can go. And what’s your name again?” prompted Vince.

He really was half-tempted to simply kill the man outright, but he was positive the Dryads would be gunned down. He also wouldn’t have access to their trees so he couldn’t just replant them with the tree, or a seed.

There was a limit to how far he could bluff with their lives.

“Alvarez Franco, and I’ll see you gutted personally. Then I’ll take all your precious Dryads and make a harem out of them,” spat the man. Turning on his heel, he began heading back to Madrid. He waved a hand at the Dryads, but didn’t actually command anything.

His soldiers hesitated, somewhat unsure, only to leave the Dryads behind. They all kept their eyes on the group as they fled.

Six Dryads rushed over to Vince. All of them talking at the same time.

“Hush, dears, hush,” commanded Dea, coming over to them. “I’ll cut your bindings and then we’ll talk. I’ll keep you empowered until we can plant your new trees accordingly.

“It’ll be fine. I promise. We just need to get you to Coruna. You can join the grove there. They need more hands anyway.”

Vince turned and looked at Ferris as Dea herded all the Dryads away.

“And what’re you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be getting all the details roughed out with Taylor?” Vince asked.

“She’s asleep. The vault’s done and she couldn’t wait any longer. We spoke for a while before she was finally settled enough to clutch in her nest. Only two eggs, but they were impressive,” Ferris explained, tilting her head to one side and looking at him in an odd way. “Ramona’s eggs were also impressive. Alice will be next. Taylor is allowing her to nest in the vault with her. I suspect her eggs will be equally stunning.

“As to the details, that was easy. Taylor said it doesn’t matter to her as long as you’re happy. She’d worship me, or not. Beyond that, she told me to get my own Wing. I ah... I’ve received all the worship from every Dragon in Yosemite since Taylor told them to do so.”

“Uh-huh. Great. Yarie was alright with it?” prompted Vince. Turning, he looked at Elizabeth and picked up her coat. Then he moved over to her right foreleg and started climbing up her.

To which the Platinum Dragon eagerly hunched low to help him on.

“Queen Yaris? Yes. She’s very excited. I let her know of your dual deities. Dryads and Dragons. She then... prompted everyone to begin worshipping Dea and I in equal measure.

“It’s... very empowering. Those spoiled brats in the Tri-lliance have no idea what they’ve done. Yosemite is free to finish off North America. After that, it’ll be a long time to build up to take South America.”

Vince nodded his head to that. He knew Yaris was already putting together many different plans on how to conquer the Tri-lliance.

Even if it was literally decades away, she wanted to be able to stomp them flat the moment she could. Even going so far as to deliberately float warships all along the coast. Attempting to provoke the Tri-lliance to be the one to break the deal.

Now that Ferris was a deity of Yosemite, she’d likely push it even further.

“I’m... going to go. I want to go warn all the Dragons in the Tri-lliance to begin moving north. The longer they stay down there, the worse it’ll be. Admittedly, many of the Reds won’t, but... that’s just

how they are,” said the goddess with a chuckle. After a moment, she rapidly shifted into her human form.

Her very young and attractive human form.

Which was also quite naked and displaying her wonderful assets quite proudly.

Walking right up to Elizabeth, she smiled at the Dragon and patted her on the side of the head. It was a very warm and loving gesture.

“I may just do exactly what you feared, Daughter, but I assure you I have no desire, nor wish, to join your wing, or lead it,” promised Ferris. “Let’s speak again soon. Take our Lord back to Coruna.”

Elizabeth snuffled, her scaled nose wrinkling, then she nodded her head fractionally.

“Of course, Mother. And I’m... sorry for praying to Dea. I’ll pray to you going forward. I’m just feeling... rebellious. That’s what you always called it,” confessed Elizabeth. “Just feeling very... Dragon about Vince.

“My rebellious girl. It’s why you’re my daughter,” agreed Ferris with a grin. Then she glanced up at Vince. “See you soon, Vince. My Lord.”

The grin she’d been wearing grew far flirtier, then she gave him a wink, and then winked out of existence.

Exiting the throne room, Vince felt exhausted. Incredibly so.

Petra had debriefed him in a way that only a true general could. Cristina had been present and was clearly listening to every word said, how it was said, and the direction of the conversation. If ever there was someone to try to take up Petra’s mantle, Cristina suddenly looked like the best candidate.

Maybe it’s a mindset only Ants can really have. Thera and Eva are both great in their own rights, but it might just be... an ant thing.

“Hey, Uncle. Any chance you can just grant me that favor for Cristina? Petra wants her as her second and she’s already pushing for it,” complained Vince as he walked into the night air of Coruna.

There was a different feeling here already.

Citizens were out and about, moving through the streets. Going about their lives without any fear or concern.

Yosemite soldiers were visible, on alert, and patrolling. They didn't hinder, impede, or even mingle with the citizens. They were on duty and needed to be aware, but they also weren't making a nuisance of themselves to the populace.

"Fine," came a disembodied voice from nowhere. "We'll pay that cost to the favor I owed you. I did fix Red of my own wishes after all. Besides, it's a good test for me. I can measure it and track it easier than I did Petra.

"Now... leave me alone. Talking to your mother-in-law. She says hello, by the way.

"Uh... and... err... fine, okay, Mila. I will. Yes. I promise.

"Mila says to tell you that everything is fine here as well. There's nothing wrong, all is well. Though I'm not very pleased with your little boat stunt. Didn't break the agreement, but still."

"Eh, you like it. You'd have done the same in my shoes. Well... thanks, Uncle. Though it sounds like I'll need to start calling you Dad, if you get too close to Mila," answered Vince, walking down the boulevard to the main plaza. He had a grin on his face from ear to ear.

"Shut up," growled Ryker. "No, no! I didn't mean you. Yes, I— no. Okay, fine. I'm sorry, Vince for telling you to shut up. There, okay?"

"Okay. Yes, Mila.

"Vince... we'll talk more later."

Laughing now, Vince could only nod his head. He hadn't doubted that Mila could whip Ryker into shape. It sounded like she was doing just that.

Entering the plaza, he started off to where the old tree was. He found that location to be somewhat soothing to him. He enjoyed just sitting on the grass there beneath its branches. Watching the city breathe freely, without the stench of blood and executions hanging over everything.

"Oh, hello," said a somewhat nasally voice. "I didn't expect to see you here, Mr. Campbell."

Grinning even before he turned his head, Vince knew exactly who it was.

“Mr. White Junior, how are you?” he asked, finding the man.

He was sitting on a low bench to one side. In his lap was a small electronic device that he was tinkering with. A small item in his right hand that looked like a measuring device of some sort was wedged into the device.

Next to him were several individuals in Legionnaire armor. His personal and private bodyguard contingent to ensure his safety. They were very likely all female beneath those helmets.

Where Mr. White had garnered great interest from the Orcs in Yosemite, his son had picked up more than that. He had the same affinity for technology that his father had, but it also came with a smattering of magical awareness.

The combination appealed to many of the magical races.

Though the Orcs pushed the hardest on him so far. Apparently, as a race, they wanted both Whites.

“I’m quite well, thank you for asking,” he said with a chuckle.

“Really... enjoying being out here. Outside of my father’s shadow.

“I didn’t really understand when he suggested I come here. Go with you? I thought he was getting rid of me. Though... now it just feels like he forced me to wake up.”

“I know I’m rather glad you’re here. Having a Mr. White on hand makes any journey seem less daunting,” Vince replied.

Mr. White gave him a confident and easy-going smile. The exact same that his father had often flashed.

“Well. You just let me worry about that army out there, Mr. Campbell,” said the man, pointing his device toward the gate.

There was a fairly massive army encircling Coruna. One with actual artillery pieces, heavy machine guns, and a great many soldiers.

Shields were being employed to great effect to minimize damage, but it was most certainly a war of attrition. Right now, there was more than enough magical force in Coruna to recharge the shields, which gave Yosemite an edge.

Only for Nullifiers to target them as soon as they were deployed. While they couldn't break a shield, their magic sapped its strength greatly.

Everything was rising to a fever pitch now across the board.

Coruna was under siege. Bilbao would be under siege again rather soon, he imagined. Magi Vale was under siege.

There were a lot of active engagements that were all vying for his attention.

"I'll leave it to you then, Mr. White," Vince murmured, deliberately clipping off the Junior. The man needed to grow on his own, to move out of his father's shadow.

That would include the name, Vince imagined.

"So, meet any nice Orcs?" Vince asked instead.

"I did!" Mr. White said enthusiastically. "But even more surprising, I met an entire colony of Lamia! They're quite spectacular to watch. The way they can propel themselves and the places they can maneuver... it's impressive.

"Not to mention, their shed scales are far harder than I suspected. I'm toying with a bag of them they let me borrow. I think I might be able to utilize them in a practical application. I could just make it into scale armor but that seems almost wasteful. I'm sure I can think of something cleverer than that.

"I also have been experimenting with this—"

Vince just listened to the man rattle off anything and everything.

It was nice just to let the world go by and hear about another person's day.

Laying down on the grass, Vince just let himself enjoy the situation.

Chapter 30

Vince looked down and across the Orange Dragon's back.

They had been collected by Elizabeth and brought back this morning. Along with a number of other Dragon Maidens.

So many that he'd lost track of which had gone where. All he knew was that there were more of them now. A number of them, in fact.

To the point that Elizabeth had left someone behind to convey instructions on how to reach Bilbao and her. She'd assign them a position from there.

"Lord, should we move in?" asked the Orange.

Bilbao was directly ahead in a line of the Dragon, and it didn't look out of the ordinary. Nor had an army shown up to lay siege. Everything looked as it should from here.

Vince wanted to go check the wall instead. Then possibly out to Magi Vale to see how things were going. His bubble of responsibility was those three areas and that's what Petra was relying on him to handle.

She hadn't been very happy about him taking Magi Vale, but only because she hadn't planned on it. The inclusion of the city into their domain was good news, just not what she'd been expecting.

"Uh, I'll be honest here, I forgot your name," Vince shouted over the sound of the wind rushing past them. On his left and right were several more Dragons. They all had occupants. People who were shifting to work out of Bilbao rather than Coruna.

Dea was with Elizabeth, while Red was running on foot again. She apparently enjoyed the chase from below at full speed rather than riding a Dragon.

"Oh, that's okay. I only told it to you once, Lord. Given how many people you meet daily that's expected," allowed the Orange. "I'm Renata."

"Renata, thank you. That's very kind of you. I need to go to that wall over there. Then north to Magi Vale, would you mind?" asked Vince.

“Not at all! I’m here to be ridden by you. Mistress Elizabeth was very kind to allow me to join her wing. As an Orange, I’m only marginally better than a Red. I’m also not very Dragon-like, really.”

“Oh, that’s fine, Renata. I don’t need many more warriors. I need more support types at the moment, actually. So if you’ve got a flair for magic, that’d be better for me anyway,” he assured her, patting the side of her neck roughly.

Renata turned with that, laughing, and began moving toward the wall.

The other Dragons, including Elizabeth, kept on toward Bilbao. He was thankful for that, as the sooner they could check-in and make sure all was well there, the better.

There really were other things they needed to double-check on though. Dea could be his minder for Bilbao for now.

Let’s... see. Dea can hear prayers. As can Ferris.

I’m their lord, but I can’t hear prayers as I’m not... the same as them.

If I pray to them, they can hear me, but not vice versa, right?

Let’s go with that.

Vince put his thoughts to a simple request. A prayer to the goddesses Dea and Ferris. His goddesses, in fact.

To pray to them that all would be well when he reached the defensive wall, and that all would be well when he made it up to Magi Vale.

That Dea would be able to handle anything in Bilbao while he went onward.

There was, of course, no response. No sense of satisfaction to his prayer. It was like tossing a rock down an empty well. A single clatter as it bounced off a wall, then vanished silently into the dark.

As they approached the wall, Vince saw that there was indeed an army at the wall. They were milling about in a camp they were constructing. Towers, tents, ditches, and a supply depot.

This had the look of something that wasn’t going anywhere until a job was done. There was also a clear path that they’d taken to get here. One that likely led back into the mountains and then beyond, past Magi Vale.

A supply route that'd keep them stocked up and able to act regardless of what happened at the wall. That was something Vince would have to contend with.

"Lord, should I strafe them?" asked Renata. "I could lay down a decent line on them. I'm faster than any other breed, you know. We all have our strengths, but Orange is the fastest!"

"Bring us in close to them and put me right in front of them," requested Vince. He was in the Sword of Yosemite armor, so he wasn't terribly afraid of this situation.

Not to mention, he didn't think they'd send much in the way of anti-magical forces in this direction. If they had any to spare, they'd all be at Magi Vale.

"Become your human form so you can stand behind my shield. I don't think they'll be able to do much anyway," commanded Vince. "Elizabeth and Dea will join us as well, I imagine."

Damn, doing a lot of talking lately.

This is getting rather annoying. I'd rather just do what Renata said. Burn them down and let the gods sort'em out. Not my problem. Especially with them not being natives to the country we're taking.

But Petra wanted me to try to convince people to leave us be... so... here we go.

Renata did a maneuver he hadn't experienced before. As she landed, she put her snout down to the grass and laid herself down in almost supplication.

Her neck shrunk, her head became much smaller, and suddenly Vince was standing on his own. Renata became her human self behind him, her head on the ground, her hands forward, and her knees on the ground.

As if she were praying to him.

"Thank you for accepting me, my Lord," Renata enthusiastically declared. "I will always be thankful for your protection. As all have done who joined, my Dragon word is yours, and I'm pleased that it is so."

Huh.

Weird little... ritual feeling, there.

“Ferris teach you that?” asked Vince, his eyes moving over the ranks of soldiers who were arranged in front of the wall. They were wearing the exact same uniforms he’d seen previously, though there were also a number of designations on it he hadn’t seen before.

“Yes, Lord. Ferris told us all many ways we can worship you, which in turn worships her,” offered Renata, who then got to her feet.

She was a beautiful specimen of Dragon with an upper-body that was as well-endowed as Meliae’s, and with a waist and hips to match.

If he had to put a woman together in a sex-crazed fantasy, she’d be it.

She had long, curling hair that was a pale red that did look orange. Her eyes matched the color of her scales, and her horns were long, delicate things with sharp points.

Damn. I’ll... uh... damn.

Vince was having a hard time looking away from the lovely Dragon in his cameras.

Renata eased up behind him and laid her hands on the back plates of his armor. She was tall. Taller than he was, in fact. She could look over his shoulder even in his armor.

Announcement mode. Directly ahead.

“Complete,” Meliae stated.

“Send out whoever speaks for your encampment. My name is Vincent Campbell. I’m the Lord of Dryads, Lord of Dragons, and the Lord of Yosemite. A vassal kingdom to the Empire of Legion,” announced Vince.

There had already been a shuffling of people in the camp, now it was frenzied and frantic.

Sooner than he expected, a man in a greatcoat came running out of the camp. In his hand was a white handkerchief that he held above his head.

Vince realized it was Tim heading right at him. The man had left the camp so quickly, that he was only wearing pants and a coat. His tunic and armaments were entirely missing.

“He looks like he really wants to talk,” whispered Renata, her head right beside his.

“His name is Tim. I’ve spoken with him before. It’ll be interesting to see what he has to say. We weren’t gone that long. He must’ve sent a very fast runner and gotten a response instantly.

“With a response as fast as that I have to wonder... I don’t think they’re here for friendly reasons. I think this is yet another army for us to fight.”

“That’s fine, Lord. I don’t see any Nullifiers with them, or anyone serving the Arraignment,” countered Renata. “You and I can handle them all, Lord. It isn’t a concern.”

Arraignment. Tribunal of Arraignment.

Those who run down all those who can use magic outside of Necromancers and Warlocks.

If there are none of those in this army... that does change things a bit.

Do we just wipe them out?

“Lord Vince!” called Tim even as he came onward. Further behind him came another individual, though they were considerably slower.

“Lord Vince,” Tim said, stopping in front of Vince and Renata. Mentally, Vince asked for the speaker volume to become normal. There was no response from the suit, but he assumed it’d received his wish. “I’m afraid I was ordered to immediately turn south and begin sieging the wall. Then to break through to Bilbao and take it.

“I argued how pointless that order was, but... it wasn’t something I could actually change. Orders from above are absolute. They were also backed by the Arraigners. They’ve all moved on the Magi Vale.”

