The Midnight Compass

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The Midnight Compass

by DeeTheTeaDrinkingDragon

Summary

Things have become a lot more complicated since stepping into Xadia. What had started as one quest to bring the Dragon Prince back home, has now become a race against time for Callum to master each primal source to stand any chance of protecting everything he loves from a looming evil. With the gift of a mysterious compass to guide them, Callum and Rayla set out to try and stop both a war, and a world changing disaster. At least they don't have to face it alone.
“Oh no… It’s him… Sol Regem.”

“Who’s Sol Re-Gah!” Rayla whirled around and yanked the cloak from Callum’s bag unceremoniously, drawing the hood over Callum’s head, and suddenly he felt himself being dragged at a pace towards the canyon wall. Zym wriggled under his cloak on his back, chirping in confusion near Callum’s ear, until he felt the little dragon climb in blind panic into the rucksack.

They didn’t make it to the wall before a mighty crash in front of them signalled with dread what they were about to face. Callum’s face paled as he stared up at the monumental form of the sun dragon blocking the path into Xadia.

“Oh…. Hi! H-Hello there!” Rayla greeted, panic set in her voice. She gave a clumsy, nervous bow. Callum followed suit. The last thing he wanted to do was insult a dragon, let alone this one. “I’m Rayla! And this is my absolutely definitely fellow elf companion Callum! If you wouldn’t mind, Your Gracefulness, we would quite like to make it home-”

The Dragon’s head lowered slowly, blocking the way as Rayla attempted to step forward, and it turned to peer at Rayla with one giant azure eye. She shuffled closer to Callum, and her hand landed on his shoulder. He glanced across and could see the pained, very fake grin on her face.

For as incredible as she was, she was also unfortunately very bad at lying. Callum prayed to whoever might listen that the dragon wouldn’t pick up on her bluff.

The giant’s muzzle inched ever closer and he sniffed deeply, dragging the pair staggering towards him further. Then, an ominous and fear inspiring growl rumbled deep in his throat.

“O-Oh, Yeah we might smell like humans, they’re everywhere over there, y’know? Haha! But I’m sure it’ll wear-“

Huff.

The dragon exhaled and Callum’s hood was forcibly blown back off his head.

Rayla’s face scrunched up when she realised what had just happened and Callum shot her a mortified look. “Ah.” Was the only thing that left her lips as she glanced remorsefully back at the boy.

Sol Regem’s eyes blazed with icy fury and he encroached closer towards Callum, nostrils flaring. Rayla pushed herself between the dragon’s giant maw and the tiny human prince, her arms outstretched protectively. She was walking backwards, forcing Callum back, until he could feel his back against the stone wall, and when Rayla pressed into his chest, he could feel her trembling. Her palms hit the smooth rock each side of Callum, and he could hear the terrified laugh in her voice.

“Ahaha! Hahaha! N-Now I know this looks bad Your Highness, but there is a perfectly good and logical explanation for all this! Really!”

Smoke began to pillar from the mighty sun dragon’s nose, and lips peeled back to reveal more teeth than Callum thought possible, each sharper than any blade he had ever seen, and nearly as tall as him.
and the girl trying to protect his life with her own. A low rumbling growl shook the earth beneath their feet, and echoed through the canyon.

He raised his own trembling hands to find Rayla’s shoulders, hoping to offer any tiny shred of emotional support. He had become uncomfortably aware, staring up into that one bright and furious dragon eye, of the reality of the dire situation they were in.

In a few short moments, he could die. They could both die. And that would be it. There would be no hero’s welcome back to Katolis, no end to the war. No future for him or Rayla to grow up and find their own places in the world. He would never see his brother again. Tears stung in his eyes at the thought of Ezran all alone with no family left.

“Look, we are on a peaceful, diplomatic mission, of the utmost urgency, and we would both very much appreciate it if you didn’t… y-y’know. Kill us.” Rayla continued, one hand slowly peeling from the wall and very gently reaching up to rest on top of Callum’s, her fingers curling tightly around his palm. She was incredibly tense, still shaking slightly. He could tell she was in fight or flight mode, getting ready to yank him out of harm’s way if she needed to.

Not that it would save them. If the dragon wanted them dead, they would be dead. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Perhaps she knew this too. Perhaps, just maybe her hand on his was a gesture that she would try even in the most hopeless of situations to protect him.

Slowly the dragon’s jaw unhinged, and it inhaled, Callum watched as tiny sparks began to ignite in its mouth, a bright red glow forming in the back of its throat.

In those few seconds, Callum wasn’t quite sure what happened. He was pretty sure he was screaming something, maybe yelling Rayla’s name as every muscle in his body locked up in fear, in hers too, as he tried desperately to drag her out of the way. But they weren’t going to be fast enough, there was no way. He staggered over, collapsing to his knees in his attempts to flee and felt Rayla drag him upwards, her arm suddenly around his shoulders, and the other wrapped around his waist and she was holding him as closely, as tightly as she could. Callum closed his eyes, bracing for the swift end about to befall them both, his own arms wrapping around Rayla. His heart ached. Only hours earlier they had crossed into Xadia, so sure that things were going to be okay.

This was it.

But the final strike never came. Instead a shrill, intense sound echoed through the canyon. Callum dared himself to peek an eye open, feeling Rayla shift slightly too, as curiosity took hold of her.

The sight was truly something to behold.

If giant, terrifying fire breathing dragons could look baffled, they would look like what Sol Regem did right now. For standing before him, was a very angry looking, yappy Azymondius, bounding up and down, little sparks of electricity jumping from his tiny jaws.

Sol Regem closed his mouth very slowly, his one good eye peering down at the tiny dragon prince, and lowered his head again to get a better look, sniffing so hard that it bowled the baby dragon over backwards, and Callum felt Rayla squeeze him a little tighter as both of them stood their ground to lean against the gust.

Zym righted himself, then bounded back over, yipping angrily back at the giant in front of him. The Sun King made a softer rumbling noise this time in response, eyes full of… something else now. Not a burning fury, but a simmering curiosity.
Callum hadn’t realised how much he and Rayla had been trembling until he felt hers easing off, and her grip on him relax a little, as she perked up a little. Her ears that had been pinned back in fear were now pricked forward to listen intently.

Her voice was almost a whisper. “…They’re talking.”

“About… About what?”

Rayla finally turned to look at him with a quizzical look. “I don’t know, I don’t speak dragon.”

It was then that Callum realised how close her face was to his, but a smile worked its way across his face, and Rayla returned it with a small lopsided one and a head tilt.

They both slackened their arms around each other, but neither of them pulled away. They just held each other quietly as they both returned to watching the two dragons communicate.

It was a strange back and forth, low rumbles that caused loose stones to tumble down the towering canyon walls, and small yips and zaps back from the little storm dragon. The minutes it took felt like hours, until finally, Sol Regem leant forward and gave Zym a small lick, knocking the now, much more cheerful looking baby over. Then he stood tall, towering over the trio and spread his wings, and with a mighty crash as they hit the ground, he ascended into the sky briefly, to take his place back at his post, pausing to glare at the group before lowering his head back down, curling around the rocks.

As relief washed over Callum, suddenly, he felt his legs buckled beneath him, and Rayla too fell to her knees with a sigh, pulling a hand away from Callum to wipe at her forehead.

“Oh wow, I was certain for a minute that we were going to die.”

“Y-Yeah. That was intense.”

They were silent for a minute, sharing a look. And then, almost at the same time, they both began to laugh.

“We’re alive!”

“Of course we are! I didn’t doubt for a minute!” Rayla beamed back as she pulled him in for a hug, squeezing him around the ribs.

Callum squeezed her back, still overwhelmed with giddiness, watching over her shoulder as Zym trotted proudly over.

When Rayla pulled away, she opened her arms wide as an invitation to the little dragon, who bounded excitedly the rest of the way over and jumped into them, tail wagging.

“Who’s the mightiest little prince in all of Xadia? Hmm?” She rubbed noses with Zym and he chirped back in delight.

Callum feigned mock offence. “Hey, I’m right here you know!”

Rayla laughed him off. “You can have that title when you stand up to a dragon a twenty times your size about to blast us into oblivion.”

“That’s… actually fair, honestly.” He scratched the back of his head, suddenly aware his other hand hadn’t left Rayla’s shoulder. “I guess maybe we should uh… get going. Before he changes his
Rayla shuffled, bringing herself to her feet, Zym still purring in her arms. Callum stood too, suddenly feeling like he didn’t know where his hands were meant to go now that he’d taken a few steps back from her.

“Yeah… You’re right. We’ve still got a very long way to go, and…” She trailed off, frowning slightly as she looked down the path they were taking. “It’s going to be important that we try to get through as much of this canyon today as possible.”

“Why? Does something terrible come out at night that eats humans and elves and baby dragons?” He had meant it as a joke, but honestly, as the words left his mouth, he realised he had no scope for what Xadia was truly like. He felt completely unprepared, he had only heard stories from those lucky few who had entered Xadia and come back alive.

Most of the stories hadn’t been pleasant he reflected, as Rayla lead the way forward, and he did a little jog-walk to catch up to her.

“No, it’s not that… it’s the storms that’ll get you.”

“Stor-?”

“Not your kind of storm.” She jabbed him lightly in the arm with his elbow. “Sandstorms.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

Rayla shot him a look. “Said by a prince who, I might guess, has never been in a regular sandstorm, let alone one from here.”

Callum opened his mouth to argue, then grimaced. “You… Okay. Point made.”

“Listen, Callum.” She stopped, turning fully to him now. There was something in her eyes, vibrant and intense, but gentle. Something was hiding behind those eyes. Something like fear. “You’re on my home turf now… And you’re going to have to trust me. Things are going to get complicated, and maybe confusing for you at times, but I’m not going to let anything happen to you. To either of you. I promise.”

His own voice came out softer than he intended. “I do trust you, Rayla. More than anyone else in the world.”

Her eyes lit up as they widened, and as she turned back and begun to walk once more, he could have sworn he saw her lips twitch into a slight smile. Her cheeks seemed just a little pinker too, but perhaps, he thought, that was the sunrise reflecting over them both.

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Rayla became increasingly antsy throughout the day, constantly checking the wind, her eyes darting about in case they needed to take shelter quickly. Zym had settled to rest against her shoulder, being carried in one arm. At some point, he had fallen asleep, the air whistling out of his muzzle with each breath.
The sun was hanging lower in the sky once more, and Callum’s legs ached from walking. They had only stopped once to forage for food and firewood, as Rayla had been insistent that they push onward.

“The storms here are so intense they can shred the skin clean off you, and if that doesn’t kill you then suffocating will.”


“They usually start to pick up around the evening time, so we’ll have to set up camp somewhere safe a little earlier than usual. The good news is they have early warning signs so as long as we keep our wits about us, we’ll be okay.”

“Right.” Callum’s foot collided with something smooth and hollow, and it rolled a short distance away. His stomach turned when he realised what it was. The horned skull stared back at him with lifeless eye sockets. He winced and by the time Rayla had turned to see why Callum had stopped, he had already placed a hand under the upper arm she wasn’t using to carry the sleeping dragon, and his other hand landed gently on top of her forearm, giving her a gentle tug to keep them moving forward. He heard a barely audible gasp from her, but she didn’t pull away.

“…You okay?”

Callum nodded quickly. “Y-Yeah, I just don’t want to end up like him.” He jerked his head back towards the skull, watching Rayla’s eye glance there, frown, and then regard him softly again, all in the space of a few of seconds.

“You won’t. You’ve got me to look out for you, remember?” She offered him a small comforting smile, and he felt his nerves settle a little. He nodded back to her.

They were walking quietly for a while, and while the hand on Rayla’s lower arm fell away to swing at Callum’s side, the other stayed resting gently curled around her upper arm. She didn’t pull away, in fact it seemed to bring the both of them some level of comfort after the tense morning they had left behind, and the lingering danger ahead of them.

The peace didn’t last for long. The air that had been still for so long, began to shift as a wind blew gently at first through the canyon. Rayla’s arm tensed under his hand as her eyes darted around furiously again. She stopped walking, bringing Callum to a halt too. When the breeze didn’t stop she turned to Callum and gave him a gentle nod.

“Keep your eyes open for somewhere we can hole up tonight. We need a cave against that wall there, to keep the sand from blowing in too much.” She pointed to the wall on their left. “As soon as you see purple mist on the horizon, that’s the signal.”

“S-Signal to what?”

Her eyes regarded his with intensity. “To run.”

They sped up their march forward, Callum pointing out various crevices and openings in the mighty canyon that they could shelter in, but none seemed to satisfy Rayla.

It was a race against time.

“Y’know what would be nice, Rayla? If we could go one day, just one day, without nearly dying.”

He heard her stifle a laugh as she pulled him along. “You might be asking the universe for too
much—” She cut herself off and as Callum glanced away from her, he realised with horror what was approaching.

The horizon was tinged with lavender hue.

“Go.” She breathed out the word, and when Callum’s legs froze, he felt her pull her arm free, and a hand grab his own in a vice like grip. “Go!” She yanked him backwards and to the side, towards the wall he had just been searching for any signs for shelter. “There!” she motioned with her head to a crack in the side of the rock.

“But you said—”

“It’ll have to do!”

Callum’s head swirled in panic, and he realised to his horror he could hear something from behind them. A whirling hissing noise, getting louder and louder. He could feel the wind picking up around him, particles of sand whizzing past him, and if there was any silver lining, it was that the fear gave him the motivation to run faster still. Zym was now wide awake, looking past Callum with a mix of surprise and terror, his little claws digging into Rayla’s arm and shoulder.

Rayla practically threw Callum into the opening, the prince landing with a dull thud on the ground, before diving in herself, just in time for a wave of sand and dust to rush past. The wind curled slightly as it first hit the wall, causing sand and dust to fly into the cave, and Rayla curled around Zym to protect him as best she could, but she was knocked over and forwards a few metres before landing stunned a few feet from Callum.

Callum protected his eyes feebly with one arm, crawling towards her and the dragon, to check they were unharmed. Slowly, the sand settled, the wind continuing its harsh assault outside, but no longer barged into their shelter.

“Rayla, are you okay?"

She coughed, eyes scrunched closed, still clinging to a shaking baby dragon. “Y-Yeah… Yeah I’m okay.” She opened an eye a crack, to meet his own gaze. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He smiled. “That’s two for two near disasters we’ve survived today!”

She laughed, coughed, and finally sat upright, sand flittering away from her as she did. Zym poked his head away from Rayla’s neck to blink with big eyes up at Callum. The elf and baby dragon had gotten off rather lightly, but were both dusted with sand. He reached over and brushed it absentmindedly out of Zym’s mane, who made a little gentle beep noise each time Callum batted the dust away.

“That was… too close.” Rayla looked over her shoulder and Callum followed her line of sight. Outside, a blur of red and gold rushed past the entrance, at wind speeds Callum never imagined possible. It was so powerful that he could feel the ground beneath them rumble slightly.

“How long do the storms usually last for?”

Rayla looked back to him. “It depends… Sometimes a few hours, other times all night long, or even late into the morning.”

“So we’re probably not going to sleep easy tonight.”

Rayla chuckled, brushing the sand from her own hair, clothes, and arms. “It’ll be fine. Honestly after
everything we’ve had to deal with today… we’ll probably crash soon enough.”

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Rayla was right. Once the fire was lit and the adrenaline had faded, the weariness hit them like a brick wall. It was still only evening, though the storm continued to rage outside, so it was hard to tell if the sun had completely set or not.

As usual for the young prince, Callum had settled to spend his time drawing, resting against the craggy wall. Zym had joined him a few minutes in, curling up next to his leg with his head resting on Callum’s lap. His hand found its way to gently scratch the dragon between the horns as his other hand worked its way across the paper.

“Do you mind if I watch?” He heard Rayla shuffle from across the fire. There was a faint hint of a smile on her lips, but her eyes looked tired. He didn’t blame her, he could feel it too. It had been a long first day in Xadia.

He smiled gently back at her. “Oh… no not at all.”

She scooted around their fire to sit next to him, and seemed content to watch his pencil glide across the paper, her head resting gently against the knee she was loosely hugging to her chest.

Over time, the image appeared on the page, of the Sun King, looming intimidatingly over a brave little Zym.

He tried to glance subtly at her every so often, and watched as after about half an hour, her eyelids began to flutter, and her head sank and rose ever so slightly, as she tried to fight off sleep.

Another half hour passed when she became still, eyes closed, one arm falling limply at her side.

He reached over tentatively, and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle shake. “…Hey… Rayla.” He whispered under his breath. She inhaled sharply through her nose, brow furrowing for a moment as she first tensed and then relaxed, peeking a tired eye half open at him.

“Huh…What…?” Her voice was slurred from weariness.

“You’ll hurt your back if you fall asleep like that.”

True to his word, he watched Rayla raise a hand to the back of her neck and she sat upright, stretching backwards slightly until her shoulders hit the back wall. She yawned, rubbing at her bleary eyes, before she spoke again.

“I dozed off?” Her voice was still soft, barely above a whisper, as though trying not to disturb the peace between them.

He chuckled quietly. “Yeah... It’s been a busy day though, I don’t blame you. I think it’s time we both get some sleep.”
She nodded, slowly rising to her feet. “I wanna see it tomorrow though.”

“Hm?”

“Your drawing.” She smiled back to him. “It was looking impressive, the last I remember seeing of it.”

Callum’s ego was boosted from the compliment and he cracked a cheerful smile back at her.

They settled down for the night a little further inside, Zym still fast asleep as she laid the little dragon down, her arms cuddled loosely around his scaly body.

Callum wriggled to get comfy before settling on his side watching Rayla. He caught her eye and she smiled at him over the top of Zym’s head.

“G’night Callum.”

Despite the roaring of the wind outside, he could feel sleep tugging at his mind. He closed his eyes, a smile painted across his own lips. “Night Rayla.”

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And then, everything was white. Almost blindingly so, for a moment, and Callum squinted, unable to focus on his surroundings.

“Callum.” His name reverberated through his head. Like it was coming from inside his mind. A voice that felt… familiar somehow. And yet, so far off from anything or anyone he had ever heard before.

“Who… Where…” He wanted to turn around, but his body resisted. Everything felt so off. Like he was floating in nothingness. A fear began to bubble in his chest. Was he dead? He tried to recall back to his last memory. They had just settled down for the night… Had he died in his sleep? Had they been ambushed?

Rayla. Where was Rayla? His panic began to escalate as he called out into the empty white abyss.

“Rayla? Rayla are you-”

“She’s not here.” The voice was louder now, and the power in the woman’s words made him shudder.

Callum breathed in slowly, trying to calm himself, to slow his fluttering heart. “What have you done with her?” His voice cracked slightly and he mentally scolded himself. Not the impression of bravery he had wanted to make.

“This isn’t about her.” Her voice was still firm.

Callum’s jaw clenched. “Where am I? Let me go! I need to find-”

“Relax.” The woman’s voice softened slightly, and, for a moment, Callum felt his body relax, and his fingers were able to twitch free of the unseen grip on him. “She’s perfectly fine. She’s back in the cave, fast asleep, next to you.”
“So I’m… I’m not dead?”

“Goodness, no. I should hope not. That would certainly throw a wrench in my plans.”

As she said that, Callum felt the grasp on his body fade slowly away. He rolled his shoulders a little, stretching his arms out and tried to take a step forward. There was a strange disconnect, Callum realised, as his foot felt the ground beneath him, but he couldn’t see anything there. It felt like there was no sense of depth wherever he was, everything was just the same gradient of bright light.

With nowhere to go, Callum walked forwards. And as he did, colour began to paint like a watercolour around him, building the landscape, grass, trees, rocks, until he was standing in a forest clearing in front of a beautiful spring, sparkling under the midday sun. He could feel the warmth of the daylight on his skin.

“Where…?” He reached out timidly to touch the bark of one of the trees, walking ever closer still to the spring, his fingers brushing along the foliage as he did. It all felt so real. Too real. But… where had it been seconds before? Was this some sort of strange Xadia thing? A trick of his mind?

“Do not be afraid, Callum.”

Callum whirled around and suddenly he wasn’t alone. Standing before him was the figure of a woman he had never seen before, with mahogany skin and black wavy hair flowing down past her shoulders. A long flowing cape was drawn around her, obscuring most of her body, burgundy in colour, and the very ends of it danced like flickering flames. Though there was no breeze, the cloak was almost floating against some unfelt air current. The hood was drawn up, and because of this, Callum couldn’t tell if she was elf, or human.

But the most striking thing about her was her eyes. They were completely and utterly pitch black. But they sparkled… almost as though the night sky itself was trapped within them.

“I… I wasn’t afraid.” It was the truth. Confused? Yes. Unsettled slightly? Perhaps. But afraid… for some reason, right now, Callum wasn’t afraid. He had been when he had thought Rayla had disappeared, but a wave of tranquillity had fallen over him. Was this some kind of spell…?

“I’ve seen what you’re capable of.”

Suddenly, Callum found himself rubbed the wrong way. “You’re not going to try and convince me to do dark magic again, are you? Because that ship has long since sailed and I’m never putting myself or anyone I love through that again-”

She rose a hand to silence him. “Calm yourself, young one.”

Callum swallowed back his words, and allowed her to continue. She stared him down silently for a moment, and Callum felt his heart begin to race. She held an air of immense power. The words that followed rattled Callum to his core.

“Everything you love is going to end.”

“W-What?”

“Your world is in grave danger, Callum. Everything you know, everything and everyone you hold dear to you, it’ll all go away. All of it.”

Callum’s stomach lurched, and his heart pounded wildly, ringing in his ears. “Is this about the war? Because we’re trying, we’re really trying-“
“I know you are. But things have become more complicated. Danger is coming unlike anything
you’ve ever faced before. Unlike anything anyone has faced before in thousands of years. And it is
going to destroy… Everything.”

Callum felt numb. No. That couldn’t be right. This was all a dream. A stupid dream. He’d wake up
any second now, and Rayla would be right there at his side, and they would be okay, and take Zym
home, stop the war, live happily ever after-

“But. There’s something you can do to stop it from coming to that.”

Callum perked up, pulled out of his spiral of denial.

The figure stepped forward slowly to take a place by Callum’s side, and gestured with her head
towards the sparkling water surface. “Reach into the water.”

Callum hesitated, but it felt like he didn’t have much choice. He rolled up his sleeve, and slowly,
cautiously, he reached out towards the water, dipping the tip of his fingers in. He flinched in
anticipation, but when nothing happened, he relaxed a little. The flow of the water lapped calmly
around his fingertips. It seemed like pretty regular water, and when Callum felt certain it wouldn’t
suddenly kill him in some horrid way, he reached further into it.

It wasn’t very deep. It was only up to just past his elbow when he felt the mossy rocks lining the
bottom of the pool, and he traced his fingers along until they bumped into something very obviously
not a rock. His fingers curled around its shape and, with a little force, he pulled it out.

In his hand, he found something unlike anything he’d seen before. It was about the size of his palm,
circular, its dark metal delicately shaped and woven together in curves. A pane of glass covered one
side, and beneath it lay something swirling. Deep blue, like an ocean reflecting the midnight sky,
flecks of gold rising to the surface every so often before sinking away once more. A golden arrow,
also delicate, thin, and woven with bits of metal and etched spirals and shapes, sat on its surface. It
was pointing at the woman in front of him.

“Is this… Is this a compass?”

“It will lead you where you need to go.”

It was quiet for a moment, as Callum ran his fingers over the intricate craftsmanship, his brow knitted
together in a frown. “Why me?”

His eyes met hers and he felt uncomfortable for a moment as she regarded him with an unreadable
stare. “There is something about you that I haven’t seen in thousands of years. A spark. An
understanding. You were able to connect to the Arcanum despite being human. And if you can
connect to one primal, I believe it’s not impossible you can connect to the others as well.”

“You… You really think?”

“Callum. There is something terrible and powerful coming, and you need to be ready to face that.
You need to be the most powerful you can be if you have any chance at all of fighting back, and
being able to protect the people you love.”

Callum felt a pit gnawing at his insides. “A-And… And what if I can’t?”

“Doubt is a powerful foe, young mage. There is hope, and you still have time. And you’re not alone.
There are people who will guide you, support you, and fight by your side in this battle.”
Callum’s thoughts drifted to Rayla. She had stood by him through everything so far, and something panged in his heart. A confidence that she would stand by him through this as well.

They were in this together. They would always be in this together.

His voice came out cracked with emotion. “Okay.” And with that, the world around him began to flicker into dimness. Panic set in for a moment, as he realised he had questions, too many questions, and not enough time to ask them all, so he blurted out the first one that came to his mind. “W-Wait! Who are you?”

The woman’s lips twitched up into a smile, her dark eyes softening before she faded completely from his view.

“A friend.”

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Callum’s eyes snapped open as he gasped in a breath, staring up at the ceiling of the cave in alarm. He turned his head immediately to his left, and felt the tension in his body fade.

Just as the mysterious lady had said, Rayla was fast asleep close by his side, her arms cuddling Zym to her chest, face half buried into his mane. Completely peaceful, her hair was falling slightly in front of her eyes. Callum resisted the urge to reach over and brush it aside, instead sighing softly as relief washed over him. She was okay. They were okay.

He rubbed his eyes, arms clumsy from grogginess and he sat up slowly, taking a look out of the cave entrance. The storm had ended, and all was silent. From how dark it was outside their temporary abode, it looked to still be the early hours of the morning. The sun wouldn’t be up for a few more hours at least.

Rayla stirred slightly, and he held his breath, hoping he hadn’t disturbed her. She tensed momentarily, before her shoulders slowly relaxed again and she buried her face a little more into Zym’s fur. He let his breath go again, turning once more to stare out at the starry night sky.

What was that? If it was a dream, it certainly hadn’t felt like one. It had felt too tangible, too real, as though he had been walking on another plane of existence entirely. His hand clenched slightly, and he felt the cold of metal between his fingers, blinking in surprise.

“…Callum? Is everything okay?” Rayla’s voice was quiet, half asleep, and as he turned to look at her, her violet eyes were only half cracked open, brushing the hair tiredly from her face with the back of her hand.

“It’s okay… Everything’s fine… I-I think. Go back to sleep, I’ll tell you in the morning.”

“It is the morning…” She attempted to protest, a tinge of wit in her grumbled voice, but her eyes were already closed again, and she didn’t press any further.

Callum felt something in his heart flutter as he smiled fondly, watching her cosy back up into her little dragon companion. He tucked the compass away in his bag, and lay back down himself,
shuffling a little closer to her before closing his eyes, feeling sleep tugging him away once more.

Things were going to be okay. As long as he had Rayla looking out for him… Things would always be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Thank you so much for all of your support so far. This is gonna be a huge long term project and I really hope you guys love it as much as I do!

Leave a kudos and a nice comment if you enjoy it, they really mean the world to me to know you guys enjoy my stories!

P.S, I might end up doing some cool illustrations to go with each chapter, and add them later, so keep an eye out! ;)

- Dee
Callum woke up hours later to something soft tickling his face. He wriggled with a half asleep grumble, his nose twitching as tufts of hair brushed against it, and he subconsciously pulled something warm closer to him... Wait. What were his arms holding? “Hey buddy.” He whispered gently, reaching up to scratch the baby dragon behind the horns. Zym stirred a little, fidgeting until he was blinking up at Callum with big tired eyes. He gave a little coo, and Callum responded as though he somehow understood. “I know, but it’s time to get up now.”

Callum peered over the top of Zym’s head, Rayla wasn’t lying there anymore, but this was pretty standard by now. She usually seemed to be the first awake, and must have gotten up to keep watch, or scout out the area. That would have likely been when Zym had crawled under his own arm for warmth.

He sat up slowly still cuddling the little dragon close, Zym whined a little at having been moved, but was still too sleepy to really put up a fight and just clambered his little front legs up to rest his chin on Callum’s shoulder. Callum smiled softly as he held the little dragon. His presence was comforting.

Now where was…?

‘Everything you love is going to end.’

Callum’s blood froze, remembering the chilling words he had heard last night, and his breath hitched as his eyes glanced to his bag.

Maybe it had just been a dream. A terrible, silly dream. No end of the world was coming, just a war, and Callum and Rayla were going to put a stop to that when they got Zym home.

Maybe the compass wouldn’t be there.

Maybe if he didn’t look… he wouldn’t have to face the reality that it could be there.

Callum swallowed, and reached a trembling hand out towards the bag. ‘Please. I have enough to deal with right now. And I don’t want to drag Rayla into this, we’ve got enough to worry about.’

His hand didn’t reach it before he heard her voice, almost singsong call out to them both from the cave entrance. “Hey! Morning sleepyheads!” She beamed, approaching with a far more cheerful attitude than Callum had expected.

Callum snapped his hand back, and tried his best to crack a fake smile back to hide his growing anxiety. “O-Oh! Hey!”
“So I have some good news. I managed to get a good vantage point earlier while you were asleep and it looks like we’re just over half way through this canyon. If we hurry, we can probably make it out before the next sandstorm… hits… Hey are you okay?” Her eyes softened as she took in his face, now taking a knee in front of him.

“I-I’m…” Callum faltered for a moment, glancing away from her eyes to the ground. He’d nearly just brushed aside his fears with an ‘I’m fine’ but that wasn’t going to help. And it wasn’t the truth, Rayla deserved the truth. Besides, if it hadn’t just been a strange dream, she was going to find out eventually… and now was as good a time as any.

“Hey…” Her hand was on his shoulder now, concern laced in with her gentle tone. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

Callum took a deep breath before meeting her eyes with his own again. “Rayla something happened last night. Something kind of scary.” He paused, and she gave him a gentle nod to continue, eyes still soft and compassionate. “I had this… weird dream? And there was this lady who told me that the world is going to end, and that there’s only one way to stop it. I-I…” He gritting his teeth glancing away. “I have to learn to connect to the other primal sources.” He blurted the last bit out as fast as he could, now too scared to look her in the eye. What was she going to make of all this? At times she had been so deadest on their mission, laser-focused on getting the dragon prince home to stop the war. And this… this would be not just a distraction but take them way off course from that…

He felt her hand leave his shoulder and he tensed as soon as its presence left him, feeling even more vulnerable now. Was she going to be angry?

But then she surprised him. The hand that had been moments before on his shoulder was now tentatively brushed against the top of his own. Startled, his eyes went up to meet hers, but she was staring down at their hands, almost nervously, as though she wasn’t quite sure if she should do what she wanted to do. He blinked, then let his pinkie curl around her finger, and it seemed to give her the courage to slip her hand into his, their fingers hesitant at first, but slowly intertwining. Callum felt his heart flutter. Her fingers fit the spaces between his perfectly.

They caught each other’s eye at the same time.

“Callum… This has got you really rattled, hasn’t it?”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, sad eyes searching her gentle ones. He didn’t know what for… maybe some kind of sign. A sign that she could fix this somehow, and they could continue with their original, already-dangerous-enough-as-it-was mission. She continued. “And you’re sure it wasn’t just a dream?”

His eyes glanced to the bag at his side, he inhaled slowly, bracing himself. “…There’s one way to find out.”

He didn’t want to let go of Rayla’s hand, and missed it immediately the second he gently uncurled his fingers from her own. But he reached for his backpack and pulled it between them. He hesitated. Then, with trembling hands, pulled the bag open and reached inside, past the supplies, and the rolls of paper and-

There it was. The clink of metal.

Callum tried to hide his crestfallen face, but Rayla clearly caught it and placed her hand back on his arm. “What is it?” There was a hint of something underlying the concern in her voice. Nerves, maybe? He couldn’t exactly blame her, after all he was being uncharacteristically cryptic right now.
Slowly, he pulled out the strange looking object, fingers clutching it around its rim, so that its surface was visible when he presented it to her. The arrow was pointing towards what Callum assumed was the east.

Rayla blinked, and then frowned, her eyes scrutinising its details. “That’s… is that a compass?”

“I think so? She said it’d lead us to where we’re supposed to go.”

Rayla leaned in, squinting, and gave its glass casing a little tap with her fingernail. “It’d be nice if it just pointed us straight to the Queen but… I guess that’s wishful thinking.”

“You’re… taking this surprisingly well.”

Rayla went quiet for a moment, sending a wave of nerves gallivanting through Callum’s stomach. “It’s not… ideal.” She was frowning, but there wasn’t an inch of anger in her eyes. It was more the look of a young elf who was processing the information laid out before her. “I’m certainly not-wait.” Her eyes widened suddenly. “You have to connect to all the primal sources but you didn’t say why.” And suddenly, like that, her eyes flickered to fear, as a dawning realisation fell on her. “You’re not going to do something stupid and get yourself killed, I’m not going to let you do that-”

“Rayla.” Now Callum’s hand was on Rayla’s. “I’m not going to do anything stupid. Or well… I’ll try not to. T-To get myself killed that is. Doing stupid things is just part of who I am at times, I guess.” He tried to crack a smile.

Rayla’s expression didn’t falter. “If you get yourself killed while we’re doing this, I won’t forgive you.”

*We. She said we.*

“So you’ll help me?”

She blinked back at him, almost dumbfounded at the idea that he would think anything less. “Of course I will. I need to keep you alive and in one piece to stop this war. It won’t do anything if I just abandon you to die on this ridiculous quest and take Zym home by myself, will it?” She frowned, and with a sigh, dragged a hand down her face, staring off into the distance pensively. Her fingers curled under her chin and she pressed her lips to her knuckles. It took her a moment to talk again, and as she collected her thoughts, she flipped her other hand slowly onto its back so Callum’s palm was laying against her own. “This is actually happening.” Her voice was barely a whisper against her hand.

Callum dared himself to wrap his fingers around her hand again gently, and she reciprocated by curling hers around his. “I’m… sorry to drag you into this.”

Her eyes snapped to his again. “No, don’t, you’re not dragging me into anything.” She jabbed him lightly in the chest with her free hand. “I’m choosing to go with you because you’re my friend, and I want to go to keep you safe. Don’t feel guilty over that.” Her eyes softened and she glanced to the compass for a moment. “Besides, it’s not your fault some catastrophic event is on the horizon. If you learning primal magic is the world’s best hope, then I’ll support you. One hundred percent. Even if it means postponing our current… situation.”

She looked back to the little dragon, trying to poke his head in Callum’s bag, sniffing about. He was completely and blissfully ignorant of their dire circumstances.

“Who says we can’t try and do both? If the compass leads to where we’re meant to be then maybe
it’ll have us get to the Dragon Queen along the way.”

“I suppose… Yeah.” She offered him a more hopeful smile. “Ugh... How do we keep getting ourselves into these situations?”

Callum tucked the Compass back in the bag, and slung it over his shoulder, going to stand, and felt Rayla do the same, her hand not leaving his. His lip twitched into a little grin. “I don’t know, I guess we just emit a ‘world saving quest’ energy or something.”

Rayla laughed, dissipating the morbid tension that had hung around them moments ago, and gave his hand a little tug leading him out of the cave. Zym chirped, scampering over to keep up with them. “Alright… Let’s just get out of this canyon, and then we can figure out where to go from there.”

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Though they knew they had to pick up the pace that day to stand a chance at beating the next storm, it was looking more and more like they were going to spend another evening in the canyon. Rayla was still restless, but now Callum feared it was partly his fault for dropping such a huge shock on her. He couldn’t quite remember when they had stopped holding hands as they walked, maybe it had been when a grumpy and tired Zym had demanded to be carried. Now the baby dragon was resting in the elf’s arms, his eyes half lidded and cheek squished against Rayla’s shoulder.

“I can take a turn carrying him if you want.” Callum had said when he noticed her shoulders sagging from the weight, and the fatigue in her eyes.

“No it’s… it’s fine, really.”

“Rayla, it’s okay. Let me help you.” She didn’t put up any resistance when placed a hand on her shoulder to slow her to a halt, and tugged the little dragon gently from her arms. Zym whined a little, he had clearly been comfortable, and he wriggled a little in Callum’s own arms before settling once more. He watched Rayla stretch back a little and give him a thankful nod and smile, before they continued.

Callum’s own thoughts turned to the task ahead of them as they walked. Stop a war. Defeat a powerful evil. Save the world. His eyes flickered to Rayla.

…And keep each other safe. That was priority one.

She caught him glancing at her. “Hey… You doing okay?”

“Y-Yeah. Sorry. I was just thinking.”

It was quiet for a moment before she spoke again. “It’ll be alright, you know. We’ll figure out something.”

“I know.” He smiled weakly back. “Hey. D’you mind telling me about Xadia again? I think it’ll help.” In more than one way, he added in his mind. He wanted to feel prepared for what was ahead, but also seeing Rayla’s eyes light up in excitement whenever she talked about her homeland always boosted his mood.

She was more than happy to oblige him, though her heart only seemed half in it today as she
attempted to stay aware of their surroundings. The last thing they needed was to get caught in another storm, or some other environmental disaster.

Callum was just thankful to have a distraction, and Rayla’s stories and the soft cooing of a sleepy Zym cuddled up to his chest helped alleviate his nerves. Rayla rattled on about different villages and towns she had travelled through, names Callum was sure he would forget in an hour or two, but also vibrant stories of beautiful forests with trees over 70 feet tall, of beaches with purple sand as soft as silk, and of giant floating islands hovering majestically above emerald treetops.

He couldn’t wait to see it, as much of it as he could. Maybe, once things had settled, he could travel to these far off places… Maybe Rayla would take him.

It felt as though a weight was lifted from his shoulders in that moment. They had a future. He would hold onto that. There was no point in moping over what might happen, it was like admitting defeat without even putting up a fight. No.

They would put up a fight. Callum was sure of it.

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As Callum had suspected, they weren’t able to escape the canyon before the next storm rolled in. Perhaps they had been dragging their feet too much, lost in thought, and the heat of the sun beating down on them with little shade during midday didn’t help. They had certainly made progress, and would likely make it out before noon the next day, Rayla had said.

But now another problem had arisen. As they had passed through the canyon, food had become more and more scarce. They had stopped to gather as much as they could but it seemed that everything was either stripped bare by the storms, or growing between cracks hard to reach.

As they settled in the next cave, it was apparent that they would go hungry this evening. Rayla laid out the berries almost apologetically in front of Callum and Zym.

“I’m sorry. This is all we have tonight. It’s not really enough to keep us full but… it’s better than nothing. We’ll eat better once we get through here, I promise.”

The storm had picked up outside their cave once more, rattling the walls around them. Zym was fast to snap up his share, but Callum had opted for eating his slowly, to try and make them last through the evening. It seemed Rayla shared a similar idea.

Again, they settled quietly by the fire in comfortable silence, Callum content to finish off his sketch of Sol Regem and Zym, with Rayla scooting over slowly to watch. There wasn’t exactly much else they could do, trapped in the confines of the small cavern, and drawing helped Callum keep his mind of the hunger biting at his insides.

Zym was restless too, sniffing around in an attempt to find literally anything else to eat. Rayla kept a close eye on the dragon as he explored, on the off chance he tried to devour some poisonous bug or wander too close to the roaring sands outside. But eventually he scampered over to his two caretakers, resting his head on Rayla’s lap with a disgruntled rumble. It was clearly a hard life, being a growing baby dragon with not enough food.

Rayla chuckled under her breath, giving the dragon an affectionate scratch against his cheek. “You
wee lil’ cutie. I know. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow, there’ll be food a bounty more once we make it to the forests.” Zym purred back in response, leaning into her hand and rolling over onto his back. She laughed, rubbing his belly as though he were a dog, and the dragon’s tail wagged excitedly in response, his tongue lolling out of his mouth goofily.

Callum felt himself relaxing more, taking a break to reach over and scratch Zym under the chin. It didn’t take him much longer to finish the picture and he shifted a little to show Rayla, her eyes lighting up.

“It’s brilliant. Look at how brave Zym looks,” She laughed, and the dragon on her lap chirped proudly, righting himself to also take a look. “A young hero, fighting something powerful, and winning.” She caught his eye and he felt her give him a gentle elbow in the ribs. “That’ll be you one day.”

He chuckled back. “We can hope.”

Zym clambered slowly across their laps to sit on Callum now, stretching up to plant a little sparky lick on his cheek. Callum half grinned, half winced at the strange sensation of sparks and slobber against his skin and Rayla laughed.

“I think he approves of your art.” She beamed, watching as Callum attempted to settle down Zym. After a while, he hopped off, sniffing around at their feet and curling up there to watch the campfire.

Callum was about to close the sketchbook, when he heard Rayla’s voice, somewhat timid, stop him. “Do you…” She trailed off, a slight frown on her face as stared at the pages. Her hand twitched a little towards it, uncertain. “Could… Could I try?”

Callum regarded her with surprise, and she recoiled a little. “I-I mean, it’s okay if you’d rather I didn’t, I just thought-” The book was pressed gently into her hand, Callum giving her a reassuring smile. He watched the surprise on her face melt away into delight, the firelight sparkling in her violet eyes. She flipped to a new page and hesitated.

“I don’t know what to draw.”

“Whatever you like.” He replied softly, and watched her glance up at his face, an idea dawning on hers. She shuffled around so that she was facing him more, her knees up to lean the book against them. The sketchbook was now obscured, and as she began to scratch the graphite against the paper, curiosity took hold of the prince. When Callum leaned to try and peek, she shuffled again, and pulled the book up glaring at him.

“Don’t look yet.”

“Oh?” Callum couldn’t hide the humoured surprise in his voice. “Why?”

The corner of her lip twitched into a small smile. “It’s a surprise.”

It was pretty obvious what she was doing. He caught her constantly glancing between the book and his face, and he tried to look nonchalant and oblivious, opting to make a fuss of the little dragon prince at his feet, and eating the last of his berries.

He kept peeking at her from the corner of his eye, her face screwed up in concentration, her tongue sticking out the corner of her mouth just slightly as she sketched away. It was incredibly endearing. Callum felt a warmth radiate through his heart. Perhaps it was just a small gesture, but there was something so sweet about how she wanted to try and understand him more and be more involved in his interests. It was hard to believe that just over two weeks ago she had been chasing him through a
castle trying to kill his family.

And now here she was sitting here opposite him, sketching away in the sketchbook he trusted her with, pulling a silly face as she tried to draw him.

“Almost done…” She said after about fifteen minutes. “And… Huh.” She glanced between the pages and Callum again. Her nose wrinkled a little and Callum fought back a mischievous grin.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well I mean… I made an attempt at least.”

“What are you talking about? This is the best thing in my sketchbook now.” His voice came out so gentle that it surprised even him, and he watched Rayla’s head rise to look him in the eye questioningly.

“Wh… What are you talking about?”

“Rayla laughed. “I don’t think so… I think I’ll leave that to you.” There was a cheerful glint in her eye now. “You’ll have to try and draw me next.”

“Who’s to say I haven’t already?”

He watched the mischief die away and confusion took its place. “Wait, you have?”

“Oh, I-I, uh-” Callum fumbled over his words, heat beginning to sting his cheeks. He hesitated before slowly flipping back a few pages, and felt Rayla lean a little closer to him. And there it was. The drawings of Rayla he had done a few days previous, on the edge of Katolis’s border.

She glanced back down at the page and a gentle smile finally found its way across her face. “Oh… You’re welcome, I suppose.”
Rayla’s eyes flickered in the firelight, as she stared at the page in awe.

“I drew these back in Katolis a few days ago. When you… When you ran off to save that dragon.”
His mouth suddenly felt very dry. “I was scared I was going to lose you. And I felt powerless to help so I just… drew you. So I could hold onto you in case…” He trailed off, suddenly feeling very exposed.

He could feel Rayla’s eyes on him, and he heard her shuffle, and then her shoulder was brushed against his, leaning ever so slightly against him.

“I’m really sorry I worried you like that.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I guess I didn’t really… think. About how you and Ez would have felt. I just wanted to do the right thing.”

Callum’s lips pursed together and they were silent for a moment. “I don’t think I ever really apologised to you either.” Rayla’s eyes caught his. “For my stupid stunt in the forest.”

She frowned slightly. “Yeah. That was completely idiotic, and I hope you’ve learnt your lesson from that.” She turned back to the fire. “You scared the life out of me. I…” She trailed off and it was quiet for a moment, but for the crackling flames and the whirling storm outside. “I nearly watched you die. And I couldn’t do anything.” She paused again, and Callum could have sworn he heard a soft crack in her voice when she continued. “I was so scared.”

Callum’s hand twitched. It wanted to be on Rayla’s. He slid it timidly towards her hand, still delicately resting, now on the blank page opposite so she didn’t smudge his work. When she didn’t pull away, he raised a shaky thumb and rested it on the back of her hand. And then her hand moved, not away from him, but into his, and they stayed there, his fingers resting gently on her own his thumb brushing over hers.

When he spoke, his voice was gentle, light hearted. “More scared than when we went on that boat down the river from the Banther Lodge?”

She nodded quietly, her eyes on their hands.

“More scared than our encounter with Sol Regem?”

“What’s the point you’re trying to make here?” She queried, turning her head to look at him, her eyebrow raised.

He smiled. “I just think it’s interesting that for someone who isn’t supposed to show fear, you’re completely fine talking about this right now.”

“Well yeah. Because it’s with you.” She offered him a small smile back. “You don’t make me feel weird, or wrong. For being afraid. It feels like… something I could get used to.”

Callum felt like he was about to melt. What an honour, he thought. That this girl felt so at ease around him, trusted him so fully, that she could tell him something like that.

“Well, I think this might be my favourite thing in your sketchbook.” She announced proudly, sitting up a little straighter. And like that, the tension dissipated and Callum let out a breath he didn’t realise he had been holding to laugh.

“I wonder why that could be.”
The following morning Callum felt sure his stomach would digest itself, and he was incredibly thankful when they stopped to rest and Rayla was able to scavenge more berries.

He would be glad to leave this canyon behind them. He missed trees, and grass, and the sounds of animals. It felt like they hadn’t really seen any wildlife beyond a few bugs and at one point an angry snake hiding in a berry bush. It was strange, the things you took for granted when they weren’t around.

And at that his thoughts turned to Ezran. How was his little brother doing? Was Corvus taking good care of him? It felt so weird not having him by his side. At times, as they walked, he could almost trick himself into believing Ez was right behind them, and that if he glanced behind him, he would beam back, cuddling the grumpy glow toad close to his chest.

But whenever he looked back, Ez wasn’t there.

It didn’t take Rayla long to pick up on this. She could read him like a book. “…Ez’ll be fine. He’s a smart kid, in his homeland, surrounded by people who will look after him.” Zym chirped from her shoulder, pawing his little foot in the air towards Callum, as though to offer his support to the boy.

“I know… I mean, I guess? It just feels really weird, him not being here. I can’t remember the last time we spent such a long time apart.”

“It’s not fun being separated from people you care about. But we have to move forward.” She bumped her shoulder against his lightly as they walked. “I know something that’ll cheer you up when we get out of here. There’s this really beautiful tree in this grove, not too far from where this canyon will take us out. We can stop there to eat.” She was smiling now, and it clearly had an effect on him since he could feel his lips turning up a little too.

“Y’know what? That sounds great. We can make it a picnic.”

“A what?”

“You know, when you eat lunch outside on like a blanket. Usually with a basket. We don’t have a basket, or a blanket but uh…. but we can sit on my cloak.”

Rayla laughed. “That’s ridiculous. Humans are so weird.” He gave her shoulder a little bump back and a cheeky grin, and Rayla rolled her eyes affectionately. “Alright, alright. We’ll have this little ‘picnic’ in the grove. Then we need to figure out exactly where we’re going. This new quest has kind of blown up all my plans.”

“Yeah… alright.” And with that, Callum let a peaceful silence fall between them.

He glanced back one last time, mentally saying another goodbye and good luck to Ezran, wherever he was.

And then, after about another half hour, they could finally see the treeline approaching in the distance.

Chapter End Notes
Hey guys! Thank you for all your love and support so far! This chapter was a bit shorter than the last. I've been pretty ill this week unfortunately, but wanted to power through and get this done!

Aren't they adorable? I love writing these kids they're so supportive. Please leave a comment if you're enjoying so far! It really means the world and gets me excited to write more! <3 Love you guys!

- Dee
So this was Xadia. Of course, they had been in Xadia the past couple of days, but that had been mostly spent scrounging for food and avoiding deadly sandstorms. But now this… this seemed more like it. A lush forest sprawled out before them, and Callum beamed, feeling his tired legs pick up the pace a little from excitement.

“Wow, someone’s certainly eager.” He heard Rayla laugh. “Slow down a minute.”

