



The Dragon's Tamer

Megan DERR

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By Megan Derr

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"Layneth!" Alaith bellowed, making certain the damned dragon could hear him wherever it was skulking. "How many times have I told you not to leave entrails in front of the tower?" He planted his hands on his hips and glared as a guilty-looking dragon with dark purple scales slunk around from behind the tower, where she had no doubt been taking a post-lunch nap by the wood pile. "If you don't want to eat them, fine, but don't leave them in front here where it makes us look uncivilized and disgusting! Clean it up now!"

Growling and looking very put upon, Layneth nevertheless began to clean up the remains of the steer carcass she had earlier eaten.

"Make certain you get all of it," Alaith said for good measure and turned to head back into his tower, but paused when he heard all too familiar laughter coming down the path from the castle proper. Alaith stifled a sigh. If he were lucky, he would at least be able to enjoy staring surreptitiously at Trey while he attempted to avoid murdering or maiming Prince Rythe. He fussed over his hair and clothes in the few seconds he had before they cleared the forest, then turned around to supervise Layneth's mediocre cleanup efforts so it would not look as though he were waiting for them.

"Hail, Mightiest of All Dragonslayers!" Prince Rythe called as he and Lord Trey came from the forest. "We have need of your fine services this day."

Ignoring him, Alaith scowled at Layneth and pointed to the stone path that led to his tower home. "You missed a bit of intestine, you lazy, good for nothing dragon. Don't you sigh at me, miscreant. Clean that up or all you get the rest of the week is rabbits and vegetables."

After he was satisfied Layneth would clean up properly this time, Alaith turned around and crossed his arms over his chest. He frowned at the two men who drew to a stop before him.

Prince Rythe was the king's youngest and brattiest son. Smart, but spoiled and obnoxious, he would have been handsome, save for that obnoxiousness he wore like his tailored jackets. His hair was a mess of curls severely restrained and the color of dying embers, a red-orange that faded to the barest hint of dark gold at the tips. He was dressed in hunter green with dark brown and touches of deep gold that offset his hair all the more.

Pretty, so very pretty. But Alaith wanted nothing more than to put a fist to that perfect nose and mar his smug, infuriating face, see that full, pretty mouth turn down in a true frown.

Beside him was Lord Trey, the Duke of Denning. He was smart without being obnoxious and handsome, all sharp lines and graceful movement. His dark blue jacket set off his eyes of the same color, and his black hair was cut short, falling perfectly around his face to compliment the razor-sharp lines of his cheekbones. Unlike Prince Rythe, he had manners and employed them, possessed class and did not need to be punched in the face.

Alaith loved to look at him, because if he looked at Rythe too long he started to go mad.

At first, he had thought they were friends, though he could not fathom why someone like Trey would endure Rythe—except, of course, that Rythe was royalty, but all the same. The longer he knew them, however, the more he had the sense they were together more by necessity, rather than choice. They acted like friends, but there was a very faint undercurrent of some tension Alaith could not put his finger upon. It was none of his business, however; they only came to see him when there was a dragon that required his attention.

"What do you want?" Alaith asked, then after a long beat added, "Highness."

"Your services, as I said," Rythe said with a smirk that Alaith would have *loved* to knock off his smug, infuriating face. "We've had reports of a black dragon running amuck about a day's ride from here. I'm afraid that no one else has been able to kill it, so we have come to fetch you."

"I am so very sorry you've been reduced to circumstances as trying as asking the royal dragon tamer for help," Alaith said, annoyed—because he refused to be hurt. He refused to be upset by the fact he was considered a laughing stock for his methods, for his preferences. Alaith might have been eccentric and his methods unorthodox, but they worked, damn it. If they meant he was thought less of, well, bugger all of them.

Rythe laughed. "My dear, my dear, the only problem is that we hired a dragon *slayer*, and there is no such thing as a dragon *tamer*."

"How distressing that I do not exist," Alaith replied. "Where is this black dragon requiring my nonexistent attention?"

"North, a day's ride away, as I said," Rythe replied. "We want to leave immediately so as to arrive in the morning. Go take your daily bath or whatever funny thing you still must do today, so we can depart. We are going to be riding hard; pack and dress accordingly." He looked Alaith slowly up and down, lingering on his bare chest and the metal and ink decorating it. "Or not, as is your preference, my darling dragon slayer."

Ignoring the obvious taunt, Alaith scoffed and said, "Ride hard? Can you do that? Highness?"

Rythe's smirk turned into something sharp and hot, light brown eyes looking almost as gold as the ends of his hair. He drawled, "I prefer to be ridden hard, but that is another discussion for another day, sweet slayer."

Rolling his eyes, refusing to be pulled into such ridiculous games, Alaith turned around sharply on his heel, shoved Layneth's large head out of the way, and went to go pack. It was only as he walked away that he realized he had been so busy bickering with Rythe that he had never really spoken to or even glanced at Trey. Opportunity wasted, he thought with a sigh. Inside, he opened his trunk and pulled out sturdy boots, sitting down on the trunk to pull them on and lacing them up over his tight leggings. Standing and opening the trunk again, he pulled out a long, wide length of scarlet fabric that he wound around his head to keep his multitude of long, heavy braids back.

His hair had been one of the first marks against him when he had arrived. The pale gold color was remarkable enough in a place that was predominantly brown and black with splashes of red, but the

fact it fell halfway down his back, and that he wove it into dozens of braids decorated with beads and bangles was something no one there could comprehend. They had taken one look and labeled him a savage. If he were to cut it, life would become that much easier, but Alaith loved his hair and could not bear the idea of 'taming' it.

He briefly considered pulling on a tunic, but he hated them. His leggings and the leg wrap he wore over them—slit up the sides to ease movement and decorated with more beads and symbols of his tribe—were all he could bear to wear. Even the boots were already beginning to bother him, but his slippers would not do for harder travel.

Besides, if he actually dressed even half-properly, Rythe would harass him all the more, and the entire ride would be punctuated by remarks about Alaith's tattoos and piercings—in his nipples, on his stomach, two in each ear, the one in his nose, and thanks the gods of heaven and earth that only Rythe seemed to have noticed the one in his tongue.