Ah.

I see.

Great.

More... more people to fight, kill, and eat.

“I see, that’s a shame,” confessed Vince. “I’ll be forced to burn out your camp entirely right here and now.”

“What... would you accept those looking for asylum? Refugees?” Tim asked instead, looking hopeful and determined. “Everyone with me isn’t from this area. We’re all... we came from the north-east. We were too close to the border with Prussany, and they burned our city down.

“All the survivors enlisted together. Men and women, all. The company that we’re here with is very similar. They’ll have to have some family members come join us, but... but they could easily do the same.”

Oh?

Oh. That could work out.

“As long as you’re willing to worship the Goddess of Dryads, Dea, or the Goddess of Dragons, Ferris, that would be acceptable,” Vince allowed. This was a perfect way to gain new converts. “Those who aren’t true to this wouldn’t be welcome and... it’d be found out. I will have one of those two goddesses on hand to make sure of it.”

“Acceptable! More-more than acceptable. We’ll do that,” agreed Tim. He turned and waved at the man who was still coming. Then he made an odd gesture with his hand that touched his chin, then his shoulder, then his chin again.

The man turned back the way he’d come and began shouting orders out.

“We’ll be ready in an hour. All we ask is a place to call home,” Tim said, looking back to Vince.

“You’ll be the garrison of Bilbao and its adjoining wall. There’s a stone fortress not far off from the city. It’s empty and ready for encampment,” Vince offered. “You can use that as your base of operations. Any other concerns?”

“Uhm... no, my Lord. Thank you. I’ll have everyone rounded up and praying to the goddesses immediately,” Tim said with a nod of his head. He looked at Renata and dipped his head to her. “Lady Dragon.”

Tim started back toward the camp at a slow jog. He wasn’t moving too fast, but neither was it slow. There also looked to be a great deal of freedom in his movement.

“He is very happy you agreed,” Renata murmured. “His mind is wounded. Very wounded. He’s seen far too much magic and had it used against him. He’s served a great deal on that frontline of theirs.

“Their minds are always problematic afterward. It was easy to see he was happy. Happy and more than excited to get out of this situation.”

“Hm. Can you use magic, Renata?” Vince asked.

“A great deal! I’m perhaps not as versatile as many Elves, but I’m stronger than any I’ve met,” answered Renata. “It doesn’t do much good though with so many Nullifiers running around. It’s why I wasn’t allowed to join any Wings. Not as useful.”

“Oh, you’ll be useful just as you are,” Vince said soothingly. “Useful just as you are. Now... let’s go see what’s going on with Magi Vale. I think they’re having more problems than I suspect.”

“Of course, my Lord. I’m always available for you to mount me. It’s one of the reasons Elizabeth allowed me to join,” promised Renata. There was no hiding the secondary meaning to her words. Less so when she nuzzled him openly as she said it. Her horns scraped against his helmet.

Even at the distance they’d been at, Nullifiers had taken shots at Renata. A never-ending stream of magically propelled negative-space magic that would possibly knock her right out of the air.

A barrage of them that just seemed to never stop.

There was no way for Vince to get in touch with Leila and Zathira by Dragon. He’d have to sneak in on foot if he wanted to talk to them.

“One problem solved, another created,” grumbled Vince as Renata brought them down on top of the keep. Once again, she helped him dismount by laying herself out on the ground, her hands pressed to the ground near his boots.

“Thank you, my Lord,” intoned Renata, staying where she was for several seconds before getting to her feet.

“You... you don’t have to do that, Renata,” muttered Vince. The first time she’d done it, he had honestly discounted it, thinking it was a one-off.

Only now did he realize she would likely do it every single time he got down.

“Don’t try to stop her,” Blue chastised him. She was seated at the edge of the roof. Watching him and Renata with a smile. “She’s

doing what she wills. If she didn't want to, she wouldn't.

"Who are you to tell her how to worship her deities? That's not very kind of you. I know many of my Dryads, including myself, are quite happy to show you worship. Especially in directing it to Dea.

"It's quite lovely to have a deity, you know. We've never really had one before. We just... worshiped the earth. Except they never responded or really paid us much attention. I'm sure Renata feels the same."

"Ferris sends me warmth and kindness often. I'm very pleased to have her as my deity," agreed Renata with a sharp rapid nod of her head. "She's already guided me several times in my prayers. My worries always find her, and she answers me.

"It's... there are no words to describe how pleased I am. To have a god as my Nest-mate, a goddess who listens to me, and a place to call home that will defend me. I've... I've also already seen the vault. Elizabeth took us all there.

"It'll be wonderful to eventually lay my eggs there. When it's my turn, that is."

Renata had put her hands together in front of herself and began wringing them. She slowly began to rotate back and forth in place as well, her eyes peeking up at him from a slightly downturned face.

It was a very cute look that Vince couldn't help but notice.

"Well, I take it Magi Vale is under siege? We assumed it was at this point. Sam hasn't returned since going there, which means she can't.

"There's not much that could keep her penned in unless Magi Vale was under siege by an overwhelming force.

"Not to mention, you wouldn't have come straight back as you did," reasoned out Blue with a small tilt to her head. "You'd have made contact and likely brought back any combination of Leila, Zathira, and Sam."

"Yeah, it's bad," admitted Vince. "I did strike a deal with the army outside the wall here, though. They're going to be joining us. They can take that garrison we cleared out."

"We just have to have Dryads and Dragons check them as they enter, yes," Blue murmured, finishing his thought. She gave him a

loving smile and made a hand-flick gesture. “I spoke with Dea about it all when she arrived. My goddess and I are in-sync since... since I’m a head priestess.

“I even have a bunch of spiffy new powers and... and I can communicate with Meliae a bit. Through Dea, but I can still communicate with her. This is already much better than we were afraid of.”

“Okay... yeah. That. Then we can get Tim settled and that’s great for us, more troops,” said Vince, unable to look away from the lovely Dryad. “More troops means we can make things happen.

“The enemy could siege Bilbao, but they’d have to be wary of Tim and his people. I wouldn’t want to actually use them though. They’re better used after we make sure of their allegiance and then have Mr. White outfit them.”

“That’s already my plan. There’s no need to call them out at this moment either,” Blue assured him. “All the Battle-Dryads are more than enough to make our walls safe here with the Yosemite troops and our recruits.

“It won’t be an issue. We’re also due to receive more of Cristina’s troops. She’s currently in the field on a patrol with several squads of them. With how diligent she is, I can see why Petra wants her as her second.”

Vince had partly tuned Blue out even as he stared off into the distance.

He wasn’t thinking about any of this in the right way.

Letting Tim and his people waste away in a garrison while he made sure of their allegiance was foolish. They wouldn’t do any good there, nor would they even be that useful.

If he were to take another city, install Tim as the military commander there, and let them be garrisoned at it, Yosemite would gain far more. They’d have another target for the enemy to worry over. To stretch their forces even thinner to try and deal with the situation.

“Leaving Tim at the garrison is foolish,” Vince whispered to himself as a plan came together in his head. “We’re going to keep moving. What’s the next closest city?”

“Zaragoza! It’s a wall city to the southeast,” Renata interjected quickly. “I’ve memorized all the cities, locations, and what could be a valuable target. I... I want to be as useful to you as I can, my Lord.”

“Consider yourself my personal mount, then,” Vince said without really thinking about it. Still staring off. “We’ll hit Zaragoza, put Tim there, and then keep moving along the wall. If we use all the Dryads we pick up on the way... incorporate them as we have all the other Battle-Dryads and get Antona to rapidly indoctrinate them... we could keep moving.

“All the way to the end of the wall. That’s a Dryad torture city, isn’t it?”

“Barcelona. It’s at the end of the wall, my Lord,” agreed Renata. “It is indeed a Dryad breeding center. There’d only be one after that, and that’s in the south. Just past Madrid. Toledo. It’s heavily defended as that’s where the majority of the Dryads in the region come from and are taken to.”

“There it is,” Vince determined. “Zaragoza, the wall, Barcelona. We can use the wall as a trade route and defend it. I just need to go see Zaragoza and get an idea of what we’re looking at.”

“I’ll get all the forces formed up,” offered Blue and stood up. “Antona will be excited, I’m sure.”

“Please, mount me, my Lord,” Renata quickly said and got down on her hands and knees, lowering her head down. “We’ll go look at Zaragoza, as you said. You said I’m your personal mount? Please, mount me.”

Blue laughed at that and patted Renata on the back as she passed. There was no mockery in her humor. If anything, it had a sultry undertone to it. A warm and welcoming one.

One that made Vince acutely aware of the very naked Dragon, and that Blue was indeed a Nymph.

“Oh, I’m sure he will eventually Renata. Then it’s my turn to help you along. I look forward to it. You remind me of my first wife, Meliae, and my second wife, Green,” promised the Dryad. “Pregnancy, birth, and death are the domains of Dryads now, so I’ll be involved. All hail the Lord of Dryads and his Dryad goddess wife, Dea.”

There was a thump at the titles in his chest as Blue left.

She did pause at the stairwell down and gave him an odd look.

“Don’t worry over Dea. We’ve... made sure everyone knows. There won’t be an issue ever again. Some of the younger Dryads were very confused at the start. They didn’t mean anything by it, just eager,” promised Blue, and then went into the keep.

Chapter 31

Vince had scouted the city of Zaragoza quite a bit with Renata.

Even going so far as to do a circuit around it on foot with Red.

There were a number of defensive positions, towers, and even a few machine-gun nests. Vince had no idea how they'd managed to get those, but he really didn't want to test how Legionnaire armor would fare against them.

Regardless of how strong the armor was, a heavy-caliber machine gun was indeed a heavy-caliber machine gun. Enough rounds would be put down that if there was a weakness, it'd be found.

They were also on high alert, with Nullifiers in many watchful positions.

A daylight assault wasn't something doable given all that.

Instead, they were moving at night.

Antona was ahead of him, dashing along the wall. They were all utilizing melee weapons at the moment. Each was armed with a heavy combat knife.

Moving with them were a number of Dragon Maidens as well.

Vince, Red, Blue, and Dea were also amongst them.

Elizabeth was busy recruiting Dragons in the south.

"Ferris, time to join," Dea muttered as they ran across the stone ramparts. The enemy hadn't bothered to put up any walls, blockades, or anything to stop Vince from simply rushing down it.

"Ferris?" Vince asked.

The Dragon goddess materialized next to Dea, naked, and running along next to her. The two goddesses gave each other a nod of their heads.

"We're learning to work together in our pantheon," Dea explained. "Dryads and Dragons need to learn to depend on one another. We'll be the backbone of Yosemite's long-term identity."

Ferris was nodding her head quickly at that, her head swiveling a bit as she took in the scenery. Then she turned and gave him a wide-eyed, full smile.

“I’m enjoying being on the physical plane a lot,” she remarked. “All the worship your Dragons throw at me has given me a lot more room to do what I want.

“It’s rather kind of the Dryads to include me in their prayers. I’m making sure the Dragons do the same for Dea.”

“Exactly, Ferris,” Dea agreed. “You and I are the only two deities they have. The better we support each other, the better we all are.”

Ferris laughed at that and looked ahead, then fell into a personal conversation with Dea.

“Aw, that’s so nice. I’m glad they’re becoming friends,” Blue remarked next to him.

“Guard tower and gate,” reported Antona.

“Two to the top, two to the bottom,” Blue replied with her ever warm tone.

“BD One and Two, take the top. Ten and Eleven, the bottom. The rest will continue,” ordered Antona.

Two squads of Battle-Dryads had all rushed forward toward the squat tower ahead of them.

There were no lights on the walls, nor on his people. There were several low-quality electric lights attached to the top of the tower, though they were pointed outwards.

Two other squads of the Dryads broke off and ran to the edge of the wall. They pulled out ropes and a number of other things that looked like they could be secured to the stones and parapet.

The entirety of the rest of the group all followed to the side, so Vince went with them.

This part of the plan really wasn’t that much of a concern. All of this was just to make sure that they couldn’t be struck from the rear by the wall garrison.

Two Dragons had gone in advance with the squads moving ahead, two others simply jumped off the wall and were now at the bottom. As best as he could figure, they were putting one Dragon with every Dryad squad.

Vince didn’t bother to wait, he just hopped off the wall.

Falling down the considerable distance, he hit the ground with a loud thud. He bent his knees and that bleed off some of his

momentum.

The rest of it went right to his ass as it smacked into the ground.

The Sword of Yosemite was well armored, however, and didn't even seem to register the hit.

Springing to his feet, Vince moved onward. He was the lead man on this attack, and he'd have to be quick. Quick and lethal.

His goal was simple.

Get up over the perimeter wall of Zaragoza, land inside, and smash the gate open. Then head straight for the garrison house inside the city.

There, he'd be responsible for slaughtering anyone who tried to resist.

Tonight, when most slept, Zaragoza would join Yosemite by force. In the morning, there would be no Francoist forces left in the city.

Tim and his people would roll in during the afternoon at some point, then be tasked with defending it. Holding it and making it their new garrison.

He'd briefly told the man what he was doing, and Tim had been quite eager to accept this instead of going to the fortress in the middle of nowhere.

"Red is excited to be hunting with you, Bringer!" called Red with a laugh. She was charging across the grass on all fours in her Legionnaire armor. Flinging dirt and chunks of green as she went, her claws and unshorn feet digging up the turf.

"Not hunting, really," Vince argued as they ran on.

Dea and Ferris appeared on either side of him, pushing to keep up with him. A moment after that, Renata joined them as well.

"Antona and Blue are following," reported Dea. "They'll be fine without us. You're the one who needs a hand more than they do."

"Oh? Do you think so?" asked Vince, eyeing the gate out ahead of them. It was iron bound, made of wood, and likely had a bar on it from the other side. Except Vince was already changing the plan in his head.

It wasn't that Blue's idea was bad, it's just that he knew he could run through walls even before he was in the Sword of Yosemite.

Piloting it, he was likely able to go right through the door and into the area beyond it. In fact, he was betting that it would only barely slow him down.

“Then stay on me. We’re going through the door and onward. There’s no time for this bullshit,” growled Vince.

The gate wasn’t too far out now and, honestly, it was likely the guards there had spotted them. They were most likely already sounding an alarm.

Vince’s thoughts were confirmed when a machine gun opened fire on them.

The rounds slammed into his shield and made the whole thing glow bright blue. Then the automatic fire slashed toward Dea and Ferris.

Both goddesses erected shields of faith magic, which defeated the small-arms fire as easily as Vince’s shield did. Several Nullifier blasts shot out as well.

They all connected with the shields, two of them on Ferris and Dea’s. Both of which shuddered but held. It was quite obvious in that moment that a Nullifier could have an effect on faith magic, but it was less when compared to its effect on regular magic.

Of course, the one that struck Vince’s shield did absolutely nothing other than dissipate completely. There was nothing a Nullifier could do to the technology of Legion.

Vince would have to work with Mr. White to start putting together Legionnaire armor for his Dragon Maidens. They needed to be shielded in the same way Dea and the Dryads were.

Dashing headlong toward the gate, Vince didn’t stop at all.

Slamming into it at a full sprint, he’d thrown his shoulder down and tucked his head at the last second. There was a splintering and cracking noise all around him at the moment of impact.

Several lights flashed on his screen, there was an odd whining noise, and he felt his feet momentarily lose purchase. The heavy armored boots skidded over loose debris and rubble.

Only to come out on the other side at nearly the same speed. It only took him two steps to find his rhythm. His footfalls and body moved in a set time and pace.

Several of the flashing indicators moved from red to yellow, but stayed lit. Clearly, the blow had done something to the armor, though Vince wasn't sure what.

Can we fix it?

Uhm, Meliae? Suit? Armor?

"Repairs have begun, don't you worry, Sweetling," answered Meliae. "It'll be done in—"

"Sixteen hours," finished a robotic-sounding voice.

That's a bit more damage than I thought it'd be just for running through a gate.

Glancing to the rear-facing cameras that looked back the way he'd come, Vince saw Renata, Dea, Ferris, Red, and even Elizabeth. He had no idea when she'd joined them, but she had. The Platinum was pushing up fast and hard, clearly wanting to be directly at his side as Red was now.

At the gate, Vince saw that it hadn't just been a wooden frame after all.