He complied, and she turned him slightly by his shoulder to rummage through his backpack, pulling out the cloak again. She draped it around his shoulders and pulled the hood up over his head, tugging on its sides slightly to make sure his ears were covered. Her face was serious now.

“We might start running into people now that we’re here. And the last thing we need is to give them a reason to attack us. Do you think Zym can fit under-?”

Before she could finish Zym had jumped up into Callum’s arms and was already scrambling over his shoulder, giving Callum a whack in the face with his wing for good measure.

“Wow. Getting pretty smart aren’t you?” She scratched him behind the horns as he clung to Callum’s back with his front paws, and balanced delicately on Callum’s bag with his back ones.

Callum pulled the cloak around his arms anxiously after rubbing his offended cheek. “Are you sure this is going to cut it?”

Rayla softened a little. “It’ll do for now. It’s just a precaution, we’ll get you sorted out properly once we get to Argenti’s Glade.”

“And why do we have to hide Zym? He’s the Dragon Prince, surely if people knew we had him we’d get places a lot easier.” Rayla’s face faltered, and she glanced down at the ground. He poked a hand out of his cape and it found Rayla’s arm. “Rayla…? What’s wrong?”

“Callum things have gotten complicated in Xadia since Thunder died.” She met his eyes again. “I wish I could say Zym is safe now he’s back here but… he’s not. If anything he’s in more danger now.”

Callum’s voice came out as a cracked whisper. “What do you mean?”

She sighed gently, glancing away. “Without a king, there’s been a lot of unrest in Xadia. Squabbles to fill the void in power. We have our queen still, but everything’s sort of collapsed into chaos. And
from that we’ve had factions starting to branch off. People’s loyalties are all over the place. I just…”

“You don’t trust that everyone’s going to be happy about Zym coming home.”

“Right. I can’t guarantee that anyone wouldn’t just try and off all three of us if they knew what we were trying to do. And even if we ran into people loyal to the queen, chances are they’d just take Zym off us to deliver him themselves. And then that would be it, it wouldn’t be a symbol of peace from one kingdom to another anymore.”

It... made sense. If a patrol of guards loyal to the queen came across two teenagers in possession of the son of the dragon queen, they would surely take him from them. And they’d be lucky if they only did that and didn’t kill Callum on the spot for good measure when they figured out he was human.

“Alright. Then we’ll just have to be careful.”

She nodded, then smiled gently at him, her hand on his arm. “Just stick close, and don’t do anything stupid.” She gave it a gentle squeeze before letting him go, and lead the way forward.

Callum had never felt both so relieved and so terrified at once to feel grass under his feet as they made their way into the forest.

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As they walked, Callum had snuck a peek at the compass. They were heading vaguely in the right direction, a little off course but not by much. Rayla had insisted that this tree she wanted to show him was only about half an hour walk away, so it wouldn’t be too much of a detour, he thought, letting the compass slip through his fingers back into the backpack.

Instead a new anxiety began to stir inside him. The path they were taking was rough terrain, but what if they came across someone out here? He felt incredibly conspicuous despite the cloak around him and Zym. Surely they would know immediately. Had Rayla been this nervous when she’d disguised herself in the towns of Katolis, he wondered? He tugged the cloak around him a little more, hiding his hands under its fabric.

“Are we almost there?” He asked after nearly twisting his ankle for the fourth time on yet another tree root.

Rayla raised a hand to halt him, and he nearly bumped into her. Bushes obscured his vision of what lay ahead of them, but then she whirled around with a big enthusiastic grin. “We’re here.”

When Rayla pulled the bush’s leaves and limbs aside, Callum gasped.

It was beautiful. Warm sunlight trickled through the treetops into the clearing, soft vibrant green grass blowing gently in the breeze. And right there, at the back of the glade, stood a tall, proud silver barked tree, its limbs twisting and twirling high in the sky. Its branches held aloft beautiful star shaped leaves, azure through to shades of turquoise and cerulean. Its roots reached out around the perimeter of the glade, like a protective barrier, curling around rocks and mounds, bright flowers sprouting from vines wrapped around them and other flowers and plants sprouting from the thicker tufts of grass dotted around the site. And at the base of the tree, laying as though the roots were hugging it close, was a little rock pool, water streaming gently out from between tree roots before trickling serenely into the pond at its feet.
Callum was stunned speechless. Rayla beamed at him, and he felt her hand take his with a laugh as she tugged him forwards from the bushes and into the open. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? This is Argenti’s Glade.”

“Argenti’s Glade.” Callum breathed, staring in awe around him. He heard a snuffling from by his ear, and Zym poked his head out of the cloak’s hood to take a look. A joyous smile split across the dragon’s face, and Callum felt himself thumped backwards slightly, staggering as Zym spring boar off his shoulder out of the cloak to the ground. It seemed the little dragon prince was eager to stretch his legs, bounding about the clearing playfully exploring the roots of the tree and the little pond.

“Don’t wander too far Zym!” Callum called out after him. Rayla laughed at his side.

“He’ll be fine. Hardly anyone ever comes here anymore. More important things to worry about I guess.”

Callum stole a glance at Rayla, she looked incredibly peaceful, and almost reflective. “Have you ever been here before?” He asked as he felt a little tug on his hand, and let Rayla lead him closer to the tree.

“Once. A few years ago. Runaan took me.” She stopped when they reached one of its roots, so thick that it was taller than the both of them. She brushed her fingers against it with a smile. “I remembered this place when we were in the canyon and thought you’d like to see it.” She let go of his hand to climb up the root and sit atop it, giving him a lopsided grin that seemed to dare him to try and follow her.

Unfortunately, Callum had never spent much time climbing trees as a child, and Rayla watched amused, as Callum jumped, grabbed the root, and slid back down to the ground. He huffed, and attempted again, this time clambering for purchase. He made it about half way up before he slipped and yelped, and felt a hand around his wrist stop him from falling further.

“Not very good at climbing, are you?”

“No. Not really.”

She smirked a little, and effortlessly pulled Callum the rest of the way up the root. He sighed, relieved once he plonked down by her side, and she gently tugged his hood down with a smile. Callum felt a sense of safety overcome him. It was just them here... there was no need to worry.

They sat quietly for a moment before she spoke again. “There’s... actually a kind of sad story about this tree.”

Callum blinked over at her. She was looking up at the tree’s leaves as they danced gently in the breeze, her eyes melancholy.

“...Yeah?” He scooted a little closer to her and followed her gaze skyward, drawing a knee toward his chest.

“Well... a long, long time ago, a little before humans were driven from Xadia, there was an elf named Argenti. He was a powerful warrior and hero. And he fell in love.” She paused. “He... fell in love with a human.” Callum lowered his eyes and turned ever so slightly to face Rayla as she spoke. She was still looking up at the tree but he caught a strange look on her face. Uneasiness? Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but she did look a little pinker in the cheeks than usual. She caught his eye for a second before they shot back to the tree and she scuffled to raise her own knees to her chest. “A-
Anyway, so even back then I guess those kinds of relationships were frowned upon so they had to keep it secret. And one day they decided to elope and run away together. They decided to meet here, at this spot. But she never showed up.”

Callum listened eagerly, concern on his face. “Why not? What happened to her?”

“There’s different versions of the story. Some say she ended up falling in love with someone else and ran away with them instead. Most tell of her being killed, when people found out through the betrayal of a friend.” Her ears drooped slightly, her eyes now glancing down at her feet. “Argenti waited at this spot. He waited, and waited. And when he realised she wouldn’t meet him, he died on the spot of a broken heart.”

Callum felt the story tug on his heartstrings. “And then?” He asked softly. He rested his head against his knee, his eyes never leaving Rayla’s face.

“The spirits of this land took pity on him, and from his body they grew this beautiful tree. As a testament to the strength of his love.” She smiled sadly back at him. “It’s kind of poetic, don’t you think?”

“Yeah… but that’s so sad.”

“…Yeah. I know.” She turned her gaze back towards the leaves, and then he heard her shuffle nervously. “H-Hey… Weird question but… Do you think it could ever work out? B-Between an elf and a human? Hypothetically speaking.” He blinked back at her surprised and she raised her hands defensively, almost in panic. “Hypothetically!”

He gave his response some thought. “I think… that I’d like to live in a world where they could. Where elves and humans can live in peace and fall in love without fear.” He smiled gently, watching a couple of leaves fall gently from the mighty tree, dancing through the air until they landed in the water below. Zym, who had been wandering around the water’s edge noticed too, his tail wagging and he looked back up at his caretakers cheerfully. “Maybe we can make a world where that can happen.”

It went quiet, but neither of them minded. Had Callum looked across at Rayla in that moment, he might have noticed that Rayla was looking at him a little differently, her eyes full of adoration and hope. And had he looked down at the root they were sitting on, perhaps he would have realised how close Rayla had come to taking his hand in her own in that moment. But she had hesitated and let hers fall back to her side. So close. And yet so far.

He didn’t realise it, but Rayla had fallen a little more in love with him at that moment. Poignant, she had thought. That she should feel herself falling more in love with her human on the resting place of an elf who had done the same. Her only hope was they wouldn’t share the same sad fate.

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Callum had been eager to explore the glade that afternoon, and it hadn’t taken too long for him to become enamoured with the beautiful pond. It was so clear, you could easily see right through it to the mossy pebbles and rocks lining its base. It wasn’t particularly deep either, and he watched a few leaves float across its rippling surface like tiny boats on an ocean.

It was incredibly soothing to watch, and he had sat by its edge to sketch, his back resting against one
of the tree’s gargantuan roots. It was a rare occurrence, Callum had realised soon after, to see Rayla looking so relaxed. In Katolis, she was often so one-track minded about their mission to get Zym home, or patrolling the area, keeping watch over their group. But right now, it seemed she had finally relaxed, or at least relaxed as much as she would allow herself to, sitting in the middle of the clearing laughing as Zym bounded excitedly around her chasing butterflies.

It was nice to see her so at ease outside of their little fireside moments together in the canyon.

“Hey Rayla?” He called over to her, trying to stifle a laugh as Zym knocked her off balance and she landed with a gentle thud on her back.

“Yeah?” She looked back at him upside down from the grass where she was lying, Zym squirming and chirping excitedly in her arms.

“Would it uh, be bad to dip my feet in the water? I don’t want to like… y’know… disrespect this place.”

“Naa, you’re fine. Go ahead. Oof!” She was winded as Zym stood heavily on her stomach and Callum laughed as she launched herself up into a sitting position, and Zym attempted to escape her clutches as she yanked the baby prince close and aggressively tickled the wriggly little dragon. Zym squeaked and pawed out in protest but he was clearly enjoying the attention.

After removing his boots, Callum swivelled to face the water and slowly lowered his feet in, letting the water lap at his skin. He felt his muscles tense from the cold for a moment before relaxing into it.

“Wh- Hey!” He heard from behind, before a scuffling and the bounding of a baby dragon rapidly approaching him. Zym stopped just short of the water, and caught his reflection. He tilted his head curiously, then looked up at Callum questioningly.

“Who’s that in the water, huh?” He teased.

Zym blinked back at his reflection, and began pulling an array of strange faces at the water sending Callum into fits of giggles. He heard Rayla amble over slowly and settle in the grass a few feet away, and he peeked over his shoulder to glance at her.

“You okay back there?”

“Oh yeah, I’m just keeping a safe distance.” She smiled back but he could see the tension in her eyes. Zym chirped at her before trotting along the rocks lining the pool to investigate the area more, eventually laying belly up up in a sunny patch to sunbathe.

“Y’know it’s really nice over here. It’d be a shame if my dear elf friend couldn’t join me.”

Rayla’s face faltered in confusion for a moment. Then she rolled her eyes with a fond smile, and he watched her shuffle tentatively closer until she was almost sitting by his side.

Slowly, she scooted as close as she would dare herself to the water’s edge, her nose wrinkled and knees hugged tightly to her chest. “Hmph.”

Callum laughed, letting his legs sway back and forth alternately, sending ripples across the surface of the water. “It won’t hurt you Rayla, I promise.”

He watched her rest her chin on her knees, her brow relaxed a little, but there was still a small pout on her lips. “I think I’ll just watch for now.”
“Alright.” He leaned back to support himself on his arms closing his eyes. “Y’know… the way this feels, the sun, the water… it reminds me of when I used to do this with my step-dad.”

“Oh?” He heard a light shuffle from his side and opened his eyes. She had shifted to rest her cheek against her knees now so she could look at his face, regarding him with curiosity.

“Yeah. Sometimes we’d go for little walks together, me, him and Ez. Down by the river there was this place we liked to stop, and while Ez was playing we’d just sit together on the dock and paddle our feet.” He smiled fondly at the memory.

“Were you close?”

“Sort of…? I think… we wanted to be closer but things were complicated and… maybe we were both too scared. It’s silly thinking about now.” He smiled sadly. “I guess… I wish I’d told him how much I cared. I wish I had the chance to…” He trailed off. It stung, the pain of knowing that when he went home there would be no warm embrace from his step-dad waiting for him. The king was gone. Forever. There was no undoing that.

“I’m so sorry, Callum.” Her eyes were back on the water. “I wish I could take back what happened.”

“It’s… not your fault. It’s in the past, and we have to work on saving the future now. And stopping this fight, so no one else loses anyone else to the war.”

He felt her eyes on him again as he watched the little ripples gently ride across the pond. Then he heard her shuffle again, and when he glanced up, she’d swivelled around so her back was to him. He squinted, looking over her shoulder. Was she pulling her boots off?

Realisation soon dawned on him on what she was doing. She turned again, returning to hugging her knees, her now bare feet on the rock, staring at the water mistrustfully. Her toes inched slowly towards the water’s edge, but she recoiled when Callum’s leg swayed again, causing little waves to ripple towards her.

She glanced at him nervously and he smiled back reassuringly. Then, cautiously, she slid a foot closer and dipped her toe in. She jerked back almost immediately, flinching. Then, a newfound determination spread across her face and she slowly dipped her foot in, toes first, until the water lapped around her lower leg gently.

She was tense. Incredibly so. And her nose was wrinkled, ears pinned back. But still, she repeated the agonising process with her other foot, until her legs were dangling gently in the water next to Callum’s, and he watched her face and shoulders relax ever so slowly.

“See? It feels nice, right?” He watched her arms unfold from her chest and land in the grass behind her, until she was mirroring the way he was relaxing.

“It’s weird. But I guess it’s not so bad.” Slowly she swayed one of her legs in the water, sending little ripples of her own across the water’s surface. She was smiling a little now, eyes softening.

“Hey, you’re only got four toes.”

“What? Yeah, So?” The statement had clearly taken Rayla by surprise, and she raised an eyebrow questioningly at him.

“I dunno, I guess that just never really occurred to me.” He beamed, stretching out his toes and giving them a wiggle.
Rayla laughed, tilting her head at him. “Humans are so weird. What do you even need an extra toe for anyway?”

“Y’know what, I don’t really know? I guess humans really are weird.”

She smiled at him with a mix of humour and fondness, before returning her eyes to their legs swaying gently in time together. It was so peaceful right now. Callum hoped that after things had settled down, every day could be like this. At the end of it all… they were still kids. Kids who had been robbed of their childhoods by this war. And they deserved this moment, right now. He knew Rayla certainly did. He made himself a mental promise that after the war, they’d do a bunch of dumb kid stuff together and make up for lost time.

Callum’s thoughts were interrupted when Rayla sprang back from the water’s edge having been spooked by something in pond, and he ripped his own legs away in panic.

“What?! What is it, is there something dangerous in-”

Her fingers dug suddenly into his arm as she shuffled forward, glowering at the shapes swimming slowly closer and closer…

Fish. Small ones at that.

He squinted nervously at them. “Are they dangerous, magical fish?”

“No.” She turned her head away from him mumbling. “They just made me jump.”

“Oh.” He blinked, biting back a laugh. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass her any further for her fears. “Tell you what, why don’t we take a break from the water for now?”

He felt the fingers clawing into his muscles relax and she sighed relieved. “Yeah… Yeah good idea.”

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Callum hadn’t realised how hungry he had gotten until Rayla disappeared through the treeline to find them something to eat. How long had they spent here? It was definitely going to be a late lunch, and they would likely have to make a move soon after if they wanted to get back on track. But he was thankful for Rayla sharing this place with him. It had helped alleviate his anxiety for the future briefly.

Regardless of the serenity of this place, he couldn’t help but feel a little more nervous without Rayla’s presence. If elves happened upon them while he was alone he would have no chance to protect himself. So he hunkered down between two roots, his hood up again, as he sketched away in his book. A picture of the great tree spread across the page, and a small elf and human sat at its base together. Callum smiled softly, a warmth in his heart, then he closed the book and glanced to his bag.

Alright.

He reached in and pulled out the compass carefully, cupping his hands around its edges. The needle wobbled slightly, before settling, pointing away from him and just past Argenti’s tree. He tapped its case gently, and turned it upside down in his hands to look over its back.
What he found surprised him. Engraved into the metal, lay strange runes and as he brushed his thumb over them, they glowed faintly golden. Then, shifted slowly, into letters he could understand:

‘Stay not earthbound,
Do not be wry,
Help can be found,
Look to the sky.’

“What…” Callum squinted and raised his eyes skyward, but all he could see were the tree’s leaves blowing gently in the breeze and white fluffy clouds passing overhead.

“Hey!” Rayla’s voice snapped him out of his stupor as she called out from the treeline, her arms full of fruit he had never seen before, towered up to her neck, and she was trying to keep it from collapsing by resting her chin on top. Zym bounded excitedly over to her and did a little lap around her feet. She staggered for a moment, laughing, as she tried to shoo him away with her foot.

“Do you need a hand?” Callum was already standing, slinging the bag over his arm, and pulling the hood back down over his shoulders. He jogged over and Rayla let some of the fruit topple into his arms. A few tumbled carelessly to the ground, and Zym made quick work of a bunch of berries and a small orange looking fruit. “Where did you even find all this?”

Rayla laughed. “It’s like I said. There’s food in abundance here. Especially when you know where to look.” She beamed back, ambling slowly towards the middle of the grassy clearing. She knelt and laid out the spread carefully, and Callum did the same, having to place a hand on Zym’s nose to stop the dragon from devouring their shared meal. He pulled the cloak over his head and with a dramatic flair, laid it out on the grass. Rayla chuckled.

“After you.” He gestured, and watched as she shuffled over and sat cross legged on the cloak, leaving room for Callum to scoot over to her side. “So… what have we got here?”

Rayla named and pointed out the various fruits and berries in the pile, moonberries he recognised, amongst the lot, and a few he had recognised as fruit Claudia and Viren had brought back from their trips, but most were things he had never seen before. Sundrops and nectarberries, silvermelon and rosefigs, there was so many exotic things to sample, and he wanted to try one of everything, eager to experience what Xadia had to offer.

“Oh and I found these!” She produced two small, but wide, dark brown branches from the pile. Callum raised an eyebrow and regarded her curiously. “I figured if I can whittle them a little we can make use of them in your disguise.” She grinned, raising them both and placing them against the top of his head. His lips twitched into a smile. “We could probably pass you off as an Earthblood elf. Just as long as people don’t get too up close and you don’t drop your horns.”

“And how are we going to keep them from falling off?”

Rayla’s nose wrinkled and she pulled a face as she tried to think. “Uh… We could try and tie them on?”

Callum smiled sadly back at her. “With what? I don’t know how well that’ll work, Rayla. It was a
cool idea though.”

She pouted and shrugged, before giving him a playful grin. “Hey look, I am clearly a master of disguise, you should have more faith in my skills.”

He laughed, watching her place the branches aside and dig into something that resembled an apple.

An idea formed in his head and he grinned. “I bet you I can catch more moonberries in my mouth than you.”

Rayla smirked, humour lighting up her eyes. “Oh, is that a challenge?”

Callum beamed back. He was well aware of how this would end. But it was worth it in that second to see Rayla’s smile.

Their spirits were lifted as they laughed the afternoon away, eating heartily and goofing off together, Callum pelting himself in the face accidentally with moonberries. Oh so many moonberries.

All was peaceful in that moment.

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“Hold still, would you?”

Callum tried desperately to stay as still as he could, as Rayla carefully painted the markings across his face with a sort of makeshift paste she had make from various plant life in the area. She painted it gently across his cheeks with her thumb, her eyes sharp and focused. Her other hand cupped his cheek carefully to try and stop him moving, and he felt a little awkward as he sat there, hoping she couldn’t feel the heat beginning to rise to his face.

“Alright… There. I think that’s the best I can do.” She finally pulled back with a satisfied smile, and he let out a breath he had been holding. “Just don’t touch your face until it dries. Actually just… try not to touch your face at all for a while.”

He pulled the hood of his cloak up and gave her a sheepish smile. “How do I look?” his hands moved on their own and he found them giving her nervous finger guns.

She laughed. “Like a complete dork.” She reached over and tugged the cloak down and around his face a little more with a gentle smile. “Now don’t talk to any strangers.”

“Why not? Do you not trust me and my ability to talk like an elf?”

“Oh really?” He tilted his head raising an eyebrow, a sly grin on his lips.

She faked a look of betrayal, raising a hand dramatically to her chest. “Why Callum! Are you suggesting my acting skills are bad?”

The two laughed, and Callum let Zym clamber up him to curl up inside the bag once more.

“Alright. Let’s get moving. We have no idea how far we have to travel.”
Callum let Rayla hold the compass as they walked. It made sense, he figured, in case they ran into anyone, as he wouldn’t have his hands on display. He had become weirdly self-conscious about them since the reality of running into elves had hit him, shoving them deeper into the pockets of his jacket, his shoulders hunched around his neck. “So uh… any idea on where we’re heading?” He finally asked.

Rayla gave a gentle shrug. “I mean… If we carry along here it’s either taking us to, or through, Kalarrden.”

They had been travelling for some time along a winding dirt pathway, and though it was beginning to dim with the sun lowering slowly behind them, the path was well lit with… what at first looked like lampposts, but were in fact large luminous flowers, beginning to glow lighter as sundown approached. The path was well worn. It was only a matter of time before...

*Clip-clop, clip-clop.*

Callum’s stomach did backflips and he inched closer to Rayla as he saw a Moonshadow elf approaching down the path on a large blue stag like creature. He seemed to pay the pair of them little mind as he trotted towards them, but regardless, Callum tensed, and Rayla placed a hand between his shoulder blades to encourage him along.

‘Don’t act suspicious. Don’t act suspicious.’ Callum kept repeating in his head as they walked past. But he had become so hyper aware in that moment of every single action, that he was terrified it was making him act suspicious.

The elf gave them a nod as he rode past, followed by a “Hail and well met.”

Rayla smiled back and gave him an acknowledging nod.

Callum let out a little cracked, oddly accented “Hi there.” Gritting his teeth slightly as he bore his eyes straight ahead, the hairs on the back of his neck bristling.

‘Don’t stop to talk to us. Don’t stop to talk to us.’

He didn’t, thankfully, continuing on his way without giving them a second glance and the tension in Callum’s muscles eased slightly. Rayla seemed to feel this, and she gave him a gentle pat before removing her hand from his back.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, that was just… pretty scary is all.”

She glanced at him, and he caught the sympathy in her eyes. “I’m afraid you’re gonna have to get used to it. But you’ll be fine, I promise.”

“Were you this on edge whenever we were in human towns?”

Rayla mulled over the question for a moment. “Uh… yeah. Yeah I guess…” She scratched at her chin a little. “But then again I’m trained in self-defense so I guess I figured if something were to go wrong I’d be fine and figure out an escape plan.”

Callum pursed his lips. “I don’t have any self-defense training. Soren tried to teach me but I guess it’s just not my thing.” He felt her bump her shoulder gently against his.

“Yeah, you’re not exactly much of a fighter. But you’ve got your magic back now. That’ll come in
handy in a pinch.”

At that, he felt a wave of relief wash over him, and his shoulders lowered from around his neck. Rayla was right. It wasn’t like he was entirely helpless.

“Hah. I got you to smile.”

“Huh? What?” He glanced up at her in surprise, and she was smiling at him gently.

“I got a smile out of you. I’m getting good at this whole comforting human princes thing.”

He could definitely feel the smile creep a little more across his face at that. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

The rest of their hike along the path had Callum feeling a lot less tense than before. The sun was just about set as they reached the edge of the forest, and the trees begun to thin out, until finally, Callum could make out buildings not too far off, surrounded by lush grass and fields of crops growing amidst trees. Rayla’s face lit up.

“Here we are, Callum! Welcome to the town of Kalarrden.”

Chapter End Notes

Interesting... Callum's first elven town! I wonder how that will go and what awaits them?
And I wonder what that mysterious poem could mean...? Stay tuned to find out!

Dont forget to leave a comment if you're enjoying the story! It really makes my day to see how much you guys enjoy my writing and I love every single comment I get! You guys inspire me to keep writing! Love ya!
Rayla hurried Callum along towards the town, eager to find a place for them to settle down for the night. It would be nice, Callum admitted to himself, to not have to sleep on the cold hard ground.

The streets were lit up with little crystals and florescent flora, like the ones lighting the pathway through the woods, but Callum was barely allowed a passing glance at the buildings as Rayla pulled him along by his arm briskly, his hands still firmly stuck in his pockets. It was surprisingly lively, carts being pulled through the streets by creatures Callum had never seen before, and folks meandering peacefully on their way home, or packing up their things to continue travelling.

“Do you know where we’re going?” He whispered, watching her smile back.

“Nope!” Her voice was surprisingly cheerful. “But that’s part of the charm of these towns. You get discover everything for the first time.”

They were wandering aimlessly for about half an hour when Rayla stopped them, a hand on her hip looking up and down the road at an intersection. An intersection Callum was sure they had passed about ten minutes earlier.

“Rayla are we lost?”

“No.” Her voice was firm. He couldn’t help a small smile.

“We’re lost aren’t we?”

She didn’t answer, her nose wrinkling slightly.

He chuckled, tentatively poking a hand out of his pocket and patting the one still clinging to his jacket, before slipping it safely into the cloak once more. “It’s alright Rayla, it happens to the best of us. Why don’t we just ask for some directions?”

Rayla grumbled, and rolled her eyes at him, giving him a little tug and a grouchy “Fine.” before pulling him aside, and she picked someone at random, gently waving them to stop.

“Hello? Uh, excuse me, but we’re looking for somewhere to stay tonight.”

The Sunfire elf smiled politely back. “Oh, well in that case you’ll want the inn. It’s just around the corner from here, The Cerulean Deer. It’s the building with the little white fence and the sign, you can’t miss it!”

Rayla gave the man a polite bow, then as he left, she turned to Callum, puzzled. “Weren’t we just around that corner?” He shrugged back at her, and she furrowed her brow. “Helpful response.”

He laughed, and as they walked, he found a strange sense of peace fall over them. It was only them now, walking down the road, and he noted how Rayla still hadn’t let go of his arm as they strolled together. He didn’t feel anxious anymore, and he knew Rayla could feel it too, her hand was less tense than before. He wondered, if he hadn’t been so nervous about people seeing, would they be holding hands right now? They had in the canyon for a while, and at the glade, and he missed the feeling of her fingers laced between his own.
“How did we even miss that?”

“How?” Callum hadn’t even realised that they’d come to a stop outside an old cobblestone building, and Rayla pointed at the sign hanging from its wall. It would have been hard to make out in the dark if it hadn’t been for the cobalt crystals illuminating it, a majestic deer carved into the blue painted wood. ‘THE CEREULEAN DEER’ was painted in bold white letters beneath the animal.

“We must have walked right past it! Jeez... We really need to pay better mind of our surroundings.”

“Wait… Rayla. How are we going to pay? I don’t have money, or-”

She raised a confused eyebrow. “Callum we’re in Xadia.” He blinked back, not understanding what she was getting at. “It’s fine, just... relax.”

She tugged him towards the door, and gave it a push.

The reception area was warmly lit, and it took Callum’s eyes a few seconds to adjust. It was homely inside, almost like the inns back in Katolis, but he could feel the magic hanging in the atmosphere. The light radiated from little yellowish white orbs that dangled out of thin air, and a fireplace in the main area that crackled with a faintly pink glow. It was empty, aside from an older looking elf at the desk, fretting over papers and scribbling away on parchment. He imagined that she must have been an Earthblood elf from her features, neatly combed brown hair tied back in a long ponytail, and a pair of large round glasses perched on the end of her nose.

Rayla approached her calmly, and Callum let her pull him along.

She greeted the lady cheerfully. “Hey there! Do you have any rooms available?”

“Hum? Oh!” The glasses nearly slipped off the end of her nose and she pushed them further up as her eyes met Rayla’s. “My apologies, yes we do! Are you looking for a room each or one to share?”

Callum felt his friend glance over at him briefly. “Uh… If you have a twin room that’d be great. If not two singles are fine.”

The lady smiled gently and nodded, turning to search through the keys hanging behind her. Her fingers brushed against them until finally she seemed to find one she was happy with and she plucked it from its hook. “Right this way then.”

And with that she stood, and trotted along up the narrow wooden staircase. Rayla gave Callum a little grin, before finally peeling her hand from his arm to follow behind her.

Callum however, paused, glancing back over his shoulder.

There was a coat rack by the front door. He had spotted it briefly out of the corner of his eye as they had walked in, but he eyed it carefully, glancing around. He was completely alone. He gritted his teeth, feeling guilt at what he was about to do, but steeled himself before plucking a pair of thick gloves from one of the pegs, shoving them quickly in his pockets, and hurried along to catch up with Rayla.

“Here you are, dears. Room 4. Give us a shout if you need anything.” She unlocked the door, then dropped the key gently into Rayla’s hand, before hurrying off down the hall and back down the stairs once more.

Rayla opened the door and made a grand gesture to Callum. “After you, good sir.”
He entered slowly, squinting in the dark. “Rayla where’s the—” He wasn’t able to finish his sentence, as Rayla clapped twice and a little orb of light flickered into life above them. “…Oh.”

She grinned, and followed him inside, pulling the door closed behind her. “Cozy, right? Much better than sleeping on the ground.” She collapsed, arms spread out, onto the bed closest to the window with a happy sigh.

She was right. It was small and humbly furnished. Besides the two beds lay little bedside cabinets, and unfurled on the wooden floor a worn down, woven rug. A small wicker chair sat in the corner with a puffy green cushion, and on the walls hung paintings of what Callum assumed must have been the surrounding area.

Callum smiled, pulling the hood down, and rested his bag on the other bed. Zym cooed from inside the bag, and he watched as a little snout poked curiously out first, before Zym clambered out and onto the mattress, stretching. Callum sat by the dragon’s side, ruffling his mane up. “Sorry buddy. I know it can’t be nice being cramped up in there for so long.”

“And to think you doubted me.” She chimed, swivelling to lay properly across the bed.

“I never doubt you. Except when you’re wrong.” He laughed and she smirked back at him. “Though… I do have a question. Are we staying here for free?”

“Well yeah, duh.”

“How does that work? How does she make ends meet?” He was laying down himself now, Zym climbing over him to flop happily against Callum’s arm.

She regarded him with a mix of expressions. “Humans are so strange. In Xadia, everyone takes care of each other. It’s our way. You look after others when they need help, and in kind, they take care of you. Everyone’s equal here. It’s why most elves can’t be bribed by money or possessions. You might have to trade for things at markets, but other than that, all we have… we share.”

“That’s beautiful. And uh… Makes me feel a little less guilty about this.” He pulled the gloves from his pockets, cautiously eying Rayla’s reaction. She blinked at him, then gasped, feigning horror.

“Callum! You little thief!”

“You took that pair of gloves back at that village in Katolis!”

She snorted. “I know, I’m just pulling your leg. It'll be fine.”

Callum relaxed a little, then squinted down at the gloves, trying to figure out how he would make them work. He pulled one over his hand, and let his ring and pinkie fingers fall together into the same socket. It was a bizarre and uncomfortable feeling, but the thickness of the glove disguised the appearance of his hands well. He pulled on the other glove, and gave his fingers a little wiggle, then smiled, raising his hands to show Rayla.

“Hand disguise.” He mimicked affectionately.

She chuckled, rolling her eyes fondly at him. “Nerd.” A little hint of mischief flickered across her eyes. “Anyway, maybe you can take the ideal of sharing all you have back to the human kingdoms, hm?”

He laughed. “I would like to try. I think Ez would be on board.” He sat up to pull the gloves off, laying them on the bedside table, then flopped down again and stared back up at the ceiling, one
hand resting on his chest, the other against the sleeping Zym. “My step-dad once told us this story about how he was willing to share all our kingdom had with one of our neighbours, Duren, during a famine. I think there’s something noble about that.” It was quiet, and he could feel her eyes watching his face. “I think Ez is gonna be a good king. Like his dad.”

“I know he will be.” She was silent for a moment, and Callum had almost started to doze off when she spoke again. “It’s kind of weird. Everything I thought I knew about humans was wrong.” He turned his head to look at her, her eyes now ceiling bound, her face pondering and lost in thought. “When I first came to Katolis, I guess it never occurred to me that they could be such kind-hearted people, trying to take care of each other. I always had it drilled into me that humans were selfish, and only did things for themselves. That’s why they turned to dark magic all those centuries ago… And then I met you both. And everything I knew changed.”

She turned her head to look at him, and for a moment he got lost in Rayla’s eyes. He couldn’t look away even if he wanted to… and he really didn’t want to. She didn’t look away either. Something stirred in his chest again, something he didn’t quite understand just yet. “…I’m really glad we met Rayla.”

She seemed satisfied with his reply, a gentle smile crossing her lips. “Me too. You changed my whole world for the better. Even if you do stupid things and put us in danger sometimes.”

He chuckled. “You wouldn’t have me any other way and you know it.” He had the feeling that if he wasn’t out of arms reach she would have given him a light shove or a poke in the ribs.

“I would knock some self-preservation into you if I could. But yeah…” She yawned, snuggling her face sleepy against her pillow, her eyes now half lidded. “I suppose you’d do the same for me.”

Sleep was beginning to tug Callum away too. “It’s a good thing we’re so good at keeping each other alive considering we’re pretty bad at keeping ourselves alive individually.” He closed his eyes and heard Rayla snigger.

“Speak for yourself. I’m great at keeping myself alive.” She muttered, her voice slurring as she started to drift off.

“…Hey Rayla?”

“Hm?”

“Sweet dreams.”

“…Yeah. Sweet dreams, Callum.”

He did the double clap that Rayla had demonstrated earlier, and let the room fade into darkness.

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Callum knew something felt off when for the first time in a long while, he woke up before Rayla. Long before Rayla. He had expected her to already be awake, but hadn’t given it too much thought when he rose and saw her still curled up fast asleep, her back to him in her bed. But as time passed, he grew more and more anxious. Five minutes turned into ten. Ten minutes turned into twenty. Twenty minutes turned into half an hour, and it was at this point Callum had knelt by her bedside,
and noticed how she was curled into herself defensively, her hands balled into fists. There was a troubled frown on her sleeping face.

“Rayla?”

There was no response, and he felt panic flutter in his heart. “R-Ray?” His hand reached forward and found her side, giving her a gentle shake. She grumbled, shifting slightly, and a sigh of relief escaped him. His hand repositioned to her arm, his thumb brushing gently across her skin. “Are you okay?”

“Mm…” Her eyes fluttered open, still half asleep, and she glanced up at him tiredly. “What?”

“I… I asked if you were alright.”

She was quiet for a moment, closing her eyes again, and turned her face so it was buried half into her pillow. Her voice came out muffled. “Did you see the moon last night?”

“Uh no, I… I didn’t see.”

“Precisely.”

Callum raised an eyebrow at her, confused. “What?”

She grumbled back, rubbing blearily at her eyes, and pointed out the window skyward. “It was a new moon last night. You know that when the moon is full, that’s when Moonshadow elves are at our most powerful. So what d’you think a new moon means?”

Callum paused, as the answer dawned on him. “O-Oh…” He stood slowly, perching on the side of her bed nervously. “Are you gonna be okay? Do you need anything?”

“Nah… I’m good, it just makes me feel like… weak and tired is all. Just… gimme a few more minutes to wake up properly.”

Callum nodded softly, even though she couldn’t see him, and stood gently, returning to sit on his own bed. He turned his attention to his bag, rustling through it to bring out the compass. With a gentle clink, he rested it on his bedside cabinet and watched the arrow slowly spin before resting once more on its inky surface. “I wonder where it’s taking us…”

“Hm?” Rayla rolled over to stare, still groggily, at her human companion. Zym scampered about the floorboards until he came to a stop at Rayla’s bed and hopped up to press his snout under her arm. She let him wiggle under and purr against her chest comfortingly.

“The compass. And how will we know when we get there?”

“I dunno… I guess we’ll just… know.” Rayla grumbled, her face half buried in her pillow once more. Callum shot her a gentle, but amused look.

“Hey, why don’t we just take it easy today? Have a little wander around town and get some supplies, go for a walk, and maybe just… hang out?”

She furrowed her brow at him slightly. “We have a very important mission to deal with.”

“We do. You’re right. But I also have another very important mission. And that’s taking care of both of you.”

“I think you’re mistaken, you silly prince. It’s my job to keep you two alive.”
“We take care of each other. That’s what we do.”

She smiled warmly at him now, a sparkle in her eyes. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.” Slowly she sat up, Zym still cuddled up happily in her arms, and let herself stretch a little. “Ugh, today is gonna be… a day. But if you insist on taking it easy I guess I’ll keep my complaining to a minimum.”

He offered her an encouraging smile. “I’m sure it won’t be so bad. We’re safe and sound in a town. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Irony, Callum. Now you’ve gone and done it.”

He laughed. “We’ll be fine. Everything will be fine.”

But there was still concern painted across Rayla’s face. “You say we’re safe and sound in a town but you remember that if anyone here figured out what you are, you’d be in mortal danger right?”

Callum’s smile slipped. But then something registered on Rayla’s face. A realisation. “Wait a minute… We’re in Kalarrden, right?”

“I uh… I think so? That’s what you said when we got here.”

And then she was smiling. “Callum I have an idea. An ingenious, risky, but brilliant idea.”

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Rayla didn’t have her usual spring in her step that morning. Callum could still feel the aura of weariness radiating off of her, but she tried her best to push onward. He had absentmindedly washed his face in the little en suite bathroom, (Callum had found it accidentally when he opened the door thinking it was a closet.) and she had yanked him back before he had opened their door to remind him that the innkeeper would probably be confused if Callum had magically disappearing face markings. So she spent a few minutes delicately painting them back on for him as he sat opposite her on his bed. He could feel her thumb trembling slightly against his cheek as she tried to focus her energy desperately on her task.

His own hand raised slightly, hesitating before taking hers to steady it as it came away from his face. “It’s okay… I can do it if you want.”

She blinked at him, the fatigue in her eyes flickering away to surprise for a moment. Then she relaxed again with a reassuring smile. “No no, it’s fine… I want to. I’m nearly done anyway.”

Zym watched them both sitting there with a soft chirp, and pawed gently at Rayla’s leg. She laughed softly down at him. “What, do you want me to paint your face too, hm?”

Zym’s tail wagged in affirmation, a grin forming on his little face. Callum reached over to ruffle his mane. “Tell you what, Zym, after Rayla’s finished with mine, I’ll paint yours. Deal?”

Zym yipped approvingly, and Callum heard the baby scamper across the floorboards to jump up onto the bed next to him.

“There.” Rayla pulled back again with a satisfied smile that he had grown accustomed to. Callum felt Zym’s paw on his leg and he cooed impatiently, his snout wiggling into his palm. Rayla chuckled lightly, pressing the wooden container of makeshift paint into Callum’s other hand. “Alright… Your
Painting Zym’s face was a task easier said than done. The little dragon squirmed constantly, seemingly unable to understand the concept of ‘sit still’, too excited and ticklish to let Callum work. He huffed, and caught the amused expressions of Rayla as she sat cross-legged on his bed watching intently. “Zym if you don’t stop moving I’m going to accidentally poke you in the eye, and no one wants that.”

Zym cooed, settling slightly and Callum sighed relieved as he finished off the little markings across Zym’s face. “There.” Zym yipped excitedly and turned to Rayla proudly, who clapped gently with a smile and opened her arms for the little dragon to clamber into.

“Aw, you just wanted to be included, didn’t you? Did Callum do a good job painting your face?” She grinned tickling Zym’s tummy. He squeaked in delight, and Callum felt a smile part his lips and a fondness stir in his heart.

“Well… let’s just say that Kalarrden is an interesting town. Full of… interesting people.”

Callum raised an eyebrow at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well… there’s a market on the outskirts of town, one that specialises in wares that would elsewhere be… tricky to get. If we can find it, maybe we can find something to help you blend in a little easier.”

Callum frowned now as realisation dawned on him. “Wait… are you talking about a black-market? I don’t really know how things work in Xadia, but aren’t black-markets kind of, y’know, illegal?”

“Callum, I smuggled you across the border. The fact that you’re here at all is pretty illegal.”

He opened his mouth to argue, then bit his tongue. “…Touché. But how do you know for sure we can find something that can do that?”

“About a year ago I met a man who told us about a vendor at the market who deals in all kinds of Moonshadow gear… but he can also get items enchanted with illusions. Y’know how Lujanne used that fancy pendant to give Ava a forth leg? It’s like that.” She stood, and then wavered for a moment, steadying herself with a hand on the bedside cabinet. Zym jumped from her other arm and cooed in concern. Callum found his own legs moving on their own as they swivelled over the bedside and he reached out a hand towards her.

“Hey… you alright?”

“Yeah… I just stood up a bit fast. I’m fine.” She waved off his concern with a little flick of her wrist, but Callum’s unease didn’t waver as she raised her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose painfully.

“And you really think going to a shady market while you’re like this is a good idea?” He was standing now, his hand finding its way onto her shoulder, and she smiled gently back at him, reaching over to shove his rucksack into his free arm.

“We’ll be fine. It shouldn’t be too busy today anyway. But thank you.” Her eyes were a little brighter as they met his. “Let’s get you sorted. We just need to find this market, find the right guy, get you a better disguise, and we’ll be on our way!”
“Sounds simple enough.” He sighed. “But we both know things never go quite as planned.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. But that’s part of what makes it exciting, right?”

His face twitched into a smile. “I guess. And how are we going to acquire this… mystical item?” He asked, pulling on his new gloves once more.

“It’s like I said last night about markets.” She smiled, pulling out something small that glittered as it caught the morning sun pouring in through their window. She flickered it gracefully through her fingers back and forth before holding it between two for him to see. A small golden coin that must have been loose in his bag for the past couple of weeks without him even noticing. There was a confident smirk on her face.

“We trade, of course.”

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They had left Zym, somewhat begrudgingly, in their room. Rayla had agreed that it would be dangerous to risk Zym getting lost or stolen in the market, and besides, what kind of caretakers would they be? They had to set a good example to the baby dragon. Zym wasn’t exactly thrilled to be left behind, and the prospect of leaving him alone didn’t exactly sit right with either Rayla or Callum, but it seemed like the safest option. Rayla had told Zym to hide under the beds if he heard anyone approach the room, and locked the door for good measure behind them as they left, muttering quietly to herself as she turned the key. They listened to Zym scratch and whine at the door for a little bit before scampered further into the room.

“I… Really hope we’re doing the right thing.” She whispered.

“He’ll be safer here. And we’ll be safer together. I’d rather go with you to this market if you’re not feeling well.”

Slowly she nodded, and trailed down the hall, Callum following close behind.

As they sauntered out of the inn, the streets were a lot quieter, than they had left them the night before. And it didn’t take long to put two and two together. Though the town was residence to a few different kinds of elves, it had seemed last night that a substantial amount of the population had been Moonshadow elves, and of the few elves going about their morning business, it seemed Rayla was one of the only Moonshadow elves out and about. Even passers-by seemed to cast concerned or sympathetic looks her way as they strolled down the path. Callum had only spotted two other Moonshadow elves dragging their feet looking just as tired as Rayla passing through the town as they strolled idly towards what Callum imagined was the town centre.

“So where do we even start?” He finally asked, casting his eyes across to a still drowsy looking Rayla.

“Well… I heard it usually sets up on the northern outskirts of the town, just a little ways past the orchards. I think there’s like… a cave? And the stalls are set up in there.”

“And no one does anything about it?”

“Eh. Well, they tried to. Originally the market would kinda pop up at times around the town, and the
guards would chase them away, but they just kept coming back, and eventually the guards just kinda gave up and settled on them setting up far away from the town centre. Works out for us though today.”

She bumped her arm against his, and he bumped hers back with a smile, but he could feel a pit of anxiety forming in his chest again. It felt as though they were about to walk into the lion’s den, and he felt more exposed than ever. Callum was thankful at least, that he could mentally prepare himself over the course of their walk and, at times, he could even distract himself slightly by taking in the sights.

It had been harder to make out in the dark, but in ways, Kalarrden almost resembled a regular human town. Almost. Architecturally, there were differences in style, the buildings were a little taller, most of the slated multi-coloured rooves spiralling up into neat points, overgrown in moss and vines. The structures were mostly cobblestone based, with wooden beams, but everything had a sense of magic and colour to it, from the bright charms and wood chimes hanging outside houses, to the floating magical crystals lighting up the pathways in technicolour hues, and beautiful runes carved or painted onto walls. Everything was so vibrant. And all of it was built around the landscape and trees, woven into the very life of the land. It felt a part of the nature.

But they were also still buildings he could recognise, mills looked like mills, blacksmiths looked like blacksmiths, and Callum found himself smiling slightly. Elves and humans had one more thing in common. Maybe it seemed like such a small detail, and yet, the divide between their people felt a little smaller now. A little less daunting, if only by a minute fraction.

At least Rayla seemed to be getting a kick out of his reactions to things that he imagined she found rather mundane.

“Rayla this place is so beautiful.” He breathed, his eyes darting around to try and take in everything at once.

“I suppose so.” She tried to sound nonchalant, but he could hear the smile in her voice. “Just you wait. If we get a chance to travel through Mystilia, you’re going to love it. It’s known as the Capital City of Magic.”

He beamed back at her. “I can’t wait! Though right now I’m kind of just… happy to be here. And I’ll be all the happier when I feel less like I stick out like a sore thumb.”

She smiled gently and gave him a little pat on the arm. He had to squash the urge to reach over and take her hand in his. She was standing a lot closer to him than usual, and Callum couldn’t easily tell if it was out of a protective attitude, or because of how tired and weak she was that she wanted to walk closer by his side.

She had spent so long taking care of him but now there was this strange feeling stirring in Callum’s chest. A longing desire to protect her, the way she always protected him. But how could he? She was notoriously stubborn when it came to showing weakness, and he didn’t want to cross over any boundaries she wasn’t prepared for him to just yet.

So he decided to take things slowly. Test the waters and see where exactly he stood with her, and what she would allow without making her uncomfortable. Let her know he was there if she needed him for anything. And with that he inched ever so slightly towards her as they walked, until his arm was brushing timidly against hers.

She didn’t pull away, and, in fact, to his surprise she raised an arm and he felt one of her hands press gently between his shoulder blades.
“Are you okay?” She asked quietly.

Oh. Well that was ironic. In his bid to comfort her, she had mistook his body language for needing comfort himself.

“Uh, yeah, I guess I’m just… It’s nice here but the prospect of walking into a black market is still kind of terrifying to me.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. As the words fell from his lips, the anxiety returned to his chest, swirling around his insides and tightening like a constrictor snake around his heart.

“You’ll be fine. You’ve got me, and new moon or not, I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you.”

He took a deep breath, trying to muster up the courage inside him. “Hey, Ray? Are… Are you holding up okay?”

Her eyes caught his in surprise. And then she offered him a small lopsided smile, tilting her head with humour in her eyes. “What is with you today? I’m fine. You don’t need to keep fretting over me. I’m perfectly capable of dealing with this. It’s sweet of you to worry but really.”

“Okay, it’s just I… Well you’re my friend, and I care about you, y’know?” He twiddled his thumbs awkwardly under his cloak, glancing down at his feet as they walked.

She pulled him a little closer for a second, and there was a tender warmth in her voice. “Yeah. I know.” And then he felt her hand disappear from his back and fall back at her side.

_Dang it._

Maybe one day she’d let him past the walls she put up to guard her. He was getting there. Every day he felt like he knew her a little more, and he trusted her now with his whole heart. But even so, it felt like there was so much he didn’t know about her, so much she was still so secretive about. Like her feelings. She had implied back at the canyon that she was comfortable being vulnerable around him but it still felt like they’d only really scratched the surface.