And heaven and earth prevent that Rythe should learn where else Alaith was pierced. Though Alaith hazarded even Rythe would fall over dead of shock if he ever did. He really hoped Rythe never learned that it was not because of Plainsmen tradition that Alaith had so much metal puncturing his body; that he did it solely because he liked it.

Reaching once more into his trunk, Alaith pulled out his satchel and slung it over his head so the strap fell across his chest. Next, he pulled out a long roll of fabric embroidered with marks to match those on his pants and leg wrap. Winding it around his shoulders so that he would be warm against the dark that would soon fall, but his arms would be free for whatever problems might arise, he strode back outside.

Layneth growled at him, eyes whirling blue and red. He reached out and stroked her snout, laughing softly when she head-butted him gently in the chest. "Now, now, Lay. I'll be back in a couple of days, at most. I'll be fine; do not fret. One black dragon is no match for me! You behave while I am gone, all right?" She growled again, but allowed him to leave after nipping playfully at his hair. "Shall we go, then, Highness?" Alaith asked.

Rythe said nothing, only nodded, then turned and led the way back to the castle where their horses waited.

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Alaith had the sense he was missing something.

One year ago, the king had sent a request to his tribe for a dragon tamer. No one knew much about the Plainsmen who lived on the edge of the kingdom, but everyone knew dragons weren't a problem there and that they were a plague everywhere else.

At the orders of the chief, Alaith had answered the request. He had been horrified to learn the king had actually requested a dragon *slayer*, which was something the Plainsmen did not do. Despite being told they wanted the dragons dead and being ordered to kill them, Alaith had said he would do it as a Plainsman, or he would go home. So he had done it his way, and even the king had begrudgingly admitted that Alaith should be left to his own methods.

But he had also been given the old tower well behind the castle and out of the way of everyone else—an eccentric, half-wild man tucked out of the way until needed. Always they left him to his own devices unless he was needed. Even when he was summoned, it was only to be escorted to the location of the dragon and left there to do whatever strange Plainsmen things he did.

It was usually a soldier or some such, however, who took him. Why Rythe was this time, and why Trey was tagging along, Alaith could not even begin to comprehend.

Nor he could he understand their behavior. Trey was usually congenial, willing to hold light conversation whenever he tagged along with Rythe to visit Alaith at the tower. He was witty, engaging, fun to speak to and did not seem to hold Alaith's oddities against him. That day, however, there was a definite tension about him, a tight line about his shoulders. He made all the right noises and gestures, but it was clearly his mind was elsewhere.

Rythe... Again, he acted like himself—annoying, *infuriating*, lewd, rude, and in need of a beating—but it all seemed reflexive, as if he were as lost in his own thoughts as Trey.

If Alaith truly gave a damn about either of them, he might have been worried, or at least offended. As it was, he was grateful that Rythe eventually lapsed into silence and merely disappointed that Trey was not as engaging as usual.

As it grew darker, he broke the silence only to say, "We are going to need torches, soon, if we want to travel in the dark." With the moon only a sliver, even he could not see all that well in the dark when so much of the land was marred by trees. He missed the openness of his plains, where much could hide in the tall grasses, but it was also possible to see great distances even on just a sliver of moonlight.

Rythe smirked, the expression just visible in the growing dark, and said, "Torches are for amateurs and wild Plainsmen." He let go of his reins, lacing his fingers together to cup his hands in a ball, and began to speak in soft, lyrical words.

Alaith jerked in surprise, whipping his head around to stare in shock as words of magic filled the air. Rythe was a mage? He could not fit what he knew of magic and mages to what he knew of Rythe. Nevermind that Rythe boasted about *everything*, and he had never breathed so much as a word of his magical abilities. And the way the words rolled off his tongue, so smoothly the lyrical words were almost a song, sensual and soft.

The words slowly drifted off, and Rythe opened his hands, freeing three small orbs of soft-glowing mage light. They drifted out, one to each man, and flared larger and brighter as Rythe spoke a few last words of magic.

Alaith continued to gawk, too stunned to immediately formulate words, but Rythe did not appear to notice, his attention on their surroundings. His mind whirled with shock—and begrudging admiration—but mostly shock.

Magic was an incredibly difficult field; it required complete dedication and discipline over many years. Mages were few in numbers because there were not many people who could afford to sacrifice so much else in their lives to devote their time and energy to bending over books and training their mind.

It was rare to find a mage who was not, or had at one time been, a member of the noble class. Occasionally, members of the wealthy merchant class would put a child into magical training, but most still considered magic to be a frivolous luxury.

However, that did not lessen its impressiveness, not in Alaith's eyes, anyway. Rythe, he knew, was just past thirty. He had likely spent at least two full decades of his life studying and mastering magic. That almost sensual quality to his casting... that alone spoke of his skill.

Alaith had always heard of the way mages could look and sound when casting, as if they were whispering endearments against a lover's skin. There were no mages in the Plains, however, only Shaman, which were something else entirely.

He'd met no mages since travelling to the capital, though he had secretly hoped he would. To actually witness all he had heard about, and that it was Rythe... As hard as he tried, he could not wrap his mind around it. He was going to kill his father for making him come to the capital. "Since when are you a mage?" he demanded.

Rythe finally turned to look at him, and Alaith regretted saying anything because that damned smirk he hated finally made its appearance. "Parlor tricks," Rythe said, sounding spoiled and bored and infuriating. "Any apprentice can do mage lights, but light a few and pretty lords and ladies will do practically whatever you ask."

Alaith turned away, angry—and disappointed, though he hated to admit it, and didn't even know precisely why. But those mage lights were not parlor tricks, and no one studied magic just for the chance of an easy fuck or two.

So why was Rythe lying about it and making light of what was obviously considerable skill? Or maybe Alaith was an idiot, and it really was just a parlor trick.

Trey stirred from his long silence, tone dismissive as he said, "His Highness was made to study magic by her Majesty. She wanted a mage in the family, and the king had the temerity to put her older sons to other pursuits. Alas, Prince Rythe has very little acumen for it. He managed to learn a few parlor tricks, as he says, but nothing more."