It'd had a significant amount of either iron or steel backing it, but he wasn't sure about the material. There were also a number of what could only be enchantments made of nullification magic.

Okay, that makes more sense.

I guess I probably should have listened to Blue.

Laughing, Vince turned his focus ahead once again. His goal was to get to the garrison with all haste. He couldn't let it stand long. The quicker they could bottle them up, the better off his Dryads would be.

"Red is so excited," exclaimed the Beastkin and she began to actually outpace Vince. She was moving at full speed to the squat, ugly tower that stood in the middle of the city. It was made of brick, stone, and even had electrical conveniences in it.

Vince had seen the powered lights from above with Renata.

"I'll race you, Red!" called Elizabeth. She then powered ahead of Vince as well, quickly catching up to Red.

Laughing, the Beastkin started to move faster, only for the Dragon to start pulling ahead of her. The two of them pushed hard to outdistance each other.

Out of nowhere, the very lovely and naked Renata blasted past both of them. Making them almost look like they were standing still. Her long legs flung her forward and her wings were snapping lighting behind her to propel her.

“God damn,” muttered Vince, watching Renata leave them all in the dust.

“She’s very eager to show off. More so than Elizabeth,” Ferris remarked, from Vince’s right. “She feels very inadequate with so many powerful breeds around her.”

“I figured that’s what it was,” added Dea from Vince’s left. She lifted an arm up and the area where Renata had just passed by began to churn. Stones, earth, and dirt rose up and formed itself into a large humanoid shape.

Dea’s earth constructs could be worn like the Sword of Yosemite, or so Dea had said. While it would likely be a bit more vulnerable to magic than the Legionnaire’s armor she was wearing, it’d still provide her with more options and armor.

“I can’t blame her. Even I want to show off a bit,” admitted Ferris. “If I wasn’t afraid of damaging the city, I’d transform right now and start making my way over.”

“So would they,” argued Vince, pointing at Renata and Elizabeth.

The former was now far ahead and practically at the garrison.

Running on, they all fell silent. Though Dea did pause for a fraction of a second to jump through her earth construct. She came out the other side in a very golem-like look.

They took the boulevard down for quite a ways and eventually turned, heading toward the keep and the garrison. The keep would need to be taken separately, but that wasn’t Vince’s personal goal.

His Battle-Dryads and Dragons would handle that for him.

Up ahead, Vince could see Red and Renata working in tandem to butcher everyone at the entrance of the garrison. Elizabeth was halfway up it and looked like she was planning to start killing her way down.

Huh. Maybe I won’t have to do much here after all?

When you have great people, things become easier.

Reaching the garrison, Red slashed a soldier to bits with a clawed hand and turned to look at him in the same move. She had a fang-toothed smile on her face even as blood sprayed into the air around her. A swirl of blood spraying out with the force of her strike in a weird wave about her.

The beautiful monster and her glowing eyes looked enchanting to Vince in that moment. She paused to put a hand to her chin, the other going to her waist.

A trail of blood lined the corner of her mouth as if she'd eaten someone or something before he'd gotten there.

Renata grabbed Red by the shoulder and then physically flung her into the garrison. The Beastkin laughed as it happened, curling up into a ball as she vanished into the building.

Renata chased in after her, slipping inside, though she did kick the head off a wounded soldier as she passed. Her foot tore his head clean off his shoulders.

Stopping just at the entrance, Vince shook his head. There was no reason for him to be here.

"Dea, provide assistance for them," commanded Vince. Turning on his heel, he started running off, there really was no point in him being here. No reason for him to wait.

Ferris stayed with him grinning from ear to ear as they strode forward.

"What're you smiling for?" asked Vince. He didn't even have to turn his head to watch her given the way his suit fed him so many different angles.

"This! I'm part of your group now. I'm not your enemy and you treat me as a companion!" Ferris joyfully answered. "It's been so long since I could be so... free. Not have to think about how others might view me, or act a certain way for them to worship me.

"All the Dragons who've joined Yosemite, or the worship of me, simply worship me as I am. They don't have any notions of it other than I am 'yours' and I am their 'goddess'. It's absolutely freeing."

"Goodie. I needed another wife," grumbled Vince.

"You very much don't, but I don't mind it. I'm fairly certain I can stand unique above so many others," argued Ferris. "Now... I'm

going to rush off to the keep and open that gate. Watch me as I go now. I'm very proud of how I look as a human. I've done all I can to keep my figure. A Dragon's pride is vast, you know."

Sprinting ahead now, Ferris left Vince behind even as he ran full out.

He just couldn't keep up with all these incredible monsters of fantasy and myth.

Machine-gun rounds, Nullifier spells, and a number of other things that Vince couldn't even identify began raining down from the keep.

From every level, every window, and every open location, things were discharged at Ferris. Her shield of faith in front of her shimmered and buckled more than once. She began to dodge as she went, trying to minimize the impacts.

Damnit.

A Dragon's pride really is vast, you nitwit. Rushing headlong into danger.

Grasping at the power inside him, Vince pulled at it, then tried to force it to Ferris. Except it didn't work. There was nothing for it to latch onto.

Unlike Dea, who was part of him, inside him, there was nothing for him to link his power to.

Ferris took cover behind a building and pressed tight against it. The look on her face was one of embarrassment and anger.

He imagined she felt quite ashamed in being forced to break off. Especially after acting so prideful.

Vince kept going even as endless rounds and anti-magic slammed into his shield. It felt a lot like standing in a downpour. Except he had a heavy umbrella that was maybe a little oversized as well.

Turning at the same point Ferris had, Vince came up next to her. Leaning against the same building.

"Hey there," Vince said, doing his best to not sound mocking. "There's a difference between you and Dea, you know."

"Oh? What's that?" asked Ferris dangerously. Her white eyes were illuminated and were quite bright.

“I have every scrap of Dea’s original field in me that she had. Every gram and spec of dirt. I’m constantly reinforcing her,” Vince answered as rifle rounds and Nullifier spell bursts kept pelting the area around them. More than a few of the anti-magic spells passed through them, thankfully it didn’t do much. “I have nothing of you, inside me. There is no physical part of you, with me.”

Ferris winced at that, sighed, and then looked up to the sky above them.

“All of her?” she asked in a tight voice.

“I took every smudge of dirt. All that she was at a deity level, is with me and my grove,” confirmed Vince.

Closing her eyes, Ferris shook her head, then bumped the back of it against the stones several times. Her horns clicked against it as she did so, gouging out small chips.

“Fine, here. This... is all that’s left of my physical body. The rest of it was destroyed with my death,” Ferris grumbled then held up her hands. Laid in between her hands was a long shard of bone. He had no idea what part of a Dragon it was, but it was only about the length of his hand and no wider than two fingers. “It’s all I have. Please... bury me in Dea’s dirt, with the grove. You better take care of me, Vince. There’s no going back for me from here.”

Raising his eyebrows, Vince was shocked. He hadn’t expected this.

It took a little finagling, and a number of different mental commands being tried, but he managed to get the Sword of Yosemite to open. Though only the chest compartment.

Then he managed to get a view of his shirt-covered torso with one of the cameras by craning his head to one side. Lifting a gauntleted hand, he pressed it to the spot where everything entered him now.

Without much more than a whisper of his desire to his grove and Dea inside him, the skin peeled apart. The muscles parted and a hole was there.

Roots came out from him and wriggled about, clearly expecting to be given something.

Ferris winced, chewed at her lips for a moment, and then handed off her remains. The roots encircling it then drawing it down into Vince's body.

No sooner than it had vanished out of sight, he knew where it was going. They were going to indeed bury Ferris in Dea's soil, in the heart of the grove.

There really was no going back for any of them.

Vince quickly closed up the Sword of Yosemite and then gave himself a small shake. He could feel a great deal of power from Ferris flowing into him, though there was also a shift in what was going out as well.

Ferris' form lost the slight blur it had at the edges and become razor sharp. There was also a high-pitched whine followed by a hard thud. Then another thud.

And another.

It kept going and eventually gained a steady beat. A hard pulse and then a soft one.

Vince realized in that moment that Ferris had just been forced into a mortal body. She'd been reborn and now had a beating heart.

Partly because she was leaning against the wall with wide eyes, one hand pressed to her bare chest. Right atop where her heart was now thudding hard.

"Oh... heavens," whimpered the Goddess of Dragons as she was given a mortal vessel once again. A handful of breaths passed, and she regained control over herself.

She was staring up into the sky above them again, taking in slow and steady breaths, her hand atop her chest. He could feel her life now firmly grounded in his own. Just as Dea's was.

The grove was the tie that bound it all together. Dea's soil was their home. Ferris had become death in that small cycle. Then forcefully reborn through Dea's power and the Dryads' wishes.

What remained of her original body would forever be with the grove and Dea, connected to her new one.

"I see," she whispered and nodded her head. Then laughed. "No wonder I couldn't keep up with Dea. It makes perfect sense."

Ferris walked around the corner of the building and vanished out of view.

By the time Vince made it around as well, he could see she was slowly walking to the keep.

Unending blasts of Nullifier magic, automatic fire, and even rockets pummeled into her faith shield.

Nothing happened to it other than becoming a kaleidoscope of colors with each impact.

Ferris laughed and began moving at a slow jog. Her wings were held open and behind her, spread wide.

“For my husband, the Lord of Dragons, the Lord of Dryads, the King of Yosemite, I will now take this keep! I will give it to him as a gift!” shouted the Goddess of Dragons at the top of her lungs.

It made the very ground shake briefly.

There was a resounding response from inside him as well. An upwelling of support and power pushing through him, to her.

Faith from Dragons and Dryads alike all responded to her call. This was unlike anything he’d ever experienced, and he wondered if she’d given that statement only to provoke a response in faith.

She’d been a goddess a long while, after all.

Ferris kicked the front gate of the keep in with one blow.

Clearly her strength and ability had jumped up after having her body interred within him.

Huh. Well... okay. I guess I can just let the Sword work on itself.

“Command elevated,” announced Meliae with a laugh. She clearly wasn’t taking herself seriously and was just enjoying the situation.

Chapter 32

Standing in the middle of the keep's throne room, Vince waited.

Renata had joined him and Ferris in the push to enter the keep. Then she and Ferris had demanded he remain there while they went to work clearing the keep.

Shortly after that, two squads of Battle-Dryads and two Dragons arrived. One squad went to join Ferris and Renata, the other, including Antona, remained with him.

A sudden thought popped into Vince's head.

"Any losses?" he asked, looking to Antona.

"Several, my lord. They were struck by an explosive device. We arranged their bodies for transport and will have them shipped back to Bilbao. They'd all received the gift of your seed and you carry theirs, so I don't think it'll be long before they reawaken," Antona said with absolute sincerity. "They will be laid in the Dryads field with all the appropriate measures. For now, they're... with us. In the cocoons that Mr. White supplied specifically for us. The Dryad reawakening cocoons."

I guess Blue's been spreading information. Though these cocoons are probably just body bags. Specific ones certainly, though I wonder how.

Or is it part of the ritual Blue is creating?

It's all going in such a ritualistic direction. To the point that I can't help but wonder if the power of their faith will cause this to happen on its own faster than anyone thinks.

This was so very different with Karya, Daphne, and Green. So very different.

It's all just... learn by experience and hearsay.

Now we're creating those myths and legends only to prod it along.

"Would our lord please bless their graves with his power? Many believe they'll come back to us within weeks if you blessed them. That their reawakening would be swift," Antona requested. "As... as their leader, I want my girls back. I need every Battle-Dryad and... and they deserve to live. The sooner the better."

“I’ll bless them. Every day if I have to. I already did for those in Coruna, you know,” Vince agreed, turning his head to look at Antona directly.

“Everyone knows that you buried them all with your own hand, my lord. I would ask that if I fall that you would please honor me in my reconnection with the earth by burying me yourself,” asked Antona. He couldn’t see her face behind her Legionnaire’s helmet, but he had no doubt she had the look of a fanatic.

All the Battle-Dryads did. As did all the regular Dryads, as well.

Dea was living proof that they had a goddess and Vince’s deeds were becoming more far-fetched with every retelling.

Then there’s... reconnection with the earth. They really are turning it all into one giant ritual.

Though... err... hm. I guess that did just happen with Ferris.

“As the commander, I will lay you into the earth myself,” Vince promised. Vince had decided to change the way he was speaking, if only to make this seem more out of this world. “And you’re right. The... reawakening can come quickly. For Ferris, it took only minutes, but I buried her bones in my own body.”

Vince reached up and tapped the front of his chest plate as if to signify where she was.

“She now lives and will remain with us,” he continued. Every Dryad there was now looking at him. “Her heart beats anew. Her flesh is whole. Touch her when she comes back if you doubt my words. The breath of life is in her.”

There was a trembling inside of him as he finished his words. A quiver that ran through a handful of his trees. It passed somewhere else, to what felt like Dea.

Then to Ferris.

Only to slam back down into Dea, and then every other tree in the grove.

There was a collective shudder in those trees. A tremor that shook his insides for a scattering of seconds, only for there to be an incredible stillness to them afterward.

This... is this a moment I can leverage? Can I set that myth right now?

Belief is reality, after all.

Their trees are communicating. They're using Dea as a go-between and spreading the word from here to the cities, and likely all the way back to Yosemite.

Perhaps not in words, but in feeling and expressions.

"Bring me my fallen Grove-wives, and Dea, my goddess," commanded Vince, turning to look at Antona again.

Several of the Battle-Dryads left at a dead sprint. A couple of others looked like they wanted to go as well, but remained in place with Antona.

"Lord?" asked Antona in a soft voice.

"I'm not going to wait for my wives to come back on their own. We're just going to call them back now. I need them. Just as you said," dismissed Vince. "I'm their lord. Their goddess is my wife. They'll come back. No sense in waiting.

"I'll also call forth those who fell at Coruna. This'll be an opportunity for them to return if they wish. I'm sure their spirits already call out to Dea in supplication. They just lack the power to do so. We'll grant it to them through their relative, Leandra."

Once more there was a crawling sensation moving through his grove. Traveling to Dea, to Ferris, and then back again.

There was something else he felt then. An ache, as if there was a missing piece. One he didn't understand but would have at in time.

Vince turned to look at the wall again. He was still waiting for this to be over. He needed to be off to Barcelona before dawn came. He wanted to punch down that city before they knew Zaragoza had fallen.

As if responding to his need, Ferris and Renata came down from a far stair well. They were dragging a man between them. His head was covered by a sack and he'd clearly been beaten quite badly.

"My husband, your Goddess of Dragons presents you with this human. May I slaughter him, and then display his corpse on a pole for the public?" asked Ferris, holding up the human partly with one hand.

"Please do so," Vince said, his eyes sliding to Renata.

Staring at the Dragon, he had a weird thought in his head as to what the ache could be. That maybe what he was missing, was a circle for the Dragons.

His Dryads could be rebirthed, but his Dragons could not.

What if they fell, would they simply rejoin the dirt?

“Renata,” Vince called, causing the Dragon to stand completely upright. Her chin lifted and she let go of the human, moving over to him quickly.

“Your Dragon Maiden awaits you!” stated the Orange, who then performed a curtsy despite being entirely nude.

“Break the tip off your horn and give it to me,” he commanded, pointing to her left horn. “Just the barest end of the tip mind you. Nothing more than a grain of sand if possible.”

Without any hesitation Renata reached up and snapped the tip off the horn. It was nearly as small as he’d wished.

Getting the Sword to open this time was much easier. He put himself into the same position as he had last time so he could see his chest. Then he opened it, just as he had for Ferris.

“Please give your horn over to me, Renata. I already have your word, now I’ll have your body,” Vince requested. He was going to ritualize this just as the Dryads had done with their seed pods.

Renata darted forward and pressed her fingers to the hole in his chest. The roots were quick to snag the small bit of Dragon horn and carry it down into him. He knew for a fact it’d be planted down in Dea’s soil.

I mean... won't I run out of space at some point in there?

Should probably ask Ryker about it in the future.

The wound sealed itself and he felt the ache wither away. The trees responded, conferred with Dea, who reached out to Ferris, only for her bone to resonate with the bit of horn. Then there was a new presence in the grove.

A curious, gentle, and quite orange speck of energy that fluttered through the trees and across the vale that was Dea.