He wondered how it must feel for her, to try and be so strong all of the time. It couldn’t be healthy. It was only a matter of time, he worried, before she would crack. But he wouldn’t push her into opening up, she would come to him when she needed to, he hoped, and he would be there in any way he could be.

They walked the rest of the way quietly, Callum trying to distract himself from his thoughts by committing the area’s details and roads to memory. Every few minutes he brushed his arm against hers again.

“Relax,” Rayla muttered. “You look so tense, that’s not going to help you blend in.”

“Well now I’m extra tense because you said that.” He huffed softly.

“Just play it cool. Like me.” She gave him a small finger guns and a wink, and he felt his shoulders lower a little as he snorted to contain a laugh. “We’ll be in and out in a blink. No need to worry.”
Oh if only.

As they approached the cavern entrance, the pair of them caught a glimpse of just how big the literal underground market was.

To say it was vast would be an understatement. The cave was almost completely packed with stalls, so close together it was hard to tell where one ended and the next begun, winding like a maze up and down the slopes and around corners off into the dark.

Rayla had said that it wouldn’t be busy today, but it seemed she had been mistaken. There were a surprising few Moonshadow elves about, albeit they all looked as drained as Rayla, and it was bustling with others, mostly Earthblood elves, Sunfire elves, and the very occasional Skywing elf. And it was loud, bursting with energy. But it had a kind of on edge liveliness to it, like one wrong step could lead to a sudden brawl. Callum hoped under his breath he wouldn’t be the one to start something like that.

Rayla’s voice was sharper and more serious now, as she turned to face him. “Keep your head down. Don’t make eye contact with anyone walking about. Don’t get drawn into anything the vendors say. And above all else, stay close to me. If we get separated, Callum I swear-“

“You’ll kill me?” He retorted with a little mischievous smirk. He watched her nose wrinkle and found her finger prodding him lightly in the chest.

“Yes. I will. Don’t test me.” His grin didn’t falter and he watched a smile of her own flicker in her eyes as she attempted to keep a serious face. “Don’t be an idiot, alright?”

“When have I ever?” He replied innocently. She rolled her eyes, before turning to take a step inside. He followed stepping in time with her, eyes down as she had said, watching her feet so that he didn’t lose track of where she was. He tried to hide the fear on his face behind a stoic façade.

The pair trod carefully, mindful of other pursuers of the wares around them, and if there was any silver lining, it was that with so much going on, no one batted so much as an eyelid at the pair. At times he felt Rayla give his arm a gentle tug to steer him around corners, or out of the way of other elves. But the further into the market they got, the more anxiety ate away at Callum and the harder it became to keep a straight face.

What if they got lost? What if someone attacked them? What would their exit strategy be? They would be completely surrounded and outnumbered, and with Rayla as she was-

“There!” Rayla’s voice hissed near his ear, startling him out of his thoughts. He glanced at her, then followed her gaze, her eyes locked on a stall straight ahead of them. “That’s our guy.”

“How do you kn- hrk!” Callum was spared the luxury of finishing his sentence as he was jerked forwards by Rayla, her hand like a vice around his arm.

They slowed to a halt as the merchant, a Skywing elf finished his business with a large brute of an elf, as his customer skulked away.

“Pleasure doin’ business with ya as always, big guy.”

Rayla sauntered over casually, and leant her elbow on his stall. Callum stood rather sheepishly at her
side trying to look, what he hoped was, confident. The booth holder was tall, dressed in relatively
decent clothing, which was half obscured by a large, oversized coat. This was the first time Callum
had seen a Skywing elf up close in person, and it was fascinating, how different he looked from the
other elves they had glanced by on the streets. He was covered in a light blue down, with piercing
gold eyes and white swirled markings around his eyes, framed by a messy length of long dark blue
hair. His horns, or horn was and it seemed he only had one, the other cracked near the base, curled
upwards, wavy, and the weight had resulted in him being permanently off kilter, making him appear
to regard everyone with a slightly tilted head. Perched precariously atop his head was a strange little
bowler hat with a greenish blue ribbon, something written across it in a language Callum didn’t
recognise.

He blinked curiously at Rayla as she stared back at him.

“And how can I be helping you two lovely folk today, hm?”

Rayla glanced over his wares, and wrinkled her nose a little, before meeting the man’s eye again.
“You deal in Moonshadow stuff, right?”

The elf leaned forward, resting her chin on his hands. “Yeah. I know a guy. We work together.
Why?”

“Perhaps we can talk somewhere a bit more private?”

He blinked back, glancing between them, suddenly suspicious. “You’re not gonna beat me up and
loot my stall are ya?”

“What? No,” Rayla stumbled. “We’re just looking for something a little more… delicate, if you catch
what I’m saying.”

“Fine, fine.” He groaned, pulling a wooden shutter down over his stall. They heard the clicking of
locks and then he appeared around the corner, ushering them along. He led them a short distance
away, to a small den of crates and tarps, and hurried them inside, pulling a curtain across.

“Alright, what d’you want?”

“Listen. We’re looking for something more… illusion based.” The elf raised an eyebrow curiously.
“Do you have anything that could, say, theoretically, make a human look like an elf?”

The elf scratched his chin, a sly smile creeping eerily across his face. His bright eyes flashed to
Callum, and he felt immediately exposed and uncomfortable.

“You planning a smugglin’ gig or somethin’?”

Callum felt his legs tremble slightly, and while Rayla’s eyes never left the merchants, he felt her
shoulder brush against his own protectively.

“Oh relax, it’s not like I care. We’re all a bit crooked ‘round these parts. I can probably get you
something... I know a mage who can make you somethin’, custom ordered. What have you got to
trade for it?”

Rayla flashed the gold piece between her fingers and his eyes lit up.

“Oh… Is that human money?”

“Indeed it is. Pretty rare and hard to come by round these parts, collectors might be interested.”
He scratched at his cheek and leant against the stacks of crates behind him. “It’s good but I might need a bit more than that. I’m sure you understand but this kind of thing will take finesse, and for me to leave my stall for a while. I’ll be losing out on business… So what else y’got?”

Rayla glanced nervously to Callum. Clearly she had thought his single gold piece would have been enough.

“I’m guessing by the get up, you’d happen to be a warrior in training of some kind, right?”

“Oh... Yeah. An assassin.”

The vendor’s eyes were on the hilt of one of Rayla’s blades, and he uncurled a finger from his chin to point at it. “I would gladly take one of those off your hands.”

Rayla’s eyes narrowed and her hand shot to her hip.

“Pretty valuable… Hard to get, even harder to find on the market. If you handed that one over I would gladly make the deal and even throw in somethin’ else as an act of goodwill.”

Callum watched the pain in Rayla’s eyes as she weighed up the deal. She was looking between her weapon and the vendor torn. It was too much for Callum to bear. He wouldn’t let her make a sacrifice like that on account of him.

“What if I did you a drawing?” He had spoken and stepped forward almost without thinking.

The sales-elf rose an eyebrow curiously, and watched as Callum fumbled under his cloak for his sketchbook. He hesitated for a moment. It was precious to him, and to hand it to a stranger felt… weird, and wrong. A strange lump of anxiety formed in his chest. Could they trust him? But then he looked to Rayla’s hand on the hilt of her blade, her brow furrowed in concern as she watched him. He slipped the sketchbook out of his cloak, over carefully to the vendor, who took it with a surprising amount of care.

He skimmed through the pages and, to Callum’s relief, he watched the man’s expression flicker with interest.

“Hm. Yeah, yeah actually these are pretty cool. D’you think you could draw me in all my glory?” He flashed a cocky smile and Callum feigned a confident one back.

“Of course. But, if you want a picture, my friend gets to keep her blades.”

The man wrinkled his nose, shrugged nonchalantly and handed back Callum’s book. “Deal. A service for a service I suppose.” He regarded the pair closely for a moment. “Your purchase will be ready to collect the day after tomorrow. You kids gonna be around town then?”

Callum glanced at Rayla, and he caught her eye for a moment. She hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. We’ll stick around.”

The vendor nodded. “Alright. Well I need to get back to running my… ahem. Business. Pleasure to meet you both.” He tipped his hat to them, then turned on his heel and sauntered away back towards his stall.

Callum felt Rayla’s hand tug gently around his wrist. “Okay. We should go now.”

She didn’t have to tell him twice. The less time they spent here, the safer he would feel.
I’m afraid to tell you this, dear reader, but Rayla and Callum were in grave danger from that morning on.

For they had not realised there was someone at the market who knew very well what Callum was, and of the precious cargo they were carrying. And with a clank of metal chains, and rattle of the bones around his belt, the cloaked figure stood slowly from his seat, watching the pair leave in blissful ignorance.

He watched them speed through the crowd, one sapphire eye cold, and the other glassy, milk white and blind from a terrible scar ripping across half of his face. A wicked smile cracked across his features.

The hunt had begun.

Chapter End Notes

....Uh oh. Looks like our heroes are in a spot of trouble.

Some fun trivia, do you remember Aeslen from New Dream? In my head, I imagine the Skywing vendor as being his younger brother! The more you know.

Thank you for all of your support. I love you guys so much! Don't forget to leave a comment if you enjoyed this chapter, it really helps me out!

Sorry it took a while to come out but the wait for chapter 5 shouldn't be as long since I actually had this chapter cut in two, so a chunk of chapter 5 is already written.

Thanks again! <3
“Theres a human in Xadia.”

The words hung in the stagnant air of a dark room, as elves of several different kinds sat around the wooden table. The Moonshadow elf who had spoken, a tall man in mage attire, continued. “One of our scouts spotted him and a Moonshadow girl taking the moonstone path a yesterday. But that’s not all,” He paused, glancing around at the others. “They had a baby storm dragon with them.”

The table erupted into murmurs and hushed gasps.

“You don’t think…”

“It couldn’t be…”

“There’s no way to be certain just yet.” The mage continued, letting the whispers fall once more into orderly silence. “But, if somehow it is the kin of Thunder, it could set back all of our plans. We can’t let the world know about this. We have to act fast, before word can spread of the runt’s arrival.”

There were nods from around the table. And then-

Scrape. Scrape.

One by one, eyes fell to a hulking figure wrapped in furs and a long russet cloak sitting in the corner, a whittlers knife in one hand, and a bone in the other. He scraped the knife across it slowly and carefully, twirling it between his fingers. The shape of a small dragon was emerging from it.

A single working eye glanced up, meeting the Moonshadow mage’s.

“Feran… Will you take care of this?”

The elf stood silently.

“Kill the girl. But bring the human and dragon back alive. We may be able to use what he knows of the human lands before we end him. And… perhaps the dragon prince may be useful to us.”

Feran nodded, pulling up the hood of his cloak. Then, in a garbled and husky voice, he spoke.

“You want the human boy… alive.”

A cruel smile worked its way across the Moonshadow mage’s face. “I understand what you’re getting at Feran. We would prefer him mostly in one piece and at least able to talk. But the rest I will leave in your capable hands. And you can have what’s left of him after we have what we need.”

A crooked, malevolent grin cracked across Feran’s face.

“He will come to you alive…” He sneered. “Perhaps just barely.”

---
“Rayla you’re gonna pull my arm off in a minute, can you slow down? We’re fine now.”

“Callum we left Zym unsupervised back at the inn. What if he hurt himself? What if someone found him, or he set fire to something and burnt the place down?”

Callum winced at that, jogging to try and catch up with her to let the tension in his arm loosen. “Rayla, I’m sure he’s fine. Try to relax a little, you don’t want to burn out.”

She huffed slightly, ignoring his advice to continue speeding along briskly. “I’ll relax when we’re back at the inn.”

It was hard work keeping up Rayla’s pace. For someone suffering from fatigue and weakness she was certainly pushing herself to get back as soon as she could, and Callum found his lungs burning by the time they approached the familiar building. She took no time in letting go of Callum’s arm and dashing up the stairs, and by the time he got to the room, the door was already ajar.

He creaked it open slowly, nervously, and let out a heavy sigh of relief as he saw Zym poke his head out from under the bed to give them both a cheeky smile.

“See, look! I told you he’d be fine!” Callum grinned. But his smile waned when Rayla didn’t respond.

And then he noticed she was trembling. Her legs were about to buckle.

“Ray-!” He found himself dashing forward just as Rayla began to collapse to the floor, and he pulled her towards him, falling to his knees to break her fall. She was completely limp in his arms, and he panicked, gently turning her over to he could see her face. She was breathing softly. He took a breath, then pulled her closer, shuffling to lift her in his arms, as a panicked Zym yipped, scampering around his feet.

She was so light. Surprisingly so, and he was relieved that it wasn’t too much of a struggle despite his lack of upper arm strength to stand with her in his arms. He lay her ever so delicately on her bed, quietly scolding her under his breath. “I told you not to push yourself! You need to remember to worry about yourself sometimes too, you know…”

There was no response, she was completely out cold. Zym whined, placing his front paws on the edge of Rayla’s bed, and rested his chin gently on Rayla’s upturned palm.

Callum placed his own on her other hand, resting against her stomach, willing her desperately to open her eyes.

He wasn’t sure how long he was kneeling there for. Time seemed to stretch out, every second feeling like minutes. But as he searched her face desperately, he felt her hand twitch slightly under his own and her brow furrow. Ever so slowly, she stirred, her eyes fluttering open, completely dazed.

“Oh thank the stars.” Callum fell back, lowering to rest on his heels with a heavy sigh.

“What happened… where…?”

“It’s okay. We’re back in our room. You… you collapsed just after we got in.”

The fingers of both her hands curled, and her eyes widened a little as they wrapped around the baby dragon’s face. She turned her head ever so slightly to look at him. “Zym…”
“He’s okay… Everyone’s okay. Well… Mostly okay.” He brushed his thumb gently over the back of her hand.

She closed her eyes and sighed softly. “I’m sorry if I worried you. I think I’ll be alright now.”

“You’d better be.” He curled his fingers around her hand and gave it a soft squeeze. “No more pushing yourself today. Bedrest, Callum’s orders.”

She snorted at that, a grin creeping across her face, and she opened brighter eyes. “Oh really?”

“Yes, I’m using my princely authority. Which means you have to listen to me, those are the rules.”

“You don’t have any authority over me.” She teased. “I’m not a citizen of Katolis.” Zym clambered up onto the bed and yipped at Callum. She chuckled lightly. “Yeah you tell him, Zym. You’re the only one here who can tell me what to do, aren’t you?”

Zym grinned back at Rayla and curled up by her arm, resting his head against her shoulder as Callum rolled his eyes with an affectionate smile. “Just… please try to take it easy for the rest of the day. I don’t know what I’d do if something bad ever happened to you.”

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Her eyes softened and she smiled gently back at him. He felt her give his hand a little reassuring squeeze. “Alright, Sad Prince.”

“Yeah… I’d like that.”

He smiled across at her, watching as she curled her arm around Zym and tugged him closer to cuddle. He chirped quietly, snuggling into the crook of her neck. Her eyes were closed now as she rested her chin on top of Zym’s head.

“I think I’m just… gonna lie here a while.” She mumbled quietly.

“Good. You just focus on getting better.” He let his pencil trace across the pages carefully, letting out a little sigh. “And I’ll focus on making sure this is good enough to trade a magical item for.”

Had she fallen asleep at some point? Rayla wasn’t sure. But there must have been a moment, however brief, where she had slipped into unconsciousness for just enough time to Callum to slip away. Because the next thing she knew, the door handle was clicking, and the boy burst in cheerfully.

“Rayla! I brought you some pie!”
“Wh…?” Rayla stirred with a light grumble, rolling over to peer at the door, where Callum had two plates stacked with food, one in each hand, a bowl in the crook of his arm, and a large grin on his face. “How did you even open the door?”

“With great difficulty!” He chimed and she snorted as he approached and gently placed a plate on her bedside table. “How are you feeling now?” His voice had softened, and the smile faltered from his face for a moment, as he laid down the bowl of chow for a still half asleep looking Zym.

She gave him a little thumbs up and a smile in response. “Tired, but I’ve felt worse.” He stood for a moment, and when she slowly pulled herself up, rubbing wearily at her face, she was surprised to find him sitting next to her, rather than on his own bed, stuffing a sweet roll into his mouth.

“You know,” He said half covering his face in an effort to be polite since his mouth was still full. “We skipped breakfast this morning. Which is pretty standard for us now, but we should really try and eat meals where and when we can.”

She nodded, taking the plate of lunch he had brought her with a smile. “Yeah. I suppose we should make the most of this all before we hit the road again.”

It was quiet for a moment, and she watched as he turned to look out the window.

“…What’s on your mind?” She asked softly, leaning forward to catch a view of his face.

She felt a little relief when he turned back to her with a smile. “Oh… It’s alright, actually if I’m honest I was just thinking it’ll be nice to explore town with you tomorrow.”

“We could have a little walk around today, if you want to.”

He shook his head, suddenly a stubborn resolve on his brow. “No, you’re taking a rest day, remember.” She stifled a laugh, but her smile dropped when the concern didn’t leave his face. “Rayla… I mean it. You really frightened me earlier.”

Her ears drooped slightly as she glanced away from him, pursing her lips. “Alright, fine. But only so you’ll stop making that sad little face at me.”

She caught him smiling again from the corner of her eye, as he dug into his slice of the pie on his own plate. His eyes lit up, delighted. “Oh wow… this is really delicious, what kind of pie is this?”

“Healer berry? That sounds like what you need right now.” Her elbow founds its way digging into his ribs and he laughed.

After they had eaten their fill, the rest of the afternoon went by slowly. For Rayla, agonisingly so. Sitting around and doing nothing had never been something she was good at. For now, she sat on her bed tying little braids into Zym’s mane, while Callum sketched away quietly in his book. The dragon was surprisingly patient with her, letting her weave his tufty fur, and it provided some mild relief for now against the biting urge to go out and just do something, anything. Eventually she pulled back and rested against the headboard of her bed with an agitated huff.

“Callum I’m so bored.”

He chuckled lightly. “I noticed.” She shot him a cold glare, and he smiled sheepishly back. “Look hey, it’s just for today. To give you some time to feel better after this morning.” She slumped down the back of her headboard with a pout and watched him supress a chuckle. “Anyway, what do you
usually do when it’s a new moon?”

“Just deal with it and try to carry on as best I can. Just with more complaining.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “But you’re not letting me do anything so now it’s just me complaining. So enjoy dealing with that.”

“You could always take a nap.”

It was true that the morning had taken a toll on Rayla. She hadn’t felt this bad from the effects of a new moon in a long while. It left her incredibly drained and sluggish, and especially so now, with nothing to distract her from her aching body and weary mind. And yet, she furrowed her brow at him suspiciously. “If I nap what are you going to do? I’d rather you didn’t wander around town by yourself.”

“I won’t, I’ll just hang out here. I need to finish this drawing for that guy anyway.”

“You won’t get bored?”

“Nah,” He smiled back gently. “I might wander downstairs and have a look around, maybe read a book, but I’ll be quite content just hanging out here. Maybe I’ll even take a nap too.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t do anything stupid. I mean it.”

Callum raised his hands defensively with a soft laugh. “I won’t! Jeez, you have such little faith in me.”

She rolled her eyes and let herself fall down onto the soft mattress, staring at him a little longer before she felt lethargy tugging away at her. “Don’t let me sleep too long.” She mumbled, burying her face into her pillow slightly. “Otherwise I won’t sleep tonight.”

She heard him chuckle. And then, like that, she was out like a light.

---

Rayla hadn’t expected to fall so deeply asleep that she would find herself dreaming, but she did.

…She soon wished she hadn’t.

When the elf opened her eyes she was standing in the Katolis castle, but something… no, everything felt off. It was dark and dismal, all life and colour drained from every aspect of its design. Armour stands leered at her, paintings stared harshly back at her and she felt a strange anxiety gnawing at her insides.

As she walked down its corridors, she found herself going nowhere. Stuck. The end of the hall seemed almost to be getting further and further away. And then her blood froze at a voice that was all too familiar to her.

“Rayla.”

“Runaan?”

But when she turned to face him, it wasn’t the Runaan she knew. There was no familial warmth to
him, his eyes were cold and dead, skin almost grey. He was as lifeless as the stone cold walls surrounding him. She felt warm tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. In all her time travelling, so focused on their task… She had barely had time to think about her mentor.

And there he was, standing before her once more.

“Look at the mess you’ve made, Rayla.”

Rayla frowned, trying to take a step towards him but her legs felt heavy, and every motion felt like it was happening in slow motion.

“I didn’t make a mess. I’m fixing one. This war. I’m… doing what’s right, for everyone. Humans and elves alike.”

“That’s not for you to decide.” His voice was harsh, and dripped with venom. It was a tone she had never truly heard before and it made her flinch, her skin crawling. Runaan had been tough at times during her training, but never like this. “We don’t have the liberty of doing what we think is right. You showed weakness, and continue to do so, now for that human boy you travel with.”

Rayla trembled, staggering backwards.

“You’re a disgrace Rayla. And your actions led to our deaths. It’s only a matter of time before you lead him to his too.”

“No! You’re wrong!”

And then, reality hit Rayla, all too painfully. She had simply assumed Runaan and the others had escaped the castle after they had dispatched the king. They were still alive… Right? They had to be. But those words rung through her head so painfully.

They… they couldn’t be dead. Runaan couldn’t be dead.

No.

No.

Her body was shaking now, terrified. Grief overwhelmed her. What had she done?

She’d gotten her team killed. And now…

“It’s only a matter of time Rayla,” He continued, as though he could read her thoughts. “He’s as good as dead, and you know it.”

She felt herself being swallowed up in darkness, the scene around her disappearing into a black fog, and the last thing she could see were Runaan’s eyes. Frigid. Hard. Dead.

‘Rayla…’

A distant voice echoed in her mind, and she felt herself shaking again, but this time with a force that came from elsewhere.

‘…Rayla!’

The voice was more desperate now, and Rayla could feel herself falling, and then, suddenly with a jerk and a gasp, she was back in the brightly lit room.
“Rayla! H-Hey… are you okay? You sounded like you were having a bad dream.”

It took her a minute to recall where she was, staring in blind panic ahead at the window just past Callum’s shoulder. And then her eyes glanced across and caught his, full with concern.

She was shaking. She was still shaking uncontrollably, in a cold sweat, and without a second thought, she nearly threw herself off the bed and into the poor human crouching by her bedside, her arms clinging around his ribs, squeezing him desperately. He staggered backwards and Rayla felt her legs fall from the bed and to the ground with a dull thud, and Callum crashed back too, against the side of his own bed, but his own arms were wrapped tightly around her now, and she could feel her breaths heaving. She was crying. She felt a hot shame gripping her, as she buried her face deep into his shoulder.

Moonshadow elves weren’t supposed to show fear.

And yet, here she was, clinging to him, unable to pull away… and she wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was because Callum was so different than everything she had ever known about how she was meant to be… He let her be how she needed to be.

And right now, she needed to be there, in his arms, letting out the overwhelming anguish in her heart.

“H-Hey… Hey….” His voice was soothing, a jarring contrast to Runaan’s voice from her dream. “It’s okay, it was just a bad dream.”

“…You’re alive.” She croaked, muffled by the fabric of his jacket.

“Y-Yeah? I mean…” He raised a hand and timidly rested it against the back of her head.

She squeezed him a little tighter, and in response, felt him squeeze her back, his head lowering to rest tentatively on her shoulder.

“Rayla if you squeeze me any tighter you’re gonna break some of my ribs.” His voice sounded strained, and she loosened her grip, feeling his muscles relax slightly as he took in a slow breath. But he didn’t pull away. Instead, she felt the hand on the back of her head guide her gently so she was snug against his chest, her ear against his heart. It was pounding, but slowed down as she listened, easing as he relaxed. “There… see? You hear that, right? …I’m here, Rayla.”

Rayla didn’t reply, but she could feel her own breathing steady, and fall gradually back into a rhythm. She closed her stinging eyes and let herself just listen to his heart, his chest rising and falling slowly with each breath. His chin rested carefully on top of her head.

“…I’m sorry.” She finally whispered after what felt like an age. He shifted slightly so that now his cheek was resting just shy of the base of her horns.

“It’s okay. You don’t need to be sorry.” He paused, shuffling a bit nervously. “I don’t know what terrified you that much, but I’m here, Rayla, okay? I’m right here. For as long as you need me to be.”

Rayla would have been quite content to just hold him like that forever. But slowly, she pulled herself back so she was sitting on her heels, rubbing shamefully at the tearstains streaming down her face and around her still blurry eyes with the palm of her hand. Callum’s own hands lingered as she pulled back, until they fell gently to the floor either side of him, shuffling back so he was sitting up straighter.

“Rayla?”
“I’ll be fine.” It came out a little sharper than she had intended it to, and she immediately regretted her tone when she saw the twitch of a flinch on Callum’s face. She softened, slowly swivelling to sit by his side. She leant back slowly against the bed frame, tilting her head backwards and dragging her hands slowly down her face with a shaky breath. “I’m… sorry. That came out harsher than I meant it to.”

“It’s okay. You’re okay.” He shuffled uncomfortably. “Do you wanna talk about it at all? Or… Is there anything I can do?”

Rayla closed her eyes, allowing her head to fall forwards again, and she thought carefully for a moment before shaking her head. “It was just a bad dream, like you said. I’ll be alright now. Just… maybe sit with me a while?” She felt him slide over a little closer to her. And then…

Bump. Rayla felt a small collision as Callum had gone to rest his head against hers, but had met the side of her horn instead. He recoiled slightly, almost alarmed. “Oh, Sorry.”

She almost laughed. “It’s fine.” She heard him shuffle a little and then more softly, felt his head rest gently against her own, and his arm wrap gently around her back, his hand resting against her arm. The remnants of her unease melted away in that moment and she sighed gently, her eyes closing to just savour the stillness.

“Hey Callum? Do you mind if I ask something kind of personal?”

“U-Uh. I guess not?”

Rayla bit her lip nervously. “How did you deal with your feelings when you… when you found out about the king?”

She felt Callum stiffen, and a lump of cold dread clutched at her heart. ‘What a stupid thing to ask. You’ve only given him just over a week to grieve, and most of that was spent trying not to die!’

“Honestly it’s something I’m still trying to deal with. It’s… hard. It still hurts. But I guess being away from home it’s like… It doesn’t always feel like it’s sunk in? Like part of me still feels like I’ll go home and he’ll be there, like he always is.” She could hear a slight tremble in his voice, and he coughed nervously to try and regain his composure. “I guess I just… try to focus on what’s going on right now. What I can do to fix things. It helps. If you just dwell on things for too long then you end up spiralling into regrets, and what ifs, and it makes it hard to move forward.”

Rayla weighed his heavy words up in her mind. He was right. She knew he was. They couldn’t fix the past, but they could fix the future. And yet the pain didn’t ebb away.

“Rayla can I ask you something kind of personal now?”

She gave him a little reassuring nod.

“Did… did you see someone in your dream? Someone that you lost?”

She sighed, raising a hand to rub at her temple. “I don’t know. That’s the annoying thing Callum, I don’t know if he’s dead or not. I hadn’t thought about it and then I guess the idea just kind of… hit me. Out of nowhere.” She looked across at Zym, fast asleep on Callum’s bed. How he hadn’t been disturbed by the ruckus, she wasn’t sure. Or perhaps, maybe he had been but was content in the knowledge that Callum had the situation covered. “He…” Her voice trembled, and he felt Callum pull her a little closer. “I think he probably is though.” She finished quietly.

“Rayla I’m… I’m so sorry.”
“It’s part of the job, y’know? We’re supposed to be prepared for it. You have to harden your heart, you can’t allow yourself to get attached to your team, because you know the chances of everyone surviving are slim. Death is all in the job description. But… That’s harder when the person in charge of your mission practically raised you.” She furrowed her brow. “I’m not a very good assassin, am I? I’m bad at hiding my fear, and I get too attached to people.”

“Do you… still want to be an assassin?”

“I don’t know anymore, Callum. I don’t think I do, it’s… not me. I’m not a killer. But I know what Runaan would say. That I don’t have a choice. That this is the path I was meant to walk, and that it’s too late to back out now. There’s no changing fate.”

Callum was quiet for a moment. “I don’t think it’s too late.” When she met his eyes they were glistening with a warm intensity. “There was something in my step-dad’s letter. Something he said… To reject the chains of our pasts, and not let them define our futures. You might have chosen to be an assassin once but Rayla, you’re free, you can be whatever you want, don’t let anything stop you. Heck, if I can learn to connect to magic, then you can do anything! And whatever you choose well… the right people will support you along the way.”

She smiled softly. “Will you support me?”

She hadn’t even noticed that his hand had found its way into hers until he gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Always.”

They sat like that for a while, neither one daring to move, not wanting to disturb the delicate peace between them.

“I uh… I made you some tea earlier.” He finally said with a nervous cough. “I went down stairs and they let me use the teapot. Do you have any idea how hard it is to pour boiling water into a small cup wearing gloves? Let alone when you have two fingers jammed into one finger sleeve?”

Rayla snorted slightly. “Finger sleeve?”

Her shoulder bounced slightly against his as he laughed. “Anyway I think I got more tea on the floor and countertop than I did in the cup. It’s… It’s probably cold now but… uh…”

Without pulling away from Rayla, he reached over to the table, pulling down a small cup. It was only half full, and as he handed it to her, the ceramic was cool to the touch. A little smile crossed her lips. “Well you managed to get some of the tea in the cup at least.” She chuckled, taking a sip.

The wrinkle of her nose and her face was clearly caught by a dejected Callum. “It’s cold isn’t it?”

“Just a little. But thank you anyway.” She took another sip, trying instead to focus on its sweet flavour. “If it makes you feel better you did manage to pick my favourite tea through.”

He perked a little at that, his voice ringing with a subdued cheerfulness now. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes… it’s nice. And really sweet of you to think of me like that.” She stole a glance and watched pink tickle his cheeks as he scratched shyly at the back of his neck.

“Oh well… You’re welcome.”

They sat together for a while, talking quietly until eventually it was time to turn in for the night. Rayla lay awake for several long hours after Callum had peacefully been taken by sleep. As much as she tried not to think about it, her thoughts were haunted by the uncertainty of Runaan’s fate. But as
she turned to look across at the sleeping form of Callum, she knew she couldn’t bring herself to tell him the words that swam through her mind, over and over again.

‘You’re all I have left now.’

---

Clink.

The sound prickled at Rayla’s ears as she stirred the following morning.

“Callum…?” She grumbled, her eyes cracking open, stinging in the bright morning light.

And there he was, standing by her bed with a warm smile, his hand falling away from her bedside table where another plate of food was waiting for her.

“Wow… first lunch, then tea, and now you’re bringing me breakfast in bed? I could get used to this.”

He laughed softly, and she felt him sit on her bed by her feet. “Aatika said we could help ourselves to anything in the pantry. I didn’t want to, y’know, impose on her hospitality, so I just got us some more of that pie from yesterday. I hope that’s alright.” He laid out a bowl on the ground for Zym, who chirped excitedly before digging into the large pile of berries.

“Aatika?” Rayla sat slowly, feeling her arm tremble slightly under her weight. Callum didn’t even need to look at her, she felt him reach out a hand and place it on her shoulder to steady her gently as she pulled herself up.

“Yeah, the innkeeper. She’s really nice. She told me to take good care of you today.” He grinned at her. “I told her I intend to.” They were quiet for a moment to eat before Callum spoke again. “So are… are you feeling better today?”

“…Alright.” But there was a sadness in his voice, and it lingered in the air as he ate the rest of his pie quietly. She bumped her shoulder lightly against his as she began to eat.

“Sad Prince.” She caught the slight twitch of a smile on his lips.

“Are you ever going to stop calling me that?”

“Probably not.” He bumped his shoulder against hers back.

“Then I’ll start calling you Sleepy Elf.”

“Don’t you dare.” But now he was laughing a lot more heartily, and Rayla welcomed his change in mood. “You dweeb. Did you still want to explore the market today?”

“Yeah, but… are you going to be alright?”
“I only passed out yesterday because I overdid it getting back to Zym. I’ll be fine as long as we’re not rushing around needlessly.”

With that he smiled. “Well, as long as we’re not being chased through the town by an angry mob, like back in Katolis, I think we should be okay.”

“Don’t jinx it.” She pointed a finger at him, trying to look stern.

He pulled the hood of his cloak up and shot her a playful grin. “You’re certainly getting superstitious.”

“I’m not, it’s just every time we think things are going fine, something sucker punches us from around the corner.”

“Rayla.” She felt his hand on her shoulder turning her gently to face him more, and he regarded her more seriously, but with a softness in his eyes that rattled her to her core. “I won’t let anything bad happen today. I promise.”

A little sigh escaped her lips and she shook her head, a faint smile on her lips. “Alright. If you say so.” Her plate was neatly placed once more on her bedside table, and she pulled herself up using the headrest of the bed, wavering momentarily before standing a little straighter. “Come on then. I’ve been cooped up in here long enough, I want to get some fresh air.”

Zym gave a cheerful little yip at her foot and jumped up at her leg, and she scooped him up, swaying him back and forth with a smile. “You must be eager to get out too, huh? Just try and stay hidden alright?” Her answer came in the form of a little nuzzle against her cheek, and as Callum stood he jumped into the boy’s arms, nearly knocking him back onto the bed with a surprised laugh.

The baby dragon snuffled around his ear, searching under his cloak for his rucksack, and Callum grinned, wrapping an arm around his fellow prince, and pulled him back down into his arms. Zym squeaked in surprised, and Callum booped his nose against the dragon’s own.

“Give me a chance, Zym! I’m not even wearing my bag yet!”

Zym gave him a grin back and Rayla chuckled, ruffling the dragon between the horns. What a strange group of friends they were, she thought. But she wouldn’t change this…

Not for the world.

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It took a lot of restraint for Callum to not drag poor Rayla around excitedly at every given opportunity. His hand was hooked gently under her arm and each time something caught his interest, he would give her a little tug and she would happily comply, letting him lead her with a little smile or an affectionate eye roll, content to let him explore and roam.

At times he would find her absentmindedly tugging the seams of his hood a little further down and around his cheeks, and her eyes would meet his for a second. She’d give him a little smile, there wasn’t a need for words. He knew what she was saying, that he needed to be careful, and watch himself. Other times she would reach past his shoulder to gently bap at an excited Zym, his head poking up and over Callum’s shoulder to see what was happening, in an attempt to get the baby
prince to hide. It seemed that even in times of rest, Rayla’s mind couldn’t help but focus on keeping them all safe.

But for now, the streets were relatively quiet, and a sense of serenity hung in the air around them as they walked. He wasn’t sure when it had happened. But at some point, he had become aware that his hand had trailed down Rayla’s arm, and found its way back into her hand, and she had given it a light squeeze. It felt strange, the way her hand fit together with his gloved one, his two fingers jammed together. He wondered quietly to himself if it was as odd to her as it was to him. Regardless, he was thankful to have her hand to hold. It made the day feel so much more special.

How long had they been walking in silence for? He brushed his thumb over the back of Rayla’s hand gently.

“You doing okay, Rayla?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, I’m just grand.” And yet despite her words, she seemed distracted somehow, her eyes darting around intensely on the lookout for some unseen presence. He stopped, turning a little to face her more.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know I’m just getting this really weird feeling. Like we’re being watched.” She looked over her shoulder anxiously. “Like something’s following us.”

Callum’s heart trembled in his chest, and he felt a cold chill shoot down his spine. “…What should we do?”

She tugged on his arm to pull him closer, her voice barely above a whisper. “I think it’s best if we stick to the main roads, where there’s more people. It’s unlikely we’ll get attacked in a public place, and if it’s someone who’s caught on to the fact you’re a human and they try to reveal that, at least we’ll have an easier path to get out of here.” He nodded, suddenly on edge. Her eyes flickered to sympathy. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to say anything and ruin your day.”

“No no, it’s fine. I’d rather know, that way we can both keep an eye out.” He glanced around, but aside from the other elves walking up and down the road, they seemed perfectly alone. There was no one he could see who might be out to get them.

“Hey.” Her voice was soft, and startled him away from his thoughts. And as he looked back to her she was smiling softly and she pointed at something up ahead. “Why don’t we take a break and sit by the fountain for a bit?” This time he felt Rayla give his arm a gentle tug, and he smiled gently back, letting her lead the way.

It took a while, but in time, Callum relaxed again, and the rest of the day was spent lingering around the main streets, Callum once more excitedly pointing out little details, and listening intently as Rayla shared snippets and facts she knew.

It was nice. It was peaceful, Callum thought, and Rayla seemed to be more at ease as time passed too. The time passed quicker today, it felt, and Callum had hardly noticed the sky dimming overhead, painting the sky in pinks and oranges.

“We should probably head back soon, right?”

“Mhm.” She sounded as though she was only half listening, her eyes once more glancing at the corners of streets. Her hand felt stiff, tense in his. Were they being followed again? He tried to give Rayla’s hand a squeeze, but the longer he wore these gloves, the more agitated it made him feel.
They were a nuisance, and it bothered him to think that in this land, something as trivial as an extra finger would reveal him as an outsider. It filled him with a strange sense of discomfort, and self-consciousness.

Curse these annoying gloves, and the doubt that they laced through his mind.

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It was late in the evening when the pair finally got back to the inn. It seemed as though at some point, Zym had fallen fast asleep in Callum’s bag, and he let out a long whine as Callum gently pulled the sleepy dragon out, along with other rolls of parchment and supplies rolling across his bed.

“Poor boy,” Rayla chuckled, scratching the dragon prince under his chin. He tilted his head back in response, letting out a little rumbly purr. “Once we’re back out on the road you’ll be able to stretch your legs properly, instead of having to curl up all day in that cramped old bag, I promise.” Zym’s response came with a little chirp, and she scooped him up cheerfully, ambling over to sit in in the old wooden chair.

“Hey Rayla, do you think my hands are weird?”

“What?” Rayla glanced up at him, pausing her affectionate playing with Zym’s mane. Callum was slumped on his bed staring down at his now gloveless hands with a hard to read expression. “Where’s this coming from?”

“I dunno, I guess I just feel kinda… weird today.” His brow was furrowed, and he didn’t look up, his fingers curling in on themselves. “It feels weird having to hide them. Like I should be ashamed or something.”

Something tugged on Rayla’s heart. She could empathise with him. It was part of an assassin’s job to hide. But she had to admit that it was never easy emotionally, knowing that she had to be someone else in Katolis just to be accepted. And it seemed Callum was taking it harder than she had. He was after all, a rather sensitive soul.

“Callum, I like your hands. You have nice hands.” Suddenly she felt the heat rise to her cheeks a little, and the words tumbled from her mouth before she could think clearly. “They’re good at magic! And art! And holding things!” Holding things like my hands. She added in her head, cuddling Zym close to her chest. The baby dragon chirped in approval.

He raised an eyebrow at her but there was the hint of a smile on his lips now.

“I know it feels weird having to hide who and what you are here.” She continued. “But you’re still you. And… I like you just the way you are.”

He was smiling a little wider at her now, and she watched the sorrow in his eyes melt away. “Thanks Rayla. I think uh…” His eyes darted away sheepishly. “I think you have nice hands too.”

Rayla rested her chin on top of Zym’s head smiling at the boy affectionately. She could feel the heat radiating off her face and ears and was thankful that Callum seemed too preoccupied to notice. “So anyway, what’s the plan now?”

He turned to glance at her over his shoulder, his eyes flickering with excitement. “Actually, I’m glad
It didn’t take long to settle Zym down for the night, letting the baby dragon curl up on Callum’s bed. Rayla had taken extra care to make sure their windows were locked tight, and the baby dragon was hidden and cozy under a blanket, before Callum had excitedly tugged on her arm with enthusiasm.

Her eyes flickered to his hand. “You’re not wearing—”

“We won’t need them for where we’re going.” He smiled back. And he gave her arm another little tug as he led her towards the door. Rayla raised a quizzical eyebrow but followed suit, and let Callum open the door for her. As she locked their room behind them, she watched the boy speed off down the hall, in the direction away from the stairs, his cloak billowing behind him.

“Callum where—?”

“Over here.” He beamed, and she sighed, ambling at her own pace after him. When she caught up to him, she blinked in surprise. His hand was resting against a wooden ladder, leading up and up, into the rafters of the ceiling above. He was already clambering up it.

“Callum!” She frowned. “You’re being awfully mysterious, you know that, right?”

“Funny, it’s usually the other way around!” He called back down with a sassy grin.

“Oh ha ha.” She rolled her eyes, but a little smile caught on her lips, as she followed up after him. The higher she climbed, the more she felt a cool night air breeze brush against her arms, and as she looked up through the trap door, she could see the sky. She poked her head out, and there was Callum, kneeling with an excited grin, reaching out his hands to help her up. She took them, heaving herself up with minimal effort, and then Callum let them go gently to scramble further across the roof, plonking down and gesturing for Rayla to join him.

“What are we doing up here?” She asked quietly, shuffling over, and she watched as he lay down, one hand by his side, the other resting gently on his chest.

“The moon is out tonight.” He pointed out, not really answering her question. She raised an eyebrow at him, and he smiled back. “I dunno, I… I guess I thought maybe it might help you feel a bit better.”

Her eyes softened, and she sighed, laying down herself quietly.

But Callum was right. As she lay there, under the crescent moon, she could feel a little strength coming back to her.

She let her eyes close, and breathed in the fresh night air. “Y’know what actually…? This was a good idea.”

Callum’s arm brushed against hers. “…Yeah.” She could hear the smile in his voice, but it was different than usual. Almost giddy with excitement. She peeked an eye open to look at him.

“What is it?”

“Well, Aatika let me know something cool was supposed to happen tonight.” He grinned. “It’s a
surprise though, before you ask.”

She raised an eyebrow, but smiled sweetly back at him. “Oh, fine. Keep your secrets.”

As she gazed back up at the moon, she felt Callum shuffle a little to get comfy. “Hey Rayla, do you know anything about the stars? Like any constellations?”

“I know a few. You?”

“A few.” He smiled. “My mother taught me, and some of them stuck. I wonder if we have the same constellations.”

“Probably. Most of them are millennia old, from back when Xadia was one land.” She felt the back of his hand brush against hers, and her fingers twitched a little as a prickling sensation ran halfway up her arm. “Which ones do you know?”

He squinted up for a moment, his eyes searching the sky. “Uh… Oh! There, that’s Amari’s Star.” He grinned. He pointed up at a glittering, bright star with an almost pinkish hue. “Which means that… over there is Rhydor, you can tell by the kind of dip and like, there’s his eye, see?”

She chuckled lightly. “Any others you can see from here?”

They spent the time they had together laughing and pointing out the various constellations they knew, sharing stories and legends. And then it wasn’t long before Rayla caught a glimpse of what had Callum so keenly excited.

From the corner of her eye, she caught something glittery trail across the night sky. Callum gasped excitedly beside her, and his knuckles bumped against hers rapidly as though to get her attention.

“Rayla! Look!”

There was another. Trailing slowly overhead, something that almost appeared to swim through the air like it was water, scales of beautiful rainbow hues glistening and pale against the dark. As it danced across the sky, behind it left a misty golden trail from its glowing fin like tail. And it was followed by more and more, a whole school of them, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of them, painting trails along the midnight sky.

Skyfish. Rayla had seen them before as a child, she had stayed up late to watch them one clear night in a field with her parents the night before they left for Dragon Guard duties. They were so beautiful and graceful, and seeing them brought back a wave of emotions, a warmth in her heart. For a blissful moment, she felt like a child again. She could forget about the war, about the huge weight of the world on their shoulders, and just… be there.

She stole a glance at Callum and her heart fluttered a little. His eyes were so full of joy and awe, and a big grin split across his face as his eyes darted about, following their movements.

She tried not to stare but it was hard to look away. Her eyes only darted skyward again when his own eyes glanced to meet her face.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” He breathed, his voice almost lost to the wonder of it all.

“…It is.” She whispered in reply, and somehow, she knew she was only half talking about the migration overhead.

Rayla had never been on a date before. But… was this what it felt like? The thoughts tugged on her
mind. Of course… this wasn’t a date. She knew this. And yet…

Rayla dared herself to twitch her outmost finger to curl around his pinkie, and felt a relief wash over her when his little finger gave hers a little reassuring squeeze. They had laid together on the roof smiling, completely at ease, and for a moment… everything was okay.

But then a sound to Rayla’s right twitched at her ear and suddenly everything felt… wrong. An instinct stirred in her and her whole body tensed, and she bolted upright, a hand hovering over one of her blade hilts.

“Rayla…? Is every-”

“Shh.”

Callum fell silent, sitting up ever so slowly. His finger, still curled around Rayla’s, was twitching in heightened anxiety.

The world fell still. Nothing moved. They sat like that for what felt like forever Rayla’s eyes narrowed as she glared into the darkness past their inn’s roof.

“We should get back inside.” She finally whispered, edging towards the latched door. Callum nodded fearfully and followed suit, hesitantly pulling his hand away from hers to crawl towards the opening. Rayla let him go down first, giving him a gentle and reassuring push between his shoulders, her eyes still trained on the area where she thought she had heard the noise.

She hesitated for a few seconds longer before clambering down the ladder, and closing the hatch, locking it behind her for good measure.

In the pitch black, metres from where Callum and Rayla had been sitting, a single icy eye leered through the dark, glinting in the pale moonlight, before the figure turned and disappeared with a swish of his cloak into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! It’s certainly been a bit of a week! Things have been a little hectic on my end, so my attention has been a bit divided. But I’m still trying to get a chapter out a week for you guys!

A huge shout out to Dani, who made this really lovely animation inspired by TMC. I love it so much! <3 :)  
https://twitter.com/Piecesofarose/status/1115116478506913792

And also! Paula Burrows (Rayla’s voice actress!) who followed me on twitter! (I’m still overwhelmed with shock and awe aaaaah!) She said she might check out my work, so hi Paula if you make it this far into TMC!

Anyway thank you all for your continued support! <3 Don’t forget to leave a comment if you’re enjoying the story! Things are certainly about to pick up in the next chapter now that Feran has found his prey…
Up until this point, it had been the calm before the storm.

Xadia had been relatively gracious to Callum so far, but now a darkness lurked on the horizon about to strike, and our dear trio had no idea just how dangerous a threat was coming for them.

That threat’s name was Feran. A bounty hunter under the employment of one of the factions vying for power in the absence of Thunder, a terrible group calling themselves the Order of Tenebris.

In the past few months since Thunder’s passing, the name alone could send shivers down the spines of the hardiest warriors. There was much mystery surrounding the Order, few who came in contact with them lived to tell the tale.

But of those few tales that existed, most whispered of a merciless hunter who stalked his prey until death. There was no sanctuary, no escape, and though death was not always swift, it always came for his targets. He was like a sadistic predator, who took a sick delight in playing with his prey, tormenting them until he became bored and ended them.

And now as he skulked his way through Xadia, he had a new target. A new objective.

Capture. And kill.

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Rayla was uncomfortably quiet as she marched Callum back to their room and he could feel the tension in the hand that was pressed between his shoulder blades as they walked.

“…Rayla are you okay?” He finally asked as she fumbled with the key at their door. She didn’t answer, her ears pinned back, body rigid. She could barely get the key in the door and every second he could feel the frustration radiating off her growing. Ever so delicately, he rested his hand atop hers to steady her grip, and there was a satisfying click as the door unlocked. He heard a little sigh escape her lips before he was pushed gently but quickly back into their little retreat. She locked the door behind them.

Zym was still fast asleep on Callum’s bed and the boy wished desperately that he could be as at ease as the little dragon was. He watched as Rayla trailed over to the window, pulling the curtains shut, and she just stood there silently, clearly contemplating something. He took a step towards her anxiously. “…Rayla?” When she didn’t reply again, he urged himself forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. She stiffened for a moment, but he watched as she finally unwound a little, her fingers curling and uncurling at her side. The expression on her face melted from grim determination to a more anxious concern.

“You should get some sleep.” She finally said, and there was a firmness to her voice he hadn’t quite expected.
“What about you?”

“I’m going to stay up for a bit. Just…” She trailed off, but he caught something in her voice. A pang of remorse. “Get some rest.”

He hesitated before letting his hand fall from her arm. “Promise me you’ll get some rest too, okay?”

She smiled weakly back at him. “…I’ll try.”

Hesitantly he returned to sit on his bed, hearing Zym stir a little. She didn’t move from her spot and he watched her carefully for a moment. “Rayla?” She glanced over her shoulder at him, and he offered her a gentle, supportive smile. “It’ll be okay.”