Alaith nodded and let the matter drop, though he was only more confused than ever. He did not believe that Prince Rythe lacked ability, not after what he had just seen. He was so over-confident and infuriating, and a personality like that would not settle for being mediocre at anything he pursued. If Rythe failed at something, he could not be insufferable about it.

Of course, Rythe had never *been* insufferable about— Oh, to the dark spirits! Why did he bloody care, anyway? He did not.

Silence fell again, and Alaith felt no inclination to break it. He missed home at times like this, when the world he thought he was finally coming to understand only proved to him he did not know anything. Back home, he was nothing special—the seventh, and last, son of the village chief, the smallest and least impressive of his father's children. At least he knew his place there, however, unremarkable and forgotten as that place often was.

Here, he knew nothing, but dragons and the lonely tower he called home because he was too strange to be permitted to live in the castle proper. His only real company was Layneth, and a spoiled brat prince he thought he had known, but who now made no sense. Give him the Plains any day.

They rode on in silence, not even pausing to rest, eating in the saddle with the moon and stars above them and trees on every side. The noise of the horses' hooves on dirt was so steady that it threatened to lull him to sleep.

It had been full dark for roughly three hours when the robbers attacked—six men, shadows slipping from the damnable trees in which they had been hiding. Alaith swore and reached for the knife strapped to his thigh—

But then the mage spheres went out like snuffed candles, and he heard Rythe shout in pain.

Someone—two, he realized—grabbed him and tried to pull him off his horse. Alaith let them, let the men handle him roughly, let them think he was that scared and weak, giving his eyes a chance to readjust to the absolute dark. When they jeered and relaxed, he drew the knife they should have found and taken and killed them too quickly for a cry of help to slip out. Two dead, four to go.

The entirety of the castle population might have found it amusing he refused to eat meat or laughed at the way he did not hunt, but they were fools to think that meant he was weak. Slinking through the dark, he swiftly killed the remaining men. Cleaning and sheathing his knife, Alaith called out, "Highness?"

"Here," Rythe said, still sounding as though he were in a great deal of pain.

Alaith followed the sound of his voice, worried the prince was badly wounded and furious there was no real light to see by. He knelt beside Rythe, where he lay on his side in the grass. "Are you all right, Highness?"

"Needle dart," Rythe bit out. "Poisoned me with—" He did not get to finish the sentence, and Alaith only barely turned him in time to avoid Rythe puking over both of them, holding him steady while he emptied what seemed to be the entirety of his insides into the grass.

Something serious was at play here, and Alaith wanted to know what. Rythe had not been poisoned by chance. The best way to take out a mage short of killing him or knocking him unconscious was to poison him. Even the laziest child knew that. The only way to poison a mage so that he could not use his magic was with pure silver. Essence of Silver, it was often called, though the old name for the extract was Blood of the Moon—silver in its purest, most potent form.

But it was expensive—exorbitantly so, even for the most ruthlessly determined mercenaries, and these had only been incompetent thieves. They would not waste money they did not possess on the chance of coming across a powerful mage. Robbers would use the more expedient and far cheaper method of killing the mage. Silver was for taking them alive.

If they had Essence of Silver, then they had likely known that Rythe would be coming that way and had planned to take him—most likely for ransom, but with royalty involved, it could be anything. Whatever

the reason, someone had known Rythe would be coming by there, and they had planned to take him. Which reminded him—

"Trey?" he called out. "Lord Trey?"

"Don't—" Rythe gasped out, grasping weakly at his arm.

Alaith stopped calling for Trey and instead said, "When whatever this mess is comes to a close, I am killing you."

Rythe managed a weak, unsteady laugh. Alaith could feel him trying to sit up and helped him, settling his arm across Rythe's shoulders to steady him. Rythe leaned heavily into him and said, "Didn't—didn't think the bastard—would silver me—he knows—" And just like that, Rythe passed out, falling heavily against Alaith's chest, soft hair tickling against Alaith's bare skin. His unsteady breaths were warm against his skin.

He could not reconcile the man he wanted to kill on a near-daily basis with the silver-sickened mage lying unconscious in his arms. Neither could he stand the protective feeling that tried to rise up as he brushed back errant curls to see if Rythe was developing a fever.

Which he was, damn it. Silver always struck mages hard, but not usually *this* hard. Sighing, Alaith moved Rythe away from the foul-smelling vomit and laid him out as comfortably as he could, covering Rythe with his own wrap and placing his satchel under Rythe's head.

Then he went to go deal with the mess of bodies and horses, wondering irritably if there had ever been a dragon involved in this at all—and why he had been dragged into it.

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Rythe groaned and started to sit up, then obviously decided that was a bad idea. He lay back down on the bedroll where Alaith had put him and settled for pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead. "I feel like I just drank the castle's entire supply of wine, ale, *and* mead in one go. I hate the after effects of silver-doping."

Alaith said nothing, but pulled the hot water he'd kept warm off the campfire and poured it into one of his travel cups, throwing in a carefully tied bundle of leaves to steep. When the tea was ready, he tossed away the used leaves and walked over to Rythe, kneeling down beside him. "You're going to have to sit up."

"I don't know that I can," Rythe said. "You may just have to give me a good yank, dragon tamer." He tried to smirk, but there was too much exhaustion and pain in it for Alaith to even bother acknowledging it.

Setting the tea aside, Alaith carefully helped Rythe sit up, keeping an arm around his shoulders, annoyed at how easily Rythe simply settled against his side and pressed up against him without so much as a by your leave. Picking up the tea again, he pressed it into Rythe's hands and said, "Drink all of it—not so much as a single drop had better remain."

Rythe grimaced, but obeyed, slowly drinking the tea. After a moment, he said, "This tastes like boiled grass with notes of burned lemon."

Alaith rolled his eyes. "It's called Shaman Tea, back home. It's good for speeding the replenishing of magical energies, at least for our Shamans. Seemed like it should work to help counter the effects of silver."