Renata was staring at Vince with widened yet unseeing eyes. There was a definite connection between the Orange spiritual energy in him and the Dragon.

Which was confirmed when she slowly toppled backward and passed out, now lying unconscious on the ground. The floating Orange energy in the grove laid itself down on the soil, in those few blades of grass, and went to sleep.

“What... what have you... you... that—we’re like the Dryads, now. You just... she’s no longer a Dragon but something else,” murmured Ferris, looking at the fainted Renata.

“I’m sure Felix could name whatever species she is. I don’t care. What I do know, is that she won’t be leaving me if she dies. I’ll just call her back,” Vince stated and then turned to the Dryads rushing in with bright-green body bags held between them. “Now we’ll call back my Grove-wives, as well.”

“There was something else, m-my lord,” Ferris said after pausing to break the human’s neck she’d been holding onto. She dropped the fresh corpse to the ground and came over to him. “There’s an Elven woman we found upstairs. She refused to speak to us, but she’s an Arraigner.

“She herself is a Nullifier. Anyone that can use magic, can become one. It’s a perversion of what it should be, but... that’s what it is,” Ferris explained.

“Husband or Vince going forward, Ferris. You’re my wife, my goddess, but not a worshipper,” corrected Vince.

“I... yes, Husband,” agreed Ferris, sounding a little bashful. “But there’s more. The Elf has knowledge in her head. She isn’t as scarred as so many others. There’s a prison where they keep anyone who can use magic, who they don’t execute.

“They turn some of those people into Arraigners, Nullifiers, or just helpers after removing their ability to use magic. Others are just held there indefinitely.”

Vince nodded his head and knelt down over a body bag. He gently undid the drawstrings and found a very dead Dryad inside. Her armor had been removed and bound together at the base of her body bag. There were even straps for it that tied it into place.

Mr. White... you went all out for my Dryads. I’ll have to make sure you understand my Dragons are just as important now.

Legionnaire armor, body bags, equipment.

All to make my Dragons equal.

Vince placed his armor-covered palm against the Dryad's forehead.

He had no concerns about the power moving through the Sword of Yosemite and into her. It was an extension of him and his will. Likely the Dryads saw it as a tool of his, which meant it wouldn't be a barrier to him.

"They're planning to execute everyone in the prison. Every last one. Then empty the prison of its staff and send everyone off to join the siege at Magi Vale," Ferris continued. "The prison is literally in the heart of the Tribunal of Arraignment, on top of that."

"Grove-wife," said Vince, pushing into his grove and calling to her tree at the same time. Opening himself up to the grove, the two goddesses, and his own power well, he flooded the dead Dryad. "Time to return to me. I need you yet and it isn't time to leave me."

There was no response from the corpse. Power was filling the body, but it did nothing. It just permeated every bit of her and sat there.

Still as cold water in a mug.

"I said return to me, Marianna, my Grove-wife. This world is quite dim without you, and I need you now," demanded Vince without any hint of patience. He was done waiting and wanted her back this instant.

The Dryad took in a sudden and deep breath, began to cough, and groaned. At the same time, her eyes flew open wide. They were blazing brightly like a green-fire. Magical flame licked up from her eyes even as her body started to mend itself. Forcing itself together and healing.

Where flesh and muscle were missing, it grew back. Joining where it should be until the Dryad was whole.

Removing his hand from her brow, Vince felt his power return. She hadn't needed everything he'd put into her and much of it simply came back to him.

Gazing up at him, Marianna looked shocked as well as quite confused. She stared at him if she didn't understand.

“I... Husband? You called to me. I heard you. I came as fast as I could. Where... where was I... what... I-I’m sorry for making you wait,” mumbled the Dryad, still looking perplexed. “You need me? What can I do?”

Vince grinned and tilted his head to the side. He gently patted Marianna’s face with his armored hand.

“Thank you for coming back to me. I must go wake your sisters. They yet wait,” apologized Vince. “Then we’ll talk about how you may serve me once again. Alright?”

“Of course. I’m sorry I was late. I didn’t hear you at first,” murmured Marianna, blinking rapidly. “You sounded so far away.”

All around him, he could feel an absolute belief now. That he really was the Lord of Dryads and the Lord of Dragons. That to him, the boundary of death was only a temporary thing when it came to them.

A Dryad or a Dragon couldn’t be taken from him unless they didn’t want to come back.

Moving away, Vince knelt down beside the next body bag. He opened it and found a very badly damaged Dryad inside. A portion of her head was missing.

Let’s heal her first this time, then call her back.

“I think we should attack the prison,” Ferris suggested. “Attack it, free everyone inside, and take them to Magi Vale or Bilbao. At the same time, leave a nasty surprise for the Tribunal.

“One of those... very... bad... bombs you made. Just a smaller version of it would suffice. Do you happen to have any around?”

“I do indeed have one. Made from a Wurm,” admitted Vince, forcefully injecting power into the Dryad. He was bringing her body back together in every way this time before he called out to her. “I think your plan is probably the best we’ve got.

“Except we really need to get to Barcelona, and I feel like you’re going to tell me the mass execution starts tomorrow or the day after. Aren’t you, dear goddess of mine?”

“I... yes, I am, Husband,” confessed Ferris. “It’s tomorrow. In the afternoon, at sunset.”

Sighing, Vince laid his palm more firmly to the now reshaped Dryad's face.

She was a lovely Dryad to look at. Even amongst Dryads, she stood far and away as a beautiful woman.

"My pretty Grove-wife Dionara, it's time to come back. I have need of you. Please come back to me?" Vince asked, calling out to the Dryad.

Her eyes instantly snapped open and she turned her head to look at him.

"I... yes, Husband?" asked the Dryad with a small smile. "I'm always here for you. You don't have to ask so sweetly."

She blinked several times, frowned as her smile faded, and then looked around herself. Her brain clearly jumped to the fact that this wasn't quite right.

"Wha... where am I? Why are we here?" asked the Dryad.

"You died, dear. I just reawakened you. I need to go get your sister now. Okay?" he answered, nodding his head at her.

"Oh. Yes. I swore I heard you calling earlier. It wasn't for me, but I heard it. I was hoping you were coming for me," Dionara murmured and then sat up in her body bag.

Several Battle-Dryads descended on her and started getting her to her feet.

Vince nodded his head and moved to the next Dryad.

"I think we should do it. It's a good chance to strike several blows to them. They're going to push on Magi Vale quite hard. This is an opportunity to strike them in a way they're not expecting," Ferris pushed. "Husband, I think it's wise."

"Then we'll do it. If only because you think it's wise. You've lived far longer than I have and probably have a better mind for it," Vince responded as he undid the tie on the body bag. "Do you think Petra would push for it? If so, we'll go as soon as I finish here."

The Dryad beneath him had a hole punched through their heart. It had an odd look to it as if a large piece of shrapnel had carved out part of her chest.

Once more, he put her back together and put his hand to her cheek.

“Ynes, would you please do me a favor, Grove-wife? I have a need of you. Kindly tell Flora and her daughters to return to their own bodies. They’ve rested long enough. I’m sure their bodies are ready for them by this point.

“As soon as that’s done, come on back to me, my dear. I haven’t spent enough time with you and your smile was truly infectious the last time I saw you. Especially, given how badly you were treated in your life.”

Taking in a sudden and gasping breath, Ynes nodded her head fractionally and then opened her eyes. She did indeed present a wondrous smile to him in the next moment.

Her brow furrowed and she looked around slowly.

“I died,” she muttered, her eyes moving to Vince.

“You did indeed die, Ynes. I really wanted to see more of you though. I’m glad you came back,” murmured Vince, cradling her face.

“Of course. You’re... my Grove-husband. I can’t leave you alone,” said Ynes, looking around the room a bit more. “I heard you call for me. I told... I told the other Dryads to go back. That it was time to go like you asked. They left and... and then I woke up.

“You really think my smile is that pretty?”

“Definitely. I find it lovely,” Vince said and then chuckled. “Did I or did I not come back just to talk to you a bit more when the Dryad seeding was done? That smile, Ynes. That smile brought me back over.”

Wrinkling her nose, the Dryad grinned at him and sat up in her body bag.

“It was rather fun to go again for a second time after everyone got a turn,” Ynes admitted, reaching up to touch her chest with one hand.

“Wonderful,” Vince declared and looked at Ferris.

“Petra would tell you to go,” Ferris stated with conviction. “It’s a firm way to throw a strike deep into their own territory. I can’t speak to all of her reasoning but... she’d probably tell us that it’d make them feel a lot more vulnerable than they do now.

“That’d likely make them pull some troops back from the fronts to defend against what we could do to them. That they weren’t safe in their heartlands and couldn’t just attack without defense.”

“Then we’ll go. Now. Let’s get a horn tip from all my Dragons. I can’t let them die either you know. As long as they’re willing to come back, I’ll always call them back,” promised Vince.

Ferris just nodded her head at that and then smiled brightly.

Inside him, the bone that was the whole of her remains shuddered once and then made itself quite comfortable in the kind roots of the grove and the warm soil that covered it.

Renata’s horn speck had ended up being embedded into a root that wound over it. A Dryad tree had paired to the Dragon’s horn.

In prodding at it mentally, he found it was Antona’s tree.

Chapter 33

Riding ridiculously high in the sky, Vince was leaning up against Elizabeth and holding onto her. Not for fear of falling but because of how damn cold it was so high up here.

Pushed into his back was Red, who had Blue pushing into her, followed by a number of Dryads, all in turn huddled into the person in front of them.

The eleven Dragons around them all were loaded with Dryads. Each of them had already given him a fragment of their horn and ended up paired with a Dryad.

The duo was able to communicate at a level that was more akin to telepathy, and they could share feelings and emotions as well. They were able to understand the other with almost no effort at all.

It'd been a surprise to all that a Dragon and Dryad could so easily intertwine. Even to Dea and Ferris, who hadn't realized they themselves were so inextricably linked after Ferris had handed over her remains.

Vince hadn't been surprised by any of it.

He'd felt it all happening as they'd all begun feeling one another out. He had seen it happen when Antona's tree had taken Renata's horn fragment. When the Orange energy had raised itself up and sluggishly moved over to the tree and then filled it.

Only to exit again and begin wandering around, but to return back to the tree several more times.

It was all because of him, of course.

He was assuming that because he was the Lord of the Dryads as well as the Lord of the Dragons, he had put them on an equal playing field. They were both spirits in a way that shared more attributes with each other than they differed.

"We're almost there, Nest-mate," called Elizabeth as she banked to one side. "I can see the prison ahead of us.

"There are a great many traps and shields erected by Nullifier magic. If we trigger any of them, they'll know we're here. Exactly where we are, as well."

“Is there anywhere to put us down that we can hoof it there?” asked Vince. They weren’t going to have much time until the execution. The sun would be rising in just an hour or so and they’d lose the shadows.

As well as the ability to fly in the sky so openly.

“Already heading for it. Blue found it,” Elizabeth answered quickly.

Vince already knew how deadly a Dragon with a good rider could be. Taking what he’d seen from Caroline and pushing it to a point where the rider could telepathically communicate with the Dragon could change warfare here in Europe.

Especially since Dryads and Dragons both use faith magic now. All of their abilities are no longer limited by mana alone.

I’m sure this world will now face the same problem Felix ran into back in his home world.

Regular magic—or more to the point, Nullifier magic—can work on faith magic, but with lesser results.

Maybe that’s why they actively pursued deities here so much.

Elizabeth turned upside down and then dove toward the earth. The wind pushing at them was intense, but the way Elizabeth was falling had them pushed against her spine quite firmly. There was no chance of them being torn free so long as they didn’t move.

“Red hates this! Red wants Ramona back! Ramona at least held tightly to Red!” screamed the Beastkin from behind him.

Vince could only mentally chuckle at that. He’d never expected her to say something like that. Which could only mean she was really suffering on this Dragon ride right now.

In almost no time at all, Vince could now see the ground. It was rapidly coming up at them as if to greet them warmly.

And far too firmly.

Elizabeth’s wings sliced out and slowed their descent. When they weren’t too far from the ground, she got them oriented correctly, then began to gently flap against their fall.

By the time her clawed hands and feet touched the ground, it felt more like they settled down on a soft bed. All around them, Dragons landed and Dryads hopped free.

Looking back, he watched as Ynes, Dionara, and Marianna all got down. They were followed by Blue, who coaxed Red into getting off Elizabeth's back and letting go of Vince.

Before he could move after Red got down, Elizabeth shifted herself forward and bent her head low. Vince was dropped down to the ground on his feet. Elizabeth laid herself out low on the ground behind him.

Though where Renata had put her hands to the grass, Elizabeth had curled her hands around his ankles. Holding on to him even as she bent herself in supplication.

"Oh, come on. Elizabeth, really?" asked Vince, turning around and then bending down to get his hands under her shoulders. "Get up. Don't do that. I don't want that from you. I'd tell Taylor the same thing."

Standing up with his assistance, Elizabeth eyed him curiously, watching him.

"Why not? You're the Lord of Dragons. You hold a piece of my horn in you. The Goddess of Dragons resides in you. I owe you respect and faith," argued Elizabeth.

Dragon Maidens and Battle-Dryads were fanning out in every direction. Rapidly securing the area and providing security.

"Because I need people around me who still see me as me. Please be one of those," asked Vince, stepping in close to her. He had one hand on her hip and the other on her elbow. "Please. I need people who see me as what I am.

"If you can't do that... I'll have to try and convert someone else. Like Renata... but that seems really difficult. I'm pretty sure I'd have to make her watch me take a shit several hundred times before she believed I was mortal."

Elizabeth snorted at that and gave him a grin, showing off her perfectly straight, white teeth. She slowly tilted her head to one side and watched his face for several seconds.

"Do you see me as a woman?" she asked suddenly, her eyes picking over his features.

"I do. A very beautiful, naked, and pretty, young woman. Before you get upset, I see you as an adult, but still a young woman. You're

as young and dumb as you are hot and sexy. The first part gets fixed with time,” Vince argued. “Now... please? I need people to keep me grounded. I’m going to have a lot of people throwing worship at me and... I don’t know if I have the mental fortitude to not become an asshole.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at his words. It was obvious she didn’t like being called “young”, but she couldn’t argue it either. Instead, she leaned in and gave him a hesitant and very awkward kiss.

It lingered for several seconds before she backed up. She gave him a fractional nod of her head and then turned away, moving to where Blue was standing not far off.

Red was at her side and Ferris was coming toward them.

“Dea is leading a squad forward to screen for us and make sure the way is clear,” explained the Deity. “I’m going to remain here with you as a bodyguard and since... since my partner has the ability to talk with all of nature, she’s better as our scout.

“I’m better on defense this time around. She was right in her suggestion of the division of our troops.”

There was a note of warmth in the Dragon’s voice when it came to Dea. A respect and trust that felt strange to Vince’s ears. That it wasn’t something common to fall from Ferris’ mouth.

“Your partner’s kinda hot,” Vince replied with a strange grin. “Think I could talk you and your partner into a bed with me?”

Ferris’ eyes went wide and her cheeks began to faintly color. There was a quiver in the bone and soil inside of him.

There was a formless whisper that escaped from it. One that was as immaterial as a flirty look but just as direct.

“Yes, please,” was what the two altars responded with. “Take us to bed.”

Because that’s what they were at this point.

The bone of Ferris and the dirt of Dea were both altars that were inside him. To which the Dragons and Dryads prayed and in turn to Vince.

“Anyway,” Vince continued when Ferris stood there tight-lipped. Staring at him with a face that could quite possibly start a fire with

how bright red it was. "Let me know when we can start ahead. We should probably try to be in the compound before the sun rises. You said it's rather large, right?"

"Yes, dear, it's quite large," Blue murmured, stepping in front of Ferris. He didn't miss the fact that the Dryad had put one hand behind herself and was quite likely grasping the Dragon's hand. He'd noticed more than a few times that Blue often put herself between him and an object or fascination for him. Then directed it at herself and what she could do for him.

To him.

Or what he could do to her.

"If you need a few minutes, my love, I'd be happy to entertain you," offered Blue as Ferris quickly hurried away from them. She moved to join Red, who had already started off toward where the Dryads were. Elizabeth was moving with them.