He watched her eyes relax and she gave him a softer smile of her own. “G’night Callum.”

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Rayla didn’t sleep well that night. The majority of it was spent tossing and turning, unease and guilt gnawing at her like a ravenous wolf. Unease from the feeling that they had been followed around most of the day, and guilt at having ruined their moment on the rooftop together. At least she could pin down her guilt with the logic that if she hadn’t taken action, something terrible could have occurred, but that only heightened the awful feeling that something bad was after them. Why? Had someone caught on to the fact Callum was human? How? Or had they spotted the pair at the market yesterday and saw them as an easy target to mug?

She glanced over at Callum’s bed. The boy was wrapped protectively around Zym, and through the dark she could see a little frown on his sleeping face.

… Poor Callum. He had just wanted to make her happy today and she had dashed all that aside. She hoped he wouldn’t be too annoyed with her tomorrow. She’d find a way to make it up to him somehow, and apologise properly. Her fingers clenched and unclenched at the sheets, too many thoughts racing through her mind. It had been an exhausting few days and she would be glad to leave this town behind them and get back on track.

Eventually, the clutches of sleep muffled the unrest in her mind and she let herself fall into a fitful slumber. Her dreams reflected her concerns back at her, it seemed there was no escape from them, but for the first time since arriving at the town, Rayla woke up before Callum, and it was somewhat a relief to find the boy still fast asleep and peaceful at her side.

She smiled lightly as an idea crossed her mind, and as quietly as she could she found her feet and slunk silently past the end of his bed. She didn’t want to be an assassin anymore, but oh, the perks of her training made sneaking around so much easier. The door barely made so much as a creak as she opened and closed it in swift motion.

“Oh my, you’re up earl- Oh!” The innkeeper paused as she caught who was standing on the last step of the staircase about to enter the main reception area, and a motherly smile found its way across her face. “It’s good to see you up and about, dear! How are you feeling?”

‘Honestly? Terrible.’ “I’m fine, thank you.” Rayla smiled back. Aatika seemed content with this, and Rayla watched as she neatened the piles of paper she had been reading through and ambled briskly around her counter.
“Can I get you anything at all? It’s usually Callum who comes down to collect breakfast. Here let me show you to the pantry…”

Rayla followed quietly, as Attika chirped on and on about how sweet Callum seemed, and how the boy clearly cared deeply about her. It warmed Rayla’s heart a little. Of course he cared about her, he always had. He was such a kind and doting human.

She was still sluggish, and the thoughts of yesterday began to ring through her mind again, but she squashed them down to try and focus. Things would be okay today. They’d pick up their item from the market, then leave as quickly as they could. If something was following them, they’d put up some distance and hopefully lose them in the Xadian wilderness.

Things would be okay…

…

If only. Things weren’t going to be okay for long.

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When Rayla entered the room Callum was just barely beginning to stir, and she smiled as she gently laid out a plate of sweet rolls and a cup of tea for him. It seemed only fair, he had done so much for her when she had been feeling rough. She sat on the end of his bed, right near where his feet were, and brushed the back of her hand down his arm. “Hey, rise and shine princes, it’s time to get up.”

Both Callum and Zym made a little tired grumble, the dragon pressing his face into Callum’s chest, and Callum’s brow furrowing as he pulled the dragon closer. Rayla chuckled, amused, and brushed her hand down Callum’s arm again. “Hey, come on. We need to get moving. What’s that weird human expression? About the early worm catching the bird?”

Callum snorted into his pillow. “It’s the early bird catches the worm.”

“That still makes like… no more sense than my one, but okay.” He peeked open an eye and grinned up at her. “Anyway, I brought you some breakfast.” At the word, little Zym’s eyes shot open, wide awake now and he wriggled out from under Callum’s arm excitedly.

“Oof.” Zym’s wing collided with Callum’s face suddenly as he passed him, and the baby squeaked excitedly as he climbed into Rayla’s arms expectantly, a questioning look as though to say ‘Where’s my food?’

Rayla chuckled and pulled over a bowl of assorted snacks for the dragon and he chowed down hastily, his tail wrapping around Rayla’s back, glancing up every so often to give Rayla a grateful grin.

As Callum sat up, rubbing his assaulted cheek, he gave Rayla a tender smile. “You feeling better this morning?”

“Yeah, a little.” She paused, mulling over the right thing to say. “Look Callum, I’m… sorry about what happened yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”
“I guess I just feel like I spoilt our day out and on the roof when-”

“Rayla.” His hand found her shoulder and he turned her gently to face him. “You didn’t spoil anything.” He gave her a kind, little lopsided smile. The boy still had bed hair and Rayla found herself feeling oddly flustered in that moment, like she wanted to fix it for him. But his words resonated with her and she felt a sense of peace for the first time since last night. “I had a fun time, and I… well I hope you were having fun too. But please don’t feel bad, you were only trying to keep us safe.” She watched his face flicker with concern as he continued. “You… you kind of scared me last night, I’ll be honest.”

Rayla’s jaw clenched a little. “Sorry. I was just in a certain frame of mind, I guess.” She wrapped one arm around the dragon eating away happily on her lap, and her free hand reached up and landed against his still on her shoulder. She couldn’t quite meet his eye. “But… up until that moment, I was having a nice time.” ‘We have to make use of the peaceful times we have, while we have them.’ She thought to herself. She felt Callum’s thumb brush against her skin and she caught him smile out of the corner of her eye. The motion was soothing, and she relaxed a little.

“I’m glad.”

A heat began to tingle at her face and she coughed nervously. “A-Anyway, you should eat up and make sure you’ve got everything packed up so we’re ready to go. I want to set off as early as we can so we can get a whole day’s worth of travelling in. …We’ve spent enough time sitting around in this town.”

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It was going to be a little sad to leave Kalarrden behind, Callum realised. Especially the Cerulean Deer. But Rayla had been right at breakfast, they needed to get a move on.

Aatika gave them a heartfelt send-off that morning, insistent on them taking some lunch for the road ahead.

“I hope to see you both again sometime, you know I’ll be right here next time you pass through town. If you think you’ll come by, send a letter and I’ll make sure to have some healaberry pie waiting for you!”

“Thank you so much for all you’ve done for us.” Callum smiled back. “I uh… I actually have something for you.” He caught the eyebrow raise from Rayla as she regarded him questioningly. Then out from his cloak appeared his beloved sketchbook and he skimmed the pages, with some minor difficulty from the gloves, until a satisfied look fell across his features. “Ah, here it is.” He neatly tore the page out and handed it over, now feeling a little sheepish.

There on the page, he had drawn the inn they had spent the past few days at, in all of its glory, captured in a surprising amount of detail, its sign hanging in the breeze.

“Sorry it’s… it’s not much but I-” He wasn’t able to finish his sentence before Aatika had enveloped him in a warm hug.

“It’s perfect. Thank you dear.” She pulled back and Callum could have sworn he caught her brush a little tear from her eye as she set it so neatly on her desk. “I’ll have to get my wife to make a nice frame for it when she gets home from her trip and we’ll hang it up in the lobby.” She beamed
proudly. “She helped furnish this inn, you know!”

Callum grinned, a warmth in his heart at her reaction, and he glanced to Rayla, who was smiling back at him affectionately.

“We should get going. But thank you so much again.” And with that, Rayla gave a polite little bow that Callum repeated clumsily himself. Then Rayla gave Callum’s arm a gentle tug.

Aatika waved them off with a cheerful “Goodbye! Stay safe now!” And then the doors closed on the inn, and they were back on the streets.

“Right!” Rayla straightened up a little, a determination in her eyes. “Let’s go.”

Callum let Rayla lead the way back towards the market, and he noted that the streets were a little livelier today. It seemed the effects of the new moon had worn off enough for the Moonshadow population to start picking up again, passing by the pair as they went.

Callum’s backpack wriggled under his cloak, sending little shivers of anxiety running through him. They’d have to risk bringing Zym into the market today, and the thought didn’t sit well at all with Callum, but he tried to squash down his anxieties by focusing on the task at hand. After this, they’d be set, no more worrying about sneaking around towns, or dealing with shady businessmen, they could just focus on their mission; protecting the little dragon, learning magic, and saving the world.

The walk back to the market was a quiet one, both left to stir in their own thoughts. Callum found himself wondering what was going on in Rayla’s mind. Was she still concerned about last night? What had she heard that had put her so on edge?

…Were they still being followed?

He peeked over his shoulder briefly but there was no one down the path from them. Of course, if they were being followed that person would obviously want to remain unseen so…

As though sensing Callum’s tensions, Rayla’s hand neatly tucked under his arm, and he was brought back to the moment at hand. As he glimpsed over at Rayla, there was more of an air of confidence about her, and Callum was reminded all over again of how strong she was. The new moon had passed, and even if something were to happen, she’d be okay, they’d be okay. He was sure she could fight off anything and win at this point. She caught his eye and gave him a little reassuring smile, as though to say ‘I’ve got you, everything will be fine.’

And he believed her.

It wasn’t long before they reached the cave entrance once more, and Rayla reminded him quietly of the rules as she tugged his hood around his face again. It looked quieter today inside, and for a while, Callum was relieved. Surely with less eyes about things would be easier. But he had been mistaken. With less of a crowd, it became glaringly obvious as they wandered through the market, that people were staring at the pair, patrons and stall owners alike. To be fair, it was probably odd seeing two young teenagers wandering around a black market of all places. It was also somehow just as overwhelmingly loud as before, stall owners peddling their wares, trying to draw in sales and with less crowd to hide around, Callum felt a lot more uncomfortable as comments were made in an attempt to lure him and Rayla in. He kept his eyes down.

If there was any bright side, it was that this time they knew where to find the stall, and there, lo and behold, was the Skywing elf, rocking back on his chair quite relaxed and aloof. When he caught the pair heading toward him, his face flickered into an excited smile and he sat up a little straighter.
“Why there they are! Two of my valued customers! Welcome back to Palamigi’s Wares.”

There hadn’t been a sign on his stall that Callum could see, but he could only assume that Palamigi was the man before them. Funny, he hadn’t really thought about his name before.

Rayla went straight to business, her eyes hard and serious. “Did you get it?”

“Of course! What kind of businessman would I be to not keep my word, hm?” He leaned forward, resting his elbow on the counter, and with a surprisingly elegant flick, tipped his hat and spun its hem through his fingers so it twirled gracefully and then he held it opening upwards. Then he reached in, eyes flicking between Callum and Rayla with a sly grin, and out of the hat he revealed something small and shiny.

It could easily fit in the palm of Callum’s hand. A little oval shaped pearly broach, lined with silver curves and little glittery green gems. In the middle sat a pale purplish blue hued opal, and then he noticed the patterns, around the stone it was framed either side by little lunar moths. It was so delicate and beautifully crafted that Callum gasped a little as he admired it, and the booth keeper grinned a little, pleased by Callum’s reaction.

Rayla simply raised an eyebrow. “So you just… were sitting there with it… under your hat? For however long?”

“I wanted to be cool and dramatic, let me live a little.” The elf replaced his hat, a more serious expression on his face. “Right. Now have you brought me my payment?”

Rayla reached into a pocket on the inside of her sleeveless jacket and flicked the gold coin at him, and he caught it gracefully before turning to Callum. In turn, Callum flipped through his sketchbook until he found the picture he had finished yesterday, and pulled the page out, delicately passing it over. There was a strange nervousness that swept over him in the moment. What if he didn’t like it? It would completely dash all of their plans. He wondered if Rayla was above stealing the broach if it came to it. But his worries subsided when a big grin split across Palamigi’s face.

“Hey look! It’s me!” His voice was exuberant, and he bounced a little excitedly on the balls of his feet. “Wow this is great! I should- hold on-” He scrambled under the table and they heard clattering, before he reappeared with something that resembled a little tiny artist’s easel and a plank of wood, marked with the words ‘NO REFUNDS’. He flipped it over so the blank side was facing outwards and plonked it down on the easel, then rested the picture on it with a grin, setting it down on his stall, a little ways back so it was behind the wares he was selling.

Now two cocky grins flashed at the human, and he watched as the elf copied the pose he had been drawn in, arms crossed, rocking back on his chair casually, with a confident smile, one hand flicking the brim of his hat.

Rayla rolled her eyes but Callum smiled back at the man.

“How do I look?”

“Like the coolest vendor this side of the market.”

“Well put! I like you, kid.” He rocked forward on the chair with a strangely kind smile. “Right. And because I like you, and also I don’t want you coming back thinking this thing is defective, I have a couple warnings for you so listen closely.” His face was a little more serious now. “This was made by my buddy, a Moon Mage up in Falgora’s Pass. Here’s how it works. You need to charge it every night under the light of the moon, otherwise it won’t work the next day. It’ll create an illusion that
lasts depending on the phase of the moon. The closer it is to a full moon, the longer it lasts.” His eyes were gravely serious now. “Here’s the important part. New moons? Leave this thing kaput. No moon, no magic. So you gotta be careful.” Callum nodded nervously and he continued. “On average I’d say it lasts for like… maybe 5 hours on a crescent moon up to 9 hours on the… moon phase where it’s nearly full. I can’t remember its name.”

“Waxing or waning, depending.” Rayla interjected.

“Yeah that. On the day after a full moon though I think the effects last for like a good 18 hours. Oh, and here’s the other important thing. Once you activate it, it’s kind of like on a timer, right? So even if you deactivate it beforehand, it’ll still eat up the time, so you can’t really preserve the power of it. So you gotta be really careful and pay attention to that.”

“How will I know when time’s running out?” Callum asked quietly.

“The eyes on the moths glow a sort of bright green when it’s active or charged. But they dull and kinda turn this grey colour once the magic is used up. Also it’s not like a sudden transformation back, it’ll happen slowly and give you enough time to find cover. Hopefully.”

“…Good to know. Anything else we need to worry about?”

He scratched his chin. “Uhh… no I think that’s everything. Oh wait!” He turned over the broach in his hand and Callum and Rayla leaned over to see. “To turn it on and off, there’s this little switch here. Just flick that and you’re good to go. The illusion will work as long as it’s attached to your clothing, if something or someone takes it off the illusion will end instantly.” He flipped it over again and Callum held out the palm of his gloved hand for him to drop it into. He watched something flash across the elf’s golden eyes for a minute. “I don’t know what you guys are up to, and usually I wouldn’t care but uh… Keep safe. I guess.”

Rayla glanced a little surprised between him and Callum. “Oh uh. Thanks. We will.”

And… that was that. They left the market with little hassle, both breathing a sigh of relief at its entrance, and then set off once more, leaving the town behind them.

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They weren’t far out of town when Callum’s curiosity got the better of him.

“I should try it. Just to make sure it works, you know?”

Rayla sighed. “You heard him. Once you turn it on it’s gonna drain the power. We should save it for now.”

She heard the gears in Callum’s mind turning. “Well what if we bump into someone?”

Rayla threw a little affectionate eye roll at him. “You’re not going to stop until I let you try it on, are you?” He beamed back with big excited puppy-dog eyes. She had to admit, it was piquing her interest as well. “Fine, fine. Just… hold on a minute, we’ll get off the path first, it’ll be safer.”

She took his hand, it seemed to be a habit of theirs lately, and guided him through the brush for a few minutes until she stopped, satisfied that they were the only two about. Letting him go, she turned and
leant back against a tree, hand on hip, crossing one leg in front of the other.

“Alright then. Go for it.”

Callum looked down at the broach, and then back up at Rayla timidly. “…I’m nervous now. What if it doesn’t work? Or I turn into like… something other than an elf?”

She had to bite back a laugh. “What? Oh come on Callum it’ll be fine. You were excited a few minutes ago.”

He furrowed his brow and took a breath, removing the gloves to pin the broach to his scarf. Zym’s head poked out from under his cloak, and when he saw the coast was clear, the little dragon jumped down, stretching, before padding over to Rayla and curling around her feet to watch Callum too.

“Alright I guess. Here goes nothing.” He braced himself and Rayla heard a little click as his fingers curled around the gem.

There was a bright light for just a second, but it caught her off-guard and she had to raise an arm to her eyes, the baby dragon at her feet squeaking in alarm and shielding his face with his wing.

Callum made a little noise of surprise. “Am I…? Ray?” Ray squinted, blinking a few times as her blurred vision focused. And then the arm fell from her face and she gasped.

And then she grinned.

“Oh… of course you’d be a Skywing elf.”

Somehow, despite it all, it was still recognisably the boy she knew. Different and the same all at once. The colouration of his feathers almost reminded her of a tawny owl, with chestnut hair, through into downy copper skin, fading into tans just past his cheekbones, and down the sides of his nose. And atop his head, like a crown, befitting of a prince, sat two long smooth golden horns, reaching skyward. Little tufty pointy ears, edged with feathers poked out from his hair, and golden marks curled just under his cheeks.

What caught Rayla by surprise the most though was that the disguise also affected his clothes. He appeared to be garbed in traditional Skywing wear, he was still in a jacket, albeit tuftier and rimmed with a cream coloured fur, and his shirt was an off white now with spiralling elven patterns. His scarf seemed the most unchanged part of the spell, Rayla imagined Callum would likely be thankful for that. His scarf seemed quite dear to him.

He blinked back at her. “I’m a…?” He glanced down at his hands, turning them over, and she watched in amusement as his jaw dropped and he gawked at her. “I’m an elf!” He all but cried out into the forest.

“Shh.” She grinned. “Nobody likes a loud elf.”

He laughed, a sweet and joyous sound. “A Skywing elf, wow! Oh my gosh- do I have-?” He did a little excited twirl as he caught sight of the wings folded behind him and caught one between his hands, running his fingers through the soft feathers. Then he beamed up at her, jogging over. She laughed, pushing off the tree to meet him, and found herself in his soft arms as he gave her an excited squeeze. She felt him sway her back and forth a little before taking a few steps back, admiring himself further.

“My hands, wow it’s so strange- Like I can still feel my pinkie fingers but they’re not… Are they invisible? I think they’re invisible Rayla!”
His hands found his face, his horns, and his ears-

They lingered on his ears for a moment. She watched his face flicker to curiosity as he tested something. Concentration on his features. She could make out the twitching movement of the little tufty ears behind his fingers. And then he gasped, overjoyed.

“I can move them!” His eyes were full of unbridled delight. “Rayla! Rayla look!” He was beaming, fingers pointed at his ears. “They wiggle! I have cute wiggly ears! Like you!”

Rayla chortled. “You do! You do have cute wiggly ears.” She was grinning widely now, and took a few steps forward. Her hands found his shoulders, and she tried hard to look serious, but the corners of her mouth were still upturned as she spoke. “Now this is very important, Callum. You have to promise me you’ll use the power of your wiggly ears for the forces of good.”

Callum shot her an amused look. “Is that sarcasm?”

“Oh no, of course not. Don’t you know we elves store all our magical abilities in our ears?” She smiled mischievously and Callum laughed, giving her a little jab in the arm with his knuckles “Quit teasing me!”

“What? What is it?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. It’s just… nice seeing you so happy.”

His eyes widened a little in surprise, but it melted back into a warm grin. “Yeah well… you have to admit this is cool right? Right? Like look, I have wings! And horns! And look, Rayla!” Suddenly his hand was on hers and he guided it up to his cheek. She brushed the back of her fingers across his now downy skin. “I’m so soft!”

She bowed her head down, shaking it as she laughed, and nearly head-butted the boy in the nose as she did. “You’re so precious.”

“What?”

“You. You’re like an excited little child getting a new toy. It’s completely adorable.”

He smiled shyly back, hues of pink tinging his fuzzy face. “Oh. R-Really?” His eyes shone, and her heart fluttered again. Despite all the illusions, Callum’s eyes had remained untouched by the spell. They were still the eyes of the boy she had found herself in this strange circumstance with. Deep, warm, soft hazel eyes.

“Yeah.” Rayla became acutely aware in that moment that her fingers hadn’t left his cheek. She pulled them away slowly, and as though to dispel the strange tension that hung around them, raised it to ruffle the auburn hair at the side of one of his new horns. “You big goofball.”

She took a step back, watching Zym sniff around Callum’s legs curiously. For a moment, the dragon had looked confused and concerned, but now he looked a little more relaxed, and Callum scooped him up with a laugh.
“It’s alright Zym, it’s still me, see?” Zym cooed, tilting his head a little and Callum grinned and bumped his forehead to Zym’s. “I’m still me. Even if I look a little different.” Rayla watched as Zym’s tail swayed side to side contently, seemingly satisfied that Callum was who he said he was, and the dragon stuck his tongue out and lapped at Callum’s cheek sending little tiny blue sparks dancing across his skin. Callum giggled under his breath. “I love you too, buddy.”

Rayla smiled adoringly at the scene before her for a few more seconds before she put a hand back on Callum’s arm. “Sorry to disturb this touching moment, but we should probably get going if we want to get to… wherever it is we’re going.”

Callum gave an affirming nod and smile. “Yeah, alright. Come on Zym!” The dragon chirped and scrambled up Callum and curled around the back of his head to lay across his shoulders. He gave a little cheerful squeak at Rayla and she grinned back, brushing a finger down his snout and tapping him on the end of the nose, before she turned to lead them deeper into the woods.

In the dark undergrowth behind them… something growled lowly.

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Callum’s eyes barely tore from the compass as they walked, so he became somewhat reliant on Rayla guiding him carefully through the brush.

“You’re going to slip and twist your ankle if you’re not careful.” She warned shaking her head disapprovingly. “And I’m not going to be happy if I have to carry you the rest of the way.”

He chuckled and rolled his eyes, stealing one last glance at the compass before replacing it in his bag. They had switched the broach off while they travelled through this part of the forest, it seemed somewhat safer given they were far from any paths or roads, and it would be easy to just quickly switch the illusion back on if they felt as though they would run into anyone.

“Look to the sky.” He mumbled quietly. The words had been spiralling in his mind ever since the initial elation of his little transformation had worn off.

“Huh?”

Rayla raised an eyebrow then looked up, squinting in the sunlight that trickled through the leaves above. “Well I don’t really…” She trailed off and put a hand out to stop him. “Wait here a minute.” And before he could open his mouth to question her she was clambering skilfully up a tree, disappearing out of view.

“No not really.” Her voice finally replied, muffled by leaves. “Not yet anyway. Maybe we have to get closer.” Callum took a step towards the tree she’d climbed.

And that was when it happened.

Something whizzed past his back, small and fast, and landed with a dull thunk in a tree just past him.
And then in rapid fire, he heard another zip. Zym yelped in surprise. And then, horrified, Callum felt the dragon’s grip on his shoulders slacken, and he rolled off and landed limp on the ground behind him. Callum was seized by shock and horror.

No.

“Ray-!” He shouted up, his voice spiked with bloodcurdling terror. But he didn’t get a chance to finish her name as he felt something small and sharp stab him in the arm. The pain stunned him into silence and he looked down. It wasn’t agonising, more like a bee sting in intensity. But as he looked, he felt a numbness trickling through him, up his shoulders, and his legs began to shake.

There was a dart in his arm.

The dread continued to claw at his chest, mixing painfully with the numbness that was ceasing him, and his legs buckled. He tried desperately to cry out for Rayla again but his mouth couldn’t form the words, coming out as a pained, terrified cry. He could hear Rayla above, far too distant, and everything felt strangely sluggish in those few moments.

The world was falling from him into slow motion. It had only been a few seconds, but each one was drawn out, feeling like minutes.

…Oh no. He was going to die.

Rayla wasn’t going to make it in time, his vision was already blackening and he felt himself hit the floor, his heart quivering anxiously. He wouldn’t even mercifully be able to see her face one last time. He was going to die there, alone and scared, next to the dragon he had promised to protect, now laying just as still as he was. He swallowed hard, tears pricking at his eyes and he tried to imagine the people in his life he loved, Ezran, Rayla, his parents… His parents. At least, maybe, he’d see them again. He closed his eyes, feeling warm streaks of tears across his face.

He could hear Rayla’s voice, but it was so echoed and garbled he couldn’t catch her words, only the fearful tone of her voice, and the pressure of her hand against his arm.

‘Rayla, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’

By the time she had turned him onto his back, his thoughts had slipped away from him, and he fell limp against the grass.

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“Ray-!” Rayla’s ears twitched and a cold dread shuddered down her spine. His voice, it was so afraid- something terrible must have happened. She sprung down the tree as fast as she could and a lump caught in her throat.

Callum was on his knees, falling forwards slowly and landed with a gentle thud in the grass, unmoving. Zym was there, laying on his back, still.

“Callum! Zym!” She cried out, falling to her knees between the boy and the dragon, one hand resting on Zym’s chest, and the other found the human prince’s arm, turning him onto his back. “Callum, I’m here, I-I’m-” Her breath shuddered in horror. Was he…? Were they…?
But as she reached to try and find a pulse, her ear twitched again, catching a slight sound and reality came back to her. Something, or someone had done this and-

Her instincts had her jerk to the side as something flew past her head and landed with a loud metallic **thunk** into the tree she had moments ago climbed.

That was definitely not a dart. *That* was a crossbow bolt. Rayla found her feet quickly and with a **swish** both blades were out. She glowered at the bushes, teeth gritted, eyes narrowed.

“Come out and fight me face to face instead of hiding in the bushes, you coward!”

There was no reply at first, but every muscle in Rayla’s body tensed, ready for combat. Oh, whatever had done this to her boys would not get off lightly, she was certain of that.

And then, he rose, ever so slowly, a towering muscular Earthblood elf who must have been twice the size of Rayla. His hood was up, but even then she could make out his jagged features and his striking blue eye. He sneered at her.

Rayla’s nose wrinkled and she grimaced back at him. “What did you do to my friends?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about them.” His voice came out almost in a purr, but distorted almost like a strangled animal. And then, it was all too low and deadly cold. “Akzral wants them alive. You should be more concerned about yourself… Because I get to *kill* you.”

And ever so slowly, he reached behind him, and from his back, she watched him pull out a large metal mace. And with a speed she hadn’t expected, he lurched forwards and was suddenly right in her face. As he swung she barely swept out of the way in time, darting under his arm. She jumped back glancing him up and down, reading him as quickly as she could. She needed to draw him away from the princes, if either of them got hurt-

His eye caught hers and he scoffed. He was standing over the two unconscious figures, and his boot rested atop Callum’s back. “Oh what’s wrong little one? You seem awfully attached to this vile little human boy.” A sadistic grin split across his face. “They want him alive but oh… it would be such a shame if something were to accidentally happen to him…” He wavered the mace over his head and Rayla felt her stomach drop.

“No! P-Please… don’t.” She tried to keep her voice from shaking. She couldn’t attack him like this. If she disarmed him, he would drop the weapon on Callum, or if she lunged, he could easily crush the boy underfoot. So she stood there, holding her breath, waiting, trying desperately to think. “If you have *any* ounce of honour, you’ll fight me as I stand, not kill him while he’s down.”

She watched his grin twitch, and slowly the mace was lifted away and rested calmly against his shoulder. Then, he stepped towards Rayla, pressing down his full weight on Callum as he stepped on the boy to amble closer. She recoiled as she heard a pained little whimper from the human and swallowed back the emotion clumping in her throat. “I don’t really do honour. But I’ll admit it’ll be more fun to squash you first.” His lips pursed together and a cockiness exuberated from him. “Tell you what… you want honour? Here. I’ll let you take the first swing this time. It’ll make things interesting.”

Rayla exhaled through her nose and her legs moved before her mind could. She darted forwards, anticipated the swing, feinting to the left and…

She miscalculated.
She had been certain he would swing down at her but in a swift movement, the mace fell from his shoulder and swung upwards colliding with her right shoulder and upper chest. She cried out as something cracked from the impact and as the spikes dug into her through her leather armour, the collision sent her flying skyward, her weapons were ripped from her grasp. She landed a good few feet away, rolling across the ground and colliding painfully with the base of a tree. She hissed under her breath, agony ringing through her, pulsing from her shoulder.

He sighed, tutting as he shook his head, approaching her as she lay there, stunned and shaking. “Oh, shameful. I thought this would be more fun, that you’d put up more of a fight. Oh well. Let’s end this shall we?” He raised the mace to take another swing, but with what energy she had, Rayla kicked away from the tree and rolled between his legs. She heard the smash of metal against wood a fraction of a second after her foot had left the tree.

He paused, glowering at her over his shoulder, and it gave Rayla enough time to pull her shaking body back to her feet. He huffed and shook his head. “Oh, I pity you. Truly. The longer you draw this out the more painful your death will be. But if you’re going to keep bouncing around like that I suppose I’ll need a weapon that can keep up.” He returned the mace slowly to his back, and Rayla watched as he reached for something on his belt, slowly drawing out a large deadly looking machete.

Rayla’s eyes flickered with confusion. The mace had made sense to her, from the looks of it, the weapon had been crafted by Earthblood hands, but this? The machete was clearly of Moonshadow origin and it made her… uneasy, to say the least. He grinned again, running his finger slowly across the side of its edge.

“Nice isn’t it? One of the first weapons I collected. I’ve run through a fine number of people with this.”

Rayla’s eyes burned into his own, and she bit back her words. But now she felt vulnerable. Her blades were scattered, and she feared if she broke eye contact for even a second to check their location, he would strike. She acted on instinct. She bolted, as he did, the larger elf forward, and her to the side, reaching for at least one of her blades so that she could hold her ground. She tumbled and rolled again, grabbing her blade in the hand of the arm that wasn’t screaming at her in agony and raised it to meet the incoming weapon. There was a clash of metal against metal, and he bore down on her heavily. It took all her strength to hold him back, but eventually, the metal of both blades slipped, and he used it to slash at her previously uninjured arm, leaving a nasty gash against her skin.

She hissed, and in retaliation, her blade slashed up, catching him in the face and he staggered back clutching at his jaw. It gave Rayla enough of an opening to properly take him in. Something on his person caught her eye, and she lunged again, but this time, Feran was prepared, and he countered, shoving Rayla back the tip of his blade catching her in the side.

She staggered back, panting, the grip on her blade was now slipping, and with a glance down she shuddered. The hilt of her blade was wet with blood, her blood, from the wound on her upper arm as it trickled down to her hands. She couldn’t keep this up much longer. But maybe, if she was lucky… she wouldn’t have to.

Feran dived forward again, a fury in his eyes this time, and Rayla tried to dodge, but he crashed into her, and she found herself pinned down, blade clattering from her hand once more. His hand crunched down on her wounded shoulder and she howled out in pain. The man’s voice hissed. “You insolent child. I’ll make sure you die a slow and agonising death for this.” He snarled, blood trickling down his chin and dripping onto her neck.

She regarded him coolly. “I’d… like to see you try.” He snarled, and pulled back the machete, but froze, and his face flickered to confusion. Now, Rayla smirked, and weakly raised a pointed finger.
He followed her gaze to his chest, where one of his own darts was stabbed. “That would be the art of misdirection. Got the idea from you, you big fool.” She grinned, watching the harrowing realisation flicker in his one good eye. She felt his hand on his shoulder tremble and his own weapon clanged to the floor beside her face.

Life was precious. And Rayla would get to keep hers on this day. But unfortunately, she was now stuck in a bit of a situation. As the giant fell, he collapsed on top of the girl, who let out a little muffled ‘ooof!’ He was still awake, even if he couldn’t move, and she could hear him growling lowly as she attempted to pull herself free, her fingers scrambling for purchase in the grass. When she did finally slip herself out, hers eyes caught his again, furious, glaring daggers into her very heart and soul.

She pulled a little cocky smile back at him, before turning onto her knees and pulling herself, exhausted and agonisingly towards her blades. Once they were safely back in her possession, she stood, legs shaking, and she shuffled back towards her princes.

The hunter had said that they were alive. And yet a cold fear bit away at Rayla’s insides as she approached. They were so still, if they were breathing it was hardly at all. But they needed to get out of here, urgently, and put as much space between this man and them as she possibly could. So she slunk an arm around Callum’s waist and hoisted him up onto her shoulder with some level of difficulty. Then, in the arm that was still ringing with an excruciating pain, she scooped up the little dragon close to her chest.

It was agony. But she steadied a shaking breath… and ran.

She ran as fast as she could, sluggish and slowed from the weight of her fallen companions, and biting back the pain ringing through her entire body now. Several times she nearly tripped, but the momentum carried her forwards, and despite the aching of her legs and burning of her lungs, she didn’t stop.

She had no idea where she was, or where she was going, but she had to get away, get somewhere safe, and make sure Callum and Zym were…

They would be okay, right? That elf had wanted them alive. But what if… what if…?

She shook the thought from her mind, but instinctively, the arm around the boy on her shoulder heaved him up as he slipped and she gave him a small squeeze, and against the protests of her ruined shoulder she pulled Zym closer so the little dragon’s head flopped against her collarbone. The motion sent throbbing shockwaves through her, and yet Zym’s soft little breaths against her neck offered some small level of comfort, his eyelids fluttering in his sleep.

By the time she had collapsed to her knees, body shaking from exertion, the flickers of dusk were beginning to orange the western skies. The boy and dragon tumbled in a heap from her arms, and she coughed and hacked as she tried to fill her lungs, wiping the sweat from her brow with a weak and trembling arm. The young elf groaned, glancing around for anything they could use as a temporary shelter for now.

“Callum?” Her voice cracked through shaking breaths, and she weakly pulled him onto his back. He was still completely limp, and she placed a hand gently on his chest to feel for him breathing. It was shallow, and she pursed her lips together, her ears pinning back in worry. “Callum hey… come on, you gotta wake up. You…” Her voice trailed off and she scooped him up in one arm. “I need your help… I can’t keep carrying you both. It’s too much.”

No response. She swallowed, shaking her head, and ever so gently laid him back on the grass. “Fine.
Be like that, you stubborn human.” She whispered softly, brushing his fringe out of his eyes. It was then she noticed the little stains streaming across his face from his eyes and her heart sunk. He’d been crying. “Oh Callum…” She reached out and gently brushed her thumb across the watermarks to wipe them away. “Don’t be scared. I’ve got you now, okay?”

Her attention then turned to the dragon lying at his side. “What about you Zym, are you gonna help me out?” The little dragon lay just as still and she reached over to give him a little scratch on the top of his snout. Zym didn’t respond either and she sighed gently. She scooped the dragon up close and curled him up gently on Callum’s chest, wrapping the boy’s arm around the dragon supportively.

“Hold on. I’ve got you both.” She braced herself as she scooped the boy up to carry him bridal style, and she could feel her arm trying to give way but she fought it as she stood. “I’m sorry Callum,” she whispered. “I think I might be getting blood on your jacket. I’ll wash it for you when I get a chance, alright?”

Even though there was no witty remarks or soft reply, talking to him helped her somehow. ‘You’re fine.’ She could imagine him saying. ‘You should be more worried about yourself.’ He’d try and dote on her the second he was awake, of that she was sure. But right now, they both needed her to be strong.

So she would be.

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The passage of time felt completely distorted to Callum. He didn’t dream. And there was a terrible awful feeling as his consciousness regained where he entered a sort of sleep paralysis. Everything was pitch black, and he couldn’t move. He couldn’t hear anything.

Panic set in.

Was he dead? Was this what it was like? Just empty nothingness and an inability to feel, to move, to see or hear? It terrified him, he wanted to call out to someone, anyone, but he couldn’t. It was torture. But as he lay there, he could feel something, a sensation of his back being lifted gently up and he could hear something, a voice… one he knew all too well now.

“Hey… it’s okay, Callum, it’s okay.”

And then he realised to his relief that he wasn’t dead, but rather laying limp in Rayla’s arm. At least, he was pretty sure he was alive. If he was dead and hearing Rayla’s voice, he imagined her words would probably involve a lot more her yelling at him or words full of bitter grief…

But he still couldn’t open his eyes, they felt glued shut, and he trembled, trying to at least find words to let her know he was awake, but none came to him.

So he lie there, perfectly still. It was at the point he realised just how numb every part of his body was. There was little sensation anywhere, only pressure, the pressure of his back against Rayla’s arm, of her hand on his side, and of something rather heavy sitting on his chest. Whatever it was, it was making it rather difficult to breathe, and as he tried to take a larger breath, that was when a sharp pain rang through his chest and back, and he whimpered, shuddering.

Immediately he felt Rayla’s grip on him tighten a little and something brushed against his cheek.
lightly. “H-Hey, hey. Shh… you’re alright.”

It was almost like magic, the way her soothing words dispelled the pain, and the tension in his body relaxed again. “Callum I’m so sorry.” She continued after a few seconds. “I wanted to keep you from getting hurt, but I-I don’t know, he stood on you pretty hard.”

Who? Someone stepped on him? When?

“You know what I… I don’t think… hold on… Zym’s probably not making it very easy for you to breathe is he?” and like that he heard a little scuffle and the weight on his chest was lifted, but as it was, he heard a little pained cry from the elf holding him, and the sound sent a wave of emotions through his brain.

She was hurt. Something had hurt her, and he wanted so badly to help her, but he couldn’t, and he could feel the frustration rising.

After a moment, he heard her sigh. “Please wake up soon okay? I don’t know how safe we are right now, we really need to get moving but I just… I can’t carry you any further while I’m like this and…” She finally fell silent.

He tried to take another deep breath and the pain rang through him again, sending out another pained cry, and she clutched him close once more. He tensed, gritting his teeth, then with what energy he could muster, he finally opened his eyes. He heard Rayla gasp lightly, and as his eyes glanced up to meet hers and he mustered a weak smile.

His voice came out broken and weak, but it felt louder in the silence. “H-Hey.”

She was too stunned to reply at first, but he watched her face crack into a relieved watery-eyed smile. Then, in a voice so soft and gentle, she responded.

“…Hey.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow that was pretty intense.

Quick shout out to some people! First, Leslie, who helped me name Palamigi, and drew some cute art of him! His name comes from the word "Palamig", meaning "Chill" in Filipino! And also shout out to Dani for drawing really adorable art inspired by this fic. You guys are amazing, and really inspire me to keep going! <3
And thank you to all of you who read this, and leave lovely comments or say hi to me on tumblr and twitter. You'd be surprised they go a long way towards keeping me going! <3 so thank you!
“You’re hurt.”

It was the first observation Callum had made when his eyes adjusted and his gaze had settled on her, his eyes flickering over her. He couldn’t see much, but her face was paler than usual, little scratches flecked across her skin. Her eyes were totally exhausted, duller even than they had been when she had been suffering from the new moon. But it was her shoulder that sent a horrible feeling churning in his stomach. He could see the blood seeping into her clothing just under her collarbone, dark against the bright teal of her shirt, and there was clear damage to the leathery tunic, dented and pierced in places. Thick dried streaks of blood trickled down her arm over the straps of her shoulder pads down to her elbow. Her upper arm and shoulder just looked… mangled. Her forearm rested limp against his chest, and he realised that the warmth at his cheek came from her hand that was curled there, the backs of her fingers just resting gently against his skin. Her other arm cradled him lightly so his head lolled against her other shoulder.

She was in pain. It was written all over her face, and yet despite it all, she smiled down at him warmly, relief and hope flickering in her eyes. “Hey… it’s fine. I’ll manage.” Her hand fell slowly from his face but as she moved her arm he watched her wince, trembling a little as she shuffled to get comfortable. Her hand rested against his chest over his heart, and despite the numbness in his body, it offered him a little comfort to feel her hand there. She tried to turn her grimace into a weak grin.

Callum tried desperately to move his arm, to reach up and just hold her hand, or reach for her face, to provide any kind of comfort back to her. But his arms remained limp at his sides, barely able to twitch his fingers.

He took a minute to take in his surroundings. He could see the sky overhead darkening through a rooftop canopy, and something tall scaling up past Rayla, a rocky formation. They were still outside, but sheltered by the leaves above, and on the sides by scraggily thick bushes. It seemed Rayla had stopped to rest them in as good a hiding spot as she could possibly find out here.

…How long had he been out for? The sky was growing dim, but it didn’t seem like a cloudy day. Surely it couldn’t be sundown already…

“Ray… What happened? What did this to you?”

For a second, Callum thought he saw fear dance through her eyes, and she broke eye contact, looking up and around. “I… We’ll talk about that later. For now, do you… do you think you can walk?”

“How can I walk? Rayla, can you even walk?”

Her ears pinned back a little as her face furrowed into a small frown. “Callum… I’m fine.”

“Rayla you look like you’ve been hit by a dragon or something, you’re not fine-!” But as he spoke, his frustration rising, that awful sharp pain rung out through him again and he shuddered with a gasp, curling up and biting back a pained cry.

“Callum!” Her hand jerked up to his face again and he felt her pull him closer gently. “Callum please, you need to stop working yourself up. I’m not the only one who took a bad hit today.”
Callum tried to steady his breathing until the ringing dulled enough that he was able to relax back in
her arms. His chest still shook, trembling with the effort to breathe, and it was all so quiet except for
his shaking gasps.

Rayla waited patiently, silently, and despite Callum’s eyes being screwed tightly shut, he could feel
her hand still gently on his cheek, trembling a little, her thumb brushing back and forth just under his
eye. It helped ground him slightly as the pain passed.

“He’s… He’s still out there.” She finally spoke lowly, and Callum’s eyes fluttered open to look up at
her.

“H-Huh…?”

“He’s going to find us. I didn’t exactly make it hard for him to follow our trail. I don’t know how
long he’s going to be down for, he… he could be on his way here already.”

“Who?”

“The elf who did all this.” She looked at him desperately, almost pleadingly. “Which is why we need
to keep moving.”

Callum twitched his fingers again, and his arm shook with effort, but he found himself able to lift it
ever so slightly off the ground for a few seconds, before it landed with a thud back against the
ground. “Ray I… I can barely move at all let alone walk.”

Her face fell, and she looked away so Callum couldn’t see her face. “…Callum. I don’t know what
to do.” She whispered. “I can’t fight, I can’t carry you. All I can do is just… hold you both for now.”

Both? Callum felt a pang in his chest, as he suddenly fell aware of the fact that the baby dragon they
cared for was also right there, unconscious and still, his little head resting on his stomach. Why had
he become so focused on Rayla? Was Zym okay? His eyes searched the little dragon, but it seemed
no harm had befallen him. He was simply fast asleep, his breathing steady and warm.

“It’s okay.” Callum smiled weakly back up at her finally, after he was satisfied the dragon was okay.
“That’s all I need right now. And then when I can move, I’ll carry you both for a bit.”

That got a small laugh out of her. “You don’t need to do that. I can actually feel my legs.” Callum
felt her hand curl gently away from his cheek again and found his shoulder. She winced again, and
turned to look at him seriously. “Callum I want you to make me a promise.”

Something nervous fluttered in his chest. “What?”

“That if something… if something happens, and you’re able to, I want you to take Zym and run as
fast as you can. Try and get somewhere safe, like a town. Somewhere he wouldn’t dare to attack
you.”

“What about you?” He had a feeling he already knew the answer, and it wouldn’t be one that he
liked.

“If that elf shows up again I’ll try and buy you as much time as I can.”

“Rayla no. He’ll kill you.”

“I’m prepared for that.”
“Well I’m not!” Rayla frowned and opened her mouth to argue but he cut her off. “I’m not… I’m not going to let you die, Rayla. You might be prepared to give your life for this, but I—” His voice cracked with emotion and he glanced away. “I don’t want to lose you too.”

She was quiet, and yet he could almost hear her mind processing his words. Her hand trailed ever so slowly down his arm, until it found his hand, and she tucked it gently into his, fingers intertwining. He gave hers a tiny squeeze with the energy he had to fight through the numbness.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “…Okay.”

---

He had fallen asleep at some point. Callum wrapped up safely in Rayla’s arms her back against the rocky wall, and Zym curled across his lap. But it had taken Rayla far longer to drift off, the elf was far too alert and on edge.

All it would take was one slip up, and she would wind up dead. She knew this. She should have realised sooner. And it filled her with a terrible feeling, that if she fell asleep, there could be a chance she wouldn’t wake up again.

But she couldn’t fight off sleep forever, and it was becoming increasingly harder with Callum and Zym cuddled up to her like a warm blanket, and the exhaustion of her fight throbbing through her body. Her chin sat on top of Callum’s head, now resting just over her heart, and she heard him mumble something quiet and incoherent in his sleep. Rayla sighed closing her eyes. She was so tired. Far too tired, and when she spoke, it was low and soft, as to not wake the boy in her arms.

“Callum… If I die in my sleep tonight… if that hunter guy finds us… I just want to say thank you for being my friend. You brought purpose to my life and made it feel worth living again for the past few weeks. You gave… you give me hope.” She wondered if he heard her as she twiddled with his hand gently despite the throbbing pain of her arm. Her head tilted so she rested her cheek now against his hair, feeling the warm clutches of sleep tugging at her, pulling her down. She nuzzled against him a little, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “…So thank you, Callum. Thank you.”

And with those last words, Rayla slipped into the depths of slumber.

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Miles away, Feran lay limp against the dirt, his mind seething with rage. He resisted the pulls of unconsciousness. He was far too strong to let something like that take him out.

But to be bested by a mere child? That struck a blow to his pride. So he lay there, festering in his fury, until he felt the ground shake slightly with a dull thumping.


Feran hissed through his teeth but let out a low whistling noise, and the thuds stopped for a moment, before moving closer. Something loomed over him, framing him on each side by powerful monstrous
feet, and he felt a pair of jaws delicately lift him from the floor, and the creature disappeared back into the brush with the hunter in tow.

This wasn’t the last they’d see of him. Not by a long shot.

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“…Rayla? Ray?” Callum’s voice cut through the fog of Rayla’s mind as she begun to stir. Callum was still in her arms, Zym fast asleep on his lap.

“Huh…? What…?” Rayla raised her head from Callum’s, still a little dazed. But as she went to absentmindedly rub her eyes, the sharp pain rang through her again and she yelped in pain, twitching the arm cradling Callum away, and the poor human and dragon tumbled away from her and to the ground with a panicked and surprised;

“Ack!” Followed by a small squeak from Zym.

“Callum!” Rayla reached out for him with her not quite as broken arm but he raised a hand to wave her off-

…He raised a hand.

“Callum. You’re…?”

The boy righted himself, a little dazed, then sat up until he was kneeling in front of her, rubbing the back of his head. “…Yeah. I woke up and I guess the poison must have worn off in the night. I uh, I didn’t know how to wake you up.” He smiled awkwardly. “I’m sorry. You seemed so peaceful, I felt kind of bad, but my legs were going back to sleep and my back started to ache after a while.”

He scooped up Zym, who had stirred from the tumble, but it soon became apparent to them both that the little dragon was still rather limp in Callum’s arms. “Hey Zym… how you holding up?” Zym whined a little and buried his face into Callum’s chest letting out a sad little grumble. Callum frowned. “…Still?” He used a hand to lift one of Zym’s paws, and watched as he let it go and it flopped back down again heavily. Zym peeked a big sad eye open at him and Callum scratched him sympathetically on the cheek.

“…How about you?” She watched his eyes glance her up and down, and his face betrayed his concern for her.

“Oh yeah, I’m grand. I just love being beaten up by some random mace and machete wielding maniac.” She smirked, but Callum’s expression didn’t falter. The boy shuffled forward a little, his hand sort of wavering towards her timidly. Her glance flickered between his hand and his eyes.

“Callum what are you doing?”

His nose wrinkled a little. “I… don’t know, I just… I want to help somehow.”

She gave him a gentle but serious look, pulling herself carefully up so she was sitting a little straighter. “You can help by carrying Zym. We need to get moving. Right now.”

“Oh I… okay.”
Callum pulled himself up, and reached out a hand for Rayla. She took it, hissing through her teeth as all the aches and pains throbbed and shot through her. She staggered for a moment, her legs a little weak from the day before, but she steadied herself, and with a steely determination, took a step forwards. Then she froze.

The thoughts flashed across her mind of the hunter’s face and she remembered that he was still out there, that he could be following them. He could be close by, closer than they knew.

“Ray-”

She turned and lifted a finger to her lips to signal him to stay quiet. Callum took a tentative step forwards, cradling the little dragon in one arm, and his other hand delicately found her back, as the pair silently surveyed their surroundings.

Rayla swallowed hard. “Do you know which way we need to go?” She whispered, feeling Callum’s hand hesitantly leave her back and fumble for the compass in his bag. He offered it out to her, the arrow wavering and pointing them off to their left. Mercifully, it wasn’t telling them to head back the way she had run from the evening prior, and she out a small breath. “…Okay. We need to be quick but tread carefully. The last thing we want is to make it any easier for someone to follow us.”

