



Magic cannot die.

If chased, it hides.

If crushed, it transforms.

*As slippery as an eel, magic takes cover, evades, darting
through shadow and darkness and light, shifting and taking
shelter in the most unexpected of places until it is time.*

Until it stirs, wakes, and reveals itself.

Stretches its wings, finds its wind, and soars.

*Like the seedling, it begins small and alone. A flicker of life. A
sprout that grows and thrives, battles and fights, reaching
toward the sun.*

First one.

Then another.

And another.

Until it is an army.

Magic is not dead. It only slept.

Now it wakes. Reborn. Stronger than ever.

Ready to begin again.

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TAMSYN

One year in the Craggs . . .

THE BLOW CAUGHT ME IN THE TEMPLE.

The force of it radiated through my head, threatening to drop me to my knees. Abuse was not unusual for me. And yet my life as a whipping girl had not prepared me for this last year—for the grueling, endless cycle of pain and blood and loss and loneliness.

My teeth snapped down, sinking into my tongue. Copper flooded my mouth, the taste washing over my teeth and tongue. Turning my head, I spit out a mouthful of blood, the glistening substance landing in the dirt. The sight of it did not faze me. Not anymore. Except it was purple. Damn my blood. Maybe no one else noticed. I could only hope.

A ringing filled my ears as I fought to keep my balance. The moment I went down, they would be on me like a pack of wolves, and it would all be over.

That couldn't happen.

I blew strands of hair out of my eyes and kept going. Stopping to collect myself and catch my breath would be the end. The moment they took me.

I shook myself once, hard, determined to stay on my feet. I clenched my teeth until my jaw ached, keeping upright, pushing past the discomfort, and facing my attackers.

There were two. The boy was younger than me, but bigger, the



planes of his face wide, forehead and chin like the blunted edges of a rock. He was as strong and unmovable as the oldest trees in the Craggs, thick roots burrowing sideways, deep into the jagged mountain slopes. The throbbing in my head attested to his strength. I still felt the reverberations from his thick fist against my face.

He snaked about me so quickly that my eyes struggled to keep track of him, coiling like wind around me. Damn. He was fast. Usually, my speed gave me the advantage, but he darted left and right, his feet barely touching the ground.

My other attacker slowly drew closer, seemingly mild and non-aggressive . . . innocent, harmless with her much smaller size and lovely hazel-bronze eyes that offered the lie of gentleness.

I knew better than to be disarmed by her.

The most brutal, the most savage things came in small packages. That was what I had learned—to never underestimate an opponent.

Nothing was as it seemed in this world. There were all types of dragons, but sometimes the smallest ones, the prettiest ones with their mesmerizing eyes in colors I never even knew existed, were the deadliest.

Safety was never a guarantee. An enemy was always an enemy, but a friend was not always a friend. My experience with Stig had proved that true. I'd made a mistake in trusting him and had very nearly paid the price with my life—if not for Fell.

Fell.

My throat thickened the way it always did when my thoughts drifted to him. My eyes stung, nose suddenly congested and stuffy, the center of my chest aching dully.

Fell had saved me. He'd shown himself to me then—who he really was, the core of him, his very heart.

He'd been brought up to believe dragons were the monsters—unaware that he himself was one of them—but he'd saved my life anyway.

Except none of that mattered now.

I would never know what we could have been.

I would never have the future of us. We would not be together. And that loss was another hurt, a profound ache layered upon all the rest meted out to me every day.

And yet I pushed on. Fell would want that for me.

I couldn't stop, couldn't quit.

Here, each day was a struggle. A constant battle to train, to prepare. I accepted that. Accepted that I must learn to be *this*—the thing that I was.

I went through the motions, the routines of life in the pride with vigorous, single-minded intent. I performed my assigned duties, volunteering for more, training, fighting until I bled. I worked myself until muscles I never knew I possessed burned and quivered. It was necessary. The thing to do to prove myself.