"We could play a game if you like? Maybe just let me take the edge off you real quick?" asked Blue, slowly drawing closer to him. Watching him with partly glowing eyes.

"I'm alright. I was just teasing her, I don't actually need a release right now. Ynes, Dionara, and Marianna took it all out of me if you remember," admitted Vince. Apparently, being called back from beyond had made all three Dryads very eager to feel him against themselves.

"I saw. Ynes was quite happy about your comments regarding her smile. It's why she worked so hard with her mouth. Was kind of fun to watch you get all of them at the same time," purred Blue, coming to a stop in front of him. "But I'm better than all of them, aren't I?"

"I'm right up there with Mouth and Meliae, isn't that right? If you had to pick a Dryad to lay with... it'd be one of us three and you'd have a hard time picking."

She... has an ego about this?

Wow.

I know she changed after Green died, but this is certainly different. That or Sam's success has started to rub off on Blue and she wants to change it up.

It doesn't hurt anything to admit it though.

Encourage her to step up.

I do need a Meliae here, and she certainly has an ego.

Pride in her position.

"You're right, Blue," Vince said and put his arms around the lovely woman. "But I do have to confess, Meliae is... she's still my number one. You and Mouth are just a tiny step behind her."

"That's fine. Honestly, it'd be impossible for anyone to take her place. There's a reason all your Dryads are content and happy. Meliae learned how to be a perfect Grove-wife and Grove-mistress from her mother," Blue confided. She put her hands on his chest and glanced up at him with a look that could only be described as "where's the bedroom, darling?" and it made Vince want to comply. "I don't mind being second to her. Though... am I just a teensy step ahead of Mouth? A little bit?"

Grinning, Vince shook his head and chuckled. It seemed Blue really had grown an ego. She wanted to have her pride stroked.

"Yes. You have a small lead on your competition, Blue. You and Green can consider yourselves second to Meliae and Mouth. The European Grove-mistress to Meliae's North American Grove-mistress," Vince confessed. What he didn't say was that Karya and Daphne were neck and neck with Blue and Green.

"Good! I'm so glad to hear that. I've taken Antona as my Grove-wife formally, by the way. I'll need them here and Green told me to make sure I grew it accordingly for us," Blue murmured, then she leaned her head in and kissed him for a few seconds. Pulling back, she nuzzled him, rubbing the crown of her head against his jaw. "Now, go give my Grove-wife a kiss so I can show off the benefits of being mine, and let's get ready."

"Dea just cleared the way up to the compound's exterior wall. We'll be moving just as soon as Ferris gets everyone organized."

Vince didn't need to be asked twice to kiss Antona. He thought she was rather lovely.

"Then you need to kiss Dionara, Ynes, and Marianna, as well. I took them as wives as soon as you brought them back. They'll hold some religious power since they were the first ones here who came

back from death,” prompted Blue, who then began leading him over to the Dryads. “It’s a shame, but I can’t really have any more than that, either. I’d be looked on as greedy if I took any more. Five is already pushing the limit.”

Kiss those four?

Who am I to say no?

Vince was rather annoyed that he hadn’t been able to bring the Sword of Yosemite now. The wall looked rather impressively tall and was as smooth as ice. There would be no way to clamber up the side of it by strength and grip alone.

Just had to run through the gate, didn’t I?

I mean, I admit I didn’t think it’d be as strong as it was. Looked like just wood.

Still, I had to show off. To run right through it like a damn wrecking ball.

How the fuck was I supposed to know that it’d be just enough to damage it so that it couldn’t hold a charge for long? Going to have to make sure Mr. White knows about it so he can prevent the situation in the future.

Then again, they probably didn’t expect me to use it as a battering ram. They were likely thinking I’d use it as a weapons platform, instead of as the weapon itself.

“Alright, we’re going to make a train. And not the fun type that Vince likes to make Dryads put themselves into as we all got to see not long ago,” muttered Dea from where she stood next to him.

There was a smattering of chuckles and snickers at her words from Dryad and Dragon alike. Apparently, it wasn’t a secret that he took Dryads three or four at a time. Pairing them up with each other only to get in between them and force them to pair up in other ways.

“Don’t you laugh, Dragon Maidens, you think he won’t do it to you? Remember how you laughed just now when you’ve got your head between a Red Maiden’s thighs and Vince is behind you drilling

you down into that Red's privates," Dea continued, which made them all continue to chuckle even longer.

"Can I be in a train with Dryads?" asked a Green Dragon Maiden.

"If you can talk your Lord into it, that's on you," Dea said and shook her head. "We're going to make a train up the wall. Dragons on the bottom, Dryads on top. Straight up to the top. Then we're going to start pulling everyone up and over.

"No sense in wasting our collective strength here. We're not mortals nor are we bound and beholden to their laws and rules. We need to do this before the sun rises. We don't have much time."

"Elizabeth, you're the base. Everyone else up there in order of color strength," ordered Ferris.

The Dragon Maidens moved forward out of the brush and trees near the walls. The Tribunal had ignored the growth thinking that their walls wouldn't be troubled.

Their confidence had become a weakness.

In no time at all, there was a long ladder of Dragon arms, legs, and backs that went up along the wall. Elizabeth was braced against the wall itself at the very bottom.

"Go, girls. Up, up," commanded Dea as soon as the Dragons were in place.

Dryads began scrambling up the ladder of flesh, moving much more quickly than the Dragons. They went right up to the top in no time at all. Then they began to move over the top and onto the wall.

Distantly, Vince swore he could hear grunts, moans of pain, and a stifled yell. Then all was silent.

"Ferris, go take the wall," Dea said, looking at the Dragon. "I'll be right behind you with Vince. You'd be better up there first rather than me."

Nodding her head, the Dragon goddess hesitated, then snapped her wings down and launched herself halfway up the ladder. Landing near the point where the Dragons gave way to Dryads, she began to climb up. Her wings pumping here and there to help her move faster.

Vince didn't need to be told twice to start climbing.

Red shot past him and flew up the ladder of people as if she were rocket propelled. Even going right past Ferris and reaching the top

before the other had.

Grinning, Vince started up as well. He was being extremely gentle as he went, trying to not stamp a boot on a shoulder or leg, while keeping his hands to “polite” areas.

“Vince, grab’em by the crotch if you have to and thrust your groin in their face as you do it, but get up there. Now!” demanded Dea from behind him. “Elizabeth can’t hold this forever.”

Fuck.

Grabbing a Dragon by the hip, he then pulled upward. He ended up with a handful of bare breast before he managed to get a shoulder.

Moving faster and not trying to be as delicate, Vince ascended the wall.

When he reached the top, he flipped over to the other side.

Down on the ground were several guards and one Dryad.

She had a bayonet stuck in her throat. Or at least, that’s what he thought it was.

Still wearing her armor made it hard to see what was going on exactly. From what he could tell, it’d managed to somehow puncture the Legionnaire armor. She was bleeding out rapidly right there with a puddle forming below her.

“Ah, no, none of that,” Vince said and came over to her. He pulled off the helmet and found the beautiful Dionara staring up at him with wide eyes. “Oh, Dionara, what’re you doing? Are you that eager to have me call you back?”

She gave him a bloody-toothed grin, but stared up at him with panic and pain in her eyes.

Laying his hand on her neck, he pulled out the blade then pushed his palm over the wound. He flooded her with magic and demanded her body answer his desire. To mend itself and put its flesh back to rights.

Her body responded and the wounded closed itself, leaving nothing behind except blood. There wasn’t even a scar.

“There. Be more careful, my Grove-wife,” admonished Vince, reaching over to grab her helmet. “I worry for you.”

“I’ll do my best, Grove-husband,” whispered Dionara. Her eyes were glowing in a way he’d seen before. As if there were flames licking upward from them. “For you, I’ll do anything.”

Vince snorted, pulled her helmet back down over her head, and then pulled her to her feet. He pushed her over to the others in her squad and then went to the edge of the wall.

Grabbing hold of the person climbing up, he started hauling people up.

Then realized they were wasting time. Time they didn’t have. The sun would begin rising right now.

“Everyone hold on tight to everyone else,” he called down as softly as he could. Then he grabbed the Dryad at the top and began hauling the whole ladder up. Pulling them upward all at the same time.

His muscles flexed and strained against the massive weight, but he managed it. Getting the first Dryad up and over. At the very bottom, he could just barely see Elizabeth hanging on tightly to the Dragon above her.

Dea and Ferris joined him, the three of them dragging the whole ladder upward. As they worked, the Dryads were tossing the corpses of the soldiers off the wall and into the foliage not too distant from them.

The bodies vanished into the brush with a loud thump as they hit the ground out of sight.

When Vince got Elizabeth up and over, while inadvertently grabbing her by the crotch, the sun started throwing out its rays and lighting the world.

Everyone had been getting down quickly. Scurrying into the nearby compound that doubled as a prison guard garrison.

There were sounds of fighting coming from it, which meant the Dragon Maidens were busy punching, kicking, and probably biting people to death in there.

In close combat, they were much better off than the Dryads.

Well, we broke in.

Now comes the hard part, getting everyone out.

Chapter 34

Entering the garrison, Vince found his Dragon Maidens were stacking corpses in the corner.

There were far more bodies than he'd been expecting. There were at least forty that he could see without really counting each and every one.

"They were meeting to discuss the execution," Elizabeth said, coming over to him. There was a very obvious knife wound on her face and an open gash across her upper chest to shoulder. "Walked in on them before they'd gotten to the armory for the day.

"Was somewhat... difficult... to kill them all without letting them raise an alarm. Or destroy the building and give away our assault."

Blue moved away from Vince and then laid her hands next to Elizabeth's injuries. Her fingers pressed to the other woman's flesh quite close but not touching each bloody wound.

There was an odd tingling feeling in the air. As if there was static electricity building. Then it began to fade away rapidly.

A blue and green aura passed back and forth between the Dragon and the Dryad. As if it were a circuit that'd been completed and was now actively sending power back and forth.

That feeling was replicated inside of him. The roots that were Blue's trees held quite firmly to Elizabeth's bit of horn, energy passing between them.

Even as he watched, the wounds started to close up.

Everyone was watching it happen now. Every pair of eyes in the garrison that could do so, were staring as Blue literally closed the gashes up.

"Oh, that went a lot easier," Blue said a second or three after the wounds were completely closed. "And so much faster. It took me forever to heal Vince. It's so much different with you. It felt more like I was just guiding my tree to heal itself."

Elizabeth nodded her head and reached up to touch her fingers to the spot where she'd clearly been stabbed. She seemed equally surprised.

“One of the many benefits of being one of the Lord of Dragons and Dryads personal followers,” Ferris murmured and patted Elizabeth on the shoulder. Then she moved past her, dragging a corpse along with her.

“He won’t be able to take on every Dryad, nor every Dragon,” Dea added, pulling a corpse along as well, several steps behind Ferris. “You fortunate ones won’t ever have to worry about such a thing.”

“We’re clear and ready for the next phase,” Ynes reported, closing the door to the garrison. Dionara and Marianna weren’t far from her. The three tended to move together now.

“As far as we can tell, these were the majority of the guards. There’s only the active shift in the prison and armory left,” said a rather cute Green Dragon. “We were asking questions as we killed the survivors. Their thoughts gave it away for us.”

“Two teams then,” Dea said and dropped the body amongst the pile. Dusting her hands off and then wiping the blood on the dead man’s tunic, she came over to Vince. “One for the prison, one for the armory. Larger team for the prison, smaller for the armory.”

“That means it’d be best if Vince went to the armory,” Blue chimed in while stepping up next to Vince. “He’s a force to be reckoned with all on his own. I’d suggest myself, Red, and Elizabeth as his squad members. The rest with you and Ferris.”

Dea and Ferris looked to one another, clearly shared some type of telepathic thought, and then nodded their heads, looking back at Vince and Blue.

“Agreed,” they said in unison.

“Take Dionara and Ynes with you as well,” Ferris added. “They’re well-suited for close-quarters combat.”

Dea put a hand on Ferris’ shoulder and then moved off to talk to a Blue Dragon Maiden. There was a lot more passing between those two than Vince had suspected.

“Do you know how to get to the armory?” asked Ferris.

“No—”

“Red does. Red spoke with Isa on the way in. She pointed it out to Red,” interrupted the Beastkin before Vince could answer.

Red moved to the door and then jerked it open. She looked at the others and then waved a hand toward them before stepping outside.

“No need to meet back up. If you have to use a gun, do so. Try to bring bodies back if we lose anyone,” Blue said, looking between Ferris and then Vince. “Complete your side of the mission, get out, and go back to Zaragoza or Bilbao. We’ll set up the bomb to go off much later.”

“We’re in complete agreement. Best of luck to you,” Ferris murmured, then stepped in close to Vince and gave him a brief kiss. Then she patted him on the chest and moved off to stand near Dea.

Not waiting, the others exited the garrison house and followed Red.

The sun was now fully risen, and the morning dawn was warming everything. It’d also removed the dark hiding spaces that they could have used.

Dionara, Blue, and Elizabeth were all around Vince. Their eyes shifted about as they scanned the area. Dionara and Blue both had firearms drawn. Elizabeth still needed the training to use one effectively, but she did have a small SMG-like weapon in her hands.

Should get her one of those machine guns. She could probably hold it in two hands and keep it steady even while firing.

Red led them along the side of the building and to a side door that led into the massive stone building. It was an iron door that was clearly barred from the inside and was inset with the stone.

“We go through here. The armory is on the other side of this building,” Red explained. “If we try to go around, they’ll just shoot us. Red saw many guns and people watching. This is our best route to hunt.”

“My turn, then,” Elizabeth said and stepped up to the door before Vince could tear it free.

Dionara, Ynes, and Blue took up a position on either side of the entry and Vince lined up behind Elizabeth.

Lifting her foot up, Elizabeth stepped forward and slammed it home against the heavy door. With a clang, it shifted where it sat but didn’t come free.

Steadying herself, Elizabeth lifted her foot up and kicked it a second time. Then a third, and a fourth.

On the fifth kick, there was a pinging noise followed by the door tearing free of its setting. Then it tipped to one side and slammed to the ground on the inside of the room.

Dionara, Ynes, and Blue entered rapidly as Elizabeth staggered backward, her kick having done its job but leaving her off balance. Red managed to slip in, in between the Dryads, and vanished inside as well.

The Dragon then darted forward after the Dryads. Vince came right along behind Elizabeth, feeling odd being the rear guard, but also realizing he was the best suited for it.

There was very little that could surprise, kill, or handle him.

When he entered, he found Blue on the ground with a soldier in a chokehold. She'd wrapped him up from behind and was applying enough pressure to the man's throat that he'd already gone limp. His torso convulsed as it tried to forcefully pull in air, but the lithe Dryad held onto him.

Dionara was in the process of cutting a man's throat. A second man was on the ground with his hands pressed to his neck, apparently trying to stop what the Dryad had already done to him.

Red and Ynes had cornered three men in the back of the room and were slowly cutting the screaming men to pieces. Red was darting in to take a chunk out of an arm or a leg with her claws, before zipping away.

Ynes was acting as a shepherd on Red's left. Moving in to threaten the group whenever they thought about trying to slip past.

They were armed with clubs but didn't seem to be having much success with the undead monster and the Dryad.

Elizabeth simply strode forward ignoring the carnage and moving to the second door. It was almost exactly like the first, but it was set in a way to prevent anyone from leaving the building, rather than entering. This was a security airlock of sorts.

The Dragon Maiden pulled the bar, undid several latches, then pushed a second bar out of position that was stuck into the ground, and then a third that connected into the stones above.

Pulling the door open, Elizabeth entered the next room while Dionara came over to Blue. She casually pushed the blade she was holding into the man's chest and then twisted it, likely exploding the man's heart into a meat chunk.

Blue let go, checked her pistol, then followed after Elizabeth. Dionara went and joined Red and Ynes, the three of them whittling the remaining men down rapidly between them, even as they called for help and assistance.

Or just screamed.

Red tore out the throat of one man as he lost his cool and sprinted forward. Her clawed fingers deftly removed most of his neck up to his spine and left it a fleshy ruin.

Slamming to the floor, the guard's hands went to his neck as he thrashed about on the ground. Ynes darted forward and rammed her blade home into one of the guard's chests as Dionara pushed in close, landing a left jab on the final guard's chin, then smashing a hook across his jaw.