"Takes more than that to fix me, and it still tastes like boiled grass," Rythe replied, smirk mostly hidden as he took another sip.

Rolling his eyes again, Alaith fought a childish urge to let go and watch the bastard topple over. As funny as it probably would have been, Rythe was still pale, hands trembling though he fought to hide it, and it... rubbed Alaith wrong to see someone usually so loud and vibrant—even aggravating beyond all reason—so quiet and dulled. It was like looking at a dragon whose scales had lost all their color and shine.

If he wound up liking this bastard because of all this drama, he was going to kill himself.

"There, the boiled grass is all gone, lord nanny dragon tamer," Rythe said. "If you try to give me more, you will wind up wearing it, though who knows, with all those inked dragons and bits of metal, maybe you'd fancy having boiling water thrown on you."

Alaith did not know why he had feared, even for a few seconds, that he would start to like Rythe. "Shut up," he said and set the cup aside, then made to move away, but Rythe slumped more heavily against his side, head heavy against his chest. His hair smelled like honeysuckle and orange, even after a full night and half a day travelling and camping, and only some idiot royal would wear such a frivolous, expensive scent, never mind in his hair. Alaith really wanted to give him a hard shove and send him toppling.

Instead, he sighed and sat still and asked, "What in the world is going on? Who tried to kidnap you? Why is Trey missing, and how is he involved, and if you knew you were in danger, you great big idiot, why did you not have a proper guard!"

"You know, the popular impression of Plainsmen is silent, controlled, and enduring; they're the 'suffer in silence and wind up all the more noble for it' sort. You are loud and fussy, complain about everything, and I doubt you could suffer or even die in silence even if by doing so you would actually wind up living. Honestly, Plainsmen are not supposed to bathe every day, refuse to eat meat, make friends with dragons, or complain more loudly and more often than every maiden and nursemaid I've ever met," Rythe said, sounding entirely too cheerful as he listed his complaints. "It seems to me that with all the abuse you visit upon my royal person, I should at least be allowed to shut you up by kissing you. I really don't think anything about my current situation is fair. I was attacked, poisoned, nearly kidnapped, and now—"

"Oh, shut up," Alaith said again, very pointedly ignoring everything Rythe had said. "I was the dragon tamer brought out here under false pretenses. I killed six men to save you and am stuck taking care of you because you have to act like a maiden about silver-doping. And it is not my problem that all you stone-bound, empty-headed morons don't know even half of what you think you know about the Plains!"

Rythe smirked at him. "Wouldn't all this bickering be much better if I could shut you up by kissing you senseless?"

Alaith opened his mouth then closed it again. That did not deserve a response, and it certainly did not deserve to be spared even a moment of thought. No single part of him wanted to be involved with Rythe's kisses. "I wish I knew how to shut you up," he finally said. "If you make *one* suggestive remark, I will teach you what it really means to be poisoned."

Rythe made a soft, amused noise that blew warm breaths across Alaith's chest, and he could just feel the brush of Rythe's lips. He really need to find a whore when this was over, Alaith decided with deep annoyance. The lack of another human being handling his cock had clearly addled his brains if he was letting himself be affected by *Rythe*. Forcing his mind back to the problems at hand, he said, "I really need to know what is going on, Highness."

Rythe sighed. "A few months before your arrival, my father and I became aware of some disturbing... goings on in countries we do not count amongst our allies. It took me some time to work my way to the source of these troubles, regretfully here in our own home, but I could only narrow it down to three men. My gut told me it was Trey, so I set my own men to watch the other two suspects and set myself upon Trey to watch his movements discreetly."

"Obviously you were not very discreet about it," Alaith said sourly, completely unable to picture Rythe being subtle or discreet about anything.

Laughing, Rythe replied, "On the contrary, I've accomplished much. It's only recently that I've played my hand more obviously. Tonight I was forcing his hand; he had no choice, but to act one way or another. He chose to reveal himself and make a run for it. I simply underestimated the length to which he would go—I did not think he would use silver."

"Why would he kidnap you?" Alaith asked. "It seems to me, at this point, he would have every reason to want to kill you."

"Leverage, no doubt," Rythe said. "If he had me, he could have ransomed me for safe passage or whatnot. I suppose I should have anticipated that, but Trey usually is not so bold. I thought once we stopped to rest, he would slip away in the dark and be gone."

"Idiot!" Alaith bellowed and swatted him upside the head. "You are royalty! You should be more careful! Why does anyone leave you unsupervised?"

Rythe only laughed again, angering Alaith further. "Yes, well, I'm only a fourth son. They're too busy with the other ones, really. I get away with a great deal. Now, we really need to be moving on so we can get to Trey's shipment before him. I suppose we're already too late, though, damn it."

"Shipment?" Alaith asked. "What shipment?"

"Remember I said my father and I discovered some unpleasant activities? Certain of our enemies are paying people like Trey to smuggle out dragons—distinctly illegal and highly dangerous. Trey managed to catch a black dragon, one with a fresh clutch."

"What—" Anger sparked suddenly, hot and sharp, as comprehension flooded Alaith. "They want battle dragons? But that's never worked—dragons shouldn't be used that way! Bad enough they're killed and the pieces used—"

He fisted his free hand against his thigh to still its angry trembling, unable to see clearly past the haze of fury clouding his mind. Battle dragons had been tried a thousand times, but dragons were not meant to be abused that way. Layneth only listened to him because she wanted to, but if he tried to put a saddle on her—

Dragons were sacred. They weren't weapons.

Rythe finally sat up, though he braced himself with one hand on Alaith's thigh, right next to his fisted hand. "That is one reason I brought you along. You actually care about the dragons, so everyone is less likely to get hurt. No one else in this country should be trusted with a scared, angry mother and her clutch."

His words drew Alaith up short, but he could not focus on them, not with the way the words were starting to slow, slur. Rythe's eyes were far too bright, his face too clammy. Mostly to distract Rythe from his obvious misery, knowing he was just setting himself up for some filthy joke, Alaith asked, "There was another reason?"