“…Ray?” His voice was as quiet as hers, and he leaned a little closer, eyes meeting hers. “We need to get you to a doctor.”

She shook her head, frowning. “There’s no time for that. We need to push onwards.”

She heard him huff irritably through his nose a little but didn’t argue any further, as Rayla took a few steps forward.

She would manage for now. She had to.

---

They had been walking in a tense silence the entire day, stopping only to eat and exchange quiet words about the journey ahead. At about lunch time, Zym was finally beginning to wobble around like a new-born deer on his legs again, toppling over and over again as he attempted to walk and get the feeling back in his little muscles. His carers both appreciated the effort, carrying the baby all day was exhausting work.

It was evening by the time Callum made his concerns apparent again.

“If you’re not going to see a doctor, then will you at least let me help you?”

It was a Moonshadow elf custom not to show weakness. And that letting someone other than a medic or healer tend to your wounds could be taken in one of two ways. The first was almost an insult, the offeror suggesting that you were too feeble to take care of yourself. The second was a far more intimate gesture. To willingly let someone take care of you was the ultimate sign of trust, and was something usually reserved for family or lovers.

So it was understandable when a flurry of emotions caught in Rayla’s heart.

She almost said no as a force of habit. But his eyes were so soft and pleading, and his hand was so
gentle against her arm, and now he was smiling so kindly at her and-

She wondered if he could feel her trembling slightly. He looked worried now.

“Rayla, a-are you okay? You… look a little red in the face.”

Oh that didn’t help at all.

“U-Uh, yeah I…” She glanced away sheepishly. “You can… if you want. I guess.” When she caught his eye he was smiling warmly again.

“Thank you.”

To Rayla’s surprise, it didn’t take long for her embarrassment to subside. There was something that felt so soft and sweet about this, and it just felt… right. Callum was someone so dear to her, and to let herself willingly be vulnerable around him… it didn’t feel as awkward as she had expected.

She watched him work, cleaning and binding up her wounds as best he could with whatever he had to hand, usually little rags of fabric. And he was so tender and careful, anytime he felt her flinch from pain he’d pause, give her a soft apologetic look and continue only when she quietly reassured him.

He left her shoulder for last, clearly unsure about how to best approach it. His hands hovered over and around it timidly. “Can I…?”

She nodded softly. “Just be careful, I’m… pretty sure it’s broken so it hurts like a nightmare.”

With as much care as he could, and with Rayla’s help, he removed the shoulder pad from her arm, and then placed one hand on either side, feeling carefully, tentatively applying pressure. Fear flickered across the human’s face, and he didn’t meet her eye when he spoke. His voice was low and quiet.

“Rayla, I think it might be dislocated.”

“Oh. Joy.”

He ran his thumb gently across the line of her collar bone until it hit the fabric of her shirt. It sent little sparks of pain through her and she twitched a little, her fingers curling and her face scrunching up. He looked pensive, then ran it along again a little lower this time and paused about half way until it brushed along a particularly sore part of the bone.

“I… think you’ve got a little break here too.”

“I think you might be right.” She hissed painfully through her teeth, and her voice seemed to bring him out of his trance.

He pulled his hand away, and turned it so the backs of his knuckles brushed gently down and across all the torn muscles and wounds littering that area. She had probably broken more bones than Callum could find, ripped more muscles and ligaments if the ringing pain was anything to go by. He resigned himself quietly to at least try to clean the dried blood from her arm and dab gently with a damp rag at the bloody wounds around her shoulder where the mace had punctured her skin. It was no surprise to her that they were bleeding again as Callum worked, all the moving about didn’t give them the time they needed to properly heal, and she had reopened the wounds across her body a few times as they had been walking, trying not to bring any attention to them as to not worry her companions.

“He really did a number on you didn’t he?” There was remorse in Callum’s voice now when he
finally spoke again, and something coated his words. Something so sad and regretful.

“…Callum?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?” His apology took her by surprise, and she leaned forward a little to try and look him in the eye, but he looked away shamefully.

“If I hadn’t distracted you, if I had been more careful and kept a look out for threats, then maybe he wouldn’t have knocked me and Zym out. And… and you wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

“Callum don’t you dare blame yourself for this. You didn’t… we didn’t know. We thought we were safe.” Her voice was firm, but she softened a little when she noticed his hand trembling slightly as he held the cloth to one of her many injuries. “Callum look at me.” Begrudgingly he did so, and she smiled warmly at him. “I’m okay, see? Yeah I’m a bit banged up, but I’ll be alright. We escaped with our lives. And if it makes you feel any better, I’ll go see someone about all this as soon as we can, alright? Maybe we can find some medical help wherever we end up going.”

Callum relaxed a little at her words and she watched his sad eyes brighten up a little. “Alright.” She gave him a little nod and let him continue, the mood a little less tense.

She had closed her eyes at some point, quite content but her ears pricking at every tiny sound around them. So it was a little bit of a surprise to her when she heard the shuffle of fabric, and felt Callum wrap something soft and warm delicately around her. She peeked an eye open and found something red draped on either side of her neck.

“Rayla I gotta move your arm, okay?” He warned quietly and she nodded, bracing for the throbbing pain as he ever so gently lifted her forearm. She winced, but he held it gently, and wrapped the scarf under her arm to support it, wrapping it around her again and then tying it together near her other shoulder. He tugged the fabric gently around her forearm and elbow so that the weight was evenly distributed, her arm resting at an almost 90 degree angle against her now.

“Hey… there you go… that’ll do for now. Not too bad for a makeshift sling, right?”

“It’s not too bad at all.” She smiled. “Could do with being a little tighter though, my arms kind of hanging a bit limp.” She chuckled, and watched as Callum leaned across her carefully to tighten it a little, glancing between her arm and her face.

“How’s that?”

“Much better, Doctor Callum.” She replied, and she watched a little grin split across his face. Zym cooed up at them, his head resting against Rayla’s lap. “You’re right Zym, Callum is good at taking care of us, isn’t he?”

Callum blushed a little, laughing it off, and finally relaxed by Rayla’s side, scooping up Zym to lay the dragon along both their laps. He purred, rolling onto his back and Callum brushed his hand across the baby’s belly, Rayla feeling the dragon prince’s cheerful rumbles as he did.

“How are you holding up?” Rayla finally asked quietly.

“A lot better than you, I imagine.”

“Callum.”
“I’m okay. A little sore, but it’s mostly fine, it’s just if I try to breathe in too deeply, I get these horrible sharp shooting pains through my back and like along here.” He gestured with his hand along his side and down at a slight diagonal across where the middle of his ribcage would be.

Rayla slunk her free arm very slowly around his back and rubbed it gently, and she felt him lean against her ever so slightly, supporting most of his weight on the hand resting just behind her.

“Maybe we should get you looked over too.”

“Maybe. I hope I haven’t broken anything.” His hand rested on top of hers as her hand trailed to his side where he described the pains as being.

Rayla bit her lip as she recalled the image of the hunter stepping on Callum, the soft crack of something under his foot and Callum whimpering in pain. It caused an aching in her heart, and she squashed the memory down bitterly.

“I guess I won’t be using Aspiro for a while.” He mumbled.

“…Oh no, that’s half of your entire spell list!” Rayla cracked a little smile, trying to lighten both of their moods.

Callum sniggered. “Yeah I should really try and learn some new spells, huh? You don’t happen to know any other draconic words relating to the sky, do you?”

“Even if I did, you’d still need the runes for them.” She felt his shoulders sink a little, and she gave him a little encouraging squeeze. “Hey. That’s what we’re working towards, right? This compass is leading us to where we’re meant to go, to teach you more magic. So maybe it’ll lead us to like… some ancient sky mage in a tall tower who can teach you a bunch more spells.”

“Yeah… yeah!” He beamed. “It’s gonna be great!”

Rayla smiled fondly at him. ‘I’m so proud of you.’ She thought. ‘You’ve done so much I thought was impossible. And you continue to amaze me in different ways every single day.’

“Yeah… It’ll be great.”

---

The following morning was quiet. Peaceful even. And yet the pair remained tightly on edge as they walked, Zym fluttering gently at about shoulder height beside them. Zym seemed to be in a better way today, making full use of his mobility, taking little breaks to sit on Callum’s shoulder.

Callum’s ribs too were getting to a point where he could mostly ignore them. They were uncomfortable, but manageable at least for the mean time. So long as he focused on not breathing too sharply or making sudden movements. There were times they had to stop as he overdid it and the sharp ringing pains shot through him again, but they moved swiftly on as the moments passed.

The hunter hadn’t bothered them yesterday, and part of Callum hoped that perhaps some wild animal had found him and devoured him so he would never bother them again. Oh if only they could be so lucky.

Their progress was slower than usual, Rayla twitching and stopping them at every sound around
them. He couldn’t blame her for the paranoia, if something or someone attacked them right now, it
could spell the end of their journey together. And yet, Rayla still tried to put on a façade of strength,
a steely grit in her eyes as they walked, as though nothing could stop her.

Then again, perhaps, nothing could?

She was certainly stronger than anyone he had ever met before. And yet he kept getting this weirdly
protective feeling in his chest lately. He knew she could take care of herself, she was quite capable of
that. But seeing her hurt, it stirred something in him. He had felt the same way a while back, during
the time they knew about her wrist binding. A feeling that he couldn’t quite contain to one word, but
rather the idea of; ‘I want to do everything I can to help, to take away her pain, and make sure she’s
alright.’

But it had not been quite this intense back in the snowy town in Katolis. Now it felt too real. Rayla
could have lost her life.

“You’re awfully quiet. You doing alright?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I guess.” Callum tried to preoccupy himself with the compass, but he couldn’t bite
back the question for long. “A-Are… are you doing okay?”

Her good shoulder bumped against his gently. “Oh, of course that’s what’s bothering you.” She gave
him a knowing smile, and suddenly Callum felt weirdly conspicuous. Had he become that easy for
her to read? “You’re so soft… You can relax, Callum. I’m doing better today. I’m just thinking about
how tempting it is to try and pop my stupid arm back into place.”

“Please don’t!” His voice came out in a sort of shrill panic and she blinked back at him alarmed. “I
uh, I heard a story once from one of the guards, about a soldier who tried to do that and he ended up
messing up the nerves in his arm so badly he’s never been able to use or feel it fully since.”

Rayla’s nose wrinkled and she grimaced. “Oh. Huh. Well I do like being able to use my arm.”

“Yeah just… hang in there for now. We should let a professional take care of that.”

“What, so you’re telling me you’re not a professional medic? Could have fooled me.” She laughed
and Callum felt the tension around them dissipate. It was a relief, and he smiled softly back.

“Let’s just hope we find someone who can fix you up soon.” He gave her a playful grin. “I’ll have a
chance to test out my cool fancy new disguise!” Rayla bumped the back of her hand against his
wrist, and he took the opportunity to curl his hand around hers.

“To fix us both up.” She corrected gently.

They walked together, their spirits lifted a little higher now for a few hours, until the forest began to
thin slightly, and they could hear something up ahead.

People.

Callum’s hand jerked back into his bag to deposit the compass, and he felt the dragon dive into it
too, and then he fumbled for the broach- except he wasn’t wearing it anymore.

“Ray-! Rayla! The broach! Where’s-?” He hissed quietly.

“Didn’t you pin it to your scarf?” She looked down at her ‘sling’ and furrowed her brow.
“Where…?” She let him feel through the fabric wrapped around her arm, but the panic began to rise in his chest when he couldn’t find it. Where’d it go? After all that he couldn’t have just lost it! And then Rayla’s hand found his arm and she gave it a squeeze.

“Callum, calm down.” She whispered, her face serious. “Take a deep breath and keep looking. But also please stop jerking my arm about, it’s kind of agony.”

Callum’s face fell. “Oh gosh I’m so sorry.” He gently lowered her bandaged arm back down, steadying his trembling hands. And then finally, after what felt like an age, his finger brushed against something cold and metallic a little further up and closer to her shoulder. “Oh thank the stars…” He unpinned it carefully, and attached it to his jacket, flicking the broach on, and there was that strange sensation again as everything went white for a moment, and he felt the strange new appendages on his back, and the weight of the horns on his head.

When he met Rayla’s eyes again she was blinking, letting her eyes adjust, and rubbing at them with the side of her hand. “You… you need to give me a warning when you do that.”

“Oh I… sorry.” She smiled and waved it off.

“It’s fine. Still though… wow.” Reaching forward she brushed her hand down one of his wings. There wasn’t really any sensation there, but he could feel a little pressure. He imagined that would make sense, it was only an illusion, there were no nerves running through it. And yet he could still move them, as though they were his arms, without needing to think. So he did, as Rayla’s hand found his wing, he let the fake muscles relax a little under her touch and the feathers splayed out. He smiled when he heard a tiny barely audible gasp. “This is the coolest thing.”

“Careful, you’ll make our compass jealous of the broach.”

She laughed, letting go of his wing, and gave him an affectionate little poke in the chest. “Come on then, Elf Callum. Let’s go see what’s waiting for us up ahead.”

A path not unlike the one that they had followed to Kalarrden greeted them as they exited the treeline, though it was wider, more well-worn, and… to both their surprises, rather busy. The occasional carriage passed by, elves riding various mounts, and ambling by on foot, and the atmosphere was lively, cheerful even.

“Ray…?”

“I don’t know Callum.” She gave him a quizzical look. “I suppose it’d help if we actually knew where we were before we figure out what’s going on. My guess though is we must be near a big town if there’s all these people passing through.”

Callum looked both ways before jogging out to politely stop a couple of Sunfire elves, hands intertwined, laughing and talking together.

“Uh, e-excuse me?” The pair came to a standstill, smiling brightly at the boy. “Could you tell us where we are? We’re a little lost.”

“Oh, you’re on the path between Belissimara and Marinoris. Are you on your way to the festival?”

“…Festival?” Callum couldn’t help but light up a little at the mention.

“First time, huh? Marinoris holds the Festival of the Sky every year, I bet you’d love it!”

“Sky Festival?!” Callum’s whole face split into a huge grin fluffy ear to fluffy ear and he looked over
“Marinaris.” The older elf pointed with an amused smile and his thumb over his shoulder. “It’s maybe a half hour walk that way.”

“Thank you!” Callum did a polite little bow, and began to jog back over to Rayla, slowing back into a brisk amble when the ringing pain through his ribs reminded him once more of his injuries. There was still an excited spring in his step however, as he avoided elves walking and trotting past as he went. “Ray! Ray, Ray, Ray, Ray!”

Rayla laughed. “What? What is it?”

He was bouncing on his feet a little as he took Rayla’s hand in both his own. “Sky festival!”

“In Marinaris!”

“Yeah! Rayla we have to go! I think that’s where the compass taking us!” He reached one hand into the pocket of the bag, feeling Zym’s snout and him lick at Callum’s fingers a little before he pulled the compass free, and just as he had expected the arrow pointed down the path the couple had directed him down. “Look, see!”

Rayla gave him a soft look. “Alright, alright. Rein it in a bit Callum, people are gonna start staring.”

He chuckled, stopping the excessive bouncing, and replaced the compass back in his back. As he slipped his hand back into the bag, he heard a gentle ‘tink’ as Zym’s mouth pulled the compass out of Callum’s hand gently and down into its depths. “Oh, thank you Zym.”

He practically dragged Rayla along, unable to contain his excitement. His first festival in Xadia, and it came along at the perfect time. They could use a chance to unwind after everything they’d dealt with the past couple of days.

“Callum, hey, don’t forget what we’re here for.” Rayla warned cautiously. “Try not to get too distracted, alright? We still have a job to do.”

Callum slowed down a little to let Rayla’s footfalls step in time with his own. “I know, I know. But you have to admit it’ll be fun. And it’ll probably be safer too, right? No one would think to start a fight in the middle of a crowd.”

Rayla’s face betrayed her concern, and she didn’t quite meet his eye. “I just…” She trailed off. She didn’t have to finish the sentence. ‘I don’t know if anywhere is safe anymore.’

“Rayla?” She glanced across at him, and he gave her hand a little squeeze. “We’ll be careful.” He caught her sigh gently under her breath, and she nodded silently.

Inside Callum’s bag, the arrow of the compass spun wildly on its axis.
Marinoris was a much larger town than Kalarrden. In fact, it was almost a city in size, extending out and around the stretch of a huge sprawling rich blue lake and river. It was a lot more vertical too. Build upon large hills, the roads wound around and up them in steep slopes and staircases, buildings towering up around them, but it didn’t quite feel imposing. It was a little like a seaside town, even from where they stood, the port was visible, and it was immense in size, several large vessels docked in the harbour. The streets were lit up with colour, bunting dangling from the buildings, colourful marquees set up in the roads, and the town was so alive and bright and… full of wonder.

Just like Callum was in that moment.

Rayla didn’t really want to admit it to herself, but seeing Callum so abundantly excited as he took it all in filled her with a warmth that chased away her worries about their wellbeing in that moment. Maybe he was right. Maybe this place was safe.

“Rayla we should uh, look around. And you know. Blend in.” He grinned.

Rayla laughed. “You just want an excuse to play games and explore the festival.”

“What? No. Look at me Rayla, look at how super focused I am right now. This is for… investigation purposes. And surveillance.” He was trying to hide the little mischievous spark but she could see it in the smile of his eyes and lips and she rolled her eyes.

“…One day. One day of festivities. And I’m only saying that because I am too exhausted to argue with you.”

“Ray, it’ll be good for us.” His face was warmer now, and he took her hand in both of his now, brushing his thumb against her fingers. “We need some recovery time after what happened, right? We can have a nice fun day out, this time without worrying so much. Maybe we can just… be ordinary kids for a day.”

…Was something like that even possible? His eyes seemed to think so. Her fingers had curled around his without her noticing, and something fluttered in her heart.

“…Okay. You know what? You’re right.” She gave his hand a squeeze, and shot him a little determined smile. “Besides this is your first festival in Xadia, right? We might as well make it a memorable one.”

There were additional benefits to this plan too. In a large crowd it would be harder to track them. With so many eyes about, the chances of them getting attacked would be lower. And within the crowd, the pair stood out far less, especially now with Callum’s new disguise. They could walk about far more freely…

Rayla chided herself mentally for not being able to switch off the methodical part of her brain. ‘You’re just a regular kid today Rayla. Now… what do regular kids do again?’ She was sure that she was about to find out when she felt Callum tug her forwards, overjoyed, laughing over his shoulder.

Her own laughs joined his in chorus as they walked.

It was almost jarring, the sudden mood shift. It felt strange that only yesterday they had been bandaging her wounds as best they could, their moods left bleak from their run in with the hunter. But now it was almost as though it hadn’t happened… Almost. If it hadn’t been for the dull ringing of her shoulder, the stinging of her cuts, or the aches of her weary muscles.

Callum wasn’t doing too amazing either, as much as he tried to gloss over it. Every so often as they
wandered about, she watched his face fall and twitch in pain a little, his hand glancing around his ribs. It was a painful reminder of what had happened. That despite the joyous atmosphere, and his reassuring words, they were still both hurting, physically and emotionally.

“You okay?” She whispered gently as they huddled together slightly under one of the colourful gazebos to admire its contents.

“Oh yeah I’m fine. Just… sore still. Every so often I kind of forget and then my ribs are like, ‘Hey remember us?’ it’s… a little annoying. B-But I’ll be fine!” He added hastily when he caught the look in her eye. “I think I got off a lot more lightly than you did.”

It did little to ease her concern. “After things have calmed down we’ll both go get looked at by a healer, okay?”

“Sounds good.” He smiled, and then she found his hand in hers again, but… it felt different than before. Less casual, more intimate and tender, as Callum’s palm brushed slowly against hers, his fingers tracing up her own and lingering before filling the gaps between them with his own. The gesture seemed to whisper to her; ‘I’m here, and we’re both hurting, but I’ve got you. We’ll take care of each other.’ It made her hand, or perhaps even her whole arm tingle a little.

“Alright then so… where do you want to go first?”

Rayla let Callum tug her around excitedly taking in the colourful maypoles with their Skywing dancers gracefully gliding through the air. The bright banners with intricate artwork patched onto them telling stories of old. The food stalls selling various pastries and small bowls of food Callum had never seen before prepared into colourful dishes, spices hung from the gazebo rafters sending delicious scents wafting through the air.

She smiled as Callum asked his questions, all between him stuffing his face with a ‘Xadian waffle on a stick’ as he had called it, and sneaking bits to a hungry little dragon poking his snout out of his bag. ‘What’s this? What’s that? Why?’ She answered as best she could, though she had never really been to the Sky Festival before, so her knowledge on the matter was somewhat limited to what she had heard in passing from people who had been. She explained how the Sky Festival was a celebration of peace, unity and freedom, and that it was founded by a Skywing elf called Varius about 300 years ago to try and lift the spirits of all elves alike in the bleak times of war. It was known as the Sky Festival, but really, it was one celebrated by everyone.

Callum was hooked by the history of the festival. Peace? Unity? That was what they were all about right? And it was endearing to watch his spirits lift and hope fill his heart once more.

“Throw a knife through the hoop! Win a prize!”

Callum’s elven ears perked at that and he blinked across at a stall run by a Sunfire elf, calling out cheerfully while waving several knives in the air. He grinned back at Rayla, his eyes alight with excitement. She stifled a laugh, oh no, it was that face, and she knew exactly what he was thinking. ‘I’m going to try and win you a prize, just watch me.’

“Go on then.”

His smile only widened and he pulled her over with him, taking three wooden toy knives from the vendor. (Thankfully, Rayla thought. She had upmost faith in Callum but was also well aware of his chances of missing completely and hurting someone.) She watched him, his mind whirling and calculating, feeling the knives weights, squinting at his targets, figuring out distance, the power he’d need to throw them, and then-!
He missed. Completely. It sailed metres over the hoop and landed with a dull *thunk* against the wooden back wall of his stand. She stifled a laugh, and he frowned at her.

“I did that on purpose. It was a practise shot okay?”

“Alright, alright.” She chuckled, waving at him to carry on. “Please, continue.”

He tried again, and to his defence, he did get a little closer this time, glancing just past the left of the hoop.

“Last chance kid!” The vendor chimed and Rayla watched Callum tense, his eyes focused on the hoop.

“You’ve got this.” She smiled and gave him a little thumbs up. It seemed to give him a little more encouragement than she had anticipated, and his eyes softened enough for him to crack a quick smile at her before focusing and throwing his last knife.

With a gentle ringing clang, it hit the metal of the hoop, and both Callum and Rayla groaned in disappointment.

“Argh, so close! I’m sorry Rayla.”

“It’s fine, you gave it your best shot.” She watched as the vendor collected the knives, and Callum’s shoulders sank a little despite her words. But a small smile found her lips and she raised her arm a little. “Hey, can I have a go?” The vendor’s eyes flickered with concern to Rayla’s broken arm, but she gave him a little wave with her other. “It’s alright, I have another one.”

“If you’re sure.” Tentatively, the Sunfire elf handed over the knives and she grinned and gave a little wink at Callum. The boy’s eyes widened a little, his feathers fluffing up ever so slightly and it only boosted her ego further.

**Twip. Twip. Twip.**

In rapid succession, her knives whizzed straight through the middle of the metal hoop. The last one, in overconfident fashion, found its mark without her even looking, her eyes locked on the vendor’s awestricken face.

“Oh… wow, I mean you only had to get one knife through, but good job.”

From her side she watched Callum huff a little, his arms folded. “Show off.” He pouted, but he couldn’t hide the proud smile in his eyes.

“I might be, but I’m the show off that just won you a prize, so you’re welcome. Pick something you like. Preferably something small, we need to travel light.”

His ears drooped a little. “But I wanted to win you something.”

She laughed softly, giving him half a shrug. “Maybe next time?”

Callum looked a little dejected, but gave her a grateful nod, and she watched as he picked out a little bracelet, leather in white, dark blue, and light blue woven together neatly with a little brass buckle embossed with the sky symbol on it. He looked pleased, and at first tried to tie it around Rayla’s wrist but she wouldn’t let him, insisting that he wear it since she won it for him, not her. Reluctantly, he gave in, and tied it around his own wrist, admiring it with a small smile.
“…Thanks Ray.”

Her face and heart softened. But as she opened her mouth to reply, she watched his eyes go wide and he gawked, staring at something just past her shoulder. She turned and-

Oh.

Her face soon matched the awe of Callum’s, as something begun to approach slowly from the sky, its humongous form leaving a shadow over the lake of the town. It was strange how silent it was as it moved, surely such a thing could cause the earth the tremble below, but no, it was quiet, tranquil.

An island. A giant, floating, beautiful island, gliding gracefully towards the town, and it was lowering slowly as it arrived, hovering over the reflective surface of the lake. It soon became apparent what was sitting atop it. A huge monastery, the likes of which neither of them had ever seen before, carved white marble like stone, reaching up into the sky. Rayla recognised it instantly from the stories she had been told, and a realisation dawned on her. How had she not remembered this sooner?

“Ray, what is that?” Callum breathed, his eyes never leaving the sight before them.

“That, would be the highlight of the festival, and you know what? It’s also almost certainly what we’re here for. Callum, that’s the Libertas Sky Temple…

It’s the Sky Nexus.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! So I actually worked hard to get this out a little earlier. It's been my birthday today! (well, technically its 1am in the UK, but its STILL TECHNICALLY my birthday in American time zones!)

I wanted this to be a gift to you guys, from me on my birthday. You've all been so kind and supportive to me so far and it means the world to me. So thank you for everything! <3 I hope you enjoyed this chapter! We're starting up a new and important arc now in the story. :) Don't forget to leave a comment if you're enjoying the story!!
“It’s so… majestic.” Callum breathed, his eyes not leaving the temple as it glided ever closer until it finally came to a standstill hovering above the bay.

“Yes… it certainly is.”

“It’s nothing like the Moon Nexus at all.”

Rayla smiled at him gently. “Well, no, of course it isn’t. It was built by an entirely different culture, and this one is actually still, you know, intact.”

“Very true!” He chimed, flashing her a grin. “We did it Ray! We’ve reached the first milestone in our journey.”

“We have!” She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and ruffled his hair a little. “With perfect timing too.”

“Now we just need a way up there…” He mumbled, and Rayla watched amused as the gears in his mind turn briefly, before his eyes lit up. “Hey! Maybe I can fly us up there!”

Rayla stifled a laugh. “What?”

Callum grinned, fluttering his wings in demonstration. “I have wings now, Ray! I can fly!”

She tilted her head, raising an eyebrow at the boy, a small smile still on her lips. “Fun idea, but I don’t think that’s going to work. They’re illusions, Callum. They’re not real, and even if they were there’s quite a few flaws in your plan. One, you don’t even know how to fly. Two, your ribs are all messed up. I’ve seen you, you can’t even jog, imagine how hard flying like that would be. And three, do you really think you could carry me and Zym all the way up there? With those spindly little muscles?” She smiled a little now and gave Callum a gentle poke in the arm.

He pouted. “I’m not spindly. I did sword fighting, you know.”

“Poorly, if I recall you saying.”

“You just can’t see my muscles under my jacket.”

“Sure.” She rolled her eyes with a little smirk. “Regardless. I don’t think you’ll have to worry about flying us up there. The temple will be open to the public today and tomorrow. There’s even a dance in the evening, it’s a tradition.”

Callum’s eyes widened a little. “A dance? That sound’s fun.” But she watched as his expression faltered a little. “Too bad we probably won’t be able to go. I don’t think my broach will last that long.”

The disappointment on his face pained Rayla a little. “You know… If you really wanted to go, we can just disguise you like we did before we had the broach. Although I can’t imagine I’ll be much of a dancer with one arm.”

Callum’s eyes lit up again and a little smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “I wouldn’t mind! I just…
I want to have a fun time together. As... as long as you want to, I mean.”

Rayla pouted a little, before shrugging softly. “I suppose it won’t hurt if we’re having a rest day anyway.” She caught him glance down nervously at her broken shoulder. “It won’t hurt theoretically.” She corrected. Her arm fell from his shoulders and curled around his own arm as she guided him towards the docks. “Just do me a favour, Callum. Stay aware of your surroundings, alright? Keep an eye out for exit points, and the layout of the area. You never know when we might need to leave suddenly, and knowing the area is going to help us out, especially if we end up staying there for a while.”

He gave her a little nod, his face more serious, but questioning. “We’re going to be on a floating island about five hundred feet in the air... are there any exit points, really?”

Rayla’s ears pinned back anxiously. He was right. They were going to need to be more careful than ever. Because once they got up there, after the festival was over and the behemoth island rose once more... there would be no turning back.

They would be stuck there. Indefinitely.

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By the time they had reached the docks, a huge crowd had formed, waiting with baited breath and eyes skyward. In a few ways, it reminded Callum of back home. Whenever there would be celebrations within the castle grounds, large crowds would always gather for the opening ceremony. His step-father would appear on the balcony, give a short speech, and then the festivities would begin. Would this be similar? Of course, the festival was already in full swing, but he was half expecting some grand figure to peer over the edge of the island, or a Skywing elf to swoop down to give a speech to the people.

But there was no speech. Something far more dramatic was about to unfurl.

As they watched, a long ribbon curled over the edge, trailing down until its end hit the surface of the lake. Then another. And another. And suddenly all at once perhaps a hundred ribbons, all different colours of the rainbow fell like a waterfall cascading over the edge. There was a white flash overhead, and then they all flickered, fluttering and shuddering as though moved by some unseen, unnatural force. Callum watched in awe, as the ribbons began to wind and curl around each other, like an invisible giant was weaving them together.

...It was making a bridge.

A bright, spectral, woven bridge, from the top of the island down to the docks below, complete with a ropey railing on each side. It was surprisingly wide, easily wide enough for five or so patrons to walk together down its length. The ends tied neatly around one of the piers, fastening securely to its wooden posts.

“We welcome you all... to the Libertas Sky Temple!” A young voice cried out. A Skywing elf stood at the end of the bridge, his arms and wings thrown out with dramatic flair.

There were cheers and applause from the crowd, and Callum felt a gentle push from behind, as people began to make their way forward and towards the bridge, beginning the climb up to the enigmatic island.
Rayla’s earlier stormy expression had brightened, and she grinned at him, tugging on the fabric of his sleeve. Callum followed with optimistic caution. When they finally reached the base of the bridge, he tested it nervously with his foot. It seemed ridiculous to think that something as flimsy as ribbon could support the weight of so many people at once. Then again… this was Xadia. And they did seem to be magic ribbons. “You’re sure this is safe?”

“Safer than a lot of the other things we’ve done over the past few weeks.”

“You… make a very good point.”

Rayla hopped onto the bridge and smirked back at him. “C’mon, Callum, you trusted me to walk you across a river of lava, I’m sure you can manage this. And look, this time we even have handrails.”

Callum smiled back at her and watched her face soften as he did so, taking his first steps onto the bridge of ribbons. She reached out her hand to him, and he took it gratefully, his other glancing against the railing.

His legs shook a little the higher they climbed, and though he trusted Rayla it was still unnerving to say the least. But it was like she said, they had faced far more perilous things, right? But was it really just the bridge sending nerves jittering through him? He had wanted them to have a fun day today, but now as they approached closer to the temple, something about this all begun to feel strangely real. And when the towers loomed over them as they stepped ever closer, he felt something squirm in the pit of his stomach. His hand instinctively squeezed Rayla’s, hoping silently for some kind of moral support.

“You alright?” She asked softly.

“Yeah it’s just a bit…”

“A bit much?”

“Yeah. Overwhelming I guess.”

Her thumb brushed across his knuckle back and forth. “It’s just like a castle. A… A magical Xadian castle.”

“It’s the people inside I’m more worried about.”

“Hey.” She gave his hand a little tug, and she only continued when he made eye contact. She offered him a little reassuring smile. “We’re just ordinary kids today remember? That’s what you said. We can worry about all that tomorrow… alright?”

The tightness in his chest loosened and he smiled weakly back. “Yeah. Okay.”

He hardly registered the feeling of pavement beneath his feet until he had turned his attention back in front of them.

It was beautiful, awe inspiring even. Callum had thought the town below was colourful, but the temple had it beaten tenfold.

Rainbow bunting fluttered in the breeze against the stark white of the marble buildings, and flags and banners decorated every wall, ribbons like the ones that made up the bridge streaming overhead, patterned fabrics tied around the pillars and across the buildings. Perched almost precariously atop the tallest pillar of what seemed to be the main building, sat a light blue crystal glowing like a
beacon, larger than any Callum had ever seen before, and its light bathed the area in a glistening magical aura.

Everything about it was so joyous and warm, and it set Callum’s heart alight, any fears lingering in his mind immediately discarded.

“Alright, we should get a feel for the area since we’ll be coming back first thing tomorrow!”

Callum had already sprung forward excitedly, yanking Rayla forward with him. But as he bounced and his foot met the ground, his heel found the earth in such a way that it sent a shock through his body, and his side rung out in sharp pain once more. He nearly collapsed, doubling over, his hand ripping from Rayla’s to clutch at his ribs, and he hissed through his teeth, face contorted in pain. Several passes by gave the boy concerned looks on their way past.

“Callum!” Rayla’s hand found its way across his wings and to his back, rubbing it gently. “Hey, take it easy… I know you’re excited to look around but…”

“I’m… f-fine.” Callum spluttered, trying to straighten up again.

“We should find the healers for you-”

“There’s no time Rayla.” He shook his head, still winded. “I don’t know how much longer my broach will last.”

Rayla hissed something under her breath, followed by a soft, “You’re a nuisance, you know that don’t you?” But there was a fondness in her tone, and she hooked her arm through his to help him up and support his weight. “Come on… Let’s sort you out before the dance.”

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She guided him around a corner and between two buildings, before pulling out his cloak and wrapping it awkwardly around his shoulders and wings, and Callum felt the cool stone wall against his back as he caught his breath. Zym yipped curiously, poking his head out of the bag for a moment to watch, and taking the opportunity to stretch his legs and wings out.

“You know, I felt bad about forgetting to leave the gloves back at the inn in Kalarrden, but I’m sort of glad I didn’t now.” Callum smiled, as Rayla proceeded to pull them out, and she tossed them over to him. He pulled them on, ah yes, just as uncomfortable as before.

“Oh yeah, you’re a real good thief, you should definitely be proud of that.” Callum pouted at her and she smirked back. “Oh I’m kidding, Callum, don’t look at me like that.”

“Are we doing face paint?”

“I think you’ll be fine without.”

Callum nodded, as he switched the broach off. “Here… Zym, do you think you can look after this for me? I hear dragons are very good at guarding things.” The little dragon’s eyes lit up and he took the broach so delicately in his teeth. “Don’t let me forget to charge it later too, will you?”

“Callum he’s a baby, are you really relying on him to remember that for you?”
“He’s a smart baby!” Callum defended with a little laugh.

Rayla rolled her eyes, a playful smirk on her lips, and they watched Zym trot back over and crawl back into the bag. “He’s a good boy, really.” She remarked quietly, as Callum lifted the bag up onto his shoulder, cautiously slow, and pulled the hood up around his face.

“A very good boy.” He agreed with a smile.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Yeah it’s fine…” Callum rubbed at his ribs with tender care. “I think I’m alright now. Just as long as this dancing doesn’t involve any jumping, or lifts. Or very sudden movements.”

Rayla chuckled, taking a step towards him. “We’ll take it at our own pace.” She reached towards his face and gave the hem of his hood a little affectionate tug forwards. “Come on then. Let’s make the most of this evening while we have the time.”

He let Rayla guide him around, taking in the sights in stunned wonder, but he also tried to do as she had asked earlier, keeping an eye on his surroundings, and mentally mapping out the area. It helped, he found, that a lot of crucial areas were signposted, the medical bay for example. That would come in handy later. They wandered the temple grounds, briefly passing by the gardens, until the sky began to dim and Rayla urged him gently to start making their way to the main plaza of the temple.

A very official looking Skywing elf in trailing jade coloured robes was already about half way through his speech when they arrived, surrounded by a fairly large crowd.

“We are gathered here, as we do each year, to honour the great Varius and his wish for a brighter and more unified world.” Callum and Rayla exchanged a small knowing smile. “Especially now, with recent events, we feel that it is important to have hope in these troubling times. Hope for a kinder future for all, for our children, our children’s children, and all the generations to follow…”

As he spoke, Callum leaned over to whisper to Rayla. “That man looks important.”

“He must be if he’s giving the opening speech. He’s probably the Archmage.”

“You think?”

She nodded. “Look closer at what he’s wearing. Do you see the amulet? And those ornaments on his horns?”

Callum took in the man’s appearance a little closer. It was hard to guess at an age, but now that Callum was focusing, he looked on the older side, his face lined with the beginnings of wrinkles on his brow, and little crow’s feet around his eyes. He was white and grey in colouration, with little flecks of black here and there, not unlike a snowy owl from the books Callum had read back at his castle.

And Rayla was right, perhaps it was his garbs and the trinkets he wore that alerted them to his status. There were delicately crafted rings set neatly on his horns, two on each one, and little chains and ribbons linking them. The golden amulet around his neck was adorned with beautiful glittering jewels of various colours, shapes and sizes, and upon inspection, he noted how the jewels made out a very specific and familiar shape. That of the sky rune.

It was strange in a way, Callum realised. If the mage had been human, everything about him would have screamed ‘I’m wealthy’. But his face was so humble and warm, not like the flashy nobles who had visited his home in the past.
So… this would be one of the many faces Callum would likely get to know in his time here. He hadn’t noticed that the man was rounding off his speech until it was over.

“And with that, let the Sky Festival’s annual dance… begin!”

There was the sound of a fire igniting, and Callum caught sight of a large bonfire, and a plume of smoke and ashes crackling and dancing up into the sky. And just like that, the Archmage disappeared from view, back down the steps of the little podium he had stood on, and into the bustling crowd.

With him gone, Callum’s attention tugged back to Rayla. It felt almost awkward between them at first. Now that the moment had arrived, Callum wasn’t quite sure how to ask her to dance with him, so they both stood there on the edge of the dancefloor, fidgeting and stealing sideways glances at each other. It was Rayla who sighed and finally made the first move, offering him her hand.

“Just as a warning… I’ve never been great at dancing.”

“Oh, well that makes me feel a bit better.” Callum laughed, taking the hand she had extended to him. “Because I’m a terrible dancer.” She smiled at him warmly and led him onto the dance floor, still near the edge, and then pulled him a little closer to her. “I’ll be careful about your arm.” He mumbled softly.

“Yeah, that would be ideal thanks.” There was half a smirk in her voice, but her eyes were warm and lit up with the reflection of the bonfire dancing through them.

“You should… You should probably lead. I don’t know the steps.” His other hand hovered for a moment, not quite sure where it was meant to go. In most human dances it would have gone on her waist, but was it different here? It wasn’t like he could rest it on her shoulder, so side it was. He rested it there nervously, but Rayla didn’t give any indication that it was the wrong thing to do.

“You don’t need to know the steps.” She took the lead as he had asked, and Callum felt him beginning to twirl around her. “You just… dance from the heart.”

It sounded simple enough, and yet Callum felt his nerves beginning to get the best of him. At least some of the pressure was lifted from him as he tried to follow Rayla’s movements. It seemed that the dance involved a lot of twirling and spiralling around each other, but both of Rayla’s and Callum’s movements were rather sluggish from the pain of their injuries, and the additional weight of a dragon slumped clearly asleep against his back. The boy was thankful that Rayla had chosen a spot near the edge of the plaza where they were out of the way of the more experienced dancers, swirling far more gracefully around the plaza.

Callum allowed himself to relax a little. Rayla seemed quite content, and her composure rubbed off on him a little. There was no pressure here, no eyes on him like in the dances at his castle back in Katolis. They were just two regular people in the crowd. He kept peeking around them to see what everyone else was doing and only returned his gaze to Rayla when he felt her give his hand a squeeze.

“Hey. Relax. You’re doing fine. You don’t need to worry about what everyone else is doing.” She chuckled.

“Sorry, I guess I’m just used to people staring at me while I dance. It’s a little strange being someone else.”

“I imagine that’s not the only thing strange about this.”
“Oh yeah, being surrounded by elves on all sides while I dance is a little bizarre too.”

She laughed, and Callum felt her pull his arm up and around his back gently, guiding him and herself into a twirl. His ribs twinged a little, but the pain was manageable, and as his hand landed back on her side, he curled it around to her back, taking a small step closer. His chest brushed very softly against the fabric of his scarf, still wrapped in a sling around her damaged arm, and he tried his best not to press against it with his body. He caught her eyes twinkle a little, she wasn’t quite smiling but she regarded him softly, and when he offered her a timid smile she returned it with a shy one of her own. Perhaps it was just the dusk lighting, but she did appear a little pinker in the cheeks.

“Is this okay?” He asked, his voice nearly a whisper lost in the music.

“…Yeah.”

It felt nice, Callum realised. Holding her close, twirling around together, as though they had no worries in the world, at least for tonight. But there was a slight downside to this now. With how close the pair had gotten, Callum’s feet didn’t quite know where to go. How many times did he end up stepping on Rayla’s feet? Far, far too many. Each time he would feel a panic in his chest and an apology would escape his lips, but Rayla seemed to find the whole situation rather humorous.

“Callum it’s fine, you’re fine.”

“Is it, though?” He could feel the heat rising to his cheeks as he met her eye. “I feel like I’m embarrassing myself.”

“What, in front of me? Oh come on Callum I’ve seen you do far more ridiculous and embarrassing things.” She snickered.

“True…” He gave her a weak smile, and watched her eyes soften a little. “I’m… I’m having fun. I’m just sorry I’m not the best dance partner.”

“Callum?”

“Hm?”

“I wouldn’t want to dance with anyone else.” Something about the way she said that, so sincere and gentle, sent Callum’s heart aflutter, and he didn’t quite know how to respond other than a bashful smile.

The words left him without his lips without him even thinking. “Me either.”

Hearts lifted, they danced like no one was watching for the rest of the evening.

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The second day of the festival had Rayla tinged with a little disappointment, as she forced herself to focus on their mission once more. They had had their day to relax. Now her job was to get Callum back into the temple and learning sky magic.

The task was simple enough. Find the Archmage from last night’s dance. He had the most authority on this island, so if they could get his permission to stay, they would be set.
They had both been rather quiet that morning, reflecting on their mission. Zym seemed rather restrained too, as though he could sense the tension in the air, and had settled for the comforting position of sitting on Callum’s bed by his side as he packed away their supplies.

The night before it had been easy enough to duck away and find an inn to stay in, in fact the town was heavy with various lodgings scattered around, and they had managed to find one rather close to the dock. It wasn’t quite as homey as The Cerulean Deer, but it would do. With any luck, if they could convince the mages to let Callum learn magic, they would be staying in the temple the following nights.

“We forgot to get you to a doctors yesterday.” Callum’s voice cut through her thoughts, and she turned to watch as he tucked away their supplies, Zym curled up still sleepily in one of his arms. “I couldn’t see one, but we still could have gotten you patched up.”

“Yeah, I suppose we got a bit carried away with all the dancing last night, didn’t we?”

He smiled back softly. “How are you holding up?”

Rayla made a little so-so hand movement. “About as good as anyone with a broken arm can be.” Callum’s smile faltered and she raised her hand defensively. “It’s fine, Callum. While you’re talking to that Archmage, I’ll go visit the healers, alright?”

“Wouldn’t it be safer for us to both just go together? I need to go there too anyway.”

“I honestly think it’ll be faster for us to split up. Besides, we don’t know how long that mage is going to be about and easy for us to get to. If he goes somewhere off limits to the public, if we miss our chance, that could be it. You need to go find him straight away, and then we’ll get you taken care of.”

“Do you know where to go?”

“It was signposted. You can meet me there after you’re done.” Callum nodded slowly, hesitant. He clearly didn’t like this plan, his eyes serious. She raised an eyebrow offering him a small smile. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Well, it’s just last time we split up in an unknown town, you got into trouble with an angry mob.”

The laugh escaped Rayla so suddenly it caught them both by surprise. “Okay, but technically the last time we split up in an unknown town, I was hiding behind some crates while you found us that blind sea captain.”

“Yeah, you couldn’t get yourself into trouble back then because you were hiding.”

“Callum are you accusing me of being a troublemaker?” She grinned slyly, her hand on her hip, as she leaned a little closer towards him. He squirmed a little, glancing away.

“W-What? No, I…” He furrowed his brow a little as his eyes met hers again. “I just want you to stay safe.”

Rayla’s features softened, and she stood up straighter again. “I know. I will be. You should worry more about yourself, you’re the one at risk here, not me.” She watched his eyes dart down to her arm, and they stayed there, glistening a little. She sighed as she reached out and wound her fingers through his. “It’s okay, Callum.” Finally his eyes met hers again, full of worry. She gave his hand a squeeze. “Everything will work out. You’ll see.”
“And if it doesn’t?”

“We’ll figure that out when we get there. We’re getting pretty good at making up plans on the go I’ve noticed.”

Callum still looked a little unconvinced, but his face was softer now and he nodded. “Alright.”

Rayla’s eyes flickered a little in the light and she smiled. “Good. Now with that settled, why don’t we get you learning some more magic?”

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Zym felt heavy against his back as Callum walked, but it was nothing compared to the unbearable pressure of their mission bearing down on him. They had one shot at this. One chance to make a convincing argument to the Archmage to let him and Rayla stay at the temple and learn sky magic. If it didn’t work, what would happen then? Would the compass just… guide them elsewhere? Or would their mission end in complete world ending failure? It was painful to think about.

“You’re awfully quiet today.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Rayla was quiet herself for a moment before she continued. “Do you want me to walk with you for a bit? I can head off once we find him.”

“That would be nice… yeah. Thank you.” She offered him a little smile, and he threw his most convincing one back, but it fell short a little and slipped away almost immediately as his eyes fell back to the bridge.

Instinctively, his hand reached to find hers, and it seemed Rayla had a similar train of thought as their knuckles bumped very suddenly together. There was a moment where both the teens became a little flustered, sharing mumbled little apologies, before allowing their fingers to intertwine. Callum immediately felt safer and more secure, and Rayla gave him a little determined smile, the kind that made him feel like anything was possible.

‘She’s right. We’ve got this.’

They were greeted politely as they set foot on the solid ground of the island by the Skywing monks, and both their eyes scanned across the temple grounds as they ambled towards the main square where the dance had been held the evening before.

“He’s… not here.”

Rayla’s face screwed up a little, irritably. “Maybe he’s inside? He has to be around somewhere, he’s an important figure for the festival.”

“Ray… why don’t you go get yourself sorted out, I can track down this guy.”

“I’ve waited this long, it’s fine. I’d rather wait until I know you’ve found him, otherwise I’ll just be worried about leaving you alone in the middle of—”

“Uh, excuse me,” A voice startled them from behind. “I don’t mean to pry but can I be of
assistance?"

“Oh yeah, that would be great! We’re looking for- Oh.”

How convenient. There towering over them stood the mage from last night, bright golden eyes regarding the pair of them kindly. Unlike last night however, there was something in his hand, a long carved black wooden staff. Its detailing made it almost look charred, as though it had been struck by lightning, and its end curled and spiralling finely like timber talons around a swirling glass orb.

“You! We, we were actually looking for you!” Callum beamed, his feathers fluffing up a little. The mage smiled warmly back.

“Oh! Well how sweet, it feels nice to be wanted.” He chuckled.

“Hey Callum, I’m just going to…” Rayla leaned into him with a little smile, and Callum gave her a gentle nod.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. I’ll see you in a bit.”

His hand was given a final little squeeze before hers slipped through his fingers. She gave him a little thumbs up and a hopeful grin over her shoulder as she jogged off lightly back down the path they had taken. Then she was gone, and Callum felt a little pull at his heart. He missed her already.

“How may I help you then?”

“How? Oh! Right!” Callum straightened up a little, meeting the man’s eye. But now that he was standing here, he could feel a pit of nerves eating away at his stomach. “Mr Sky Mage, Sir… I would be honoured if you or your fellow mages might teach me magic.”

The man straightened up a little, and Callum watched his eyes flicker with surprise. And then he frowned a little, almost confused, as though he was trying to work something out. He glanced Callum up and down, his eyes fixed to the broach momentarily before his eyes met Callum’s again.

Callum almost panicked, had he recognised what the broach was? He felt small suddenly, and not only because of the elf’s tall stature. But the mage’s eyes finally softened. Perhaps he noticed how tense Callum had become.

“Please. Mr Sky Mage was my father.” He joked. “Those here call me Master Jorani.”

Callum’s shoulders fell from his neck and he released a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s quite alright. And who might you be?”