Even as the guard went down, she slammed her blade into the man's back. Whipping it out, she brought it down again.

The man let out a wheezing gasp that ended with him getting no breath in his lungs at all. Next to him, the one Ynes had stabbed dropped to his knees, his hands pressed to his chest where the blade had plunged in.

Vince looked away and glanced ahead.

Elizabeth and Blue were systematically destroying the next room's security forces. Blue had unslung her staff and was using it as a spear at Elizabeth's side. Blue poked and prodded as Elizabeth kicked, punched, and tail-slapped guards to death.

Ynes, Red, and Dionara finished up and then entered the next room. Vince entered the next area, put his back to the door jamb, and then turned sideways. Watching both the way they'd come, and the way they were going.

If he was acting the part of rear-guard, he was going to damn well do the job he was given. Only a fool would want to rush ahead just to endanger his people.

A lesson he'd learned firsthand, so to speak.

Vince grinned at his dark thoughts and shook his head.

How are you Karya, Mouth, Meliae?

Yaris, Ramona, Taylor, Green, Caroline, Elysia, Eva, Thera.

Berenga... and all the kids.

Sighing, Vince shook his head. With any luck, their long-term plan would begin soon. It was only a few weeks away in fact, as long as the Legion scientists had been able to keep up with what Yaris and Elysia were pushing for.

Not sure if we can do the same for Felix though. Him being sent to another world entirely makes it rather difficult.

We'll do what we can, though. Even if it's a one-way trip with mundane things. I can think of a number of things he'd want.

Glancing at the interior, Vince saw the Dryads tearing apart the security guards. Elizabeth was acting as the center and drawing the focus of the enemy. Even Nullifiers were attempting to target her to no effect whatsoever.

None of them were actively using magic, which meant none of that did any good.

Turning his gaze to one of the dying guards, he realized they were wearing a great deal of equipment that looked to be enchanted against magical threats. Spells and the like.

Huh.

They were so worried about magic that they forgot to actually train against physical threats.

Silly.

I guess that makes this plan even more viable though. If we can recruit all of the prisoners, strike a blow against this... Tribunal of Arraignment, and force them to back off from Magi Vale... then we serve a multitude of purposes.

Elizabeth and the Dryads finished the slaughter and then began to move forward again. Their goal was to traverse from one side to the other.

That apparently meant Elizabeth planned on going through anything in their way.

Including walls, which she demonstrated, were not an issue with a punch. One that shattered the stone wall and sent it crumbling

away from her.

Several more punches and kicks cleared the way enough for them to start passing through the opening, leaving behind a rather large amount of wreckage.

As Vince started moving through the hole, Dryads and Dragons began pouring in from the outside. They entered where Vince and company had come through, then rapidly spread out. Taking other halls and doors that he and his group had ignored.

Dea and Ferris were leading the way, the pair looking impressively attractive and grand as they moved ahead. Ferris was wearing a very similar and breezy outfit as Taylor wore, while Dea was in the Legionnaire armor that'd been given to her.

They both spotted him and gave him a smile, before returning to their business. Their forces were literally tearing through any and every area to make sure it was clear.

Vince put his focus back on his own team.

They had a job to do themselves.

Elizabeth started knocking down another wall.

After several minutes of smashing through walls, doors, and furniture, they wound up knocking a hole right through the perimeter of the building and found the morning sun and a patch of grass on the other side.

“Red will scout, wait one moment,” asked the Undead. Slipping past Elizabeth, she crept out onto the grass and began to look around. Her head, ears, and eyes scanned back and forth, sometimes in opposite directions of each other.

Moving forward at a slow stalk while on all fours, Red moved out of view.

A minute passed and then she came back, her whole face lit up in a grin.

“Red was close. We need to go through a wall over here. Elizabeth, come knock it down for us,” commanded Red.

Elizabeth snorted, exited the hole, and turned.

Everyone then filed out just as Elizabeth made a new entry point in the wall for them. The stone and mortar cracked away under her powerful blows.

“Thank you, dear,” Blue murmured, patting the Dragon on the side as she shook out her hands. Ynes, Dionara, and Red were entering the hole now.

“Uhm, you’re welcome. I know it’s a good use for me, it just hurts after a bit and —”

The sound of gunfire from inside startled Vince. It sounded like it was the rifles Ynes and Dionara had on a sling in front of themselves, rather than the type of weapon fired by the enemy.

Elizabeth and Blue went in, and Vince came in behind them.

They’d entered a security hallway at the halfway point. There were a number of downed guards nearby who’d been torn apart by the Dryads and Red as they tried to react.

Dionara was stepping sideways toward a corner while spraying rifle fire down a corridor, all of the rounds impacting with a wall at the end. Ynes was pushing out to the other side while taking cover as well, aiming toward the opposite corner which looked like a bend in the hall.

Red was sprinting down the same corridor considerably further ahead, toward the end of it, where the concrete bunker that had a gun emplacement.

Dionara and Ynes were trying to keep people from gunning Red down.

Then the bunker opened fire.

A heavy-caliber machine gun began spewing out rounds with a sound that was deafening.

Red had been expecting it though and dodged to the side. Then up the wall, her hands and clawed feet giving her far more traction than one would expect.

She easily ran along it as if it were the ground.

When the furious line of fire came up toward her, she let go and hit the ground again. Jumping to the left, she slapped into the wall, then bounced off it, pouncing toward the bend in the corridor.

Vanishing from view, she was no longer a target.

Several screams floated back their way and the machine-gun fire died away.

Ynes, Dionara, and Blue instantly ran forward. Their weapons were partially held at their sides as they sprinted down the corridor.

Elizabeth did the same, though she managed to leap over the Dryads with a flap of her wings. Pushing fast and hard, she reached the end and didn't stop.

She tucked her head, braced her shoulder, and quite literally ran into the concrete wall.

There was a crack, followed by most of the wall shifting.

She hadn't managed to break through it in the end.

What she had managed to do was break it free from where it'd been built into the stone. They'd decided to not do the whole wall in reinforced concrete.

With an odd creak, the concrete emplacement tilted away from Elizabeth, then toward her.

Dodging to the side and into the corridor, the Dragon barely avoided it as the massive wall slammed down to the floor.

Revealing Red, who held a guard up by the throat. She'd torn the man's heart out a moment ago, then casually tossed it to the side.

Turning her head, she gave them a bright smile and lifted her chin.

"Red is a glorious hunter and wife, isn't she?" asked the feral Undead monster.

"You sure are, Red," Vince agreed as he and the Dryads reached her.

Except Vince no longer had eyes for the lovely creature. He was looking beyond her to what the soldiers had been guarding.

"Why did Isa think this was the armory, Red?" asked Vince.

"Isa said it was the most shielded spot in the entire compound. She said it could withstand enough magic power to destroy a continent," Red answered, then turned her head to look where Vince was staring.

It wasn't an armory that they'd just broken into, but an odd room. One filled with swirling portals that led elsewhere.

A great many of them, though they didn't seem to have anyone or anything on the other side. They were in fact all black pools of nothingness.

As if they were active but didn't go anywhere at the moment.

"Figured out where to put the bomb," joked Vince as his mind came to a screeching halt. "Well, when Renata gets it here."

The bomb they were relying on hadn't ever been in Vince's possession.

Leila had it in Magi Vale.

Renata had assured them all she could get into the city, get the bomb, and get back out, then reach them. All without it being too much of an issue.

Except she hadn't made it back yet.

"Elizabeth, get the machine gun. You, Red, and I are staying here to make sure nothing fucky happens," ordered Vince. "Ynes, Dionara, Blue, off with you. Time to go find the armory."

Chapter 35

Elizabeth picked up the machinegun and began fiddling with it.

Ynes, Dionara, and Blue all put their heads together quickly. They conferred quietly, then looked at Vince.

“Dionara and Ynes will remain with you, Elizabeth, I, and Red will go secure the armory,” Blue counter ordered. “If you’re staying here and stationary, it’d be better for you to have those two. I’ll take Red and Elizabeth with me as I’m not sure what we’ll encounter, and I could use the strength.”

Vince couldn’t really argue that her corrections took more into account than his own. Shrugging his shoulders, he couldn’t help but nod his head.

He wasn’t that great with stuff like this. Vince was better as an asset. It’s why Blue, Petra, and his Elves were such a requirement for him.

Red apparently also agreed and moved over to Blue.

Elizabeth shrugged as well, then handed the machine gun off to the two Dryads and joined the other two. The three of them left without anything more to be said.

Ynes and Dionara had the machinegun put down, readied, and then began to set up a firing position in no time at all. The two Dryads apparently were quite well versed in this type of weaponry.

“Grove-husband, would you like to fool around a bit?” offered Dionara with a flicker of light growing in her green eyes. “Ynes can man the machine gun while we take a break right next to her. We can just... both get rid of our pants.

“Then when we’re done, Ynes and I trade places. It won’t take any time at all and... well... I think we could all use it.”

“I... yeah, let’s do that,” Vince agreed. With how attractive Dionara was, there was no way he’d pass up an offer like that.

“Oh, how wonderful,” gushed the Dryad, reaching down to start working at her Legionnaire’s armor.

“Actually, cancel that hon,” Ynes apologized and swiveled the gun to the left. “The one on the front left is going active.”

“What? Seriously?” growled Dionara, her hands still at her middle.

“Yeah, we’ll get him later,” Ynes said with a sigh. “I really wanted him to plant it deep in me, too.”

“Me, three,” agreed Vince. The idea of playing with these two Dryads really did appeal to him right now, but it’d have to wait. “Make it hard to see you if possible. Get out of sight, if you can’t. I need you to not be immediately visible. We want these guests to step in.”

Drawing his sword, Vince took off at a slow trot. The portals here had a weakness he’d realized during the world-ending invasion when he’d defended Legion.

They could only enter from one side and exit from one side. There wasn’t any way to see what was going on around them.

It was a choke point and a trap one could use. Once someone entered the area, they couldn’t reasonably get back out if you blocked the exit.

Legging it quickly, Vince got around behind the portal that Ynes had indicated was activating. He assumed it was some change in the magic in the room she’d felt, as he couldn’t sense it.

Now that he was so close to it, he could certainly determine that it was indeed activating. The sound of it was different, let alone the look of it.

Drawing his pistol, Vince didn’t have to check the safety or chamber. He’d done that previously and was assured that it was ready.

Stepping partly to the side, he leveled the weapon so that it’d be behind and to the side of whoever came through. There’d be no possibility for them to see him until it was truly too late.

Then he activated the Legion shield he always carried on his person. There was no reason to risk anything in a confrontation. Especially one that he got to dictate the pace of.

Because in the end, honor doesn’t matter to the dead. Stand among the dead and ask them if honor did them any good.

A whump heralded that the portal was now active and no longer idle.

Several people exited the portal and stopped immediately.

“Find out what happened. Signal when you know,” growled the man on the end. Vince swore he recognized the voice, but he couldn’t place it. He was wearing a rather well-made uniform in black and blue with a cap. Before Vince could see more of the man he turned and went right back into the portal.

It made a crackling noise and then went silent and idle.

The man and the woman stood there, staring at the wreckage that Vince and his people had caused. Clearly, they hadn’t expected to step into this and the man who’d fled was obviously off to report that something was wrong.

Vince’s first thought was that these were individuals who served as the counter to the Overgod Vince and Felix worked with. He knew they existed and had even run into several agents of them.

Blinking, Vince suddenly realized why he recognized the voice. It’d been Seville.

“Don’t turn around,” Vince said, leveling the pistol at the back of the man’s head. “Don’t move, don’t twitch, don’t really even breathe if you can help it. I don’t want to put a bullet in the back of your head but... well, I don’t care actually.

“I’d kill you soon as look at you because you don’t matter a damn bit to me. Nor do I care who you work for, how you got here, or even who that was that left. I don’t care at all.”

“You don’t care?” asked the man, holding his hands up at his sides. “Then I propose a trade. I’m the military emissary for this land, sent here by a god. I’m here to recruit and pay people.

“I’d be happy to pay you and recruit you. You just need to tell me what you want and I’ll make that happen.”

“Pretty sure you can’t give me what I want. You or the pretty little lady next to you got anything else to add?” asked Vince, looking to the woman next to the man.

She was clearly in her late teens and just barely an adult by Vince’s standards. Little more than a girl who barely knew the world outside of her mother’s skirt.

He barely registered her appearance and disregarded her further.

“Oh? Pretty? Well, you can have her,” offered the man, wriggling his fingers. “All yours. Take her and go. I have no use for her, she’s

just an assistant to me.

“Or if I may offer, I’d love to hire you directly. You can keep her still even then, just let me sign you into the forces I work for.”

The woman now had a shocked look on her face, staring at the man next to her in absolute horror. As if this was something she’d never even considered as a possibility of happening.

The idea that she was just as likely to be traded or sold off as actually serving in the capacity she’d expected was a complete shock. To the man she worked with, she was a commodity.

Unfortunately, Vince couldn’t feel anything from him. He was utilizing some type of device that made it impossible to hear his thoughts.

It was very similar to the ring he himself wore.

A ring of the Legion.

“You hear that? I should just pick you up and carry you off like a present,” Vince muttered, glancing at the woman.

Which apparently had been just the opening the man had wanted.

The man took that instant that Vince looked away to throw a web of spells at him. Many of them activated all at the same time. As if he didn’t need to cast them at all and were more like a loaded gun.

Which Vince did indeed have, and discharged it instantly as he moved the barrel to follow the man. The first round went over him and off, the second just a fraction above, and the third struck him in the head.

With a splash of blood and brains painting the ground, the man collapsed and laid twitching upon the ground, as if seeking comfort from it.

Vince didn’t even bother to move. He instead relied on the Legion shield and let all of that mana wash right over him. Like a duck deciding to dive into the water and splash back up elsewhere.

“Portals opening!” called Yves. “Clear the area!”

Vince started forward, moving right toward the young woman. He grabbed her by the wrist and put his pistol to her brow.

Everything he felt from her was horror, disgust, and overwhelming fear. Her mind wasn’t shielded as the other man’s had

been.

It was as easy to open as a book set down in front of Vince.

She was a new recruit into the forces of Zeus. They were utilizing this territory to recruit soldiers that could be trained elsewhere. This was the only location they had that linked to this plane and served as their entry point.

All the other portals led to other worlds and locations.

This woman was nothing more than an assistant who was learning the ropes so that she could eventually work under a woman by the name of Shirley.

Vince vaguely remembered her name coming up as the mastermind behind the fall of Legion and Felix. It was a name Felix would likely curse.

There was no evil in this woman though. She was recruited and brought into this as if it were an expectation that it would happen. That there was nothing else for her to do.

She'd been cultivated to this end and grown, like a flower in a pot.

"Go home," Vince hissed and shoved her toward the portal she'd come out of. "Make sure you get through quickly, or you might get gunned down.

"You should know that the entity you serve is trying to destroy everything and everyone. You won't be spared by him either, as demonstrated by his lackey."

Vince moved back to the Dryads with a quick step. He got behind the two of them and then raised his pistol.

A number of the portals were all starting to whir to life.

"God damnit, it's my nightmare all over again," muttered Vince.

Then a portal opened and revealed several men in armor on the other side.

Vince opened fire at the same time Ynes did.

Dionara was operating with her SMG but also as the gunner assistant.

As soon as those soldiers in the portal were gunned down, someone somewhere else shut it down. Apparently, they didn't want to deal with this as the situation stood.

Several more portals then opened, only to receive the exact same greeting. A hail of gunfire that left no one alive on the other side.

Then the portal the woman had come from began to power up. Ynes let out a low sigh.

“Be quick about it, little girl!” shouted the Dryad. “Don’t hesitate!” Then the portal opened.

On the other side stood Seville and a number of people.

“Ho, there,” Vince said and waved his hand at the man as the young girl scurried to the portal. She pushed into the portal, causing Seville to stutter-step back in surprise.

“You and I shouldn’t be meeting here,” growled the man.

The last Vince had seen him, he’d been rather meek and complimentary.

“Oh? Why’s that?” asked Vince.

“Because I really don’t want to kill you right now,” muttered the man with a shake of his head. “Seems like I won’t be able to let you go though.”

All of Vince’s senses suddenly screamed at him. Shouted at him in a way that made him feel like he was a small rodent scurrying about as a hawk circled overhead.