Whatever he expected, it was not the smile Rythe gave him. It was not a smirk or a grin or a lewd smile. It was simple, warm, and genuine. "In the entire bloody castle, you're the only honest one. I knew I could trust you, whatever happened. I think I must pass out again now. Being a mage who is allergic to silver is a bloody nuisance."

Then he passed out precisely as he had said, tumbling to lie face down in Alaith's lap. Alaith could not even console himself with the knowledge that he could mock Rythe ruthlessly with this later. He could only shift and heave until Rythe was lying comfortably on his bedroll again and wipe down the clammy face and smooth back the now hopelessly tangled red-gold curls.

So he was allergic to silver; that explained the severity of his reaction, and why he had been surprised Trey had used it—the silver damn well could have killed him, and Alaith was going to kill Trey slowly when he found the bastard, just for causing all this fuss and trouble.

He looked at Rythe's face, bathed in afternoon sunlight, unable to sort out his thoughts or emotions, knowing only that it felt entirely apropos to sigh heavily and say with feeling, "Damn it."

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"You are completely insane," Alaith groused. "We should be sending word back to the castle and obtaining a proper guard to escort you home while soldiers take care of hunting down Trey! Have you no concept of your position and personal safety?"

Rythe laughed, tossing his curls as he looked over his shoulder at Alaith. "I should have expected you to be a nanny. We'll be fine between my magic and your temper."

"Unless of course you get hit with silver again," Alaith replied.

"I maintain your temper could topple entire armies."

"The only thing I want to topple is you," Alaith snapped, then immediately regretted it.

Rythe stopped and whipped around, causing Alaith to crash into him. He froze in surprise when Rythe's arms slid around his waist and shoulders, keeping him close. "If you want to tumble me—"

Alaith shoved hard, sending Rythe crashing to the ground to land hard on his ass. Smirking, Alaith said, "I said topple, not tumble, and I was right—I feel much better now. Now hurry up, your Highness, or we will not reach the coast before our quarry." He stepped around Rythe and resumed walking.

Their only chance of stopping Trey and saving the dragon and her clutch was to beat Trey to the coast he was attempting to reach in order to hand over the dragon and eggs and escape. Trey had too great a head start on them because of the day and a half they had lost due to Rythe's being poisoned. If they wanted to catch him, they had to reach the coast first and capture him when he arrived.

Behind him, he heard Rythe sigh and make a production of regaining his feet. "I maintain tumbling would be more fun, but I will wait until we are home again to press the matter, my dear dragon tamer."

Alaith walked on in silence. When they were home again, he was locking himself in his tower and drinking until the world made sense again. He *refused* to deal with the fact he was minding Rythe's ribald humor less and less.

He refused to even ponder the idea that he was disappointed more and more that Rythe probably did not mean anything by his comments. There was so much wrong with that line of thought that he vehemently refused to follow it. Just to distract himself, he asked, "So are we allowed to kill Lord Trey, or do we have to drag him back to the castle to be dealt with there?"

Rythe laughed in reply to his question, a bitterness to it that disconcerted Alaith and only added to the riddle Rythe was proving to be. When his laughter finally subsided, Rythe said, "My father would prefer we take him alive, but personally I would just like to see him dead and the entire matter closed. I've had enough of that poaching bastard to last a few lifetimes."

"I'm sure the dragon would love to eat him," Alaith said. "Though on the Plains we generally remove fingers, and then hands, when we catch poachers."

Rythe smirked. "Oh, he should pay for the dragons, certainly—and I like your method—but I meant a different sort of poaching. I was getting damned tired of seeing him charm and flirt with you whenever we visited you at the tower. He was a bit too preoccupied to do it this time, of course, but it was rather annoying all those other times."

Alaith tripped over a rock and only avoided smashing his face on another one because Rythe grabbed his arm and managed to keep him upright long enough for Alaith to regain his balance. "What are you talking about?" Alaith asked irritably. "We only conversed, and it was a nice change from your lewd jests."

Rythe slowly uncurled his fingers from Alaith's arm, stroking them along the lines of the tribal tattoos that covered Alaith's arms, back, and torso. "Indeed."

"He was not flirting," Alaith snapped, "and he most certainly did not charm me."

"Then he's even more stupid than I gave him credit for," Rythe replied, "because as delectable a display as you make, even a priest would risk divine wrath to flirt shamelessly with you."

Alaith rolled his eyes. "I liked you better when you were poisoned." He refused to feel flustered; he was long inured to Rythe's comments. But, he acknowledged with annoyance and extreme reluctance, it was a good deal harder to ignore them when he knew how Rythe felt in his arms, how soft his hair felt and how stunning it looked with his red-gold curls spilled over his shoulders—and how devastatingly pretty he became with a genuine smile on his face.

He wanted nothing half so desperately as to get ragingly drunk and sleep for days.

"Any time you want to tumble into your arms, you've only to say, sweet," Rythe said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Shut up," Alaith said sourly, increasing his pace, sweating in the heat and panting as the mountain grew increasingly steep, to the point that eventually they were climbing more than walking. Thankfully, that meant conversation became impossible as all their energy was focused on climbing, on the hazards of such a steep, fast climb, and on the fact that they still had some ways to go and daylight was fading fast. Despite his general annoyance with Rythe, Alaith could not help but be quietly impressed by the way Rythe kept pace with him. Another piece of the puzzle, for no truly spoiled and useless royal could hike with the ease and familiarity that Rythe displayed.

By the time they crested the hill and stood looking down at the valley below and the endless stretch of water in the distance, Alaith had decided he wanted a bath first, and *then* the alcohol. "I am starting to think you've the right idea forgoing shirt and jacket," Rythe said, panting and tugging at the damp collar of his jacket. "Also, the next time we do this, I am going to insist villains stick to routes that permit me to retain my horse for the duration."

Annoyed that he wanted to smile, more annoyed he wanted to lean over and do something entirely inappropriate, Alaith said, "Must everything that comes out of your mouth be crude comments or needlessly long sentences?"