Callum bit his tongue. Real name? Fake name? Perhaps staying close to the truth would be best for now. He hadn’t had any trouble with his name back at the Ceruelean Deer. “Callum.”

“Oh, how on the nose.” Jorani chuckled. “Do you know any ancient draconic?”

“I know… of it?”

“Your name, boy. It sounds very similar to the draconic word for sky, ‘Caelum’.”

Callum’s eyebrows raised, and he tilted his head a little. Huh. What a strange coincidence.

“Perhaps it is fate that guided you here, hm?”
Callum’s lips peeled back into an uncomfortable smile. “Oh… yeah. Something like that.”

‘Yeah, fate and a magic compass. So much for being free from destiny and all…’

“Why don’t you follow me, and we can talk about this further.” And as gracefully as a bird taking flight, Jorani’s wings were spread wide, and with one large flap, he ascended skyward, sending a small gust out in each direction around him.

Callum watched in awe from the ground, as he did a little spin, before perching on an outstretched beam and he walked so casually across to the balcony above. Callum’s heart fluttered. Rayla had said before that it was likely he couldn’t fly but… it was worth a try, right? On each side, his own wings stretched out.

He jumped, his wings flapping uselessly at his sides, only propelling the air meekly around him, as his feet landed heavily on the floor once more. The impact sent a nasty reminder through Callum’s body of the pain in his ribs, and he doubled over winded for a moment, clutching at his side. As the pain ebbed away, Callum huffed, an irritation scratching away at his heart.

“Are you alright down there, Callum?” Jorani peeked over the side of the balcony curiously.

“Uh, y-yeah! I just…” Callum gritted his teeth a little. “I… can’t fly.”

“You can’t…” Jorani’s face fell a little, and Callum watched him climb gracefully over the bannister and practically float down to the ground using his wings to slow his fall. “Why ever not?”

“I had an accident. When I was very young.” The lie slipped out suddenly before he could stop it. “I… broke my wing, uh, both wings, and when they got better, they didn’t heal properly.”

“Can you at least Windwalk?”

“Can I what now?”

Jorani raised an eyebrow, and Callum winced, but the mage shook his head softly, and turned, making a little motion for Callum to follow him inside, this time through an archway.

The mage didn’t say another word, leaving Callum to stew in an uncomfortable silence as they wandered the halls, up a flight of stairs, until they reached a small study. Jorani motioned politely for the boy to enter, and as he did, the tall Skywing followed, making his way over to a pair of wicker chairs near the balcony that Callum could only assume was the one the man had landed on earlier.

He sat, one leg crossed over the other, and set his chin against his hand, motioning for Callum to sit as well.

“So you can’t Windwalk. Or fly.” He said at last as Callum sat, rather anxiously opposite him.

“I’m sorry, I’m probably not the best Skywing elf. I don’t really know much about what it is to be one if I’m honest.” It was a dangerous thing to admit, Callum realised but it was too late to backtrack now.

“Oh…? And why would that be?”

“I’m an… orphan.” The words stung at Callum’s heart as he let them loose. That much wasn’t exactly a lie, was it? He really was an orphan now. His mouth went a little dry as he continued. “My parents died in the war when I was little.”
The high mage’s eyes softened slightly. “Oh… I’m so sorry for your loss. This war has taken far too many people we love from us.”

“I know.” He choked a little on the words and swallowed back the emotion lumping in his throat.

The mage sighed a little, curling his fingers over the orb of his staff. “Let your first lesson be this, child. You may lose people you love, but love is never truly lost. It exists all around you, and you may find that love again one day in the form of another. Often when you least expect it.” A hand was placed firmly on Callum’s shoulder, and as he looked up he met the man’s bright warm gilded ones. “May you someday find peace in this.”

A warmth swelled in Callum’s heart, a sense for a moment that he was right. He had a feeling those words would stay with him for a while yet.

“Now then. You said you wanted to learn magic?”

“W-Well, I mean, I’m already… kind of learning? And I was really hoping maybe you could help.”

The elder hummed quietly, running his thumb against his chin. “What do you already know?”

“Two spells. Aspiro and Fulminis.”

“Well, it’s a start. Can you show me?”

Callum’s hand glanced to his ribs and he pursed his lips. “I… can show you Fulminis, but I really messed up my ribs the other day so I don’t think I’ll be able to do Aspiro for a while.”

“Dearie me. You certainly have had it rough haven’t you? A Skywing elf who can’t fly, with no connections to his culture… and now you have injured ribs. You should really go talk to the healers about that.”

“I will, they’re just looking after Rayla at the moment.” He paused when he noticed Jorani’s puzzled face. “Oh, Rayla is the girl I was with earlier.”

The elder’s eyes softened. “You care a lot about that Moonshadow girl, don’t you?”

“Of course.” Callum’s voice went softer than he expected. “And she needs them right now more than I do.”

The elder gave a knowing smile and was silent for a moment, regarding Callum with an expression the boy couldn’t quite read. “Quite often, Moonshadow elves keep to their own race when it comes to interpersonal relationships. So the fact you two are so close is rather sweet. Hold onto that one, young Callum. You’re a lucky soul indeed if she sees something worthy in you.”

…Rayla saw something worthy in him? That felt like an odd way to put it. He and Rayla were friends, close friends, but mostly he was sure she was tagging along with him to stop him from getting killed, and to stop the war. There wasn’t really anything special about him. They were just two lost kids who got thrown together into this mess, trying to find their way, holding onto each other because out here? That was all they really had.

“Oh I… Yeah. I will hold onto her, of course I will.” Callum rubbed at the back of his head sheepishly. “But uh, back to magic… You wanted to see me cast Fulminis?”

“Perhaps not in my study.” The mage cracked a little smile. “I’d like to keep my books unsinged.”
“Oh… right.”

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Jorani lead Callum out towards the back of the temple, past the plaza, and various marble pillars, until they reached a small plateau, tiled and flattened on a raised grassy slope. It teetered out slightly over the edge of the island, little jetties sticking out off the side. He wondered what they could be for, they looked almost like the kind of piers you would find in the docks below them. Were there magical flying ships in Xadia? He wouldn’t put it past the magical lands, it seemed anything was possible here.

Tentatively, he took a few steps closer to the sky pier, and Callum felt a sudden wooziness as he peered over the side, staggering back and away from the edge. A fall like that would kill him, and he didn’t quite fancy the thought of fatally belly-flopping the water below.

“I’d be wary if I were you. Especially if you can’t fly.” Jorani’s voice called out, and Callum nodded sheepishly back.

“Yeah, dying isn’t on my ‘to do’ list today.”

Jorani chuckled lightly. “Anyway, let’s make this quick, shall we? I need to get back to the plaza soon, people will start wondering where I am otherwise.”

Callum nodded, but a strange realisation fell on him at that moment. He had only actually properly cast the spell once before, on the Cursed Caldera, and that had been with the Primal Stone. Aspiro was easy without the stone, he just had to focus and channel the magic through his breathing. But Fulminis? How would that feel? What was he supposed to channel for that?

“Are you alright Callum? You look a bit lost.”

“Yeah it’s just last time I did this spell I had a primal stone so I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to do here.”

Jorani smiled softly. “Well, it’d certainly help if you had a storm, or a primal stone to draw from, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah… too bad I broke mine.”

“You… broke one?” Jorani frowned a little. Callum nodded sadly, and Jorani sighed, clearly a little disappointed. Callum’s heart sank, this wasn’t the impression he had wanted to make. “If you were a more advanced mage I would probably get you to demonstrate using Tonitrua appellamus, but I’d really rather not cause havoc on the day of the festival. Or watch you misstep and get yourself killed. So for now, I will let you borrow this.” And at that, Jorani slowly offered out his staff to Callum. As Callum reached out however, Jorani pulled it back slightly, eyes narrowed. “Do not. Break it.”

Callum offered him a nervous smile, and then gingerly, his fingers curled around its delicately carved wooden length. It was light. Surprisingly so, and Callum let his fingers brush against the glassy surface of the orb on its end. He could feel the magic radiating off it. It was smaller than the stone he had used before, but comfortingly familiar. Rather than a thundercloud, he could make out a whirlwind swirling violently inside, little crackles of light flashing at intervals inside.
“Of course with most spells you won’t need to rely on a primal stone. But lightning magic is a bit of a tricky one to control without any storms around, so it always helps.” Jorani tapped a finger against the orb, before turning on his heel and giving Callum some space.

Callum nodded slowly. So, it seemed even Skywing elves couldn’t conjure lightning out of nowhere, despite their connection to the sky. He supposed that made sense. It was as Rayla had said before, weeks earlier, primal stones were sought after by powerful Archmages, and clearly for good reason.

Callum took a breath, focusing. And then he drew the symbol, watching it crackle and flicker off his finger, and his soul lit up. He had missed this dearly.

“Fulminis!” He cried, throwing out his hand, and he watched the bolt of energy leave his palm, crackling and bending as it disappeared off into the horizon. He glanced nervously over his shoulder at Jorani, then puffed with pride at the man’s enthusiastic smile.

“Impressive! You’ve certainly got an eye for detail, some of my students struggle to get the hang of the writing part of spells.” Callum grinned, and politely handed back the staff as he approached. “Yes, not bad at all. I think you’ll be a fine young mage, and I would gladly take you on as a student here.”

“R-Really?” Callum’s face wrinkled up a little.

“He said…” Jorani’s face wrinkled up a little.

“Please…? It’s like you said, Rayla means a lot to me, she… she’s all I have left. We’re all each other has left.”

He sighed, rubbing his thumb against the primal stone. “…Fine. Besides, it would be needlessly cruel of me to turn her away. Your friend can stay, so long as she helps out around the temple.”

The tension in Callum’s shoulders relaxed. “Oh thank you, this means so much to me, you have no idea-”

Jorani raised a hand and smiled. “Now go be with your friend. I’ll have two rooms readied for you both in the west wing of the temple, second floor. Classes start up tomorrow. Oh and Callum? Get yourself taken care of too.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! I'm sorry it's been so long. Life has been pretty hectic lately, and I got stuck with a nasty case of writers block too. I've wanted to keep TMC on a weekly updating schedule but for now it might be a sort of 'I'll update when I can' schedule. I have been writing every single day though!

This chapter actually got... VERY long, and I ended up cutting it in half, so there's a double update for you guys this week! I hope you enjoy. I've been really excited to write a certain arc that's coming up soon too...

Thanks to all of you for your patience and support. It really means the world to me. And don't forget to leave a comment too if you're enjoying the story! <3
Callum had initially been turned away by the healers when he had asked to see Rayla. They had told him that he would have to wait, as the injuries she had sustained, especially to her arm were rather more serious than either of them had initially assumed, and they were still in the process of taking care of her and testing to make sure there were no ill long-lasting effects.

The idea had left him understandably rattled.

Had she been putting on a façade to mask how bad the pain had been? She had seemed relatively okay last night and that morning, and guilt panged at his heart. They should have gotten her looked at sooner.

He had decided, that if he was going to sit around waiting, then at least he should get his own injuries tended to. So he slunk away briefly to reposition the broach, fixing it instead to the hem of his trousers, before re-emerging at the entrance of the medical bay. When he admitted his own concerns about his ribs, two elves ushered him hastily to another room and sat him down on one of the beds.

As he lifted his shirt, he did wonder curiously if the broach would give the illusion that he wasn’t injured at all. How did it work? But his question was swiftly answered, as he glanced down to see the dark purple and red marks against his tan Skywing skin. It was a nasty bruise, sprawling across his side and it was incredibly tender to the touch. The healer pressed against the wound with carefully, and Callum hissed a little through his teeth. Wow. Perhaps they both should have gotten looked at sooner…

“You’ve got a few cracked ribs, but nothing ol’ Calarsi can’t fix.” The elderly looking Skywing lady smiled warmly, adjusting the tiny spectacles on the end of her nose. She turned, searching through the nearby cabinet, unsatisfied until, there, she reached for a small vial at the back and pulled it forward. A brown sap like liquid swirled around as she swished it, eyeing it carefully. “This should do the trick. Now hold still for me, it might sting a bit.”

What an understatement.

Callum bit back a small cry as she dabbed at his wound with a soft rag soaked in the liquid. It felt momentarily like his skin was on fire, crackling down deep into his body. He tried to distract himself, thinking of Rayla, this was probably nothing compared to what she was going through. Oh stars above, he hoped she was doing okay.

The pain passed slowly, and as the healer fumbled around the draws, Callum resisted the urge to scratch at the bruising. It was sore and itchy now, but he didn’t want to further irritate it, instead clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides.

“There you go.” She smiled softly, placing a dressing to the injury and attaching it with a different gel along its edges that stuck to his skin. As it met his side, a cooling soothing sensation then spread through the afflicted area. There must have been something else on the dressing now, and Callum was thankful as the itching subsided. “Should be good in a few days’ time. Just try not to overdo it.”

“Oh wow, that quickly?”

Questions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“That’s the wonders of magic, dear.” Calarsi grinned. “Far quicker than letting wounds heal themselves. I do pity those poor humans in the west sometimes, I don’t know how on earth they manage. Must be a miserable existence.”

Callum returned her smile with an uncomfortable one. “Oh… yeah… must be awful over there…”

She helped him off the bed and Callum pulled his shirt and jacket back on rather awkwardly. He was still getting used to the additional limbs attached to his back.

“Thank you so much, I really appreciate it.”

“No worries child. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll check up on your friend. Do you know where you’ll be? I can send her out to find you when we’re done.”

“I’ll just be outside, I think.” If it was the closest place he could be to her, he would take it. And with that, Calarsi guided him back to the entrance of the wing and outside, and gave him a polite little bow before returning down the hall and into the room that Callum could only assume was Rayla’s.

There was not much to do but wait now, and so he did so silently, waiting on a little carved stone bench, sketchbook in hand. From here, he had the perfect vantage point of the town below in all its glory, bustling with life and energy, and so naturally it became the perfect subject to draw. It was just a shame he couldn’t quite capture the colour of it all.

His bag sat by his side, and Callum was thankful that there was barely a soul around except for him, as a curious little snout poked out from the bag.

“You okay in there Zym?” Zym grumbled a little, sliding a little further out so his head emerged. Callum scratched him gently between the horns. “Yeah… can’t be very comfortable in there all day can it?” Callum smiled, pulling the flap of the bag down so it rested atop the dragon’s head. He chirped, tilting his head at Callum, and the boy laughed, tilting his head in response. “Must be boring in there. I promise I’ll make it up to you when we get a chance, okay?” Zym purred, stretching out his neck to rest his head on Callum’s lap.

He almost didn’t hear her as she approached him from behind. And yet, he didn’t really need to at this point, he could almost feel her presence. Perhaps she was trying to sneak up on him, she had a habit of doing that, whether intentional or not.

“Hey.” He smiled over his shoulder, laughing when she perked in surprise.

“Oh wow. I figured you’d be so lost in your own little world you wouldn’t hear me coming.”

She looked better. A lot so. The rags he had used to stop her bleeding had been replaced by actual dressings and bandages. He wasn’t sure how Xadian doctors worked, but somehow most of the minor scratches and bruises had faded nearly completely from her skin. Her arm was in a new sling too, and as she strolled over, he noted how she was wearing his scarf, draped loosely around her shoulders.

Relief washed over him. He was so happy to see her.

“It’s probably for the best you weren’t in there with me when they were sorting out my arm. I was yelling some very uh… colourful language when they popped my shoulder back into its socket.”

Callum laughed. Somehow he could perfectly imagine that. “How are you doing now?”

“So much better.” She flopped down at his side, and pet the little dragon’s snout, watching it twitch.
and wrinkle and he gave Rayla a little toothy grin. “I can actually move it without wanting to rip my arm off now.” To demonstrate, he watched as she slowly pulled her arm from the much more professional sling, and she gave her arm a very slow bend back and forth before replacing it back amongst the bandages. “It’d usually take weeks, maybe even months to heal on its own, but they said if I visit them each day, I should be fine in about a week.”

“That’s good. See, aren’t you glad we went to a healer’s now?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She rolled her eyes with a smile and elbowed him lightly in the arm. Then her face became serious, her eyes bearing into his. “You got looked at too right?”

“Yeah. I’m a lot less sore now.” He lifted his arm a little and patted softly at his side. “She said it should be as good as new in a few days. Xadian doctors really are something.” She tilted her head at him questioningly. “Well I guess since you guys have access to magic… we don’t have that at home. It’s like you said, without magic, back in Katolis something like this would take months to heal. And you’d just have to deal with it.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate.” She frowned a little. “We’ll have to send some Xadian doctors your way after the war then, won’t we? I can’t have one of my favourite humans running around getting hurt back at his castle.” Callum chuckled under his breath, and she smiled fondly at him, as though she was half serious in her statement. “Anyway, I guess you want your scarf back now so…”

“O-Oh! It’s okay I, uh-” He raised his hands in protest as she went to unravel the scarf around her neck. “You can hang onto it for now. It’s… kind of cold so.”

Rayla blinked at him, surprised. She was quiet for a minute, her hand curled around the fabric of the scarf, and yet he could feel it. Her hesitation. As though she didn’t really want to let go of it either. “…Yeah. I suppose.” She replied quietly, and he watched her hand fall back to her side and a small smile catch her lips.

…It wasn’t even that cold out.

The boy stretched his wings a little, and in a little moment of bravery, draped one around Rayla’s shoulders and back as though it was a blanket. She shuffled a little closer, her good shoulder brushing against his, and he relaxed a little, yet a question formed in his mind.

…Why did he just do that?

“So how’d it go with the grand mage guy?” Her voice distracted him from his thoughts.

“Oh, well… we’re in.” Rayla’s eyes lit up. “Though for a brief moment I was scared he wouldn’t let you stay.” And then Rayla’s face fell again. He continued quickly. “But it’s okay, you can! It’s just… he said about you helping out around the temples doing odd jobs like gardening and tending to the library.”

“Oh. Alright. Seems fair.”

“We’ve got two rooms right next to each other on the second floor in the west wing.”

“Two rooms?” She tried to sound nonchalant, but Callum could pick up something else in her voice, and Callum realised too with a similar notion, that this would be the first time they had slept apart since starting their journey together.

“Yeah is… is that going to be okay?”
She nodded. “It’s fine with me, I guess. It’ll just be a bit weird. I like being able to keep an eye on you both.”

“I’ll just be next door.”

“Right.”

They were quiet for a moment, and Callum felt a tired rumble from the dragon in his lap.

“Do you think… do you think we should let them know about Zym?” He asked softly. Rayla reflected on his question petting the baby’s head now. “I mean, after everyone else has left the festival. Maybe tomorrow we could let them know. They are monks and mages, they seem pretty trust worthy. Jorani, the Archmage, even gave that speech about wanting peace, and it would be one less thing to worry about keeping a secret. And the poor little guy has been cooped up in my bag for so long, it can’t be good for him.”

Rayla sighed, watching as Zym nuzzled against her hand, blinking up at her with big eyes. “…If we let them know we have a baby dragon, I would at least want to keep the fact that he’s the prince secret.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Well there are other storm dragons besides the King and Queen. So it’s plausible for him to not be a prince.”

“Then why have we been so careful about hiding him this long?”

“Because I really don’t like drawing attention to us like that. We’ll probably be fine here but in the general public? I don’t know if you’ve noticed Callum, but most elves don’t go around carrying a baby dragon with them. It’d attract a lot of unnecessary interactions, and we’d probably get hassled by guards wondering why we have him.”

“Oh… right.” He pursed his lips. “So is that a yes on letting the island know, or…?”

“It’s a ‘fine I guess, just don’t tell people he’s the future king’.”

He grinned at her and Zym chirped, clambering out of the bag and into his arms. “You hear that buddy? After today no more hiding in a bag for a while.” Zym’s tail wagged and he yipped. Callum stifled a chuckle as he tried to shush the little dragon. “I know, but you have to stay quiet for now. We still can’t risk people seeing you today.” Zym leaned forward and booped his nose against Callum’s, and the boy heard a little giggle from his side.

“Alright alright. Come on. We’ve still got time if you want to look around before we have to turn in for the evening.”

The rest of the day passed rather quickly. They caught the tail end of a performance in the temple plaza, and briefly returned to the docks of Marinoris to peruse the various wares in the market. Rayla especially wanted to stock up on supplies while they had the opportunity, and Callum was grateful as he watched her wander the streets with more of a spring in her step.

The day had seemingly gone without much issue. But as the sky turned hues of purple and amber, and they made their way back to what would be their temporary home, they had only just step foot on the grassy island when a problem arose.

“Callum.”
“Hm?”

“Callum your hands.”

“Huh? Oh.” He reached out for hers but she frowned, her eyes alarmed.

“No, Callum look at your hands!” And so he did, and for a moment, he didn’t really register a problem. They were fine. Yeah they were a bit fuzzy but that was part of his disguise, right? Five tan soft fingers-

Wait.

The broach was wearing off. They had become so distracted in the town that they had briefly forgotten all about the item’s time limit, and it was beginning, as Palamigi had warned, to wear bit by bit, starting with his hands. “Oh. Oh no Rayla-!”

“Go!” She hissed, grabbing his arm and sprinting with him towards the west wing. “Get to your room!”

Callum’s feet pounded against the hard marble floor, and he struggled to keep up the pace with Rayla, she was practically dragging him behind her. Despite the healing of his ribs, there was still a numb pain pulsing with each step he took, and he clenched his jaw tight.

He was surprised that they hadn’t run into anyone yet. Rayla only slowed as they ascended the stairs and he heard her mutter something sharply under her breath as she dove and dragged him around a corner. She had clearly spotted someone, and as he panted, trying to catch his breath, he heard two voices, laughing and chatting. She peered around the corner carefully, and he watched her slowly relax.

“Alright. Coast is clear.”

“Rayla, how do I look?”

Her eyes flicked back to him and she glanced him up and down, concerned. “Not too bad. Other than the five fingers. And… your ears.”

“My ears?” He whined, pulling his arm free from her grip to feel them. They were no longer tufted with feathers, and only barely pointed now.

“You’ll be fine, we should be nearly there. Do you know which rooms are ours?”

“U-Uh…” Callum poked his head around the corner to check. Jorani hadn’t said specifics, only that he would have rooms readied for them. He slunk around anxiously, peering at the doors, and only as he approached did he notice that two doors, side by side, were left creaked slightly open. “Oh… Rayla?” He gave one door a tentative push and it gave, swinging slowly open. A neatly made small room revealed itself, and he and Rayla exchanged a small look.

“I… guess?” She mumbled, her eyes flickering down the hall, and he felt her hand rest against his back giving him a gentle push for him to step inside. He heard the door neighbouring creek quietly as Rayla poked her head in.

“These have to be ours, right?” Callum blinked back at her. She gave a nonchalant shrug.

“They are now.”
Zym’s head poked out of the bag again with a small grumble. “Do you want to look after Zym tonight or…?”

Rayla gave a little nod. “Yeah, I think I’d prefer that. Is that okay with you, little one?”

Zym purred in response as Rayla’s hand found the dragon’s cheek, and Callum smiled, feeling Rayla scoop up the baby prince in her one good arm. She cradled him softly and Zym stretched, wiggling a little in such a manner Callum worried briefly that Rayla would lose her grip on him, before he chirped curiously, glancing between the boy and the elf.

“Yeah it’s a bit weird isn’t it, Zym? But it’s fine, if you miss me I’m only next door.” Zym whined a little, his mouth quivering. Could dragons cry…? It looked like he was about to. “H-Hey it’s okay! Look we’re not splitting up or anything, we’re still a team.” He scratched the sad little Zym on each side of his face.

Rayla gave him a little reassuring squeeze. “Yeah, Callum will be okay! We’ll see him again in the morning, alright?”

Zym relaxed a little, pawing at Callum until the boy gave him his hand. He rumbled a little, then let go, curling up and resting his head against Rayla’s shoulder.

“Alright well…” She turned and lingered in her doorway for a moment.

He gave her a little nod and a warm smile. “G’night Ray.”

Her eyes lingered on his face, soft and half lidded before she spoke. “…Good night, Callum. See you tomorrow.”

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It had been strange laying there in silence on his bed. No Rayla, no Zym, no Ezran. He was left completely alone with his thoughts. It was almost uncomfortable, and Callum quickly realised how much the notion of being alone made him feel vulnerable. Ever since he was little, he had shared a room with his little brother, and he had become so used to having at least someone there in the night, falling asleep to the soft sounds of sluggish movements, or little yawns and sleepy murmurs.

…Perhaps it was just something he would have to get used to.

The cold didn’t help either. For whatever reason, there were no window panes in the temple, so the chill night air left Callum curled up tight in his thankfully thick blankets. Why was it so cold? He was used to sleeping outside but this was ridiculous, were Skywing elves just naturally acclimatised to cooler conditions? He could also feel the island beginning to drift upwards once more, and it was another very bizarre feeling that he had to adjust to, as he felt gravity seemingly increase on him.

He hoped Rayla was alright in her own room.

It took him far longer to fall asleep than usual, tossing and turning, desperate for rest to take him. It must have been the early hours of the morning when Callum finally dozed off.

He only had one dream that night. For something wicked and cruel was waiting for him.
“So you decided to make a fool out of Feran did you?”

…What? Where was he? Everything was pitch black, and there was the odd sensation in his body, as though he was floating in emptiness.

Then grey slowly began to prickle at the corners of his eyes like crackling static, until eventually, everything went white.

It was eerily familiar… hadn’t it been like this when he met that strange compass lady? Unable to move, floating in a void, with a disembodied voice talking in his head… He wished it wasn’t as scary this time around, and yet the venomous tone of the voice unnerved him deeply.

“Who’s there?”

There was the sound of footsteps, and suddenly, like before, Callum felt the ground beneath his feet once more and he turned.

A tall slender Moonshadow elf stood before him in black robes, decorated with symbols… symbols that Callum was sure he had seen before somewhere. Were they runes like the ones he had seen back at the Moon Nexus? Perhaps. But they were all so closely knit that it was hard to pick any one specific rune out. Long curling horns adorned with metal bands sprouted up from his short, neat white hair, and two vibrant silver eyes regarded Callum’s own. His skin was pale, intricate blue marks curving from his forehead and splitting so they curled down the bridge of his nose and under his eyes. He didn’t quite walk, but glided over with an air of arrogance to him.

“Hm. Curious.” He completely ignored Callum’s question, circling around the boy, and Callum suddenly felt very anxious as the elf glanced him up and down. Finally he stopped in front of Callum, eyes cold and hard, his hands hidden in his sleeves. “You don’t exactly look like much.”

“What are you talking about? And who’s-” Callum stopped himself. It was the hunter Rayla had mentioned… it had to be. His legs trembled a little. Was this the elf that had sent the hunter after them? Why?

The man sighed, waving a hand apathetically. “Oh relax, you’re something of interest to me, so you get to live for now. But tell me, I am curious… Why are you at the Sky Nexus, boy?”

Callum swallowed, his eyes going wide. He knew where they were.

“W-Why do you want to know?”

The elf’s eyes darkened, and suddenly Callum felt a pressure on his head, small at first, until it began to ache, and then all at once it was agonising, as though it was being crushed slowly beneath a dragon’s talons. Callum collapsed to his knees screaming out.

Oh, if this was a dream, a nightmare, he hoped he’d wake up soon-

“I’ll ask again. What is it you two are doing?”

“N-None…. None of your business…” Callum croaked weakly, and watched as the man’s nose wrinkled and his lip peeled back into a snarl.

“Insolent child. You’re getting on my bad side and believe me, you don’t want to end up there.”

The pain was burning now, down from his head travelling the length of his spine, and in that moment… Callum was once again sure he was going to die.
Maybe, just maybe, Rayla would save him again, he’d wake up in her arms, fine, and safe, and-

There was a horrible snap. Pain ricocheted through his body and then everything went black once more.

When he opened his eyes, his head was still throbbing, but his eyes were staring up at a familiar ceiling. He was in the temple again. Cold sweat trickled down his face as he shot up, and he found his feet desperately, staggering to his bedroom door. He nearly collapsed there, leaning against its timber frame, his head pressed against the cold wooden door.

“R-Ray…Rayla…!” He cried but his voice was hoarse and broken.

She wasn’t there. His legs trembled and he found himself falling to his knees, desperately trying to cease the ringing in his ears, and steady his swaying body. The corners of his vision were fading and the room swirled around him, and now he was panicking, raising a shaking hand to the door handle.

He was going to pass out- he was sure of it- and if he did, would that elf be there again? Waiting? He didn’t want to find out.

“Rayla…” He cried out again with what was left of his energy. This was agonising, and he made a mental note that given a choice, he would much rather share a room with Rayla whenever they had the chance for the rest of this journey. Why did it seem like whenever they were separated, something bad happened to him?

He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to steady his breathing, and as he did, the pain began to numb slightly until it was more bearable.

He was fine, he was going to be okay. He was safe now.

…Okay, that last one was wishful thinking at best. But maybe… maybe it had just been a bad dream. It was the change in air pressure, the air was thinner the higher up they were right?

He opened his eyes, and the world swirled around him a little less. He let out a little sigh, pulling himself up using the door handle for purchase, and he half collapsed again, only saving himself as he supported his weight against the door.

He felt sick now. Sick, and tired, and weak. And all he wanted was the comfort of Rayla and maybe a cuddle from Zym too. She was only a room over, surely she had heard him clattering around, right?

He didn’t even bother grabbing the broach, it was too far away for him, back on the windowsill by his bed. Instead, he grabbed the cloak from the chair by his door hastily, and pulled it clumsily around him, as he pushed down on the door handle and practically fell out of his room.

If Callum had looked back as he left and closed the door, perhaps if his mind had been a touch clearer, he might have noticed through the gentle breeze blowing his curtains aside, that the broach was no longer there.

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Callum knocked gently on Rayla’s door, his hand still shaking, but he was only greeted by the sound of a little dragon sniffing and scrabbling at the door. “Rayla? Can I come in?” There was no
response. “Rayla?”

From the other side, Zym yipped quietly, clearly desperate to get to him, and Callum creaked the door open just enough for Zym to squish his nose out and peek a big blue eye up at the boy.

“Zym? Is Rayla even in there?” Zym cooed, squishing his head through the door and tilted his gaze up at Callum curiously.

Callum cracked the door open a little further, just to be sure, but she wasn’t there. Her bed was neatly made, and it would all seem rather unassuming, had there not been a note very clearly laying stark against the dark blue of the blankets.

Neat, cursive handwriting greeted Callum as he read it, and a strange realisation dawned in his hazy mind. He had never seen Rayla’s handwriting before. Yet it perfectly matched what he would imagine her writing to look like, curled and fancy, neatly written across the page. Unfortunately, Callum’s head continued to swirl slightly, and he struggled, focusing hard to read her message.

‘Dear Callum,

If you wake up and I’m not about, I’ve just gone to the healers. I know what you’re like, so don’t worry, I’ll be back soon.

Rayla’

It was short and to the point.

Callum let out a small sigh. What was this feeling? Relief? And yet, tinged with disappointment. Relief that she was okay, and yet he wished so desperately that she was here right now. Rayla had left the quill on her bedside table, and so Callum scratched a quick message on the back of her note.

‘Zym’s with me, come find me when you get back?

- Callum.’

He hoped the note was legible enough as he tried to place it and the quill with the same level of care that Rayla had before closing her door once more, Zym curling around his legs peering up at him. Was that concern on Zym’s little face or just a trick of Callum’s mind?

“C’mon, Zym. You can hang out with me in my room for a bit if you want.”

Zym let out a soft trill and trotted after Callum as he made his way back to his own room. He was thankful when he returned to sit on his bed and the little dragon hopped up right next to him, and cuddled up under one of Callum’s arms, in what seemed to be a comforting gesture, his tail swishing gently back and forth.

The pain still throbbed agonisingly across his temples, and he rubbed the bridge of his nose, exhausted. What even was the time? Rays of light were streaming in through the cracks in his curtains, so it must have been sunrise at the earliest.
He kept his curtains drawn, too tired to deal with the bright light right now. He tucked his legs up onto the bed and rested his back against the headboard of his bed, Zym rearranging himself as well to get comfy once more, cuddling up in one of Callum’s arms, while the boy reached for the sketchbook on his bedside table.

The memory of that cold Moonshadow mage still swam through his head, his words lingering in his mind.

He was still upset. So he did what he always did when he was upset. He drew.

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It was hard to discern how much time had passed when there was a gentle knock at Callum’s door. Had it been ten minutes? An hour?

“…Ray?”

“No, it’s the mail elf.” Replied Rayla’s voice jokingly. “I’m here to deliver… the mail. And do other postal duties.”

Callum couldn’t help but stifle a small laugh. “You can come in.”

She did so, and Callum watched as Zym lifted his head, excitedly jumping off the bed to run and greet Rayla. He jumped up at her leg and she ruffled the fur around his cheek a little with a smile. She was wearing his scarf, he noted to himself, and in a strange way, it softened his heart a little at the sight of her wearing it still. Her arm still rested in its sling, but the other bandages from yesterday were off now to reveal that her worse wounds were healing up nicely.

“And how are my boys this fine morning, hm?”

Zym’s tail wagged excitedly and he chirped, jumping down to follow Rayla further into the room.

For some reason, the urge to share his worries with Rayla had dissipated in that moment. In fact, he almost felt ashamed. Bothering Rayla over a nightmare? It seemed so trivial compared to all the other issues they had faced. Even if it had been a nightmare that had left him with a throbbing headache still dully ringing through his skull. Even if Rayla had trusted him days earlier in Kalarrden with her own troubled dreams about her mentor. And yet still… He didn’t want to worry her over it.

“I’m…fine, I suppose.”

Rayla saw through his bluff immediately, and he could see it on her face. “…You’re upset.”

“No I’m not.”

Rayla sighed and rolled her eyes, walking over to sit next to him on the bed. He felt her gently tug the hood down that he hadn’t realised was still up and around his face, and then her hand trailed down resting against his back. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but denying how you feel isn’t going to help at all, you know.”

Callum’s chin found his knees and he huffed slightly, unable to meet Rayla’s eye. He felt her brush her thumb gently back and forth against the fabric of his jacket, waiting patiently for his response.
“Okay I’m a little upset.” He grumbled softly. She was quiet for a moment, but he could almost hear the gears turning in her head. There was a small thump, as Zym hopped onto the bed too, bumbling over to the pair, and he curled up on Callum’s other side, resting his head against Callum’s arm.

“Hey,” She smiled finally, scooting closer. “Why don’t I ask you five questions?”

Her words took him back instantly to their time together on the river in the little rowboat. ‘It’ll be a fun distraction’ He had told her back then. Perhaps that’s what she thought he needed right now. It had certainly seemed to help Rayla back then, at least temporarily. A little sigh escaped his lips.

“Alright.”

She shuffled closer still, her arm now draped around his shoulders. “Okay. Question one. What’s your favourite thing to draw?”

It wasn’t really the sort of thing he had quiet expected Rayla to ask. In a strange way, he had been certain she was going to tease him somehow, but the question seemed genuine enough.

“Actually…? I really like drawing people.” He had perked up a little now, sitting up a little straighter, and offering Rayla a small half-hearted smile of his own. “There’s something about capturing people’s feelings and personality on the page that’s really rewarding to me.”

“Alright. Part two of question one-“

“That’s cheating.” He mumbled, but the smile on his face became more genuine.

“No it’s not!” She laughed. “It’s a follow up question, it doesn’t count!”

“Oh, fine. Go on.”

“If you like drawing people, is there anyone you like drawing the most? And I won’t be offended if it’s not me, I swear.” She added somewhat playfully, giving him a light squeeze.

Callum thought for a moment. “…You know what actually? It probably is you, if I’m being honest.” Rayla regarded him with surprise at his answer. “I guess maybe because you’re the first and well, only elf I’ve ever drawn? So it’s kind of a nice change. Though I like drawing all my friends and family. The better I know someone, the better my drawings of them come out usually.”

They both laughed. She had been right. This was definitely what he needed right now.

“Alright, are we moving onto question two, or is it question one, part three next?” He smirked a little.

“Question two.” She continued confidently, as though she already had a list of questions lined up ready in her mind. “What was it like growing up in a castle?”

Callum paused reflectively. “Hectic.” She raised an eyebrow curiously at him. “There was always so much I had to do, so many lessons, studying and princely duties. But I guess it had its perks too. I was never really bored.”

Rayla listened intently, a little smile on her lips. “I guess you didn’t really have to worry about being
“Oh no, that was a nice part of it too. I never exactly had many friends, but there was always people around, and I had Ez, and—” He faltered for a moment. Despite everything that had happened, he felt a painful pull in his heart for Soren and Claudia. Were they okay? Before they had parted ways, Ezran had mentioned offhand about how he had bumped into Claudia, and about how Soren had gotten hurt facing the red dragon.

…Were they okay? Were they back at the castle by now? …Was Ezran home and safe?

Rayla was clearly aware she had hit a nerve, and her arm fell a little so that her hand rested against his arm now, brushing her thumb gently there soothingly.

“I… never really had many friends either. I got along fine with people but things were kind of… complicated. Besides, you don’t have much time to make friends when you’re training to be a back flipping, slish-slashning warrior elf.” She offered him a gentle smile. “So I’m glad I have you and Ezran now.” Zym trilled quietly, glancing up at her and she chuckled. “And you too Zym.”

“I’m glad I- we have you too. It must have been… kind of lonely for you before.” His hand absentmindedly trailed up to his arm where her hand was, and he placed it gently on top of hers, brushing his thumb against hers comfortably.

“A little. But it was all I ever really knew back then, so…” She coughed a little. “Anyway so, question three—”

There was a knock on the door, and they both stiffened.

“Hello? Callum?”

He shot Rayla a terrified look and didn’t have to say a word as she instantly read the situation. All at once, her hand was on his shoulder, and she shoved him down onto the bed and his blankets were thrown unceremoniously over him. His surprised ‘oof!’ and Zym’s little squeak were muffled by the thick duvet, and he heard the frantic patter of Rayla’s feet against the wooden floor as she made for the door.

“Callum’s not feeling well!” He could hear her trying to disguise the panic in her voice, hoping that at least the monks didn’t know her well enough to pick up on her bluff. In a way, Rayla was right, his head was still sore and jumbled, he wasn’t really feeling great at all, despite the earlier distraction she had provided.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, should I send one of the healers over?”

“Oh no, it’s fine- it’s nothing serious, they’ll probably just tell him to rest anyway.”

“Oh…” The monk trailed off, and Callum wondered for a moment if he had simply left there and then. But his voice returned after a moment. “I’ll let Master Jorani know he’s not too well, but can you let Callum know he would like a word when he’s feeling a little better?”

“Yes, will do! Thank you very much.”
And then there was silence once more and he heard Rayla breathe a sigh of relief. Callum swam through the blankets until his head emerged once more and he peeked over them to look at her, disgruntled. At his side, Zym wriggled, and poked his head out too, more out of curiosity over what was going on. He looked incredibly cozy, a little grin on his features, and the blanket still partially covering the top of his little head.

“Wow. That was close.” She sauntered back over. “Sorry about that… It was a precaution.”

“It’s fine.” Callum mumbled half into the duvet.

But Rayla knew it wasn’t fine. And he knew that Rayla knew too, from the look in her eyes. She softened and reached over with a sympathetic smile to ruffle his hair affectionately, but then her hand froze, and trailed along to his forehead, where she rested the back of her hand. It was cool to the touch, and in a way, Callum felt a little relief. He hadn’t realised just how uncomfortably warm his head had been until just then.

There was concern in her eyes now. “You feel a little feverish, Callum are you \emph{actually} sick?”

Callum gave a half-hearted shrug. “I woke up with… with a really bad headache but…”

“\emph{I’ll} find the broach. You should stay here and rest. Besides if anyone sees a cloaked figure wandering around that’s going to look incredibly suspicious, don’t you think? I’m supposed to be the only elf on the island who’s not a Skywing.”

“I don’t want to go to sleep.” He admitted, rather suddenly, and he caught the look of surprise in Rayla’s eyes now.

“…Why not?”

Callum pulled his eyes away from hers for a moment, almost embarrassed. “I had… a really bad dream, and I think that’s what messed me up in the first place.”

“…Callum.” Her voice went soft. She sat on the edge of his bed, and he felt her hand leave his chest, and he held his breath a little when he felt the back of her hand brush the hair from his forehead and rest there again. “Maybe it’s altitude sickness.” She reasoned quietly, perhaps more to herself than to him. He glanced back up at her sadly, but when he caught her eye she threw him a sympathetic smile. “You’ll be fine. Sometimes when you’re not used to being up high it can mess with your brain a little. You just need to give yourself time to adjust.”

“…Yeah.”

“If you’re really that scared to go to sleep though, maybe Zym can help keep you awake.” Zym poked his head up again and blinked across at Callum, the blanket finally teetering off his horns. “He can wake you up if you start dozing off by biting your fingers or something.” It seemed she had meant it as a joke, but Callum wasn’t able to muster a laugh. He couldn’t quite focus on anything but the feeling of Rayla’s hand against his head. She hadn’t pulled it away yet… and he didn’t quite
“Rayla… I’m scared. I don’t know if it was just a fever dream or if it was something more ominous.”

Rayla’s hand peeled away from his forehead slowly, and he felt her ever so gently brush the back of her fingers around to his temple as though to brush his hair out of the way, and then they trailed down the edge of his cheek lingering there just before the reached his jaw. Her eyes questioned his, as though asking him to continue his thoughts. The motion had distracted him a little though, despite the comfort it gave him, and he had to pause to collect his train of thought again.

“I don’t think that hunter guy is working alone. I saw… this Moonshadow mage? And he asked what I was doing here at the temple. And when I didn’t say, he got mad and used some kind of horrible spell on me, and it felt like I was dying.” Rayla couldn’t hide the alarm that crept across her features, but she tried to regardless. Callum continued. “And then there was like this… snap? Like a painful jolt and I woke up.”

He waited for Rayla to speak, but it seemed she was uncertain of what to say for a moment.

“L-Like I said. Maybe it was just a dream.” She glanced away from him now. “But if… if it helps put your mind at ease, I’ll look into this for you, okay? Did the mage give you his name at all?”

“No but… I think the hunter might be called Feran.”

Something registered on Rayla’s face, and she nodded slowly, her hand falling away from his cheek. He instantly missed it. “That name sounds… strangely familiar.” He watched her face flicker as the thoughts rushed through her mind. “Alright. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this. I’ll take care of everything.” And then she gave him a warmer smile and ruffled his hair gently, before she stood, peering out of his window and down below for a moment. She furrowed her brow, nodded to herself, then turned back to Callum. “I’ll be back soon, okay? You just take it easy for a while. Zym, make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

As she went to open the door, Callum’s voice cracked. “Rayla?” She lingered in the doorframe, her eyes on him. “Thank you. Really. Thank you.” There was so much sincerity in his voice, and he hoped desperately that Rayla understood how much her actions and company had meant to him in that moment.

She smiled back at him. “You’re welcome, Callum.” And with that, she pulled the door closed behind her.

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It made sense to find the broach first. That was the most urgent thing, Callum needed it to get around, and if someone were to find Callum without it, it would be a complete disaster with dangerous consequences. Skywing elves, and especially monks, had a reputation for being mostly relaxed and peaceful unless pushed, but she couldn’t bear to risk Callum’s life like that if they were to discover he was a human.

So she made her way briskly to the grounds below Callum’s bedroom window, searching for any sign of the little metal pin, any tiny fragment of metal, or a loose gem, all through the grass and the bushes, and around all the columns and tiled floors. But there was nothing. Rayla’s agitation only grew as the patrons of the temple rose for their morning duties, tending to the temple around her,
most shooting her confused and concerned looks.

“Uh, Miss Rayla? Are you alright?” One of the monks finally asked, a bespectacled young Skywing with light blue skin and midnight hair tied up in a ponytail.

Rayla grumbled a little despite herself, her eyes still scanning the area. She didn’t question how the lady knew her name. The Archmage must have spread the word, she realised, given how she wasn’t immediately being harassed with questions on how she was still on the island. She hoped silently that she wouldn’t have to deal with her ‘temple duties’ today, her first priority was taking care of her poor ill human boy.

“Callum’s lost his broach. And it’s… very important to him. So I’m trying to find it.”

“A broach…” The monk mumbled quietly, scratching at her arm. “Y’know I think Halari mentioned finding something out here like that last night, maybe you should ask him. He’s usually in the library at this time of day.”

“Oh- oh, thank you!” Rayla felt relief wash over her as she darted away as quickly as she could inside, and through the temple halls. That was easy. Almost too easy. And yet perhaps, Rayla could afford to let her guard down here, just a little for now. Things had been going rather smoothly for the most part since getting to the temple… right? Other than Callum’s nightmare.

The library when she finally found it after a few confusing wrong turns, was expansive, Rayla could have easily found herself lost within it.

‘Oh, something tells me Callum will like this place. There must be so many books on Sky magic here.’

“Uh, hello? Halari?” She called out, half expecting to be hushed by some angry figure peering around the corner of an aisle. But instead, a voice called back.

“Just a second!” The disembodied voice chimed, echoing from deep within the library

Rayla waited patiently, leaning tentatively against one of the marble support pillars stretching high up to the ceiling. She wasn’t waiting long when a short, chubby looking elf bounded around the corner, a bunch of books stacked up high in front of him obscuring his face.

He dropped them on a table with a surprisingly loud thud, before turning to Rayla. He had a kindly face to him, and a warm smile that lit up the room around him.

“Ah yes, you must be Rayla! I heard about you from Master Jorani. Are you here to assist me in the library today?”

Rayla felt a pang of guilt. “Oh I… m-maybe later? I’m really sorry, it’s just Callum is pretty sick right now, and he’s lost his broach, I told him I’d find it for him. It was sitting on the windowsill last night, one of the monks said you might have it?”

“Oh, I’m sorry about your friend.” Halari’s face curled into a sad little frown. “Here, come now, follow me.” Halari set off at quite a pace through the aisles, twisting and turning in such a manner that the deeper they found their way into the library, the more maze-like it became.

Eventually however, they arrived at a small alcove with a desk and Halari pulled open its draw, scavenging through it. “Ah, here we go! This wouldn’t happen to be it, would it?”

And there it was, between the elf’s finger and thumb. It was a little dinged on one edge, but Rayla
sighed relieved, as Halari dropped it into the palm of her hand, her fingers curling protectively around it.

“Oh thank you, thank you so much! I’ll make sure he’s more careful with it in the future.”

Halari nodded politely. “He’s lucky it landed in the bushes below your rooms. That thing looks mighty delicate, if it had landed on the tiles I don’t think it would have survived.” Rayla grimaced. “It’s an interesting little piece of art though, not something traditionally worn by Skywing elves. How did he come across it again?”

Rayla’s brain stalled. ‘Quick! Say something!’

“It was… a betrothal gift…!”

Rayla mentally face palmed so hard she was sure if she had done so physically she might have mercifully knocked herself out. ‘No! You complete and utter fool! Argh!’

“Oh?” That had piqued Halari’s interest. “From you I assume, given by the Moonshadow craftwork.”

Well there was no going back now.

“Yeah… that’s right.” Her voice sounded strained as it left her throat. ‘Well, I suppose we’re literally engaged now for the rest of this visit. Agh, Rayla, you’re such an idiot… I’m sorry Callum.’

“Well that’s very sweet.” He smiled, and Rayla tried to relax the tension in her shoulders a little. “I wish you both the best, it’s a… difficult world out there for mixed couples.”

Rayla reflected on those words quietly. It was true. Couples made up of different elf races were rather rare, and there was a fair bit of prejudice facing them, varying from race to race. She had always found the idea rather sad, it seemed a cruel thing to be so coldly judged for something as innocent as falling in love.

She wondered what they might think if they knew Callum was a human. What immense struggles would they face then?

She shoved the thoughts deep down, and offered Halari her thanks and a grateful bow.

“I’d… better get going now, I need to go talk to the mages about something important and then go check on Callum. I might see you around later!”

“No worries, I’m glad I could help! Give the boy my best wishes.”

Regardless, she steeled herself as best she could to focus on the next step.