His instincts were demanding that he get away immediately.

In his mind were the glimmers of memories of all the spells Leila had tried to teach him. They’d all been little better than cantrips and minor spells that really didn’t do him much good.

Right now, he was willing to do anything to get away from Seville.

Amongst all that mess Vince struggled, pulled at all the power inside him, the faith that everyone put toward him, and asked for a single thing. To have these portals blocked up and for no one to be able to get through.

That an impenetrable force would take hold of the area. To enchant the air itself so that it would prevent anyone not on this plane to be unable to enter it, in this single area.

Or more specifically, so that Seville couldn’t exit the portal.

There was a strange shift in the world followed by a loud clack. As if someone had slapped two pieces of wood together as hard as

they could.

All around the portals the surrounding area had become hazy. As if Vince were looking through a cloudy gel.

“What... what the fuck?” asked Seville, reaching out with a hand. It stopped against the haze and went no further.

Winding back, he brought his arm around in a punch that looked heavy.

There was the sound of an explosion that reverberated throughout. Like a freight train that was carrying nothing but military-grade explosives crashing through a fireworks factory. It made Vince’s very teeth rattle in his head.

“Huh,” Seville commented intelligently. He lifted a hand up and rapped his knuckles against it. “I’ll uh... give it one more go just to make sure a certain cunt can’t say I wasn’t trying.”

Leaning back a considerable way, Seville looked like he was comically winding up.

Then he threw a punch that felt like it pushed against the very air around him. His clothes flapped and the cacophony of sound that came from the punch left Vince’s ears ringing.

To the point that he couldn’t hear much of anything except the ringing.

Seville said something, shook his hand out, and laughed. Then he waved a hand at Vince, leaned back to disappear through it, and the portal deactivated.

Vince slumped down to his knees and felt absolutely empty. Whatever he’d done had removed all of his energy stores.

He felt like a wrung-out rag.

Dionara and Ynes were on him quickly. Each of them took an arm and pulled him upward. They couldn’t sit around here and wait for Renata, they needed to get going.

He knew that, except that if they didn’t get the bomb set up, they’d have to deal with the Tribunal at a later time. A time where they’d be much better prepared to fight them and hold the forces of Yosemite off.

Dionara’s hands snapped up and she leveled her weapon ahead of herself. The gun fired off several rounds and Vince heard none of

it. Even now, all he could hear was a sharp and intense ringing that wasn't going away.

They stumbled their way as a five-legged, awkward monster back the way they'd come. When they got through the break in the wall, they had a Dragon and several Dryads swoop in on them. They looked like they were all asking questions, but Vince still couldn't hear any of it.

They got him outside and he found there was an assembly area there.

All around were magicians creating boxes made out of mana. Condensed and formed into shape by will alone.

There was a giant handle on the top of each that looked big enough for a Dragon to hang onto. It was one of the many plans he'd heard Dea and Ferris mention on how to get everyone out.

Antona stepped up to Vince and held his eyes with hers.

He pointed at his ears with one hand and then shook his head.

Blinking, the pretty Dryad laid her hands over his ears and then stared into his face.

He felt her connect with her tree inside him and then a small trickle of power began to flow into him. Directly from Antona.

It didn't last long, but she gave him a smile and then walked away. Only to be replaced by another Dryad, then a Dragon.

Each and every one of them stepped up to him and pushed a small amount of energy in him.

The never-ending process continued until he surprisingly found Blue standing before him. Her hands pressed to his ears and he the ringing finally stopped.

"There we go. Thank you, everyone. That was exactly what he needed," announced Blue. "Everyone mount up! It's time to go. We can't wait for the bomb to arrive. You all heard Ynes and Dionara. There's way too many forces waiting for us behind those portals if we stick around, because I have no idea how long it'll last."

Lifting his head up, Vince saw that everyone was indeed getting on top of Dragons. The prisoners were all clambering into the mana boxes and sitting themselves down.

Dionara and Blue lifted Vince up and just about handed him to Elizabeth. Who plucked him up and sat him down on her back. Then the Dryads clambered on behind him.

In no time at all, they were taking up off from the ground and into the sky, leaving the compound behind them. The chance to blow the whole place up with a soul-bomb was squandered.

I hope Renata is okay. There's no way she'd have not shown up unless she had no choice.

By the time the complex started to shrink in distance behind them, Vince started to feel better. To the point that he could actively pay attention to their surroundings.

Then Renata showed up.

Gliding up beside Elizabeth. In her clawed hand was the Wyrmsoul-bomb from Leila.

She was also covered in scratches, several large gashes in her abdomen, and even a hole through one of her wings. Whatever had happened to her, had certainly been a larger consideration than they'd put to it.

On top of all that, Vince noticed the bomb was damaged. Even now it was threatening to go off as she flew beside them.

Whatever had struck Renata, had indirectly damaged the bomb.

“—do about it? We're done and we need to get out of here!” shouted Elizabeth.

“I can handle it!” argued Renata. “I'll go back and just drop the bomb. It'll be fine!”

It felt like a lie in his head. That Renata couldn't just go back and drop the bomb. There was no telling if the wind would carry it off course or that it'd even go off.

While it was damaged and it was likely, there was no guarantee of it.

What Renata was actually saying, was that she'd detonate it in the air on top of herself, or splash down in the compound and detonate it there.

Neither of which made Vince very happy.

“Renata, you're the fastest, right?” asked Vince.

"I... yes? Yes, I'm very fast," she said, while giving Vince a nervous look.

"Then catch me and let's go set up the bomb," Vince said, grinned, and then threw himself off Elizabeth's back.

There wouldn't be the possibility of arguing with her. She'd fight him about it and never let it go. To the point that his only option was to force her into action.

Angling his body against the push of the air against him, Vince began slicing through the sky. Back toward the compound.

It took Renata only two seconds to actually catch up to him. She spun around him in some type of roll he couldn't identify. Where she started above him and inverted and ended up below him, and right side up.

Catching him on her back with an almost too-easy-to-be-real type of maneuver.

Vince grabbed onto her and then leaned in close to her back.

"Give me the bomb," Vince called.

Renata held up the bomb over her head for him, which he took. Looking at it, he realized he'd been right.

It was certainly damaged and could go off at any second, but not because of its structure. The casing itself was perfectly sound.

Some of the magic holding it shut had been cut away, causing it to malfunction quite terribly.

There was the possibility of it going off on impact, or not at all. Then not going off at all for days, if not years.

Renata tucked her wings and then they began a low angle dive, heading straight for the stone buildings. Even as they moved toward it, he could see that there was an ever-increasing number of Nullifier spells going up.

Domes, lines of power, and even scattered magical blasts that ripped through the sky.

They were going to be flying straight into a very stirred-up hornets' nest. There was no way they could get anywhere near it without getting caught in that.

"Get us in fast, and get us out fast, Renata," ordered Vince. He began working at the bomb, getting it set up in such a way that the

physical case itself would fail. They didn't have the luxury of trying to take this easy or slow.

He'd have to open it while riding Renata, just as they passed over the target.

At the same time, he began sharing what energy he had with Renata. Trying to push anything he could spare into her.

"Yes... yes, my lord!" cried Renata and then she took them into a very steep dive. Aimed right at the tallest building.

"If you get us through this, I'll hold onto your horns and ride you into a bed while making sure you understand who your Nest-mate is. Then I'll demand to Elizabeth you get nesting rights in my vault!" promised Vince.

Renata said nothing and he wasn't even sure she could hear him. There was a great deal of noise coming from the complex, as well as the wind ripping past his ears.

Before he realized it, they were almost there, then Renata was pulling up and away.

Vince had nearly missed their chance while drifting through his thoughts.

Shattering the casing, Vince let go of it at the same time. The Wurm soul-bomb was snatched out of his hands by the greedy wind.

Roaring, the beast hesitated in the air, watching Vince and Renata dart away. Then someone did something stupid and threw a spell at it.

The Wurm devoured it outright, then began chasing it back to where it'd come from.

The bomb had successfully gone off.

Renata was pulling hard and away, banking to the side and using what momentum they had to get them further away while changing their course.

Then a Nullifier spell passed through her head and she went limp under him. Her body convulsed and tumbled toward the earth.

"Fuck! Renata! I command you to wake up right this damn instant!" demanded Vince and expected to be obeyed. He'd made the statement with the firm belief that he was her goddess' god. That defying him was tantamount to betraying her very soul.

Shuddering as they continued to fall, Renata managed to move. Then she twitched to life and began flapping frantically.

There was no way to stop at this point though. They were on a one-way trip to the ground.

Which they then slammed into.

A minute passed as Vince simply collected his thoughts and tried to force air back into his lungs. The wind had been knocked out of him in the crash, leaving him dazed and confused.

Not least of which was from his head striking the back of Renata's shoulders in the landing.

Lifting his head up, he let out a slow breath and slowly rolled off of Renata's corpse.

When she'd struck the ground, the impact had killed her outright, Vince figured.

Which considering that her chest had split open, and her guts sprayed out of her, seemed like a safe bet. Vince had ended up being compacted down on top of her, but hadn't been too badly hurt. It felt like his ribs were fractured and maybe an arm bone had broken, but it wasn't that bad.

Or at least, that bad for him.

This was something he could hobble away from and then repair himself as he went.

Vince reached into himself and deliberately did his best to limit his powers. To force it to pool up instead of trying to fix him. He needed to get Renata out of here and relatively quickly.

The longer they lingered in this area, the more likely it was they'd get pulled into the Wyrms' endless hunger for life and mana. They likely weren't quite far enough away yet to escape its reach.

Moving over to the quivering corpse of the Orange Dragon, Vince laid his hands on her head.

He needed to save what power he could and get her into a state where the least amount of power would be required to fix her.

Grasping at the monstrous winged lizard, Vince began to shove at her. Pushing at her body this way and that and trying to force her to roll over on her side at least.

The simple fact was he was going to have to scoop all of her organs up and push them back into her. If he could do at least that much, there was the distinct possibility that everything else could be solved much more cheaply.

Or at least, so he reasoned. The idea of spending power to make her body regrow perfectly good organs seemed like a really bad idea. A waste of time and resources, both of which he was in very short supply of at the moment.

Renata let out a hint of a whimper as he pushed at her large foreleg, surprising him. She wasn't breathing as far as he could tell.

Which meant she was still dying, but trapped in her broken body for the moment.

"Renata, you're going to die," Vince said quickly. "But I need you to help me out before you die. Rollover on your back. I'm going to scoop your guts up and put them back into your chest.

"That way when I bring you back to life, it won't be as hard. Otherwise, we're both going to die here when that Wyrms gets done eating everyone in the compound."

Unresponsive, Renata laid there. Her body quivered as it continued to fail.

Growling, Vince started shoving at her again. Somehow, he managed to start her rolling to one side. Her cracked chest splayed open as he did so. Her heart was quite visible inside and weakly beat here and there.

Then surprisingly, Renata kept moving, rolling onto her back. He figured she couldn't move without help and used the momentum to make it happen.

"You big, beautiful Dragon. I'm going to hold onto your horns and ride you for hours until you beg me to let you rest," promised Vince as Renata's heart slowly grew still.

Reaching down, he began picking up the long coils of her intestines and throwing them into her body. Along with a number of other organs that he didn't really know the name of or their purpose.

Glancing up, he saw the Wyrms had grown significantly in size. It was currently head down over a building and likely feasting on whatever was inside of it.

A shake of his head was all Vince could spare for the moment. His time was running out and he needed to be done with this as soon as possible.

With a hop, he grasped at Renata's shoulder, then pulled himself up atop her. Using his hands, he pushed the broken bones of her chest together and then began pushing what power he had in himself, into her. Willing her body to begin repairing itself.

To use its natural draconic regeneration to assist and pull itself together.

Slowly, the corpse began to heed his desires. The flesh and torn scales knitted the tears together. Slowly, his goal was being met. Starting from the top and working its way down.

He already knew he wouldn't have enough power to make this happen though. That he'd run out before he could bring her back. Beyond that, he knew he wouldn't be able to recharge enough to get her moving before that Wurm came looking for them.

"Dea, Ferris, as your Lord, as the Lord of Dryads and Dragons, I need you to all pray to me right now," growled Vince as he continued to push and work at Renata. Using his hands to move the flesh and bones closer together to save any scrap of power he could.

His body ached and burned in pain, and it felt like the bones in his arm were grinding together, threatening to push right through and then break through the skin.

Even as he worked at the Dragon, he prodded, pushed, and pulled at the grove. Asking for help in a non-verbal way. Trying to direct their attention to Renata's bit of horn curled up in Antona's tree.

There was a sluggish response from most of the trees inside him, though there were a number that eagerly leapt into action. Pushing power and faith toward him.

It wasn't quite enough, but it felt like it was right at the edge of the possible.

Then Vince's worries and troubles slipped away.

Meliae's tree woke up, which promptly dumped more than enough power and faith into him so that he felt nearly superhuman. Seconds after that, all the trees that'd been quiet jolted awake.

The Dryads of Yosemite in North America came flooding to his aid even as those here in Europe's power began to fail them.

As all of this happened, there'd been a stumbling awkward feeling inside of him. It reminded him firmly of teaching Berest to walk. Where he'd held her hands and helped hold her up as she got her feet underneath her.

Then something clicked and a torrent of power came to him.

The Dragons had figured out how to channel what they had in excess to him through their horns.

"Dryads and Dragons," hissed Vince, pushing a much greater amount of power into Renata now. "I'll never be able to get enough of either. Conquer the world with them.

"I'll just barter with my brother for all the gold reserves of Legion to be held in trust by Yosemite. Make all my Dragons happy. The Dryads will be happy with children to nurture from that."

Renata's body stopped moving around beneath him and power started to rebound toward him. He dispersed it back into his grove and his people. He didn't want to draw from them if he didn't have to.

"Renata, wake up, hon. You need to get us out of here. You said you're the fastest right? Time to show me if that was you just being a braggart," commanded Vince. There was no response from Renata. He slapped a hand to her scale-covered chest and focused his will on her horn tip inside him. "Now, dear! We don't have time for you to stop and smell the dead roses, we gotta go!"

Renata's chest suddenly expanded, and she let out a coughing wheeze. Then slowly rolled over onto her stomach, which left Vince scrabbling along her side so he didn't get thrown off as she did so.

"I'm here my lord," groaned Renata. "I'm here. Sorry. I was... I was talking with my mom. I'm ready. I'll get us out of here."

Steadying herself and then moving into a four-legged standing position, Renata lifted her head up. It was at that moment that he and she both realized the Wyrms was bearing down on them.

His work to bring her back to life had attracted its attention and it was charging ahead.

Renata let out a strangled yelp, jumped, and began flapping for all she was worth. Taking them straight up into the air.

She steered away from the compound immediately and began flying them off and away. Quickly out-distancing the land-bound Wyrms and leaving it behind them.

“Oh, thank fuck,” sighed Vince as he held tightly onto Renata. His hands were holding onto her horns, and he was much further up on her neck than he’d expected to be.

Renata kept moving them up and away from the calamity that was ongoing beneath them. There was no reason to hang out here any longer and the bomb was doing its job.

“You promised me a vault, holding onto my horns, and the right to nest!” declared Renata as she took them ever higher. Moving far faster than he’d ever been before while on a Dragon. “Horn-holding through sex, a vault, and nesting!”

“My lord, I’m the happiest Dragon Maiden ever! Ever!”

Renata let out a roar even as she went faster and faster.

Vince was more than happy to give her everything he had promised her and more.

She’d come through for him in more ways than one.

Epilogue

Vince watched from the top of the keep of Bilbao as the Dragons made it back. Renata had outdone herself and moved with such speed that they'd arrived well before the rest of the team.

The Dragon was currently sleeping behind him while lying in the sun.

Quite nude, of course. As the Dragon Maidens were wont to do.

Elizabeth and the others swooped in over the wall and began depositing their cargo in front of the keep. Each Dragon in turn moved off to the side and let the Dryads down, then shifted into their human guise.

Vince turned to Cristina at his side.

He'd found the Ant Princess waiting for him with a letter from Petra.

A letter that was rather frustrated with the actions that he'd taken.

Except... she hadn't known about the raid on the Tribunal at that point.

He imagined the next letter he'd get from her would be extremely unpleasant and likely quite angry at him.