Rythe, true to form, smirked. "I could recite poetry, or profess my eternal devotion to you, sweet Plainsmen mi—"

"So crude taunts, long sentences, and mockery," Alaith said, wanting to tear his hair out and wishing that Rythe made sense. "How in the name of Heaven and Earth did *you* become a mage?"

He expected another mocking comment, but Rythe only sighed and looked out over the valley and the sea beyond. "My mother. She always wished she could have been a mage; she would have excelled at it. She was betrothed to my father when she was three, however, and preparing to be queen leaves no room for learning magic. We were talking about my courses of study one day. I was only a boy with

nary a real thought in my head, but she looked so happy when I made a passing comment about studying magic. I had no intentions of pursuing it, but she almost never smiled..." He lifted one shoulder in a shrug clearly intended to be careless. "So I became a mage."

Alaith really hated when Rythe did that—said something serious, showed bits of himself that ran so much deeper than the shallow prince he acted. It made Alaith want to learn those hidden layers, explore them, relearn the feel of Rythe in his arms. Along with a hundred other stupid things because he was foolishly coming to *like* and even *want* this man who slipped out when Rythe stopped being an ass. "So what did you want to do?" he asked.

"Travel," Rythe said. "Explore the country, explore the world, save maidens from dragons, slay villains, be brave and bold. A shining knight with a noble Plainsman as my companion in all things, striking terror in the evil, inspiring love in the righteous—" He laughed, sounding the barest bit sad, then smiled ruefully. "I may have listened too well to the silly stories my nanny told me as a child. Anyway, I'd be a terrible example for the righteous. If you were my noble Plainsman companion, I would require you to wear only that leg wrap and absolutely nothing else, and there would be very little noble and everything filthy about our relation—" His words turned into a yelp, and then a pained grunt, as Alaith shoved him.

Alaith scowled down at him, not feeling even remotely sorry. "I do not know why I ever started to like you. Everything that comes out of your mouth ends in a jest. You mean nothing that you say. Are you sincere about anything?" Frustrated, confused, and more upset than he liked to admit, Alaith made to walk past Rythe—

—Only to squawk in outrage when his ankle was grabbed and his leg yanked out from under him. He landed painfully on his stomach on the ground, breath knocked out of him for a moment. When he could finally function again, he levered himself up on his forearms and glared. "I am going to kill you! Trey won't have to worry about the threat you pose, you gods-damned royal pain in my ass!"

Rythe laughed, then smiled in that soft, sweet, genuine way Alaith hated just because of the way it made his heart misbehave in his chest. Then Rythe reached out and tugged him hard, rolling over onto his back and dragging Alaith on top of him. Alaith tried to protest, but found that was hard to do around a mouth that felt and tasted even finer than it looked—and he had caught himself looking at Rythe's mouth more times and more thoroughly than he would ever admit.

He tried to break away, really he did, but Rythe's mouth was hot and his tongue as wicked as Rythe often bragged, and he tasted of tea and jerky. It reminded Alaith of the ridiculous scent that had finally faded from Rythe's hair. But he could not muster the willpower to break the kiss. It felt too good, better than he wanted to think about, and so he didn't think, just kept kissing.

Hair that now smelled only of dirt and sweat and hard travel, but was still soft. The once neat curls were tangled and messy, springy under his fingers as he held fast while Rythe kissed him—and when precisely had he wound up on his back with Rythe on top of him? Hadn't it been the other way around?

Until he jerked away with a gasp, sensation shooting through him as Rythe tugged on the rings in his nipples—tugged hard and exactly the way Alaith liked. "Rythe—"

Rythe kissed him again, hard and bruising. Alaith could only whimper and kiss back until Rythe finally drew back and allowed him to breathe. "I am very sincere about you, sweet. Do not doubt that." Then he stood, pulled Alaith to his feet, smiled at him, straightened his own clothes, and began walking down the hill.

Alaith watched him for a moment then bellowed down the hill at him, "I don't like you!"

Rythe paused and looked over his shoulder, looking entirely too cheerful and smug and—and beautiful, damn it, and Alaith really could not stand him. "Good," Rythe called up at him. "My ambition is something much greater than like. Now come along, Plainsman mine, there is a villain to slay and a dragon and her babies to save."

"They're called kits," Alaith groused half-heartedly as he obediently jogged down the hill to catch up to Rythe, wishing and yet not wishing that he could stop feeling Rythe's kiss on his lips.

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He bit back the urge to ask questions, mostly because he did not want to hear the answers, but also because, as they crossed the small valley and finally drew near the coast as night fell, there were more important matters to address.

Moonlight reflected off the water, cool and mesmerizing. As grimy and disgusting as he felt, it was all he could do to avoid the temptation of that dark, moonstruck water. "If you would like to go for a swim, I would not be opposed," Rythe said, interrupting his thoughts. "Pity I would not be able to enjoy the view, though, with the dark in my way."

"So where is he going to meet his transport?" Alaith asked, pointedly ignoring the comment, and instead looking up and down the seemingly endless stretches of sand and sea.

Rythe laughed, but pointed up the coast to a set of cliffs that jutted out into the sea. "Those cliffs mark a little cove that is often call 'Smugglers' Crescent'."

"Have you been here before?" Alaith asked, though he supposed the answer to that was obvious.

"Oh, certainly," Rythe replied. "To catch smugglers, to meet with smugglers. This little cove is the least kept secret in the kingdom."

Alaith frowned at that. "Why would he come here, then? And why do you often capture or meet smugglers?" Why was the damnable man such a riddle?

"It's what I do," Rythe said. "Not a dashing hero, perhaps, but a useful shadow. All my magical training must be good for something, after all, given the time and money that was poured into it. Training me probably cost more than raising my brother to someday be king. A mage is costlier than a crown prince, how sad a state of affairs is that?"

"You must have learned some damned fine parlor tricks," Alaith retorted. "Why can you not simply say that you are a top level mage and do covert work for your father?"

Rythe tossed a smile over his shoulder, so beautiful and infuriating that Alaith wanted to shove him into the sea, then drag him back out and do filthy things to him on the sand. "It was much more fun the way I said it." Alaith sighed and gave up, tamping down on anything else he might have said.