She needed to find the mages.
Poor Rayla ahaha! She's really put her foot in it now.
But on the bright side she's kickstarted a really fun subplot I've been excited about since long before I actually started writing this fic!
Anyway I hope you guys have enjoyed this little double-update week! I'll try and get a chapter out next week if I'm able to, but for now TMC is on a "I'll update when I can" schedule. Thank you guys for your patience and enthusiasm. I love reading your comments and getting your lovely messages, you're all so kind!
As always, hope you guys will leave a comment letting me know what you think! <3
Thank you!
The Secret Garden

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t too hard to work out where they were. If Rayla’s assumptions were correct, the way the Sky Temple worked meant that there would be a council of High Mages, and Jorani, being the Archmage, was in charge. So she needed to find the council if she was to get any answers about this strange dream Callum had. And a council so important would surely be found in the most impressive part of the temple, the main tower with the crystal sitting atop it.

She wished desperately that the poor boy had simply had a bad nightmare brought upon by altitude sickness, but… that name he had said… she was sure she had heard it before, and there was no way Callum would have known the hunter’s name from his sheltered life back in Katolis. The man’s face flashed through her memory and she shuddered a little, her brow furrowing in anger.

Feran.

What a brutal foe he was… and if he wasn’t working alone then…

Rayla sighed. What a mess. If it wasn’t humans trying to kill her in Katolis, it was elves trying to kill her and Callum in Xadia. She had always known it wouldn’t be easy, this journey, but could the universe cut them at least a little break? They barely had escaped the hunter with their lives, if there were more people after them then…

The thoughts swam bitterly through her head.

‘They’ll have to take Callum and Zym over my dead body.’ She thought, but a cold fear grew in her heart. ‘…Just so long as that mage can’t kill Callum in his sleep…’ Her fist curled tightly as she walked, and she quietly pleaded to the stars that the notion was impossible.

‘Don’t take him from me. Please.’

Her feet instinctively drove her towards the tower, and as she stewed in her thoughts, she realised she had come to a standstill outside an archway with a pair of large oak doors. Hushed voices came from within and Rayla’s curiosity piqued. Perhaps it was a little rude to listen in, and yet…

She leaned closer, nimble footed so that they wouldn’t hear her approach the door, and listened quietly. She could hear them surprisingly clear.

“I still don’t like this, Jorani.” A gruff voice she didn’t recognise mumbled.

“Oh would you relax? I know you like to keep to traditions, but there’s respecting our past, and then there’s being tethered to it.” That was Jorani now.

“But an outsider? Staying on the island? It’s ridiculous!”

Another voice sighed now. “Oh Karajh… Are you good for anything other than complaining all the time about every little thing?” The man’s voice was softer, like a calm breeze. “Master Jorani is right. In times like these we have to be adaptable. And I don’t see any reason why welcoming a Moonshadow elf into our temple should be any different than welcoming any other Skywing.”

“Because Moonshadow elves cannot be trusted!” The first voice hissed angrily. “It’s in their nature,
Jorani, they’ll stab you in the back when you think you can trust them. They are cold, and brutal, and you are all fools to put so much trust in someone you don’t even know.”

The words stung a little, and Rayla wrinkled her nose. Oh, great, more bigotry. She thought she was past that when she left the human kingdoms behind.

The other unfamiliar voice groaned. “You have some issues.” Rayla nodded in agreement. “Moonshadow elves are an honourable bunch as a whole. You’re letting your experiences of one elf cloud your judgement.”

“Aeslen’s right, Karajh.” There was a woman’s voice now. “It’s not fair for you to judge this child so harshly for something completely unrelated to her.”

The voice belonging to Karajh grumbled but said nothing. Well, at least some of the council had sense. Though now the idea of presenting herself to the group for this matter left an uncomfortable pit in her stomach. Should she just… wait? And come back and ask Jorani in private? He seemed nice enough from her brief interaction with him the day before.

No… surely the more mages she could ask about this, the better her chance at getting answers. And waiting around would be a waste of time, she wanted to get back to Callum as soon as she could. Karajh would just had to deal with it.

The conversation seemed to have moved on thankfully within the room, and Rayla braced herself, knocking upon the door. The voices fell silent.

“We’re busy.” Karajh grumbled, but was hushed again by the other mages.

“Uh yes? Come in?” Jorani spoke now politely, and Rayla creaked the door open slowly, poking her head around the corner.

It was a fancy looking room. On the smaller side for a temple’s council room, and yet it held a certain air of grandeur to it, tall, with curving supports reaching high up into the temple’s rafters. It had long tall windows as well, seven in total, but Rayla noted how there were no windowsills, the windows reached right down to the floor, and she supposed it would make sense. They weren’t just windows, but rather entrances and exits for the Skywing elves to fly casually in and out as they pleased.

But one window, was unlike the others. Instead of a hollow pane-less frame, the one directly in front and to the back of the room, was a stain glassed one. It was beautiful. A depiction of Thunder himself, the mighty king of dragons, but a kinder, and more patient iteration of Xadia’s former protector, against a backdrop of sunset hues.

Five seats tall carved stone seats curved around the table, occupied by four very finely dressed mages and at the head of the table, right in front of Rayla, sat Jorani. The chair to Rayla’s far left, was empty.

He seemed a little surprised to see her. “Oh, hello there young Rayla. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“You’re interrupting a very important meeting.” Karajh growled. The elf was by far the shortest, and surprisingly muscular for a Skywing elf, his armless tunic and robes revealed several scars on his downy blue skin. An ex-soldier perhaps?

“Yeah… clearly.”

The woman directly to the left of Jorani stifled a laugh. She had a pretty face, darker skin, and
piercing blue eyes that twinkled with almost a playfulness to them. She looked to be the youngest at the table. Karajh shot her a distasteful look.

“Look I’m… really sorry I wouldn’t bother you if this wasn’t important. But Callum… Something happened to him last night.” She paused her words lingering in the air, and the mages all listened intently, even Karajh, his eyes bearing into her. “He saw a Moonshadow mage in his dreams. And it seemed like he used some kind of magic against Callum. He’s… he’s really shaken up about this, and I just wanted to know if something like that is even possible, entering someone else’s dreams.”

The response was unfortunate, as Rayla felt a very heavy silence fall across the room. It answered her question, and it wasn’t the way she had hoped for.

The mages exchanged nervous glances. It was Karajh who finally broke the deafening silence. “That’s… high level Moon magic. Very high level. Especially if he was casting spells in the dream.” The distaste was clear from his voice, but there seemed to be some level of sympathy in his eyes. “Is the kid doing alright?”

“He’s… got a fever.”

“Well then he got off lucky if that’s all.”

The other mages gave varying gestures of agreement.

“So… so Callum’s in really bad danger. If this mage can hurt him like that…” Rayla breathed, her heart beginning to pound against her chest. “But there’s… something you can do, right?”

Jorani’s fingers wove together and he rested his chin on them, his eyes glazed as he thought deeply before answering. “Rayla it’s very important you tell me everything you know about this.”

Rayla relayed what she knew, until she finally mentioned how Callum was snapped awake painfully by some unknown force.

“The snap…” Aeslen muttered, the tall elf with long dark hair to the right of Jorani glanced over at the High Mage over half-moon specs. “Could that have been a result of our climbing altitude? Maybe we got out of his range.”

“It’s possible. It’s also possible that the connection was severed some other way.” The lady to his left offered gently. “Perhaps someone was protecting the boy.”

Rayla listened quietly. Her gaze found Jorani’s face. As the mages around him discussed, she could see the gears turning in the old Archmage’s mind, his eyes distant bearing into the floor. What was he thinking…?

Another detail fluttered to Rayla’s mind as she glanced down at her arm. “Oh… there’s something else.” The muttering fell silent again, all eyes on her. “We think he might be working with someone. This big brutish hunter looking guy. He attacked us a few days back. Apparently the mage called him Feran.”

The silence grew cold and anxious. You could hear a pin drop against the tiled floor. No one moved, frozen at the sound of his name. It didn’t bode well for Rayla’s confidence, her heart shuddering at the response.

“Jorani…” Karajh glanced over at the Archmage, eyes dancing with fear. “Y-You don’t think it could be…?”
Jorani’s finally let out a shaky breath. “Oh dear children… what have you gotten yourself mixed up in?” He asked in a voice so sad and full of pity.

Rayla felt the tension rise through her muscles, stiffening in her shoulder, and her jaw clenched. She was wordless, searching the man’s eyes for any sign of hope that, maybe, things weren’t as bad as she was beginning to think they were.

When she didn’t reply, Jorani turned to Karajh. “It has to be him, Karajh. Akzral.”

The drop of his name did something to Rayla. She shuddered in response, her memories thrown back to the fight with the hunter, his face a sickening grin, voice purring coldly.

“What did you do to my friends?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about them. Akzral wants them alive. You should be more concerned about yourself… Because I get to kill you.”

She flinched a little, glancing down at the floor and away from the mages. “I-think… you might be right. The hunter said something about someone with that name. About how he wanted to capture Callum and-” Rayla cut herself short of saying Zym’s name… Not just yet. “…And well… I guess for some reason he wants me dead.” She finished, brushing her hand anxiously against her healing shoulder.

“Jorani we’ve taken in a pair of dangerous rouges, they could put us in serious danger if they’re mixed up with Akzral and his organisation-”

“Oh Karajh can you shut up and have some empathy for once in your life?” The woman snapped. “For the love of Thunder, rest his soul, they are children! Children who need our help clearly!”

Karajh flinched, curling away, almost ashamed.

Aeslen nodded in agreement. “Madrana is right. And Karajh, you see this as an invitation for The Order to attack us but you’re forgetting they have no way of getting anywhere near us.” He glanced back to Rayla, who had been so desperately trying to make sense of what was being said, and was struggling to keep up. “Don’t worry, so long as you’re here, no one will be able to hurt you. And they shouldn’t be able to track you anymore either while you’re out of range of their mage.”

“Thank you but… I’m sorry can someone please explain what’s going on? Who are these people? You said something about an Order?”

“Akzral is a very dangerous man who leads a group, calling themselves the Order of Tenebris. And if he is after you then…” Jorani glanced away sadly. “Then I can only pray that you become the first to survive them.”

“People who have a run in with them usually don’t survive a moon’s full cycle.” Madrana added softly. “Once they want something, or someone gone, nothing stop them.”

Rayla’s entire body went stiff with fear, but she tried not to let it show on her face. “…What is it they want?”

“No one knows. Only that they’ve been taking out important figures, and agitating the brewing civil war below.” Jorani replied stiffly. “It… is devastating to know that Xadia is falling apart like this. With Thunder gone, there is so much unrest... Our land is falling out of balance.”

Rayla flinched a little, biting back the impulse to defend the ones she had come to care for dearly.

“Regardless,” Jorani rose to his feet slowly, demanding the attention of the room. “It is as Aeslen said. Akzral and his group can’t reach you here. Not anymore. You have no reasons to fear them right now.” He glided around the table, and placed a hand reassuringly on Rayla’s shoulder. “Go look after the boy. He’s probably scared and alone right now and could do with a friend.”

…Callum wasn’t exactly alone though was he? Rayla glanced away before meeting Jorani’s eye again. “W-Wait…. There’s… something else you should know before I go.” Jorani raised an eyebrow, regarding her with gentle curiosity. “It’s not just me and Callum… we have someone else with us. A baby dragon.”

“A…” Jorani was knocked off-guard, and the council behind him also all reacted with varying levels of shock. “Excuse me, did you say a baby dragon?”

Rayla nodded, wincing a little. “Yeah, I’m sorry, we should have said something sooner, but we were a little scared to. He’s a good boy, really, he’s no trouble at all.”

“They have a baby dragon, Jorani! A baby dragon!” Karajh piped up, throwing his hands in the air. “If that isn’t suspicious I don’t know what is-!”

Aeslen smothered the man’s mouth with a tired expression. “Please stop yelling.” Karajh wrestled free with a little angry hiss and a glower, but said nothing further.

Jorani ignored the scene playing out behind him. His eyes searched Rayla’s very carefully. “Why do you have a baby dragon with you?”

“H-He… We found him.” It wasn’t technically a lie. “Actually… we found him as an egg. It’s a long and complicated story but we rescued him, from some bad people and we’re looking after him for now.”

Jorani stared into her eyes a little longer, uncomfortably so, before they softened, and he seemed satisfied with her answer. “…Alright. I believe you.”

“You-!”

“Hush, Karajh.” Aeslen mumbled.

“Thank you for letting me know. It would likely cause a bit of panic if the monks discovered a dragon on the island.” Jorani nodded. “I’ll inform them and everyone else on the island. Just please do take care with him… Keep him out of trouble.”

Rayla smiled weakly back. “That’s my job at the moment. To keep my boys out of trouble.”

Jorani’s eyes lit up a little and he offered her a warm and comforting grin. Then he nodded and turned, making his way back to his chair. “You’re free to go, Rayla. Give the boy my regards.”

Rayla nodded, bowing politely, before leaving the room hastily. The news about the Order swam through her brain, over and over as she walked briskly back towards their living quarters.

What were they going to do…? Now the conversation she would need to have with Callum would be awkward and painful…
Callum was wavering on a line between sleeping and waking when he heard his door creak slowly open. His jacket was currently tossed over the end of his bed, the feverish boy too warm to wear it as he battled to stay awake. Zym who had previously been licking at Callum’s fingers in an attempt to help, jumped at the sound, perking up and yipping in greeting at the girl at the door.

“…Ray?”

“Hey…” Her voice was soft and he heard her approach slowly, the door closing quietly behind her. “How are you holding up?”

“Mm…” Callum half buried his face in his pillow. He heard her sigh, kneeling by his bed, and a hand ruffled gently through his hair. It was a soothing gesture, one he appreciated dearly at this moment, and he was thankful when Rayla left her hand there, rubbing her thumb against his head. His hand raised a little, and he let it fall on top of hers, holding it there lightly. His eyes met hers and she smiled sadly at him.

“What are we going to do with you, hm?” She asked gently. Callum closed his eyes, and sighed into his blanket. He let a peaceful silence fall between them for a moment, just letting himself appreciate her presence.

“Did you get it?” He finally asked.

“Huh? Oh. Yeah.” Her voice went stiff, and he peaked an eye open to look at her. He watched as she slid her other arm carefully out of her sling, and reached into her jacket and she pulled out the broach, carefully placing it on his bedside table.

“…Something’s wrong.” He whispered, his voice cracking a little with anxiety and her eyes shot back to his almost alarmed.

“No, no, Callum it’s okay. Everything’s fine.” Her fingers gently ran through his hair again comfortingly. “It’s just been a… a weird morning. A lot’s happened and I need to catch you up on some… uh… things. But it’s nothing bad, I promise. I’ll tell you more when you’re feeling better, okay?”

Callum relaxed a little and nodded. “Okay.”

“Oh and Callum…? The mages said you’re safe to sleep now. That man from your dream can’t hurt you anymore.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. Sleep had been tugging away at him since the moment she had left, and he finally let it take hold of him. She was there now… he felt safe enough.

As Callum let himself sink into unconsciousness, what he didn’t see was Rayla continuing to watch him for a few minutes. So peaceful, he must have looked, as a very fond elf decided silently that she would keep a vigil at his bedside, and after a few moments, she let her arm rest carefully on the bed, her head nestling into the bend of her elbow.
It wasn’t long before she too let herself drift off into a peaceful nap.

Callum didn’t sleep deeply enough to dream. But it was a restful sleep, and by the time he woke up once more it was the early hours of the afternoon.

Rayla hadn’t moved. She was still fast asleep, her fingers still laced through his hair, her face half buried in her arm.

“Ray…?” He murmured gently. Her ear twitched a little at her name. Then, as though his body was moving on its own, he reached out towards her face, and brushed a strand of hair gently from her face, tucking it behind her ear. His hand lingered there as her eyes cracked open sleepily, and caught his gaze. For a minute, she didn’t seem to register what had happened. And then her eyes widened in surprise. But still, she didn’t move, eyes locked with Callum’s.

Perhaps Callum’s brain was too foggy with fever to register how intimate this moment was. Rayla’s brain, however, was not.

He smiled sleepily across at her. “Morning, Ray.”

She was silent for a moment, before her eyes relaxed, twinkling with amusement. “Callum… it’s probably the afternoon by now.” She replied softly.

“Oh… is it?” He mumbled tiredly. He felt her hand ruffle gently through his hair again, and could have quite easily drifted off again. Her eyes didn’t leave his face, but they looked equally as half asleep as he felt, and subconsciously, he let the back of his knuckles caress her cheek until his hand landed with a gentle thud back on the mattress. He heard her sigh a little into her arm.

Something stirred in his heart. Something warm and fond.

“How are you feeling?”

“A little better. My head’s still fuzzy but…” He heard something shift and watched as she stretched slightly, sitting up a little more. Then something brushed against the hand that had been on her cheek and curled around it. Her hand.

“…Good. You just need to take it easy today, alright?”

“Nah. My temple duty today is to look after you.”

“Oh… I’m sorry that’s probably going to be a pretty boring day for you. I know you don’t like sitting around doing nothing.”

She chuckled gently. “It’s fine, Callum. I’d rather take care of you than worry all day long about if you’re okay.”

“Hmm… Well, I’d rather you were here too.” He mumbled dreamily.

She laughed a little under her breath, shaking her head. “Wow, your brain must be all fuzzy. You’ve gone all sappy on me.” The hand that had been ruffling the hair gently and rhythmically on the side of his head trailed towards his temple and then his forehead again. She didn’t say anything at first, reflecting quietly. It seemed like she wanted to say something, but she stopped herself, shaking whatever thought it was from her head. “I’ll get you some water. And some breakfast while I’m at it.”
And then both her hands were gone from his skin and he felt a strange discomfort for it. She was
gone, almost in a hurry, and he caught the look on her face as she closed the door, almost
embarrassed, her brow furrowed deep in thought.

…Had he said something wrong?

She returned a few minutes later with a couple of plates, still a grave expression on her face.

“Rayla did I say something that upset you?”

“…What?” She set the plates down on his bedside table with a gentle clink, and he felt her sit on his
bed again.

“It’s just you kind of left in a hurry and-”

“Callum I’m not upset with you in the slightest.”

“You’re not…?”

“Of course not.” She scoffed lightly. “Why would I be upset with you?”

“I don’t know… but if you’re not then… what’s going on?”

Rayla’s lips pursed together and he watched her eyes glance away. “Callum…” He sat up slowly, his
head feeling like it was lagging about a foot behind where it actually was. Rayla reached out a little
but her hand faltered and instead landed back in her lap. “The council mages think there’s someone
incredibly dangerous after us.”

“Feran?”

“Yeah. And that mage you saw.”

Callum’s eyes darkened, and his hand curled into a fist around his sheets. “So it… It wasn’t just
altitude sickness.”

Rayla shook her head sadly. “No. I don’t think it was.”

A silence hung between them for a moment.

“It’s… okay. No, it’s okay.” He wasn’t quite sure who he was trying to convince with those words.
“We knew it was going to be hard. I mean, stopping a war? That’s pretty crazy stuff. There was
bound to be risks.” He caught the sadness in Rayla’s eyes and it didn’t do well to boost his faux
confidence. “You… you said though he can’t hurt us at the moment right?”

“Yeah… we’re out of range of whatever spell he was using on you.”

“See! Some good news!” Callum smiled weakly, and reached over, finding her hand. He cupped it
gently with both of his, and he gave it a little squeeze. Almost like magic, it seemed to lift her spirits
if not marginally.

“You’re surprisingly optimistic.”

“Of course. One of us has to be.”

Her face relaxed for a moment, and she scooted a little closer. But her expression faltered and she
suddenly looked rather uncomfortable.
“Uh… Callum? There’s one more thing.” She was quieter now and avoided his eye. “When I went to get your broach something… happened.”

“Something bad?” He asked softly.

“No, uh, well, not bad I guess…?” Her hand slipped gently from between his and she stood up, rubbing her hand gently against her other arm. “But… well, someone found your broach and when they gave it back they asked what it was and I sort of… panicked.”

He stared at her for a moment, his voice low and serious. “Rayla what did you tell him?”

Rayla tensed a little, her back to him. “I might have said that it was a… a betrothal gift.”

It took Callum a moment to realise what she meant. He somehow already knew in his heart the answer to his following question, but it didn’t stop him from wanting to hear her answer. “Okay well… who am I engaged to?”

Slowly she looked at him over her shoulder, an uncomfortable grimace on her face. It was all he needed to confirm his suspicions.

“Oh… no way… You didn’t…”

“Callum I’m… I’m sorry I know this makes things really awkward-”

Before she could finish, Callum began to laugh. Her eyes narrowed angrily at him.

“It’s not funny!”

“You’re right, it’s not. It’s hilarious.” Rayla glowered at him and huffed, snapping her head away and she stormed over to the other side of the room. Zym seemed to take her side, hopping off his bed and trotting alongside her, mirroring her body language. “Rayla no, Rayla, I’m sorry, please,” He tried to stifle his laughing. “Come back I don’t mean it in a mean way.”

“Oh? Then what way did you mean it?” She glared at him over her shoulder.

“It’s just the idea of you panicking like that, and that was the first thing that popped to your mind.” Rayla continued to stare at him coldly. “I-It’s flattering, honestly.” Finally he watched her eyes soften, but she turned her head away from him again and didn’t move. “Raylaaaaa,” He whined. “Come baaaack.”

“Only if you stop laughing at me.”

“I will. I promise. Please.”

Rayla sighed and spun on her heels, returning to his bedside and sat on the end of his bed, Zym once more following at her feet. She avoided his eye. “Callum what are we going to do? I’ve really put my foot in it now.”

“I guess we’ll just have to get married.” He chuckled and heard Rayla huff. A pillow was promptly thrown at him, knocking him in the side of the head.

“Idiot.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to your fiancé.” He flashed her a cheeky smile, watching her nose wrinkle and her pout deepen.
“Oh hush you.” His giggling continued when she gave him a further shove in the shoulder and he let himself flop back down against his mattress. “You’re enjoying this far too much.” Despite her attempts to sound annoyed he could hear a hint of humour in her voice.

“Oh I am. Absolutely.” He peeked back over at her, and his heart only warmed further to see her smiling now.

“Well at least you’re in a better mood now. I’d rather this than seeing you all sad and mopey.”

Callum flashed her a gentler smile now. “Okay, okay. But in all seriousness, I’m sure it’ll be fine. You only told the one person, right?”

“Yeah, Halari, he works in the library.”

“Okay, well hopefully he’ll keep it to himself. You’re probably overthinking things, making it more of a disaster than it actually is.” He reached over and took a sip from the glass of water she had brought him. “The best thing we can do is see what happens next. If he does tell people then… we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“What bridge?”

“The… It’s a saying. It means we’ll deal with what happens when we get there.”

“Oh.” She frowned at him slightly. “And you’re not worried in the slightest about this?”

“I never said that. But I just… I think we’ll be okay.”

“Do fevers fill all humans with irrational optimism? Or just you?” She smiled gently. Perhaps he was being irrational. Rayla had every right to be concerned over this, even the smallest lie could tip off the island residents if they found out. Perhaps it was the fever. His head did still feel hazy, and perhaps it was clouding his judgement of the situation.

And yet. When he looked in her eyes, something about her just made him feel like everything would be okay. Perhaps Rayla felt it too. He didn’t need to be clear of mind to see it on her face.

“We’ve done the impossible before. Saved a dragon, no, two dragons, fought terrifying monsters, walked straight into Xadia, survived so many near death situations… I think we can manage this.”

Rayla gave him a more hopeful smile now. “Yeah… I suppose being engaged to you wouldn’t be the worst thing I’ve faced in the past few weeks.” Callum laughed. Although it was meant as a joke, part of Callum had already decided that being engaged to Rayla wouldn’t be so bad either.

He swung his legs slowly over the edge of his bed, and was almost immediately met with a sudden, “What are you doing?”

“I need to stretch my legs. I can’t just stay in bed all day.”

“I mean… you could. And probably should if you’re not well.”

“I’m not that bad right now. Can we at least… I don’t know… sit in the gardens for a bit? I’m going stir crazy in here Rayla.” Rayla narrowed her eyes at him a little, but he smiled sweetly back.

“Please? I promise to take it easy, I just want a little change of scenery, and we didn’t really get a chance to see much of the gardens the other day.”

She sighed and leaned over, the back of her hand found his forehead again. “Fine…
“Have you ever made flower crowns before?” Callum asked after they had sat down, his fingers winding restlessly through the long grass.

“Yeah, you know… you string flowers together in little chains, and then wear them on your head. My mother used to make them with me when I was little.”

“Oh, like a garland? I never made flower crowns, but I used to make these necklaces or bracelets when I was younger. When I had time to, anyway. I used to do that with Runaan’s partner.”

Callum smiled, and she clearly caught the question in his eyes, because she laughed. “I don’t think the monks would be best pleased if we start pulling up their flowers, Callum. Even the wild ones here, they might be quite rare.”

“Oh… yeah. I guess not.”

Rayla threw him a little sympathetic smile, and he watched as her eyes scanned the clearing, then caught on one of the blossoming trees. “Oh… I have an idea.” She beamed, hopping to her feet, and offering him her hand to help him up. “C’mon. I’m sure they won’t mind us using some of the flowers that have already fallen off that Serrulata tree. And maybe I can… ‘borrow’ a couple extra flowers if we run out. The tree is covered in them.”

Callum let her gently tug him along with a soft smile, until she turned and placed her hand on his shoulder, in a gesture for him to sit down at the base of the tree. He did so, leaning back against its trunk, and he sighed peacefully, watching the little petals dance on their way down to the ground. Zym clambered into his lap quite happily, resting his head against Callum’s chest with a little rumble.

Rayla took some time to gather the flowers from the ground, and let them fall in a little pile near Callum’s side. But when he went to look back up at her, she had disappeared, and a little rustle overhead was all he needed to know where she had gone.

He waited patiently, petting the dragon on his lap, listening to the rustling overhead. Little flowers floated down as she hopped between the branches, landing around him.
Then, all at once, it was raining little flowers and petals all around them.

A few landed in his hair and one on the end of Zym’s nose, the little dragon sneezing as it did. He heard a very familiar little fond laugh overhead, and when he looked up, he caught sight of Rayla, lounging along one of the tree’s limb’s shaking a branch so that the petals came loose over him.

“You having fun up there?” He laughed, shaking his head so that petals fluttered out and in every which direction.

“Oh, plenty. You should see yourself.” Gracefully, Rayla rolled over the edge of the branch, and landed on her feet, before letting herself drop cross-legged next to him. She brushed and picked at stray petals lingering in his hair, chuckling softly to herself.

In that moment, Callum felt so much better.

“Do you remember how to make them?” She asked finally, flicking a little petal at Zym, watching as the dragon playfully snapped his teeth around it.

“Huh?”

“These crowns.”

“Oh no I uh…” Callum frowned a little. “Well just about. Do you?”

“I think I’ll figure it out. Muscle memory, you know?” He watched her pull her arm out of her sling and give it a stretch.

“Oh are… are you gonna be okay?”

“Oh hush you.” She gave him a little elbow in the arm. “I’m fine. I can count this as one of the ‘gentle exercises’ the healers told me to do this morning to keep it from locking up anyway.”

Callum relaxed a little, watching as she began to work the flowers together with delicate and patient care. He watched carefully, trying to mimic her, though she made it look easier than it actually was, and Callum’s fingers struggled at first to even tie two of the flowers together.

“You need a hand?” Rayla chuckled, but Callum’s nose wrinkled stubbornly.

“No no, I got it.”

“I was going to say we can make it a competition to see who can finish theirs first but this is a little sad really.”

She laughed, and scooted closer, and Callum let Rayla show him the easiest way to go about tying the flowers into a chain. It was easier now, Callum found, despite his chain still coming out rather messy. But at least he was getting the hang of it.

Rayla finished hers first, understandably.

“There. A crown for my prince.” Rayla remarked proudly, sitting the little flower crown atop Callum’s head.
Callum laughed. It fit loosely, and so sat a little crooked on his head, but in his eyes it was perfect just the way it was. He loved it, giving Rayla a little lopsided grin.

Callum’s little crown took a bit longer to do, but eventually he worked it into a much messier little circlet with some more guidance from Rayla.

“There.” He smiled finally, and presented it towards Rayla. She bowed her head, and Callum briefly hesitated, unsure how to go about placing it. Did he thread it around her horns? But it wasn’t quite big enough for that, the way they jutted out at an angle away from each other meant it’d end up going around one horn at best, so instead he rested it between them letting the loose flowers form around the shape of the base of her horns. She perked up again with a little grin, admiring the little flowers, chuckling when a few loose petals fluttered down past her cheek.

“A crown for my princess.” The words left his lips without him truly considering the weight of them. And it was only when he saw Rayla’s eyes snap back to his in surprise that his heart and stomach did a panicky backflip at what he had just implied. The heat was already creeping up into his face, but all words completely abandoned him.

Rayla gawked at him. And then she grinned. She grinned that oh so mischievous little smile of hers, the one that always came before she teased him.

“Oh?” She hummed playfully.

“Oh no.”

“I’m your princess am I?” Rayla grinned leaning towards him, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Callum silently wished that he could melt away into the grass and disappear from embarrassment. Instead, all he could try to do was defend himself, and what was left of his dignity. “Look, you’re the one who told the librarian we were engaged, you just planted the idea in my head!” He huffed a little, trying desperately to glance away from her eyes.

Rayla didn’t seem put off by his comment in the slightest. She rested an elbow on her knee, and her chin on her hand. “Maybe so. But I said that to protect your identity. You just said that of your own will.” She’d caught him, and she knew it. Callum shuffled nervously, losing his words again.

“Banther got your tongue, Prince Charming?”

“You started it.”

“Oh, mature.” She laughed.

“I mean I guess…” He trailed off, and glanced back up at her. The mischief in her eyes was gone and she regarded him curiously. “I don’t know, I’m going to end up digging myself into a hole if I keep talking aren’t I?” He smiled across at her sheepishly.

“Yes. You are.” She reached out a hand and ever so gently straightened out his crown a little bit. “It’s alright, I won’t tease you anymore. As fun as it is to see you get all flustered, I don’t want to make your fever any worse.”

Callum sighed relieved, sinking back against the tree. Something nipped at his fingers, and when he glanced down, Zym looked back up at him with a grumpy squeak. “What? What is it?”

Rayla chuckled. “I think he feels left out. He wants you to make him a crown too.”

“Oh, but of course.” Callum smiled, scooping Zym up so he was closer, and cuddling him to his
“A crown for the mighty king himself!” Zym’s tail wagged excitedly as Callum set to work braiding the flowers together, better practiced this time, and before long another little garland was sat atop the excitable little dragonling’s head. “There! It’s not as neat as one of Ray’s, but I hope it is to your taste, oh your majesty.” Zym wiggled eagerly in his arms as Callum laughed.

Rayla regarded them both with the fondest of smiles.

They spent the best part of the afternoon there together, at peace.

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It was early evening when they finally headed back, and when it came back to sneaking back into the temple, they had no troubles. Zym lolled against Callum’s shoulder, fast asleep from a busy day frolicking through the clearing. They did have to turn on Callum’s broach to sneak him back through a slightly busier section of the hallways, and though they received a few curious looks at their crowns, and the sleeping baby dragon, no one bothered them, and Callum felt quite at ease as they ambled back towards their rooms.

But as Rayla’s hand glanced over her door handle, an anxiety flittered about his chest.

“Rayla can I ask… uh… can I ask a probably dumb question?”

“As opposed to one of your rare not so dumb questions?” She smirked back. “Go ahead.”

Callum glanced away anxiously. “Could you stay in my room tonight?” There was no reply, and he could feel Rayla staring at him. “I could sleep on the floor and you can have my bed if you want, it’s just last night was awful and it was so scary when I woke up and you weren’t there and-”

“Shh.” A finger gently found his lips. “Callum it’s okay.” She smiled, but her face fell serious for a moment. “But if you think for one second I’m letting you sleep on the floor you’ve got another thing coming.” Callum went to argue, but as he did he felt her finger press down a little harder against his lips and she laughed. “No. Shut up. Go get ready for bed, I’ll be there in a minute.”

And then she twirled on her heel and entered her room. He wandered into his, letting the sleeping Zym curl up on the end of his bed and carefully took both his own and the dragon’s crowns off, resting them on his bedside table. Moments later Rayla returned trailing her duvet and a pillow under her arm.

“Right.” She laid out her spread next to Callum’s own bed, and nodded to herself when she was content and she rested her own flower chain on Callum’s bedside table next to his own.

“Rayla…”

“No, don’t you start.”

“It’d be ungentlemanly of me to sleep on the bed though.”

Rayla scoffed. “You’re a prince. A soft, squishy, human prince with a fever.” She pointed out, reaching over and jabbing him in the arm with her finger. “And I am a hardened ex-assassin. I think I can deal with sleeping on a floor. Look, if it makes you feel any better I have a nice soft duvet and blankets.”
Callum pouted, but it was clear he wasn’t going to change her mind, so he sighed, rolling his eyes, and let himself fall back onto his bed. “I hope I’m alright for tomorrow. I really need to learn more spells if we have any chance of stopping… whatever it is we need to stop.”

Rayla reflected quietly for a moment. “Maybe it’s that mage, Akzral. And his Order.”

“Maybe…” He rolled over to face her, peering over the side of his bed to look at her. She was laying there on her back now, and blinked up at him as he appeared in her line of sight. “Do you think you can try and do some research on him tomorrow? The more we know, the better prepared we’ll be.”

Rayla gave him a little nod. “Alright. I will.” She must have caught the look of worry on his face, because she smiled gently at him now. “Hey. You’ll be alright. No more nightmares tonight.”

“I hope not. I… I don’t think I could handle something that intense again.” He watched the pity form in her eyes and he offered her a weak smile. “But it’s okay. Because now you’re here.”

“That I am.”

A mischievous spark flickered across his eyes. “My dearest, future wife.”

Rayla groaned and rolled over to face away from him. “I’m getting a divorce.” She mumbled into her pillow.

Callum sniggered. “But we’re not married yet.”

“Then I’m breaking up with you.”

“Really?” His voice sounded a surprising touch more hurt than he had anticipated, and it seemed Rayla picked up on it too.

Her voice was a little softer now as she turned to speak clearly. “Callum, I’m joking. …A-Anyway we’re not even dating.” Callum didn’t reply, instead regarding her softly now. She caught his eye before glancing away. “You’re doing it again.”

“Hm?”

“Staring.”

“Am I?” He asked quietly, his eyes still not leaving her. “I hadn’t noticed.”

She rolled onto her back and locked her eyes locked with his. “What are you thinking about?”

Humour lit up his eyes again. “That it’s probably cold on the floor.” He hoped for the remark to diffuse the strange tension that had formed between them. “And you should be up here, not me.”

Rayla scoffed, breaking their eye contact with an eye roll. “It’s fine. You need it more than me.”

“You have a messed up arm.”

“And you have a fever.”

Callum sighed. “You’re so stubborn, you know that?”

“Oh I’m the stubborn one, am I?” She smirked back. “I think you’ll find I’m usually the one to go along with your ridiculous plans. As much as I try to put my foot down.”
Callum opened his mouth to argue, but none came to mind. “…Okay but… why do you?”

“Because you pull this sad little face or give some heartfelt speech and it always makes me feel guilty.” Callum smiled a little despite himself. “Now anyway, I’m going to sleep. And so are you. You’ve got lessons tomorrow, don’t forget. And for the love of all things, please don’t lose your broach again.” She rolled over onto her side facing away from him and fell silent.

Callum lay there for a moment, on his back staring at the ceiling. But despite the company of Rayla and Zym now, the anxieties of last night were returning. His hand clenched at his side, and he rolled onto his front, letting his arm drape over the side of his bed. He sighed into his pillow, then turned to face his companion again.

“Rayla?” She grumbled a little noise of acknowledgement. “Can… would it be alright if I held your hand? I-It’s just… I’m still kind of scared about what happened last night.”

There was silence for a moment, before he heard Rayla shuffle a little. And then, her hand slipped gently, and loosely into his. She mumbled something tiredly, but it was muffled by her duvet. Still, he could just about make out the words that followed.

“I’ve got you.” She gave his hand a very small and gentle squeeze, followed by more tired grumbling. “Just be careful and don’t yank my arm about in the night, that’s my bad one.”

His voice cracked a little, soft as it left his lips. “…Okay.” He peeked over the edge of the bed at her, regarding her softly. She was laying on her back now, her arm out of her sling resting at her side, her hand curled around his. Her face was partially obscured by her blankets, but he could make out a little grumpy frown on her brow, clearly still stewing in self-irritation at their situation. “G’night Rayla. And thank you.”

They fell asleep together like that, more peacefully than they had in what felt like a long time.

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When Callum woke up, Rayla’s hand was still in his.

It was the first thing he noticed, the second being that he slept soundly through the night with no issues, and he sighed softly in relief into his pillow at the thought. Carefully he poked his head over the side of the bed to catch a glance at Rayla. She was still fast asleep, one hand in his, and the other curled into a loose fist over her chest, and her face was peaceful, face turned towards him slightly. He smiled at her, and as he shuffled again, he watched her ear twitch at the sound, her face furrowed a little in response. He froze, waiting to see if she would stir, but she relaxed again, slipping back into sleep.

Callum weighed up his options. To wake her, or not to wake her? That was the question. But eventually he settled on waking her, they both had things to do today and places to be.

“Ray…?” He whispered, rubbing his thumb against her hand. She groaned, her face screwing up into a little frown. “It’s morning… Time to get up.”
She huffed slightly, mumbling half into her pillow. "I’m so comfy though." He laughed a little. "Fine. Fine, fine, I’m awake." She sat up slowly, her hair a little messy, strands caught on her horns and sticking up at various angles, and she rubbed at her eyes yawning. Finally she turned to him, her eyes still half lidded from sleep. She looked rather cute in a way, Callum thought. He smiled fondly back, his head still against his mattress, and she raised an eyebrow, resting back on her better arm a mischievous smile on her own lips. “What? What’s that face for?”

"H-Huh? Oh.” Callum felt a little heat rise to his cheeks and he glanced away. “Nothing.”

“You’ve been staring an awful lot lately, Callum. One might think you’re actually falling for me.” She teased.

Callum’s eyes widened, and he felt the heat stinging at his ears now. “N-No! No I’m not!” And yet his voice cracked, and he felt the urge to disappear under his blankets. She was right. He had been staring a lot lately. Was that weird of him? He was just admiring her. That was normal between friends, right?

“Wow. Tetchy.” Rayla laughed. Callum rubbed at his stinging cheeks, trying as best he could to hide his face from Rayla. He heard her voice soften a little though as she continued. “How are you feeling today? Any better? Any… any bad dreams?”

“Actually… I feel okay. I slept a lot better last night.” Finally he smiled back over at her. “Thanks again, I know it’s not exactly… convenient but…”

“Nah, its fine. Honestly I’d much rather share a room anyway.” At Callum’s feet, Zym stirred, uncurling and stretching out, blinking sleepy eyes at the pair of them. “I’d rather be able to keep an eye on both of my princes.”

Callum’s heart melted a little, and he found his feet, reaching down to help Rayla to hers. She took his hand and he hoisted her up, it was a small gesture, but it felt like it had some weight to it. They’d come a long way together, and Callum appreciated dearly how Rayla reached out for his hand without an inch of hesitation.

“You going to the healers now?”

“I suppose I should. Then I’ll go see who needs help. I’ll probably end up in the library with Halari. Oh Great Spirits… Halari…” Rayla groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose with a frown.

“Try not to dig yourself into a deeper hole.” Callum smirked.

“No guarantees there. I just hope Halari isn’t the nosey type.”

“As long as you let me know afterwards, y’know, where we had our first date and when we proposed and-” He laughed as Rayla huffed and spun on her heel to turn her back on him, embarrassed again. “Hey I’m just saying! I need to know for consistency in our stories!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rayla fixed her hair, then shot him a look. “In all seriousness Callum, please be incredibly careful about what you say. Try not to bring it up unless someone asks. If we’re lucky, Halari won’t be the kind of person to spread rumours and we might be okay.”

“…Alright.”

He watched as she scooped Zym up in one arm and planted a little kiss on the sleepy dragons head. “You look after Callum for me today, alright Zym? And try not to get into any trouble.” She smirked up at Callum. “That goes for you too.”
Callum smiled as he took a few steps towards her, gently letting the half-awake dragon flop into his own arms. Zym trilled a little, clambering so that he could rest his head on Callum’s shoulder. He almost purred when Callum gave him a little affectionate squeeze.

“You stay out of trouble too. Don’t overdo it with your arm.”

Rayla gave him a little lopsided smile. “I’ll be fine. I’ll come find you later, alright?”

“She'll be fine. Maybe I can show you some new spells that I learn.” He grinned, and she gave him a little tender smile in return. To Callum’s surprise, she took a step forward, and pulled him close into a little one armed hug, her arm tentatively avoiding the dragon as best she could. Zym squeaked a little, then purred again as he was held gently between both his guardians.

“…Have a nice day. Try not to blow anyone up.”

“I won’t. I-I mean- I will… not… blow anyone up.”

She chuckled in his ear and pulled back, scratching Zym once more between the horns.

“I’ll see you both later. Oh, and I’d hurry if I were you Callum, or you might end up late to your first lesson.”

And like that she was gone out the door and down the half leaving Callum standing there silently, trying to register what had happened. Only after a few more seconds did her words jolt through his head.

She was right. He was going to be late!

Chapter End Notes

Whew! That was a long chapter. I hope you enjoyed the softness. Some eagle eyed readers might recognise the name of a certain member of the council! Aeslen was a fan favourite from my first TDP oneshot, so I thought it’d be fun to bring him back. I hope you guys like the council too, they’re all going to be very fun characters.

Thank you again for all of the support so far. Don’t forget to leave a comment letting me know what you think! I love hearing your theories too hahaha! <3
This did not bode well.

Being late to class on your first day of learning magic? It was every young mage’s worst nightmare!

It did not help poor Callum’s case, that he was in a very unfamiliar temple, with no idea where he was going. Regardless a disguised Callum sped down the halls in a panic, Zym curled around his shoulders clinging to the boy for dear life.

“This is a disaster Zym, a total disaster…!”

Zym squeaked against his ear, scrabbling for purchase against Callum’s shoulder. Where was he even going? He was running without direction, and mentally cursed at himself for not bringing the compass with him. Maybe that would have helped him navigate the winding halls and chambers…

He didn’t have to wonder for long as he crashed into a poor unfamiliar monk, twirling with a panicked squeal through the air as the monk was thrown backwards. Callum practically somersaulted over his horns, landing with a terribly painful thud on the stone floor behind him. He lay there dazed for all of a second before Zym landed on his stomach, winding him.

When his senses returned, Callum shot up in alarm, twisting to check over the monk he had virtually body slammed. The short, round little Skywing was rubbing his head, mumbling in confusion, before he met Callum’s eye.

“Oh wow, I am… so sorry. Here, let me help…” Callum found his feet clumsily before he helped up the stranger, who gave him a rather nervous laugh.

“Oh no it’s quite alright. You were going at quite a speed! Though usually I find myself bowled over when people fly past rather than run…” He trailed off curiously. “A running Skywing elf… and you look like…” The monk reached over, until he was right in Callum’s personal space, hands squishing each of his cheeks. The young prince felt immediately uncomfortable, but didn’t pull back, worried it would come across as rude. “You wouldn’t happen to be the new student here would you? Rayla’s significant other?”

“R-Ray’s-” Callum’s voice cracked and he coughed nervously. “Yes.” The word was expelled forcefully from his throat. “I am… both of those.”

The elf’s face split into a little grin. “Ah, wonderful. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Halari, I tend to the library most days and-”

“Oh the library?” Callum cut him off, immediately recoiling when he realised how rude that had
been. “Oh I… sorry. It’s just I’m in a hurry, and I’m trying to figure out where I’m meant to be, and I guess the library is a good start and-”

“Relax young one. Aeslen actually sent me to come find you and make sure you were feeling well enough for lessons. He’s waiting in the library right now.”

“Could you… tell me where the library is?”

“I could, or I could show you if you like!” Halari grinned, dusting off his jacket a little before spinning on his heel. “Come along now!”

It was a long and quiet walk through the halls. But somehow, Halari’s aura made it impossible for the silence to be tense. Even when he didn’t speak, there was an air of bubbliness to him, which dissipated Callum’s nerves slightly. Perhaps things wouldn’t be too bad, considering Halari didn’t seem in a rush to return the lost boy to his teacher.

Finally Halari stopped outside an archway, its doors swung open wide to reveal the library within. Callum’s heart did an excited little flutter. How much would he learn within these walls, he wondered? New spells? New magic? All at once it sent a little wave of enthusiasm through him.

“Here you are. If you need anything at all don’t be afraid to ask around. Everyone in the library is happy to help! Aeslen is waiting on the second floor for you, if you climb the staircase over there and make a left then keep heading straight you’ll find a little alcove.”

“Oh… thank you so much for your help!”

“It’s no problem at all, my boy!” Halari did a polite little bow, which Callum returned.

It was only once Halari had trotted away that the name struck Callum. Halari. Wasn’t that the elf that Rayla had told about them being engaged? It eased Callum a little to realise that it wasn’t a completely different elf, and so, perhaps, Halari had kept the information to himself.

Callum decided he didn’t want to keep Aeslen waiting any longer than he needed to, jogging anxiously up the staircase.

A tall slender Skywing elf was waiting when Callum got to the alcove, his back to the boy, hands crossed behind him.

“My, my. Someone must have slept in late.”

Callum fell tense, sheepish immediately, his eyes cast downward. “I am… so sorry.”

“Relax… I know you’ve been ill. I don’t blame you for needing rest. How are you feeling?”

Callum’s anxieties were eased slightly by the man’s tone. He didn’t sound mad, his voice soft and calm. “I’m… a lot better today, thank you.”

“Good.” He turned to face Callum at last, his glasses glinting in the morning rays cascading through the library’s large windows. “I am Aeslen, of the Mage’s Council here at the temple. Today I will be supervising you as you study the histories and theories of magic.”

Despite himself, Callum felt a little pang of disappointment. “So no new spells today?”

“Not today. I think Jorani will likely be your teacher when it comes to spellcasting.”

Callum tried to hide the crestfallen expression on his face. Histories and theories… It all sounded a
lot like the studies he was forced into back home. And though some of it had been interesting, Callum had often times found it hard to focus, or remember the important details of historical events.

Still, he sat down, intent on making a good impression, as Zym clambered out of his arms and onto the table. This was still linked to magic, and perhaps he would find it more engaging than the founding of Katolian towns, or the battle strategies of long gone generals.

Aeslen clicked his fingers. Then, Callum heard a little hum, and within a few seconds, Callum watched in awe as little floating trays hovered over, carrying various scrolls, tomes, parchments, and the man glanced over them all, picking a few and holding them under his arm.

“Hm… Yes these will do nicely.” Then with another click, the trays, some empty, some still carrying precious cargo flittered away, around the bookshelves and out of view. Aeslen delicately placed on the table before Callum a few gilded, intricately handled scrolls, and two small, old books. Then, he carried a tome under his arm as he sat opposite the young boy.

“Please handle these with care. The scrolls are centuries old.” He must have caught the look on Callum’s face. An expression of ‘Do I really have to sit here and read all day?’ and though the elf’s expression was unwavering, he gave a little sigh. “Knowing where you’ve come from is the first step to knowing where you’re going. There’s no doubt that you are a gifted young mage in the making. But I promise you, the more you know about the theories of magic, the better you will be at it. There’s more to everything than runes and spells.” Aeslen slid one scroll over closer, the casing rolling slightly even after the elf’s fingers left it. “Now, study. Quietly. If you have any further questions, I’ll just be here.”

Aeslen’s eyes then flicked down, as he opened his tome.

Callum sighed. It seemed there would be no hands on learning today at least, but he held so much respect for the mages of this temple. If Aeslen wanted him to learn from scrolls, he would do his best.

So Callum unfurled the scroll.

…And then he stared at it, wide eyed, and with a hint of dread.

It was written in a language the boy had never seen before, runes not unlike the ones he used for his spells, and yet, different all the same.

Oh…. oh no.

Callum’s lips pursed together awkwardly as he glanced up at Aeslen, then back down at the page. The mage gave no indication that he noticed the boy’s sudden discomfort.

He turned to the other scroll, sneaking a peak. Then the books. But they were all written in the same script. Callum weighed up his options and excuses. ‘I can’t read. No, that won’t work, he’ll ask why I didn’t say anything sooner. Uh… I-I feel unwell?’ His mind was a flustered wreck, jarring and stalling until without notice, he found himself just unconsciously staring at the page, pretending to read it. His nerves had gotten the better of him, and he resigned himself to this fate, praying to whatever, or whoever might be listening that Aeslen wasn’t the sort to pull a pop quiz on him out of nowhere.

