

Alone

[Millicent]

His malicious grin, the only part of his face I could see clearly, was predatory and possessive as he grabbed my hand roughly and led me through a stone door at the side of the keep. The door slammed behind us, the solid boom reminding me of the finality of my situation. Any chance for my freedom ended when that door closed behind us.

We entered a small chamber that led to a dark hallway, lit by odd metal torches burning with a strange green flame behind clear bowls of hand-turned glass. I didn't have much opportunity to appreciate the cleverness of the craftsmanship, however, because I was still suffering under his rough handling and he pulled me along faster than my much shorter legs could travel. Nobody was around to see him drag me up the stairs as I struggled, hitting and punching his back, hoping he'd stop moving and let me go. But he didn't. Nothing seemed to matter as he continued. Not my screams, not my tears, not all the nasty things I said about him, his parentage, his pride, his honor, and his strange-looking cloak.

His cloak was indeed very strange. It had an unusual texture, unlike any cloth or leather I had ever touched. It felt more like some type of membrane, like the skin you peel from the top of milk, but more solid. It was the same bright green as his hair, which I could see peeking out from below his horned helm. Except for his helm, knee and elbow guards, which glowed iridescent blue under the green fire, the rest of his armor was crafted, or made, of dragon scales.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he lifted me by both hands, our faces level, my feet dangling a foot off the ground. "Stop it." He growled, his eyes glowing as green as the torches. "I will not tolerate any more of your abuse, wench. My wings do not deserve to suffer by your hand. I have done nothing."

"Nothing," I snarl back. "You have kidnapped me, threw me against a wall, and dragged me into your keep." I'm screaming now, bits of spit landing on his helm. "You've made it quite clear that I am nothing to you, which is probably why you thought you did nothing to me. I..."

He dropped me, hard and I crumbled to the ground, wincing in pain.

"Enough," he roared, his chest heaving as steam curled out from beneath his helmet, his words bright with inner fire. "Your fate is sealed. The sooner you realize this, the easier our situation will be."

He then turned around, leaving me where I landed, as he marched up to a large window. The window was large enough for a grown man to stand in, which he proved when he opened the glass with a push, breaking the delicate brass latch, and dropped out of sight.

Stumbling across the carpeted room on what is most likely a sprained ankle, I lifted myself onto the window seat and peered down at the fog. A green blur of scales and wings twirled in the mists far below, flying within the cloud cover, over the valley, and out towards the sea. It looks like the dragon prince is done with me for tonight and is off in search of other prey. Good. Taking a deep breath, I sighed, letting my body melt into the hard stone seat beneath me.

As my breath returns to normal and my heart stops pounding in my chest I take a moment to look around and see my surroundings more clearly. Those green lights lined the elegantly papered walls, and unlike the more simple torches in the under castle, these are inlaid with real gold and emeralds. The pillars are pure quartz crystal grown into tall spires holding up the peaked ceiling, painted to look like a morning sky. It is dotted with skylights which are currently showing the blue-purple shades of dusk.

Much like its master, this keep is beautiful, sharp, and cold. Shivering, I wrap my arms around myself and call out. "Hello."

There is no response. Walking to the other side of the grand room, I find a corridor leading to another grand room, this one made of glass. I continue to call out, "Hello?" but find only silence and the sound of gently falling water ahead of me. When I reach the wall of glass at the end of the hall, I use my sleeve to wipe the fogged windows and place my face on the pane.

A waterfall flows along a wall emptying into a small pool. Fish swim underneath large lilies as frogs hop along the stones. Birds are flying overhead in every imaginable color, their song muffled by the glass. Walking along the perimeter of the room, I look for a door. I move along it, pressing my hands into the glass, hoping to find a hidden latch to a secret door. There are none. The room is completely sealed.

"There has to be a way in." I surmise. "There is no way that there isn't. It makes no sense." Frustrated, I walk back the way I came.

When I re-enter the hall, the unmistakable smell of food hits me and my mouth immediately begins to water. Looking around for the source I see a small table set near the center of the room. As I move closer, the smell becomes stronger, the welcoming aroma of roasted venison stew and fresh bread. Next to that was placed a tall mug of cold milk, the condensation dripping along the sides.

"Thank you," I say to the walls, not seeing anyone to give my gratitude. Picking up my meal, I decide to dine near a large pit in the center of the room, surrounded by benches and pillows. The warmth of the fire eases my aches and pains as the food fills and warms me from within. Momentarily content, I place the used dishes to the side, and let myself melt into the cushions.

It is daybreak when I feel a gentle nudge.

Looking up, I see a handsome young man wearing a simple cotton shirt. His inquisitive green-brown eyes smile down at me as he steps back, allowing me to find my way to a seated position. His long brown hair is tousled and pulled back in a simple ponytail.

"Hi,"

"Hi," he holds out a hand to help me rise.

My breath catches. He is beautiful in his way, handsome by the standards of my village, even if his hair, a ruddy brown, is a bit dark for the people of Crimson. He has the longest lashes I have ever seen which rest on his impressively sculpted cheekbones when he blinks. He has a kind face, dotted with freckles and fine lines when he smiles. It is the first friendly face I've seen since I arrived.

His hand feels so warm, so smooth beneath my touch. His smile is so genuine and kind I feel myself relaxing in his presence.

"Welcome to Ridgewood Castle," he grins. "My name is Leon, I was sent to help you."