"As to why he is coming here: there is nowhere else for him to go. That cove is the only safe place to bring a large boat or a ship for miles." He gestured at the ocean. "You cannot tell, obviously, but the water is rife with rocks, and more shallow than you would expect. It's impossible to bring any, but the smallest of boats to shore. To transport that dragon and clutch, they will need to bring a proper ship all the way to land. That means the cove. They will signal with lanterns, and once the ship comes in, we will have them all."

"It does seem rather useless to get the seller and not the buyer," Alaith agreed

"Precisely," Rythe said with a smile. "Now, I'm afraid, we must travel in silence."

Alaith snorted softly, amused, but obeyed. Silence was easy enough for him to manage. It was also apparently easy for Rythe, who moved like the shadow he had called himself after. He reminded Alaith suddenly of a dragon—and that was by far the stupidest thought he'd ever had. But now that he had thought it, the idea stuck

Rythe was difficult, tricky, beautiful. Yes, he could see it all too well. Rolling his eyes at himself, Alaith focused on the matter at hand. They knew they were coming; it was possible they were walking into a trap.

When they reached the cove, the dragon was all he had eyes for. She was beautiful—black as the night around them. Her scales were opalescent, gleaming wetly in the flickering flames, like candlelight on black pearls. She was visible only because of the torches stuck in the sand in one small area of the cover. Stupid, that, but he supposed it was more important that the ship could see where it needed to go.

The dragon growled and whined, fussed over a clutch of... three? Five? He could not determine how many eggs were there. Alaith had never wanted so badly to kill in his life. If they hurt the mother or her eggs, so help him—

He stopped only when Rythe lay a hand on his arm. "Careful," Rythe breathed in his ear. "We must wait for the ship, else they will only find another to provide them with the dragons." Nodding, reluctantly holding still, Alaith waited.

They remained there in the dark and cold for nearly two hours until his patience began to fray and he exhausted from his anxiety for the dragon. In all that time, Rythe had not once moved, his attention solely on the shadowy figure waiting on the beach below. Under other circumstances, Alaith would have been tempted to test the remarkable discipline he had never known Rythe possessed.

He could not believe he was even thinking about such things and Rythe—but even before that damnable kiss, the thoughts had been lurking, just waiting to surface. Then that kiss. Life had been so much easier when he had been able to convince himself he disliked Rythe.

"There," Rythe breathed in his ear, and Alaith's skin prickled with it. Honestly, he thought in annoyance—there was *work* to do. He obediently looked where Rythe indicated and saw the ship sailing into the cove, close enough they would be able to get the dragon and eggs on board without much difficulty.

Rythe touched his shoulder and said, "Come on." Then he rose and slipped through the brush, moving smoothly down to the beach. Alaith followed easily, the danger and tension making his heart thud in his chest, making him acutely aware of every little thing.

The ship was on the small side for a sea-faring vessel, but large enough to transport the dragon and clutch—likely a balancing act between transporting a dragon and involving as few men as possible in the transaction. He and Rythe crept slowly closer to the beach, keeping to the brush and just steps away from where Trey and the newcomers stood. Voices reached their ears, the conversation carrying easily in the cool, open air

"You weren't part of the bargain."

"Take me, or you won't get anything," Trey snarled. "I can't stay here. You won't get anyone else to get you an entire brood. I'll destroy them here and now—"

"All right, all right," the other man said irritably "But it will cost extra."

"Fine," Trey bit out. "Let's get moving. I managed to stall Rythe—"

"What!" the other man snapped. "No way, deal is off. We are not contending with *him*."

"Shut up. I said I stalled him. Prince Rythe a Wizard Lord, but he is also allergic to silver. I hit him with enough silver to keep an ordinary mage sick for days, never mind someone that vulnerable. His fawning savage will be too busy nursing him to come after us. Our only concern is that they may have sent for reinforcements. Our best chance is not to tarry, so stop griping and get moving!"

He grunted when the other man backhanded him, but then they were in motion, the other man—clearly the Captain—barking orders to his men. Alaith assumed they were orders, anyway; he had started speaking in a language Alaith couldn't understand.

"We need the Captain alive," Rythe murmured to him. "The rest don't matter as much, not even Trey. My father would, of course, prefer they all be captured, but our priority is the Captain." Alaith nodded. "Then here we go," Rythe muttered and cupped his hands. He began to chant a spell, the sensual, sing-song cadence of the words highly distracting, reminding Alaith of the music of the Plains. Rythe paused briefly to say, "Cover your eyes." As Alaith did so, Rythe spoke the last few words and released the spell.

Even with his eyes closed, Alaith could see and feel the burst of light. He heard screams of surprise and pain. When he felt Rythe move, he opened his eyes and plunged from hiding, racing straight for the Captain, drawing his knife and swiftly killing the two sailors who came at him with their swords drawn. Securing the Captain was easy work. But when he turned to contend with Trey—

"No!" Alaith screamed, the sound of it cutting through everything. He barely noticed as everyone else paused, able only to stare in horror as blood poured from the throat of the black dragon and her glowing eyes slowly faded and dulled.

After that, he remembered very little—moving, raising his knife, Trey's screams of pain—

"Alaith, stop."

The voice penetrated, if only barely, and Alaith obediently stopped, letting his knife fall to the sand. He felt cold and numb. He looked at Rythe. "Why—"

"Because he was furious with you; because since you've arrived you've made it harder and harder for him to steal dragons," Rythe said. "It does not matter why, though. The dragon is dead, which means her babies need your help. Can you do it?"

Alaith just stared at him for a moment. He shook himself and said, "They're called kits."

Rythe smiled and leaned in close, kissing him softly. "Go take care of your kits, dragon tamer."

He moved away, and Alaith headed toward the eggs, stumbling a bit over the sand. As he crouched by the eggs, he counted six in total. He looked them over carefully, relieved to see they appeared unharmed and healthy, each one set with a mage's warming stone. At least the fools had known what to do to move them. How would he get them back home, though? They would be safe at his tower, and Layneth would be plenty willing to care for them, but he had no idea how to transport six eggs over so great a distance safely.