I didn't exactly ask for permission, now, did I? Damn. I'll need to head back to Coruna and take that tongue lashing. Maybe I can offset it with some personal attention?

Maybe?

Probably not. She'll be in her full "lead general" personality. It'd be demeaning to her to try and take any sting out of the words unless it was in private.

"Can you take me down there?" Vince asked, gesturing to the landing point below them.

"Our king can take us anywhere. We are always available at your leisure and look forward to sex greatly," Cristina said with a wide grin and a twinkle in her eye.

"Did you just tease me? Were you flirting?" Vince asked, laughing. He was eyeing her in a different way now.

"We were, yes. Was it successful? We can faintly detect desire on you, but it's the same as it always is for us when we're around

you,” Cristina murmured and took a step closer to him. “Wanna go for that ride?”

With her so close, Vince couldn’t help but feel himself respond. Cristina was indeed quite pretty.

“Ah! There it is! We are so pleased to know we have this effect on our king. Sam was quite right,” said Cristina. Then she swung herself around and put her rear end toward him. “Come, mount your Princess. You may ride us as long as you like.”

Okay... need to talk to Sam and demand she stop giving the others pointers. This is growing to be too much.

“Ah, we were told to tell our king that Sam promises to tell no one else our king’s secret. We agreed. Only our royal caste know of your weakness from Sam,” offered Cristina, peering at him over her shoulder. “She said to offer it to you, along with a promise of her attention, the next time our king meets her.”

Shaking his head with a grin, Vince stepped onto Cristina.

Then realized he might as well make the trip he needed to.

Blue and the others could handle this for him. He didn’t actually need to be here.

Where he needed to be was moving off to Coruna and telling Petra of what happened. If she was there, at least. Cristina had told him she’d retreated back to the Legion Fortress as their long-term project was coming to a close.

“Get us down there then,” he murmured. “I’ll need to be heading to Coruna shortly, so we’ll have to find someone who speaks for that mass of people down there.”

“We must disagree with that. It would be better for you to remain here, our king. Our caste requests your presence in four weeks’ time. At that point, our long-term plan will finish. Until then, our king must hold Bilbao.”

Behind him, he heard Renata snort. Then she groaned and it sounded like she sat up.

“Leaving? I’m ready,” mumbled Renata, followed by a cough, then a sneeze. She coughed twice more and then got to her feet. “Your mount is ever ready, my lord. Always ready.”

Apparently, she’d been listening.

Vince laughed, then stepped down from Cristina.

Given how much Renata had done for him, he really did plan on using her exclusively, if possible.

The three Dragons with mounted Dryads swooped down toward Legion Fortress One in a v-formation. Landing outside the heavy stone walls, Vince was impressed.

It'd been two months since they'd landed here, and it already looked like a nasty sonovabitch to deal with. High stone walls in multiple settings that moved inward, gun emplacements, low angled walls, and a number of redoubts and other rally points.

There were also a number of thin towers that would be perfect for a scout to see everything, but incredibly hard to hit with anything.

It looked to him as though Petra had also mined out a good bit of the earth beneath it. Likely shored it up with materials to prevent anyone from digging in as well.

"Of course, an ant would build an underground colony," Vince muttered.

He was here by himself outside of his Dragons and Dryad retainers. Everyone else was hard at work in Coruna. There was more work to be done than anyone had expected there to be, and it required almost everyone at all times.

Vince was hard-pressed to fit this trip into his schedule, but he knew he needed to be here for it. From the beginning this was the big turning point for them.

A single goal that had to be completed above all else.

Everything up to this point was just prep work.

Vince didn't manage to get down from Renata before she bowed down and deposited him on the ground. Once again in her very worshipful way where she prostrated herself on the ground in doing so.

"My lord, your mount is pleased to have brought you safely to your destination," Renata murmured with no small amount of pleasure.

Despite his promises to her, she hadn't asked for any of them to be granted yet. He wasn't sure on the reasoning, but he suspected the Orange had made a power play.

She'd offered it all to Elizabeth to approve or deny, and was waiting for her to give her the go ahead. Or at least that's what he'd managed to coax out of a few Dryads.

They were always forthcoming with information when he got them into a bed, especially if he drug out the fun for an hour.

Renata had taken the gifts and promises he'd made to her, and delivered them all to Elizabeth to reinforce her leadership of the wing. Elizabeth hadn't given her permission to do any of it yet, but she'd named Renata Vince's official mount and bodyguard.

She rarely left his side for anything at all.

Reaching into the pack at his side, he pulled out the orange dress he'd packed for her specifically. He didn't like her running around nude and began bringing it with him to make sure she had clothes to wear.

The other two Dragons with him, a White and a Black, were also being handed dresses by the Dryads who'd paired with them. No Dragon Maiden was allowed to go unclothed anymore.

Somewhere along the line, Blue had coaxed the Dragons into believing Vince didn't want the eyes of other men upon them. Elizabeth had encouraged this belief and began to dress as well.

Neither Dea nor Ferris had refuted it and ignored it all together. Letting the two priestesses dictate everything on that on their own.

Taking the dress from Vince, Renata pulled it down quickly and then flashed him a grin, her wings pushing out quickly to each side and then stretching wide. Then they settled once more on her back.

"Your mount is suitably dressed, my Lord," purred Renata. "No one will look on me but you."

"Your Maidens are dressed," said two other voices from behind him. Likely the White and the Black. "No one will look on us but you."

I... this is a bit over the top.

It's almost cringe-inducing. This is just ridiculous.

"I'd like to remind you that we talked them out of carving your name upon their bodies," Blue chided him. She'd been the only one

in his personal retinue to join them. "So don't look down on them. This is how they prefer to show their worship. Through ritual and devotion.

"They're Dragons, not humans. Don't treat them like one. Treat them as the ferocious and awe-inspiring Dragons they are."

Vince sighed, then reached out and grabbed Renata by a horn. He gave it a gentle tug and forced her to take a step to the side. He knew they liked to be reminded that he could manhandle them.

Turning around, he walked past the other two Dragons without really looking at them. Instead, he reached up and took each by a horn and pulled them along for several steps before letting them go.

All around him, his Battle-Dryads formed ranks.

In front of him were Ynes and Dionara. Antona and Marianna had remained with everyone else.

"Think we could talk him into grabbing our boobs as he walked by?" asked Ynes.

Loudly.

"Maybe. If we ritualized it and made a big deal about it, it'd work," answered Dionara.

"Girls, no. You already have your seeding ritual," Blue stated quite firmly.

"Yes, Priestess," answered every single Dryad at the same time.

Sounds like they were all agreeing to the idea already without having said it.

Looking past the entry point to the fortress, and the very heavily armed soldiers from Frit's command waiting for him, Vince could see the boat that'd brought them here. It was docked just offshore and was bobbing along in the water.

Maybe I'm a little late.

The gate guard greeted him enthusiastically and led him quickly into the fortress. They escorted him into the center of it and to an elevator.

The type he'd seen often that Legion was fond of.

An Orc in heavy Legionnaire armor pushed a ringed hand to the metallic plate. There was a clunk, followed by the elevator practically free-falling.

It left Vince with a feeling like his stomach was going to move up through his throat and pop out of his mouth. They were moving so fast, that it reminded him of falling with Renata.

“Ooh, this is so fascinating,” gushed the Dragon in question. “Hello, you’re... you’re part of Snorg’s command, right? The Heavies.”

The Orc chuckled at that and then nodded his head.

“Yea. Was part of the Orcs under the Duke of Texas and was recruited personally. Sent me to join the Heavies. Duke didn’t want people he didn’t trust watching his family,” chuckled the Orc. “You’re part of the European Dragon Wing, under Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yes! I’m Renata,” declared the Dragon, with a small energetic bounce. “I’m his personal mount. He rides me exclusively.”

The Orc, a Beastkin, and the Ratkin who was their mount all laughed at that. They’d all been part of Yosemite for a while and knew Vince’s personality.

“You know, I wish it was that, but I’m waiting on permission from the Wing Leader,” Renata said with a laugh as well, as they continued to plummet into the earth. “One needs permission from their Fes, as you know.”

All three nodded at that, their laughter fading away. They clearly approved of the Dragon though.

“Do you think we should be more bubbly?” asked the White Dragon behind Vince to the Black in their Draconic tongue.

“Probably. Let’s talk to some of the Dryads. They can guide us. We can become more like Renata and he’ll pay more attention to us,” replied the other Dragon.

“Girls,” Blue warned with a smile on her face.

“Sorry, Priestess,” both Dragons said immediately in Spanish.

“It’s fine. Though I should warn you both, you do know he speaks Draconic, don’t you?” Blue asked, giving them a curious look over her shoulder. “Ask me later about whatever it was, I’ll help you both out. Though I’m sure I can already guess what it was.”

“Yes, Priestess,” the Dragons said again, to which Renata only laughed. She bounced over to Vince and pressed into his side.

“Maybe it’s because I died and came back, but I really don’t give a damn about a Dragon’s pride anymore,” gushed the Orange. “It’s all silly nonsense. I’m just here to have fun and be with my Lord.”

She grabbed his arm between her hands and gave it a squeeze. Gazing up at him with a radiant smile, he found it hard to look into her face at the moment.

Thankfully, the elevator ride ended, and they exited. Then they entered a security checkpoint that was manned with enough equipment to put an army down by itself.

They were ushered through quickly and then brought into a large open chamber.

Petra was standing near the middle of it with Mr. White Junior. The two of them were overseeing what looked to be a wall being constructed.

“Oh! Good timing, Mr. Campbell,” said Mr. White as he came over to them.

“This One greets her master. Is all well?” Petra asked, looking at him.

She’d been aggrieved at his actions, but had reacted quickly. Redistributing forces and resources to match the situation. After that, she’d made tentative pushes toward Barcelona, utilizing Tim’s newly encamped forces as a fallback point.

Cristina’s colony had been all too willing to start “earning their keep” as the queen had phrased it. Apparently, the idea of being part of a larger kingdom, contributing nothing, and being protected, had irked her.

Irked her to the point that she was pushing out soldier ants all day, every day, since the day Vince had left. Petra had responded by sending her more guards, a never-ending stream of high caloric foodstuffs, and entertainment.

Which only made the queen angrier at being treated “too well” and promptly continue to endlessly lay eggs. She also forced two of her daughters out to start more colonies with the goal of breeding an army for Petra.

The Soldier-Ant General had dryly remarked that it wouldn’t be needed.

The reason why it wouldn't be needed was why Vince was here, too.

"Mr. White, General Petra Campbell, a pleasure," Vince said, stepping up to them. He took a second to lean in and kiss Petra tenderly for a brief moment, then went back to a more professional stance. He would treat her as the general, but he'd never shirk his duty as her husband.

"I have a prototype for the Dragon Girls," Mr. White said with a chuckle. "I had to incorporate some magic into it, which was a challenge. Rather fun, too.

"Should be able to shift and move with them during a transformation. Won't work as armor in Dragon form, but it'll look like gold jewelry instead.

"From what I could gather, that is an appropriate thing for a Dragon Maiden to wear."

"Yes! How exciting," cheered Renata. "Good work, Mr. White. Can I try it first?"

"Yes, excellent work, Mr. White," Blue agreed. "You're a wonder to have with us on this adventure."

"Well. It's rather nice to have an area to work in all my own. My dad has already said he won't step in unless I ask him to," Mr. White murmured. Then he lifted up a small panel that had several displays on it. "General?"

Petra turned to look at Vince.

"Do it," he said with a grin.

Mr. White tapped the button and let his hand fall to his side. There was a distant noise that sounded like a teacup rattling, followed by nothing.

"The satellite should reach orbit shortly," Mr. White murmured and then lifted his other hand, looking at a wristwatch. "Which means we'll get our first transmission here rather shortly."

Turning, he looked at a number of people working consoles and equipment.

"Already receiving a number of them," reported one of the people. "Locking into the Yosemite signal now."

There was a clack followed by a clear and lovely voice over the speakers.

“This is Yosemite-Home calling to Yosemite-Europe,” came the voice of Brianne. One of the house Elves that Vince had purchased a long time ago.

“We read you Yosemite-Home,” said one of the technicians. “Loud and clear. We’re going to open it up on channel two. Three will be utilized for Legion-Home. Please confirm.”

“Confirmed. Two for Yosemite-Home, three for Legion-Home. One for cross-talk. Portal ready. Confirm ready?” came Brianne’s response.

Mr. White nodded his head and chuckled.

Suddenly the confident and ever-present smile of his father’s spread across his face.

He really does look like a younger version of his dad. Just with a few extra tools when it comes to magic. Then again, I hear Mr. White Senior was quite happy to begin working with Felicia again.

Makes sense to—

Vince’s thoughts were cut off as a portal blazed to life in front of him. Then a second one slightly further down on the wall.

One exited out into Yosemite, the other Legion One.

A troop of armored Legionnaires began crossing over to Vince’s side of the portal. They had their helmets under their arms, and each was armed with an SMG.

Pointed Elven ears and watchful eyes adorned each head.

An Elven battalion of Legionnaires had just joined the fight in Europe. At their head was Caroline, though she wasn’t armed. Her stomach, which was quite obviously pregnant now, would make that impossible.

“Good afternoon,” Caroline purred with a smile. “The first regiment of Elven Legionnaires is here and ready. While none of them are magicians or sorcerers, per the instructions of Ryker, they’re all quite able to use mana. They’re all utilizing the magical iteration of the Legionnaire’s armor. It’s much more efficient than the previous model.”

Through the other portal came Mr. White Senior, a wide, confident smile that matched his son's on his face. He looked around, saw them all, and came over.

Chuckling, he shook his head and held out his hand to his son.

"That schematic you sent over was exactly what I needed," said the older man as he shook his son's hand. "I take it you were able to adapt it to the Dragons?"

"Mr. Campbell, a pleasure as always. General Petra."

Vince and Petra both greeted the older man with a smile.

Everything had just changed in this moment.

While they couldn't send supplies to Felix yet, they were still trying. Still working at making it happen.

Because now that they were able to connect Yosemite, Legion, and Europe together with portals, nothing was out of their reach.

All it'd taken was sending the ship back to pick up another load of people. Then another load after that.

With all the resources and people they'd brought back in those extra trips, they'd completed their goal. A portal and satellite system was now in place.

"Sweetling? Hurry up, already! We all missed you!" called a voice from the portal that led to Legion One.

After all, Vince couldn't go back to Yosemite, but they hadn't said anything at all about going to Legion One. Nor had they said those who couldn't come to Europe, couldn't go there.

They had their own rendezvous planet.

Vince gave Caroline a rather large hug, stole several kisses from the beautiful Elf, and then dragged her along with himself. Practically rushing ahead.

When he reached the portal, he saw exactly what he wanted to. What he'd hoped to see.

Everyone was there.

From Meliae, down to the most recently born.

His family.

Just need Felix. Gotta get that portal open to him one way or the other. Can't leave him alone out there. For now... in this moment though, let's put everything down and take a break.

Vince crossed over through the portal and joined everyone else.

Thank you, dear reader!

I'm hopeful you enjoyed reading this story. Please consider leaving a review, commentary, or messages. Feedback is imperative to an author's growth.

That and positive reviews never hurt. Lots of them.

Please.

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If you enjoyed this book, try out the books of some of my close friends. I can heartily recommend them.

Blaise Corvin- A close and dear friend of mine. He's been there for me since I was nothing but a rookie with a single book to my name. He told me from the start that it was clear I had talent and had to keep writing. His background in European martial arts creates an accurate and detail driven action segments as well as his world building.

<https://www.amazon.com/Blaise-Corvin/e/B01LYK8VG5>

John Van Stry- John was an author I read, and re-read, and re-read again, before I was an author. In a world of books written for everything except what I was interested in, I found that not only did I truly enjoy his writing, but his concepts as well.

In discovering he was an indie author, I realized that there was nothing separating me from being just like him. I attribute him as an influence in my own work.

He now has two pen names, and both are great.

<https://www.amazon.com/John-Van-Stry/e/B004U7JY8I>

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Daniel Schinhofen- Daniel was another one of those early adopters of my work who encouraged and pushed me along. He's almost as introverted as I am, so we get along famously. He recently released a new book, and by all accounts including mine, is a well written author with interesting storylines.

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