Each night I collapsed into my furs and succumbed to a sleep so deep and consuming that it edged on death. In the morning I would wake and start the process all over again, fighting alongside those who viewed me with distrust and wariness as the girl raised among humans. With brethren that didn't feel like brethren.

And yet my place could be nowhere else. It was here. Even without Fell. Even with the X on my palm always pumping with the reminder of him.

I forgot the pang in my hand when the girl lunged for me.

Instantly I dodged her, whirling in a circle.

The boy seized his opportunity. They worked together, brutality in tandem, trying to overcome me. They had a lifetime of practice on me. At some point they had decided to ally themselves against me.

Here, I was the outsider. The one on the fringes looking in. I doubted that would ever change. In their eyes, I would never shake off my beginnings.

Their alliance worked, as usual. I could hold my own one-on-one, but two-to-one odds were not in my favor. Fairness did not apply here. Inequity was never an excuse. Not in the arena. Because in the real world it wouldn't matter either.

Taking advantage of my divided attention, the boy tackled me,



bringing me down hard. His bigger body pinned me to the ground. He grinned in triumph, flashing his teeth, a little *too* pointy, the blunt edges of his human teeth giving way to his fangs.

“Not so tough, are you, *fire-breather?*” he panted in my face, his skin flushing red in a mix of delight and exertion. And something else. His flesh winked in and out—one moment the skin of a dragon, gold red and glimmering. The next moment . . . not. Just the ordinary flesh of a boy, as though he could not quite settle on what he was—human or dragon.

He thought he had me. He thought he won.

I swallowed hard, fighting down the fire that threatened to escape. It was like that. Always. The fire alive, working inside me with a will of its own.

I struggled, writhing beneath him, attempting to buck him off. His hand wrapped around my thick braid that coiled like a serpent in the dirt where I sprawled. His grip tight on the rope of my hair, he banged my head once, twice, against the ground.

My vision flashed with spots of varying colors. For a moment the world went black, and I lost view of his face. I blinked, clearing my sight, fighting for focus.

He was certain he had beaten me. I saw that in the fiery gleam of his eyes, the smug curl of his lips. He was wrong.

I was not the same whipping girl who had first joined them.

I was many things I wasn't a year ago.

I was tougher. Smarter. Pain did that to you. Loss. It taught you things. You either withered away and died or survived it. Grew. Got better. Stronger. Became hard where you once were all soft underbelly.

I went limp beneath him, my arms falling slack at my sides, fingers opening like the unfurling of petals. Delicate. Vulnerable. A tender throat exposed to the rushing blade.

The rigidity eased from him, the heavy weight of his body letting up. His hold on my hair loosened, his grip no longer a vise.

“You got her!” the girl crowed from somewhere nearby.

He chuffed in triumph, sitting back, still atop me but not quite so crushing.

I sprang then, flipping him off me as I bounded to my feet.

The girl gaped, and I sent her to the ground with a kick to the face before she could think to react. A collective groan went up from the onlookers.

I turned to finish off the boy, but he was already on his feet, fists clenched in vibrating fury. His eyes flashed fire, pupils thinning to vertical slits, and it was signal enough for me. I knew what was coming.

I dove out of the way as a stream of fire erupted from him, exploding past my head, incinerating wisps of my hair that had floated loose from my braid.

I hit the dirt and rolled, the fire still coming for me, a hungry, devouring serpent, a ceaseless, blasting stream on the air, singeing my flesh. My face stung, my ear blazing hot.

Suddenly a new body was there, a streak of wind bursting into the ring.

Gasping, I rolled to a stop, the heat gone, no longer blistering the air—or me.

I watched as an even bigger body collided with my attacker, knocking him off his feet, dousing his fire with a sudden rush of icy mist that rolled off him in waves. Then he was bending over the boy on the ground, the long strands of his moonbeam hair pulled back into a single leather band, offering an unfettered view of his brutally handsome face, the sharp line of his jaw, the frosty gray of his eyes stabbing cold.