He looked up at the sound of someone approaching and said as Rythe knelt beside him, "We need to get these eggs to Layneth."

"A boat," Rythe replied immediately. "We'll get a few of the sailors to take us home; they'll do it in exchange for extradition instead of execution. That will get us close enough that a cart can handle the rest of the journey. I am sorry we did not prevent the mother's death."

Alaith opened his mouth to say something about it being no one's fault but Trey's, but instead said, "You're different."

It was true, but he hadn't fully realized it until he said it. Rythe was quiet, solemn. There was too much hard cynicism in his eyes and the lines of his face. He looked exactly like a man who spent his life doing the king's covert work. It was exactly how Alaith had always wanted Rythe to behave—serious, mature, and aware of his station and responsibilities.

He hated it.

Rythe started to reply, but Alaith leaned over and kissed him, not wanting to hear it. Rythe made a soft, surprised noise. Then he wrapped his fingers in Alaith's braids, dragged him closer, and kissed him deeper.

The stolen kiss on the mountain had been bolder, hungrier, but this one seemed far more intimate—and much more important. Something was decided with it, something that made him hot and dizzy and scared and happy.

Eventually Rythe broke the kiss, drew back, and smiled in that way Alaith already was too fond of. "I'll go arrange the boat. Get ready to move the eggs. Would you like a hair ornament or a new bit of jewelry for a courting present?"

"What—" Alaith tried to follow the abrupt shift in subject. "We don't do that! That's an old-fashioned custom my *grandparents* practiced. Stop being stupid and get my boat."

Rythe smirked, then rose smoothly and slipped away. Alaith watched him go for a moment before turning back to the eggs.

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Two weeks passed in a flurry of work. Layneth had been alarmed by the untended eggs and the smell of blood on Alaith. But like the good dragon she was, she focused on nurturing rather than violence. Layneth had always adored raising kits in a way most dragons did not.

The eggs hatched just two days after they returned to the royal castle, and all of Alaith's energy and attention went to helping Layneth dig a proper pit and gather suitable food since she would be unable to easily leave the pit until the kits were several weeks old. He also hauled in wood to burn to keep them all suitably warm, keeping a fretful eye on both Layneth and the kits.

On a rare quiet afternoon, he sat at the edge of the pit, playing with a kit that was too full of energy to doze off as his siblings already had. Though only two weeks old, he was strong, bold, and shaping up to be quite handsome; he'd be an impressive bull dragon with the same gleaming black scales as his mother someday.

Layneth curled around the sleeping kits, rumbling contentedly in her sleep, eyes whirling happy pinks and yellows behind her thin secondary eyelids. She stirred, though, ears fanning inquisitively, head lifting as though to try and look around the tower. Alaith turned to see who might be coming to see him, hope twisting—

And blossoming as Rythe came into view. Since returning to the castle, they had not seen each other. Alaith had been focused on the dragons, and Rythe had been hauled away to wrap up the matter of the smugglers. After two weeks, Alaith had half-convinced himself that whatever was between them, wasn't, even though he knew better.

"Dragon tamer," Rythe greeted, smiling at him, tired-looking but genuine. He was dressed casually—almost shockingly so—in just breeches, shirt, and boots, not even a jacket to add token propriety. Alaith could not stop staring. "I was beginning to think I would never escape my father's clutches."

Alaith tossed his braids, finally managing to look away, and stroked the kit behind its ears. "And here I was thinking you didn't want to escape."

Rythe laughed and dropped down beside him, lightly tossing something into his lap. Alaith scowled at it, then at Rythe. "What is this nonsense?"

"Courting gift," Rythe said with a smirk. "You're lovely when you're offended; I couldn't resist."

Giving in to a childish urge, Alaith reached out and shoved, toppling Rythe over and smirking at his startled squawk. He pointedly ignored the laughter that followed it, instead focusing on the gift in his lap. The idiot had somehow managed to make it completely traditional—so old-fashioned even his grandparents would have been amused. Alaith almost rolled his eyes.

Almost, because the small roll of soft brown leather was tied with a string of beads. If they were really courting, and went through the entire tradition of gift exchanges, the string of beads would be attached to every gift, passed back and forth until the wedding ceremony. During the ceremony, the beads would be pulled from the string and thrown to the crowds, to signify the end of one stage, the beginning of another, and luck to all those attending.

He wondered if Rythe appreciated what the beads meant and had to assume he did—if there was one thing he knew well, it was that Rythe did not miss details. Alaith unwound the beads, which were red, brown, yellow, and green. The colors made him smile, despite himself. His smile widened when he unrolled the leather and saw what was inside.

Five new hair charms, a perfect first courting gift. The first was of a little tower, carved from some soft, gray stone. The second was of a delicate-looking gold crown. The third was a jeweled flower—the very one used to make the Shaman Tea he'd used to save Rythe from silver. He hadn't realized Rythe even knew of the flower. The fourth was a seashell, and he could only assume it had been taken from the beach. The last charm was a tiny dragon carved from black quartz.

Alaith reached up and undid two of his braids, then re-wove them, threading in the new charms. When he was done, he finally looked up at Rythe. "I suppose tradition has its place," he said and reached out to pick a leaf from Rythe's hair.

Rythe smirked. "All my ideas are good ideas. So are you going to give me a gift?"

Picking up the string of beads, Alaith held it up, making a show of contemplating it. He slowly slid his eyes back to Rythe and matched his smirk. "Do you want to keep this strictly traditional, in which case I will give you something tomorrow. Or would you prefer to act on present custom and see where else I'm pierced?"

He threw his head back and laughed at the way Rythe's eyes popped open wide, relishing that he had been able to surprise Rythe so completely. "You're lying," Rythe declared.

Alaith tossed his hair back, enjoying the added weight of his new charms. He fastened the string of beads around his wrist and lifted his chin in challenge and invitation. "Come and find out." He barely got the words out before Rythe was on him, pushing him to the ground.

It occurred to him they should probably go indoors, but decided it could wait a few minutes. He had no will to do anything but wrap his arms around Rythe and hold tight, content to be tamer and tamed.