Damn it all. That face. Fell's face. And yet not. But so alike. The resemblance crashed into me, a punch to the gut, robbing me of my breath every time I looked at him. I hated it. Hated it. *Hated* it.

Not Fell.

Vetr.

“Enough,” he proclaimed, the word a thunderous shout, reverberating off the cave walls all around us.



Vetr was formidable even without the title of alpha. He was a shader. Like Fell. Not that Fell had ever realized that. He had not been given a chance to explore that side of himself, to know he possessed the ability to shade air and minds alike.

The fog that always seemed to be around Fell and his warriors in the Borg—even in the chamber with us during our bedding ceremony—had come from Fell. It was him all along. *His* power, *his* dragon talent. Magic was in our blood. Every dragon possessed it—some more than others.

The boy on the ground suddenly didn't look quite so large and intimidating, cowering in the shadow of the pride's alpha. "W-what did I do, Vetr?"

Vetr seized him by the throat, leaning down until they were nose to nose. "I said there would be no fire. Did you not understand my instructions? Was I not clear, Nayden?" Vetr swept his glare over everyone then—a dozen spectators avidly watching the unfolding drama.

They had all been waiting for the match to end so that they could take their turns in the ring, but this current display captured their attention. Everyone nodded in response to the question posed to Nayden. Even Kerstin, still breathing heavily with exertion, now sitting up on the ground where I had kicked her down. She patted her nose as though verifying that it was still there on her face, and then she sent me an audacious wink that seemed to say: *You got me good.*

Nayden glanced around wildly, his normally copper-hued skin burning bright red, almost the exact shade of his hair—a reddish-gold not so very unlike my own hair. Clearly the lack of support from the rest of the pride embarrassed him.

"It is not fair," he cried, sounding very much like a lad of fifteen then. Perhaps he was even younger. I was not certain. There were twenty-nine members of the pride, but I had not committed their full biographies to memory. "Why can we not use our talents? Should we not use everything available to us? All our abilities in a fight?"

"You should understand this by now." Vetr's frosty gaze took

in the assembled group. “All of us should understand. We must know how to fight in our human form. We cannot always reveal our dragon.”

Vetr straightened. His big body, naked from the waist up due to his earlier sparring in the ring, rotated in a small circle so that he could meet everyone’s eyes.

He was an imposing figure. Like Fell, he was well over six feet with broad shoulders and a thickly muscled body. A warrior’s body, I would have thought before. I *had* thought before—of Fell, the first time I saw him. Now I realized my mistake. Fell’s body—Vetr’s body—was a dragon’s body, camouflaged in the skin of a human.

We spent most of our days walking about as humans. That was our natural baseline, our starting point, the way we were born, but the dragon was always there, even when not visible. Swimming beneath the surface, a viper beneath the water, ready to emerge when summoned.

Everyone nodded and murmured their understanding of Vetr’s words . . . of his authority. Except for Nayden.

“Why are you not angry at *her*? She can’t even control her blood yet. Is that not equally important? Doesn’t remaining in our human form also mean never revealing our dragon blood? Isn’t that what you taught us?” Nayden pointed to the damning evidence of the purple blood I’d spit out in the arena. I knew I’d be scolded for that mistake, but I had not imagined it would be by this brat.

I swallowed miserably. As much as I wanted to punch Nayden in the throat for flinging my weakness, my failure, in my face—in Vetr’s face—he was not wrong. No matter how hard I tried, the art of bytte, controlling one’s blood and keeping it red when in human form, was a struggle for me. Everyone else had mastered it because they had complete control over themselves, over their dragon. I’d come far, but this I still struggled to learn. As with many things.

“Until she can learn to do that, she’s useless!” Nayden got to his feet, his fiery eyes flashing in defiance. He crossed over to me and spat at my feet, narrowly missing the toe of my boot.

It was the wrong thing to do.