Those hours spent in the library felt like days. And with each passing minute, Callum grew more and more anxious, the fear of discovery rising in his chest. He sat in horrible anticipation. Any second now. Any minute. Aeslen would ask him a question, one he couldn’t answer.
It seemed an agonisingly long time for Zym too. After a few minutes of watching Callum fake read, his attention drifted away. The little dragon didn’t wander too far, but seemed to find relief from boredom by climbing along the handrails of the second floor, and hopping around the tables and bookshelves.

“It seemed an agonisingly long time for Zym too. After a few minutes of watching Callum fake read, his attention drifted away. The little dragon didn’t wander too far, but seemed to find relief from boredom by climbing along the handrails of the second floor, and hopping around the tables and bookshelves.

“Alright.” Aeslen sighed gently, curling up one of his own scrolls. “I think that’s enough for today. I’m sure you’re eager to be off and doing other things. And I can’t sit around here all day.”

Callum glanced up as Aeslen stood, gathering his scrolls, and he placed them neatly on a tray that floated just past him.

“Did you learn much?”

“Did you learn much?”

“‘Oh, a-absolutely.’” Callum lied, waiting with baited breath, his heart beating a little faster. But his response, surprisingly, satisfied the mage.

“Good. You can put your scrolls on any of the trays, they’ll take them to where they need to go.”

An immediate wash of temporary relief washed over Callum. He was safe, at least for now. He reached down to roll up his own scrolls, but an idea formed, lingering in the back of his mind. “Hey… w-would it be okay for me to take these scrolls with me? So I can carry on revising, of course.”

Aeslen raised an eyebrow, peering at him over his spectacles. “…Very well. But please do take great care with them. If you so much as leave a mark on them, Maruah will have your head for it.” The mage shuddered, his nose wrinkling. Whoever this Maruah was, clearly Aeslen was talking from experience.

…Callum decided he didn’t want to meet Maruah.

“I… thank you.” Callum smiled, giving his elder a polite bow as he clutched the scrolls close to his chest. “I’ll look after them. When, uh… when am I next having a…. study session with you?”

Aeslen gave a nonchalant shrug. “Well Jorani said he wanted to see you tomorrow. I’ll probably meet you here again the day after that.”

Aeslen turned, raising a hand in farewell, as he sauntered out of the library doors. He smiled a little over his shoulder.

“Have a nice afternoon. Study hard. But don’t overwork yourself.”

Callum sighed softly, glancing across at the little dragon, tilting his head back at the boy. “Oh Zym… I get the feeling this learning magic business is going to be a lot harder than we thought.”

---

Rayla was waiting in their room when he got back, quite nonchalantly resting on his bed. She was propped up by his cushions leaning back against the bedrest, a few leaves in her hair betraying that rather than working in the library as she had said, she had instead been outdoors today.

Callum hardly noticed, stewing in his apprehension.
“How’d your studying go?” She asked cheerfully, as the dragon scampered across the floor and jumped into her arms. Callum grumbled lowly as he tossed his bag aside. “Oh. Not good then.”

Callum flopped face first onto his bed next to Rayla, and the scrolls and books in his arms tumbled across the mattress as he fell there, sending parchment in every which direction. He lay there for a moment, continuing to groan, before he felt her hand gently find his back, between his shoulder blades, and she rubbed there soothingly.

“Oh dear. Sounds like you’ve have a bit of a time.” Callum nodded into the sheets and he heard her chuckle lightly, as the hand on his back trailed up to the back of his head and ruffled the hair there lightly. “So are you going to tell me what’s wrong or…?” She trailed off, and Callum sighed, clambering up into a sitting position. Her hand lingered for a few seconds longer than he expected, only falling to her side again once he was fully sat up.

The boy paused, reflecting, his eyes on the parchment laying across his bed.

“Rayla, I can’t read.” He mumbled darkly.

“Wha-?” She stared at him dumbfounded. “Of course you can you read my note earlier-”

“No no- Rayla, I can’t read this!” He hissed in panic, rattling a scroll in front of her face. “I’m supposed to be studying magic, how can I do that if I can’t read anything Aeslen is throwing my way?”

Rayla blinked back at him over the top of the scroll. “Ah… Yeah. That could be a problem.”

Callum laid it out across his bed, glancing up at her anxiously. “Please tell me you can make sense of this, right?”

Rayla leaned over the scroll glancing across it carefully. He watched her ears pin back and her eyebrows knit together in concentration. But after perhaps a minute of studying, she sighed, defeated. “I can just about barely make it out… but Callum, this is in Skyscript. If you gave me, I don’t know, a few hours I could probably work it out. But that’d be for just this one section alone.”

Callum bit his lip. Rayla clearly noticed, as a hand found his shoulder. “Relax. Just… I don’t know, tell them you can’t read this.”

“I don’t think that’ll work Ray. I spent most of the day pretending to read this.” His leg bounced anxiously, his fingers curling under his chin. Then as he glanced over at the girl, still frowning as she tried to read the page, an idea formed in his brain. “Can you teach me to read it?”

“What?”

“Can you teach me to read Elven? Uh, Elvish?”

Rayla’s face went from surprise to regret. “Callum I don’t know how to read Skyscript, I can only barely figure it out because some of the lettering is similar to Moonscript.”

“Then do you think you can teach me that?” She regarded him in stunned silence for a moment. “I mean, it’s a start right? If you teach me that, maybe I can tell Aeslen tomorrow that I’m struggling because I only know Moonshadow. Uh, Moonscript. I already told Jorani that I have no connections to my heritage so maybe it won’t be too big of a stretch.”

Rayla’s eyes searched his for a moment, flickering as she thought carefully. “What will you say when they ask you why you know Moonscript?”
“That you taught me. Actually… now that I think about it, where did you learn to write-”

“That’s a Skywing language?”

“Of course there is, you dummy. We all have our own languages. Just everyone speaks Common now too, we mostly learn our native tongues as a second language.”

“Even in Xadia most elves write in Common.” She nodded and gestured towards his table where the note from the other night sat. “It’s just an easy universal language. It’s mostly official and important documents written in different scripts. Stars, Callum, you are so lucky this isn’t written both in Skyscript and the Skywing language, you’d be having a nightmare with this, we both would.”

Callum perked up a little, his frustration subsiding enough that curiosity took hold. “So… you can speak Moonshadow?”

Rayla groaned. “You’re going to ask me to say something now aren’t you?”

Callum rested his chin in his hands with a little grin in answer.

“Tha thu dìreach mar amadan.”

Callum gasped a little. “What does that mean?”

“It means you’re a dummy.”

Callum’s face fell a little. “Oh…”

She laughed softly. “Look, can we try and focus here? You want to learn Moonscript, right? I’ll try my best to teach you.”

A little relieved grin found its way to Callum’s lips. “Rayla, you are the best fake fiancé a fake elf could ever ask for.”

Rayla smiled a little, amused. “Yeah, you’re right, I am. And don’t you forget it.”

---

Rayla’s lessons lasted late into the evening.

It was a little strange at first, almost a rather intimate gesture to share such a piece of her culture with him. But then… they had grown rather close, rather intimate at times, and she found herself growing increasingly fond of that.

Callum was a quick learner with drawing the letters. It made sense, he seemed to recall patterns and images with ease. Where he struggled, was in fact remembering which letters were which, and the phonetic sounds they made. There were more letters in Moonscript than in Common, and the poor boy found himself rather in a muddle with this as he had to recall not only which letters matched his own alphabet, but with entirely new letters and sounds.

It was cute.

Callum pulled little faces as he concentrated, revising over the letters, Tracing his pencil across the
pages of his sketchbook. She taught him how to write his name, and as he did, he gave her a smile that could melt butter and asked how to write her name too.

Oh… she was far too soft for this human.

“Here… look.” They were sitting so close together already. One of Callum’s arms rested behind her back as he leaned towards her slightly, sharing his sketchbook between them. But she shuffled ever closer, till her leg brushed against his. He offered her the pencil, and as neatly as she could, she traced out her name in Moonscript. The ends of her ears burned a little as Callum watched so intently. “I can hear you thinking from here.” She teased lightly, catching his eye. “What is it?”

“Oh, I was just thinking to myself that you have really nice handwriting. I wanted to tell you earlier when I found your note but uh… my head was full of fever.”

“Oh… thank you.” She chuckled, feeling more heat rise a little to her cheeks. She passed the pencil back to Callum, watching him take in her name intently. “Yours isn’t too bad yourself.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. It’s very you. All round and… friendly looking. Mine’s all sharp and pointy.”

“Like your blades.” She leant back a little, relaxing against his arm, and she felt it bend a little against her weight, but he didn’t move, seemingly quite comfortable. She watched as he etched her name into the page.

And then he paused.

She watched the gears of his mind turn again for a few second, before he began to write again. ‘And’ then ‘Callum’.

Rayla and Callum.

For whatever reason Rayla couldn’t place, her heart did a strange little somersault in her chest. She wondered briefly, if Callum could hear her heart beating. It was so loud to her all of a sudden.

And yet, so innocently the boy smiled, seemingly unaware of the effect he had on her.

“Oh… I think I’ve got it.” He hummed softly after what felt like a lifetime of Rayla bashfully staring at his soft little grin.

“Have you?”

“Oh no, not at all. But I’m getting there.” He gave her a cheerful grin. Rayla smiled back, then glanced across at one of his scrolls.

“Do you want to try and look at the scrolls again tonight?”

“We may as well. If I can at least start translating some of it tonight, then at least I can get a feel for the script so I don’t go into Aeslen’s next lesson completely unprepared.”

And so for the next couple of hours the pair tried their best, grappling with the letters. ‘Was this a ‘q’ or a ‘g’? An ‘a’ or an ‘huh’?’” But between the two of them they were able to get at least a shaky idea of the context of the words on the scroll.
“I’m going to be up all night trying to translate this Skyscript into Moonscript and then into Common aren’t I?” Callum mumbled tiredly.

“No, you’re not. You’re going to sleep at a reasonable hour. You’re not going to become one of those people who studies right into the morning.” She gave him a little nudge with her elbow. “…Come on it’s getting late. We should both get some rest.”

He smiled warmly at her through his fatigue. “Alright, fine. I guess my brain needs a break from so much reading and writing today anyway.” Rayla stood, stretching a little as she did before she heard his voice again, so gentle behind her. “Hey, Rayla?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Hm?”

“Thank you for today. It really means a lot to me… All of it.” His eyes were shining a little now in the dim light, so full of emotion. Rayla’s heart fluttered again.

“You’re welcome, Callum.” She smiling, kneeling down on her own little makeshift bed set. She flopped down comfortably on her back, peaking up at him again. “Hey… you’re probably the first human to be able to read and write in Moonscript in thousands of years. That’s pretty cool, right?”

His eyes lit up again and she fought back a big grin. She watched him tidy up the scrolls on his bed and set them on his bedside table again, before disappearing from view. “I must be the coolest human in the world.” He sounded a little smug now, and she could hear the smile in his voice even if she couldn’t see it.

“You are.” He went quiet for a bit after that. Perhaps her tone had been softer than she had intended. For a moment, she nearly regretted it. But then she heard his voice again, equally as gentle.

“Well… you’re the coolest elf in the world, do you know that?”

Rayla’s lips curled into a smug, content smile. “Yes, I do. But it’s always nice to hear.” She heard him chuckle. “Now try and get some rest. Who knows what you’ll have to face in the morning.”

---

Callum had made sure to wake up bright and early for his lessons with Jorani the next day. His heart swelled with excitement, if what Aeslen had said yesterday was true, then he would be learning magic today with Jorani. Finally, perhaps he’d have some new and exciting spells to try out.

Rayla was still sound asleep, curled up on her side, but as he shuffled about in his bed he watched her ear twitching gently at the sounds. She finally hummed groggily as Callum stood, his weight making the wooden floorboards creak lightly under his weight and he strolled past her.

“Oh? What about?”

“Callum…?”

“Does it have to be already?” She joked drowsily. “I was having a nice dream.”

Callum chuckled gently. “Oh? What about?”

“Back home.” She replied a little wistfully, and the yearning in her voice almost hurt Callum’s heart.
“Oh… you okay? You feeling homesick?”

“Mm…” Rayla rolled over sleepily, rubbing at her eyes. “I don’t know… maybe a little. But I’ll be fine.” She brushed it off lightly with a smile.

“Hey… Maybe we’ll get a chance to stop by sometime.” He watched her eyes twinkle hopefully at the prospect.

“Yeah… maybe.”

He grinned down at her as he slung his bag over his shoulder.

“Where you working today, Ray?”

“Library, I think. I was supposed to work there yesterday but the gardeners asked me for help doing the landscaping.” She grumbled quietly stepping to her feet and stretching slightly. “I’ll probably working with Halari… Can’t wait for him to pry into our relationship.”

Callum offered her a sympathetic smile. “You know I bumped into him yesterday. I almost forgot to say. He seems nice. Maybe he kept our little ‘engagement’ situation to himself.”

“You think?” She trailed a little after him as he stepped towards the door.

“Yeah. He seems nice.”

Rayla chuckled, leaning closer as she poked him in the chest as he lingered in the doorway. “That’s the thing Callum… It’s often the nice ones you have to watch out for.”

---

Jorani was waiting for Callum on the smooth stoned plateau where he had first demonstrated his *Fulminis* spell to the High Mage. He seemed to be lost in thought as Callum approached, Zym on his shoulder, staring wistfully off into the distance as he stood on the very edge of the island’s ground.

“Uh, hello? Master Jorani?”

“Ah, Callum. Not quite as tardy today as you were yesterday for Aeslen.”

“Oh… yeah, sorry about that.”

Jorani chuckled, waving off the notion. “It’s quite alright. You’ll find we have a rather flexible schedule here.”

“So are we learning spells today?” Callum’s face split into a wide grin. “Are you going to teach me some more cool storm magic?”

“Actually we’re going to start with something a bit different. Something that most Skywing elves overlook as ‘rather useless’, but I assure you given your circumstances it will be very useful to you. I’m going to hopefully… teach you to windwalk.”

“Oh…?”
Jorani smiled lightly. “It makes sense to me. A Skywing Elf who can’t feel the joys of the sky to its fullest… it’s a little heart breaking to think of. So this will be your first lesson.” Callum’s heart lurched in his throat for a moment as the smiling elder took a step back, and allowed himself to fall over the edge of the island. He disappeared from view for a moment, Callum dashing forward with a squawk of alarm, until with a gust of wind, Jorani ascended dramatically, spinning in the air with the grace of an arrow.

Callum watched in awe, as the man’s climb slowed, and he let his wings unfurl, and he took a step. It was as though the air beneath his feet turned solid, and he let himself stand there, smiling proudly down at Callum’s astonished face.

He stepped closer. Then down, almost like an invisible staircase, until he was standing once more before the boy.

“You… didn’t have to do any runes.”

“Indeed. Windwalking isn’t a spell. It’s part of magic that runs through our Arcanum.”

“Like… Rayla’s invisibility thing?”

“Precisely. You can imagine, but a lot of Skywing elves scoff and don’t bother to worry about windwalking. Why walk when you can fly? But it has its uses, you’ll find. Handy for indoor use. And if, say, you have broken wings.”

Jorani lets his staff brush gently across one of Callum’s wings with a little smile. “So why don’t you give it a go, hm?”

“Is it as easy as you made it look?”

Jorani laughed gently. “It depends on the person trying.”

Callum smiled back. Alright. It was worth a shot. He had picked up spellcasting almost immediately. Magic was his thing.

How hard could this be?

…Apparently, a lot harder than the boy had expected.

Callum braced himself, lifting a leg unsteadily and prepared to feel the air solidify under his foot. And then it didn’t.

Hm. Strange. He tried again, resulting in a rather goofy looking march as he tried to find the invisible step he was searching for.

‘Oh? Are we playing a game? What are we jumping on?’

“I think the air is broken.” Callum quipped, getting a little chuckle out of Jorani.

“I certainly hope not.” Jorani stood aside giving Callum some space.

“How do you do it? What’s the secret?”

“You have to feel it in your heart Callum. You have to let yourself feel free.”
Callum spent the good part of an hour attempting to walk on the air. But no matter how he approached it, it seemed in vain. And the more he tried and failed, the more the frustration built inside of him.

Jorani sat on the side lines watching quietly and offering words of encouragement whenever Callum looked over at him. But Callum was sure he caught a look on the mage’s face. A look of concern, and doubt, and it did nothing to help raise either his spirits, or his annoyingly stubborn body.

Eventually, Callum sighed, defeated and exhausted as he approached his mentor, who perked as he realised the boy was wandering over.

“I don’t think I can do it.”

Jorani’s eyes flickered with pity. “Oh Callum… I’m sorry. Sometimes it takes a while to get a hang of these things.”

“Magic usually comes so easy to me… I guess I didn’t expect this to be so hard.” Callum’s heart sank a little. “It’s all been pretty hard so far. Aeslen’s studies, windwalking… I didn’t realise that there was a lot more to magic than just spells. Maybe that’s all I’m actually good at.”

“Perhaps it’s… something else. Like a block of sorts?”

Callum blinked. “You mean like… an art block?”

“Well, I’m no artist but yes, one might compare it to that perhaps.”

Jorani had struggled with art blocks regularly in the past, so the comparison did help him put his struggles into context. Perhaps it was just a… mage’s block? “So what do you suggest?”

Jorani leaned against his staff, scratching at his chin in thought. “Is there something bothering you, Callum? Right now? Is there something on your mind?”

‘Far too many things to say.’ Callum thought. But he didn’t have to say a word. Jorani caught it in the boy’s eyes.

“Oh Callum… I know that look. There is a great burden on you. Weighing down your heart. You can’t float into the sky if you’re being chained down.” Callum searched Jorani’s eyes sadly, hoping desperately that Jorani could help. “You have to feel it in your heart and soul, Callum. Freedom. That’s what sky magic is truly about at its core. That feeling of being free.”

“But what if I’m not free? And what if I don’t know why?”

Jorani smiled gently, a hand finding its way to Callum’s shoulder. “You are young, Callum. So young. You just need to be patient with yourself. And let yourself enjoy life where you can, even if the times may seems fleeting.”

The hand fell from his shoulder. “That’s all for now. I think the rest of your day should be spent reflecting.”

Jorani was right… Callum had a lot to think about.
Callum had been wrong about Halari.

This much became clear uncomfortably quickly to the young Moonshadow elf when she got to the library. It was surprisingly busy, quite a few of the island’s occupants were peacefully minding or enjoying the library, and for a moment, Rayla was quite relaxed.

But then something felt off. It was the way some of the monks looked at her. They didn’t throw her any nasty glares, but they seemed to know something. And it was that which sent a bristling sensation up Rayla’s neck and put her on edge.

She knew better than to ignore her intuition. But it also wasn’t as though she could just… ask someone what was going on. So she made her way to Halari’s little alcove as briskly as she could, hoping silently that perhaps she was just still just jumpy from the white lie she had told the librarian.

The day before had been so peaceful in contrast, aside from a slip up where she nearly lopped off the head of one of the swanfox topiaries. But the gardeners hadn’t stared at her like this, just made casual conversation about the weather and what they had done at the festival.

And now there was this restless feeling of anticipation. Something was about to happen, any minute now. Something uncomfortable…

“Ah, Rayla!”

“Gah!” Rayla’s hand instinctively met the hilt of her blade as every muscle in her body tensed. There was a pause, a beat, before she exhaled slowly, her eyes meeting a familiar little monk. “Oh… It’s you again. Sorry. You should uh… probably not sneak up on me like that.”

“Noted!” Halari chimed, seemingly blissfully unaware that he had come very close to finding a blade at his neck.

The Skywing elf beckoned her to follow him as he trotted quite cheerfully over to his desk. “How’s Callum doing?” He hummed softly.

“Oh, he’s… he’s doing better.” Rayla smiled a little. “He’s studying with Jorani at the moment.”

“Ah yes, then he’s in very good hands.” Halari chimed, reaching up and pulling a large book from one of the shelves and letting it fall with a heavy thud onto his desk. He flicked through the pages, before his face lit up and he nodded. “Ah yes, I think Section 7 of the library needs reorganising today, if that’s alright with you my dear.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. It’s not like I have anything better to do.” She tried to bite back the sarcasm a little, though Halari didn’t seem to mind. “Oh I understand. It must be annoying being apart from your fiancé-” Rayla’s face flushed. “For most of the day when I imagine you two spent almost all your time together.”

She coughed nervously. “Uh… yeah.”

Halari smiled over his shoulder at her. “Well if you’re feeling lonely, I can help with that. You can work with Morias today. I caught him up about you and your boy, I thought it was very sweet. I hope you don’t mind.”

Rayla’s face twitched, and perhaps it would have betrayed her discontent if it wasn’t for how utterly oblivious the librarian was. “Oh. Great. I… look forward to working with him.”

Oh. Gods.
Morias was a quiet sort. Tall, slim, with long gangly limbs and pointed features. He had narrow eyes, looking almost constantly as though he was squinting suspiciously, and it was this about him that only further rubbed Rayla the wrong way when she met him. He looked like a hawk, if a hawk could look like a goth that stood 6 foot tall and glowered at everyone.

How many people had Halari told? Was that why they had all been glancing at her in the library? Oh, how gossip spread like wildfire…

Thankfully, Morias didn’t seem interested in making small talk, and let Rayla get on with her daily work quietly.

But then he started shooting Rayla looks. Not like the ones of the other monks. These were much darker. Colder.

“Is there a problem?” Rayla finally asked, when the atmosphere became too much to bear any longer.

Morias’s eyes narrowed at her further. “I know what you are.”

“A Moonshadow elf?” Rayla raised an eyebrow at him. ‘Wow, guess Karajh isn’t the only one with prejudice issues.’

“No.” He replied coldly. “A cheat.”

“A… what?” Now Rayla felt completely thrown for a loop.

“I saw you the night of the festival. Halari told me you were engaged to that new mage kid. But if that’s the case why were you dancing with that Earthblood elf?”

Rayla fought back the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose in irritation. ‘Oh Great Spirits, this monk thinks I’m cheating on Callum with Callum this is such a mess.’

“That was… our friend. We were visiting him in Marinoris.” Rayla rambled off, trying to sound nonchalant. “Callum knew I was dancing with him it was completely platonic, you can even ask him about it.”

‘Oh that was stupid, that was so stupid, now I’ve put Callum on the spot-’

And then, as though summoned himself by her thoughts, Callum rounded the corner looking rather pensive. He ambled past the door of the library, not sparing the two a glance, but he was just within Rayla’s arm’s reach, and that was enough for her.

“Oh Callum, perfect timing!” Rayla laughed anxiously, grabbing the boy by the arm and yanking him unceremoniously over and into the conversation. Zym squeaked, fluttering from his shoulder, regarding Rayla in as much confusion as the boy. Her eyes pleaded with him as soon as he shot her a surprised look. ‘Help me out here, play along!’

“Oh uh, yes, hello… Is… everything alright?”

“Yes everything is fine, I was just telling this fine gentleman about the festival.”
The elf’s nose wrinkled. “I caught your partner with another elf.”

Callum blinked back stunned. And then, almost to Rayla’s own surprise, Callum almost looked genuinely hurt at the suggestion, glancing to Rayla questioningly.

“That was Yorrik!” Rayla defended. She watched Callum about to ask a question and stopped him dead in his tracks before the words could leave his lips. “Our mutual friend.”

“Oh…! Right. Yes. Our mutual friend. Yoseph.”

“Yorrik.” Rayla corrected.

“Yorrik. Yes. Yorrik.”

“And you were quite aware I was dancing with him, and didn’t mind, right?”

She watched the cogs in Callum’s brain turn as he finally caught on and caught up. “…O-Oh! Yes! Of course!” Callum laughed awkwardly.

“Yes… As… it would appear I am often, lately, unwell.” Callum’s face twisted a little uncomfortably, clearly thinking back to the fever he has suffered the other day.

“We’re just friends. I was just teaching him to dance was all. I am completely and utterly devoted to Callum.”

“Yeah! I trust Rayla entirely.” She felt him wrap an arm around her waist, and a wave of relief washed over her as she caught him smiling smugly back at the monk, full of confidence. “And I trust Yorkie as well.”

“Yorrik.”

“Yorrik.”

The monk’s shoulders and face relaxed a little, and he sighed defeated, shaking his head. “…Alright I guess. My apologies.” He bowed his head, then Rayla watched as he scuttled briskly away to tidy more books, clearly embarrassed and defeated.

“Wow, Skywing elves certainly like sticking their noses in other people’s businesses, don’t they?”

Callum laughed. His arm didn’t fall from her waist, instead guiding her gently around so that they were walking in the direction he had originally been heading before being dragged headfirst into that predicament. She let him, not really knowing where he was heading, but it was nice at least to be in his company again for a little while. They weren’t walking long before she had the familiar feeling of a wing draping gently around her again.

“Making good use of those wings I see.”

“Yeah well… they’re no good for flying but at least they make a cosy blanket.” He chuckled, yet she detected an air of sadness tinging his voice.

“Hey… what’s wrong?”

“Ah… I dunno. It’s stupid really.” She bumped her shoulder against his as they walked.
“It’s not stupid if it’s bothering you.” He still didn’t reply, eyes staring sadly ahead. “Come on, we’re engaged, you can tell me anything.” She teased lightly, and watched as a little smile cracked on his lips.

“I’m just having trouble with some magic, that’s all.”

“Mr Prodigy who gets spells right first time? I’m finding that a little hard to believe.”

“Well this is like that, but for the sky. It’s called windwalking. But I don’t… I don’t know if I can even do it, it might be like an elf thing, and as much as I am a mage now well… I don’t think there much I can do about not being an elf.”

Rayla paused, reflecting for a moment. “Yeah well… we thought humans couldn’t do primal magic before. And then you did. What’s to say you can’t do this as well?” Callum glanced away sadly, and she sighed, continuing. “Listen, my Moonshadow powers are me connecting to the moon. It’s a magic-y connection… Arcanum-y thing, I can feel it. So you might be having a block making that specific part of the connection, but you’ve already figured out the Arcanum enough to use spells, I’m sure you’ll get this part of magic eventually.”

Despite her words, he still looked rather unconvinced. “I dunno Rayla… I…”

“Hey.” She let her arm drape around his shoulders, and turned him a little to face her more. He caught her eye, and she gave him a little reassuring smile. “I think you need a break. You’re overthinking things. Take a moment away from it all, and then when you come back with a fresh mind, you might figure out the answer. Hey, maybe you’ll even find some inspiration where you least expect it.”

Callum offered her a weak smile. “…Alright. You’re probably right.”

“I’m always right.” She smiled smugly now and Callum laughed, giving her a gentle squeeze and a little gentle tug for them to carry on walking.

“Whatsoever you say.”

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Callum took Rayla’s words to heart.

She had always been helpful whenever he was stuck in something to do with magic, even back in Katolis, and she was right. He had hit a brick wall with this, so he just needed a moment to step back and find a different angle. But for now, he needed something to occupy his busy and frustrated mind.

He paced around the island. That would help he thought, in more ways than one. If he could get a solid idea of the layout of the temple and its grounds, he would be far less likely to get lost in the future. So Callum explored. He wandered absentmindedly, peacefully around the halls, taking note
of the vast dining hall, the cosy sleeping quarters, and the beautiful chapel. Had Callum not lived in a
castle most of his life, perhaps he wouldn’t have recognised some of the more empty rooms.

But that was a ball room from the looks on it. Dusty, Callum noted, likely not used for many years.

And that, oh that was a music hall, and it in fact caused an excited little flitter in Callum’s heart as he
noticed many instruments lined up, shiny and well taken care of. Perhaps, if they were lucky, they
might have the chance to listen to the monks play at some point.

It was once he got to one of the larger flower gardens that something caught his attention. A group of
perhaps five Skywing girls, one older and the others quite young, were gathered, sitting on the grass
together, and as his curiosity led him to approach, he caught sight of what it was they were doing.

They were weaving. The older elf, though she still had a youthful face to her, appeared to be
intertwining a long beautifully patterned rug, expertly and with care, while the others weaved other
smaller decorations, blankets it seemed, and little wall decorations.

A thought came to mind as his hand unconsciously trailed to his wrist, fiddling gently with the
bracelet there. He had once made little friendship bracelets for Claudia and Soren, when they had all
been much younger, and as he twiddled the bracelet between his finger and thumb his thoughts
trailed to Rayla.

“Hey! U-Uh…. Hello there!” He called out, his nerves now biting a little at his insides.

The monks looked up, inquisitive, and he took a tentative step forward.

“I was just passing by and saw you weaving and uh… do… do you think you could teach me?” The
monks regarded Callum curiously. “Well it’s just, I think it’d be useful for my uh… studies. Yeah.
Teaching me life skills in patience and…” His nose wrinkled as he tried to find his words. “Co-
ordination.”

The monks continued to stare at Callum rather quizzically now. The boy sighed.

“Okay look… I’ve hit a wall with my studying, and I just need something to get my mind off things.
And I thought… well I’d like to make something nice for Rayla. For having to put up with me.
Something like this?” He pulled his sleeve up to reveal the little braided bracelet Rayla had won for
him days earlier at the festival.

Finally, one of the monks smiled, the woman Callum silently assumed was leading the weaving, and
she motioned for Callum to come and sit with them. Callum relaxed, a small smile lighting up his
own face as he joined them.

“Callum, I presume?” The lady asked gently.

“Ah… yeah.” He smiled nervously. ‘Rayla’s fiancé.’ he nearly added but decided against it. “I’m the
new student mage.”

“We know.” One of the other monks piped up. “Word gets around this island very quickly you
know.”

“So you want to make something for your sweetheart?” Another asked, a girl perhaps not that much
older than Ezran, and a little playful smile crept along her face. The heat stung immediately at
Callum’s face as he smiled nervously back. It sounded like she was digging for something, hoping he
would let slip more information on the pair. It was the kind of tone a snooping family member would
use upon discovering a secret crush.
“Oh, I…”

“Oh don’t tease the poor boy look at him.” The leader chuckled gently. “Forgive Hiran, it’s just everyone gets a bit excited whenever there’s new people on the island. We all know practically everything about each other so it’s fun to learn about someone entirely new.” She shot Hiran a look, who retreated sheepishly back to her weaving. “But it’s rude to pry.”

“Oh it’s okay…” Callum muttered timidly, rubbing at one of his bright cheeks.

“So you fell in love with a Moonshadow elf?”

The older woman groaned shooting another glare at Hiran, who had piped up excitedly now. “What did I just say?!”

“Oh I…. sorry Aria.”

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “I’m sorry Callum. My pupils should really learn better respect for people’s privacy.”

Callum laughed awkwardly. “Uh no it’s… it’s okay really.” He could feel the tips of his ears burning, and wondered silently if they could make it out through his disguise. “So does uh… Does everyone know about me and Rayla being…? Y’know…”

“Together?” Aria replied. “Yeah I think so. Halari can’t keep his mouth shut when it comes to new gossip, so word spread pretty quickly.”

“Oh. Wonderful.”

Aria offered him a look of pity. “Sounds like it was something you would have preferred to keep private.”

Callum rubbed the back of his neck a little, his eyes glancing upon the brooch on his scarf. “Uh… yeah. I mean I guess I don’t mind too much, but I think Rayla was worried about what people would think.”

“What do you mean?” Callum asked gently, as he picked at a few strands of yarn and got to weaving himself, glancing at her work for inspiration every so often as he did.

“Well as you probably know, relationships between different races are met with a fair bit of lingering resentment. It’s been better in recent years but it’s still not an easy life. She must feel uncomfortable having her relationship laid out before a bunch of people she doesn’t know.” She frowned sadly. “Especially as a Moonshadow elf. I imagine her people didn’t take it very well, they’re particularly strict and rigid, so I’ve heard.”

“Y-Yeah.” Aria glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Callum swallowed nervously. His tongue was moving before he had a chance to regret what he was saying. “They didn’t take it very well so we ran away together. We uh… we eloped.”

“Oh how romantic. A forbidden love.” Hiran swooned, raising a hand dramatically to her forehead as she fell into the lap of her friend, both giggling now.

‘Oh… you have no idea just how forbidden we’d be if this was real.’ Callum thought to himself.
“Well… don’t worry. Our people here are far more accepting than most. You’ll be safe.” Aria’s eyes flickered nervously however, for a split second. “Though I would be wary of Karajh. No one’s told him as far as I’m aware and it’s probably better to keep it that way.”

“Karajh?”

“Yes. He-”

“He kind of hates Moonshadow elves.” Hiran pointed out oh so tactfully. She clammed up again when Aria glowered at her, before returning a sad look back to Callum.

“I’m afraid it’s true. I think he’ll begrudgingly put up with Rayla being here if Jorani thinks it’s best. But I would just be aware of that. I don’t think he’d take it well to find out you’re romantically involved with her.”

“Oh… okay.” Callum was quiet for a moment, the gears in his head turning. “Why does he hate Moonshadow elves?” It went uncomfortably silent, and Callum bit his tongue, regretting his question immediately. “You know what, f-forget I asked. I’m sorry. You can ask me more stuff if you want.”

Hiran perked again. “Do you think you two are soulwined?”

“Soulwined?” Callum asked gently. Aaria smiled as she worked, glancing up at the boy with bright cerulean eyes.

“Yes, surely you know what that means.”

“I don’t. I don’t think of heard of it.”

“Hmm…” Aria’s face went thoughtful. “Think of it… like a roll of yarn.” Callum listened, quiet. Hanging on her words. Even Hiran fell quiet with a little content smile. “It’s like a long stretch of it, connecting two souls together.”

“Sounds like everyone would be in a big tangle, trailing yarn everywhere.”

She chuckled. “You can’t see it, or feel it physically.” She continued. “But it doesn’t mean it’s not there.” He watched the monk continue to weave with delicate care. “You can feel it in your heart. There are many things in life like that, I suppose. Love is one of them.”

Her words were like poetry. Callum hugged his knees to his chest with a little smile, his eyes pressed her on, gently, wanting to learn more. “That’s beautiful.”

“It is quite, isn’t it? I’ve always liked the idea, it’s rather romantic.” Aaria smiled. “They say soulwined souls are often a bit of a mess at first, because you're in such a tangle, and it’s all complicated and confusing feelings. But if you're dedicated, and put in the work, over time… you sort out the knots and the tangles… and with patience and care, the souls are woven together, carefully, into a bond that can’t be broken.”

…Something about that resonated with Callum. It felt familiar, and his eyes widened a little as he glanced down at his feet, the cogs of his mind turning.

“What is it, Callum?”

“O-oh, I…” He chuckled sheepishly.

“You were thinking of your partner?”
…There was no denying it. Callum’s thoughts had indeed trailed to Rayla.

But a human and an elf… soul twined? Could something like that really happen? Would the fates allow such a union?

…It had happened before, Callum reminded himself. With Argenti, and his human lover. Though that had been thousands of years ago…

Heat begun to sting at his cheeks a little. Was he really considering the possibility of himself and Rayla being soul mates?!

…He… didn’t hate the idea though. He and Rayla were working through a lot together, and if he had to be in a tangle with anyone in the world, he supposed he wouldn’t mind if it was with her.

But the more he convinced himself of that, the more flustered he made himself. This was ridiculous, he was being ridiculous, and Rayla was just a friend! A very close, and very dear friend…

Aaria smiled gently. “Dear, it’s fine. It’s understandable to think about these kind of things when you love someone so dearly. The possibility that perhaps it was meant to be.”

Callum blinked back, contemplating. His body relaxed a little, and his eyes softened, a little smile curling at the corners of his lips.

Hiran was grinning now. “You know we could always have your wedding here!”

“Yeah! You guys could get married here! It’ll be fun! You won’t have to worry about wedding crashers, or anyone judging you, or-”

Callum’s voice cracked. “W-We can’t!” In that moment he would have gladly melted away into the grass if he could. How uncomfortable this whole mess had become…

Hiran’s face fell. “Aw… why not?”

Callum glanced sheepishly to Aria as his brain whirled in a panic. “We’re too young!” He blurted out suddenly. “W-We were going to wait a couple of years, you know? And besides me and Ray already have plans on where we want to get married.”

“Where?” Callum’s face screwed up in panic.

“Hiran that’s enough.” Aria sighed. “Let the poor boy just get on with his bracelet. You need to be focusing on your blanket anyway unless you want to continue having cold feet at night.”

Hiran grumbled, but Callum let out a little relieved sigh. “Thank you.”

“It’s fine. You don’t need to be rushing into marriage little fledgling.” She smiled affectionately. “You just take your time. Your bracelet looks nice. Lovely colours.”

“Oh, you think?” Callum beamed a little now. “I hope she likes it.”

“I think she’ll love it.”

---
He had had a whole afternoon of relaxing, taking his mind off things. Surely it was worth another go now… right?

Callum focused. He inhaled slowly, centring himself, his eyes closed. ‘Think light thoughts. Light as a feather.’

Callum took a step. He felt the tiles under his feet. He tried again, to no avail. He frowned, feeling frustration bubble inside and he crouched down,

He sprang into the air. This was it, he thought, he would float now, surely-

Callum’s ankle nearly twisted painfully as he collided back to the ground and he hissed irritated. That was when he heard her voice behind him, his companion stood there under the marble canopy and Zym at her heels.

“What’re you doing?” Rayla asked rather flatly, an eyebrow raised at the boy.

“Trying to windwalk.” Callum tried to reply indifferently, which was rather hard when he was trying not to look like an utter fool in front of her of all people.

“…Right.” She crossed her arms, leaning against one of the marble pillars and gave him a little smirk. “Going well?”

Callum pouted back at her and raised his hands, palms skyward as a little ‘what does it look like’ gesture back at her. She chuckled lightly. When she didn’t budge from her position, he felt a strange sense of discomfort fall over him.

“Are… are you just going to stand there and watch me now?”

“Well, I’ve finished my daily chores, and I have nothing better to do so…”

Callum pouted. “You just want to watch me look like an idiot.”

A little grin split across her features. “What? No… Of course not.” She gave a little twirl of her hand at him. “Just pretend I’m not here, carry on.”

Callum sighed. No, this would be absolutely impossible now with her distracting him. “No…. no I’m done now.”

“Aw. Spoilsport.” She chuckled as he sauntered over. Callum sat on the smooth stone steps near Rayla’s feet with a defeated grumble. Zym cooed softly, rubbing his head against the boy’s arm, and he heard her shuffle behind him as she adjusted and wandered around to sit by his side.

“I tried your idea about taking a break from it all but it… it didn’t work I’m still drawing up a blank.” His cheek found his palm as he rested his elbow on his knee, glaring into the horizon. “I don’t think I’m ever going to figure this out, Rayla.”

“You will. Because I know you, and you’re a dummy who doesn’t know the meaning of giving up once you put your mind to something.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted.”
She laughed, elbowing him gently in the side. “A bit of both.” She softened a little. “Look, I told you to take a break, and you did. For all of… what, a couple hours? Give it a day, maybe two. Let inspiration hit you naturally. In the meantime I’m sure you can work on your other studies, right?”

“I guess so…”

“Focus on what you can do for now then.”

Callum smiled across at her softly. “You’re very good at giving advice, did you know that?”

He watched as Rayla puffed up proudly, with a smug, satisfied smile. “Oh? You think?” She spoke in the tone of someone fishing for more compliments. ‘Yes, tell me about how great I am.’ He laughed a little.

“I do think.” He obliged her. “Thank you Rayla. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

A little sparkle in her eyes let him know it was the right thing to say. “Come on. It’s getting late.” She stood, and hooked her hand under his arm gently to tug him to his feet.

As they walked back together, he felt her hand trail slowly down his arm and into his own.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! I'm sorry it's been a while. If you follow me on tumblr or twitter you know I've been struggling with writers block a bit with this chapter and my life has been a bit hectic lately.

I hope you enjoyed this longer chapter though! It's setting up for some important things later in this arc.

Please do leave a comment letting me know you're enjoying the story still haha! They really help me out <3 I promise the next chapter shouldn't take quite as long to write.

Love you guys!

(Oh yeah and some fun trivia! I based the Moonshadow language off Scottish Gaelic. It made sense to me, but sorry if I butchered it, I tried my best!)

- Dee
Coup de Foudre

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Scratch scratch scratch.

Silence.

Scratch scratch scratch scratch.

The harsh noise of a quill against paper sounded almost as loud as thunder in the silence of their room in the dead of the night.

Callum sat hunched over several sheets of parchment and the books from the library, writing away in his sketchbook in a feeble attempt to translate whatever he could into something comprehensible. The scrolls sat in their cases in his bag, the boy deciding to set them aside for now and try and make out some of the other texts Callum hadn’t had a chance to ‘read’ in Aeslen’s study session.

It was painstaking work. But it offered him a distraction from the feelings of failure twinging at him whenever he thought about his struggles with windwalking. Rayla had been right. He just needed to focus on what he could do for now instead of what he couldn’t.

Scratch scratch scratch.

Unfortunately it was painful for a different reason for the girl laying on the floor beside him.

“Callum.” She groaned. “Go to sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will, just after this bit.” He heard the girl shuffle, and when he glanced to his left, was met with scowling violet eyes glinting in the candlelight. She was sitting up, her hair a little messy from tossing and turning, and a frown that he had become all too familiar with.

“You’ve been saying that for over an hour, Callum.”

“Oh… have I?” Callum hummed, only half listening as his attention went back to the book. She hissed a little, irritated.

“You’re such a pain.” He smiled fondly despite himself, scribbling out notes on his spare parchment.

“I’ll be done in just a minute, I promise.”

“Callum, I swear.” She was leaning on his mattress now, her arms crossed, still glaring at him. “I will come up there and make you go to sleep, don’t you test me.”

“Mhm.” But then his brain processed her words and he frowned a little, finally looking back over at her. “Wait what?”

“If you don’t wrap up your dumb studying, I’ll… I’ll wrestle you into submission.”

“You’ll wrestle me?” He tried to stifle a laugh. But there was no joke in her eyes. She was frowning intensely back at him.

“You need to sleep Callum. I want to sleep too, and I can’t do that with the grating sound of your
“quill on paper all night long!” She rubbed at bleary eyes. “It’s got to be the early hours of the morning by now.”

Callum pursed his lips a little, his eyes softening, sympathetic. “Okay, okay. I’ll wrap this up.” He watched her eyes reflect his own, softening at last.

“Good.”

“…Let me just finish off this sentence-”

“Oh great ancestors, Callum-!”

Everything after that happened in a bit of a shocked blur to the poor boy. All at once he was knocked prone from his sitting position on the bed, his candle flickering out by the rush of movement. The parchment was scattered, half across his sheets, and some to the floor, leaving a complete mess across both their beds now.

It took him a moment to process what had happened. Rayla had literally sprung from the floor and crashed into his side, and now he could feel arms around him, tight, squeezing as he squirmed in alarm. But the more he wriggled, the tighter she held him. She was clearly making use of her healed arm, though as he moved, he found himself taking care not to put his full weight on it.

“W-Whuh… H-hey!”

“Shhh! Shut up! Go to sleep!” She hissed.

“Rayla!”

He continued to struggle in vain for a minute longer.

But with the feeling of the pillow and the soft mattress below him, he grew sluggish. And his battle with Rayla made him grow weary. And Rayla herself… she was so warm, and as his fighting slowed, he could feel her rest her chin gently against his shoulder. Oh no… she was right. He really did need to sleep.

“Aokay, you win. You win… you ruthless elf.”

A gentle huff right in his ear let him know Rayla was satisfied with this news, and he finally felt her arms go a little slack.

“Good.” He found the more he let loose the tension in his muscles, the more Rayla let herself relax too, until they were both just lying there silently for a moment, Rayla’s arms still wrapped lightly around him.

Then he tried to sit up.

And suddenly, like instinct, Rayla went stiff again, constricting him once more.

“No.” Her voice was surprisingly forceful.

“Rayla I need to tidy up.”

“You can do that in the morning.” She grumbled tiredly.

Callum sighed, relaxing again, and a little more hesitantly, he felt Rayla loosen again too. The boy squinted in the dark at the end of his bed. It seemed that Rayla had knocked over most of his work,
cascading it aside and to the floor. He was surprised all the commotion hadn’t disturbed the sleeping
dragon curled up at the end of Rayla’s makeshift bed. He was also thankful in that moment that it
wasn’t the rare expensive scrolls of the library, or perhaps Aeslen might have thrown the boy off the
island, ability to fly or not.

“Can I at least move all the parchment off the bed?”

“No.” She mumbled, her voice even more laced with sleep now. He blinked turning to face her
more. The poor girl was slipping away with each passing second, and now guilt laced through him.
She was so exhausted. So much more than he had realised, and it was his fault for keeping her up for
so long.

They were still for a moment.

“Are… are you going to go back to your bed?” He finally asked, when it became very apparent that
she wasn’t making any effort to move away from him.

There was no response at first. Then he felt her ever so slowly, bury her face into his shoulder. A
muffled voice replied. “…No. You’ve just got to deal with this now…” She mumbled. “It’s… what
you get…. Stupid… dumb… hmph…”

Perhaps, Callum thought, this should have felt more awkward. And yet, when he searched his heart
there was nothing uncomfortable about this. If anything, it felt the opposite. Her arms around him
only lulled him further towards passing out. She was a warm and comforting presence.

“Rayla… I’m sorry I kept you awake for so long.” No reply this time. “Rayla?” He listened, ears
now tuned to her. He could hear and feel her breathing now, evened out and slow. She’d fallen
asleep against him, her head on his shoulder, arms loose, but still pinning his arms to his sides.

Callum’s heavy eyelids finally caught up to him, and he let his eyes close, his head lolling gently
against Rayla’s, resting there.

“Okay… goodnight Rayla.”

---

It was Callum who woke up first that morning. Still half asleep as he shifted, he felt a weight against
his side and across his chest. An arm, Rayla’s arm. She was still cuddled right up to him, her face
buried into his shoulder.

She had been so completely and utterly exhausted last night. Guilt tugged on his heartstrings again,
and so as he shifted very carefully, he decided he would try his best not to wake her and let her catch
a few more minutes of sleep.

This was, however, easier said than done. Her arms were draped around him and her fingers were
hooked into the fabric of his jacket, so he had to very carefully take her hand and uncurl her fingers,
a delicate and slow procedure. He froze each time she stirred, only continuing when she settled
again. Eventually he freed her hand from his jacket with a little sigh of relief, letting her hand rest
momentarily on his chest instead. His own hand lingered over hers for a moment, his thumb brushing
affectionately against the back of her hand, before he very slowly shifted and pulled gently away
from her.
Rayla’s head tilted and he held his breath as he let her slip from his shoulder and onto his pillow. She stirred again, her face scrunching up a little, but he soothed her gently, the back of his fingers finding her cheek.

“Hmm…?”

“Hey shh… it’s okay. Go back to sleep…” He whispered softly, and to his surprised she relaxed, her frown softening and he smiled fondly, laying on his side watching her for a moment as she sighed into the pillow. When he heard her breathing even out again, he gently slipped out of the bed.

But as he turned to look over at her, now she looked sad and uncomfortable. Her arms were empty, and in her sleep they curled in towards her with a little discontent frown. Oh wow, now he felt even guiltier.

Callum snuck very carefully around the bed, avoiding the books and parchment scattered across the floor from last night. He was searching for something, or someone, perhaps, and ah, there he was, nestled up in Rayla’s little bed set.

Zym made a sad little quiet whine as he was lifted, floppy in Callum’s arms, but he relaxed again as Callum carefully crept around the bed, leaned over his elf and slipped the baby dragon into her arms. Naturally, she tugged the dragon gently to her chest and he curled up with a little purr, resting his head against her. Now both the girl and dragon seemed quite happy again.

Callum smiled, letting himself sit on the bed for a few moments longer, glancing between their sleeping faces. Absentmindedly he reached over, brushing a little strand of hair from her face, and then he let the back of his fingers gently stroke down the hair that framed her cheek.

Her hair was so soft. Silky. He was very careful not to catch her ear as his fingers traced there slowly, before he slowly pulled his hand away and stood up again.

Callum was feeling very affectionate in that moment it seemed, as after finally tidying away the paper strewn across his bed, he also pulled the throw blanket from the end and draped it gently over Rayla and Zym. He caught the little curl of a smile on the girl’s lips as he did so.

There. Now they were definitely comfy.

The boy slipped away quietly over to the writing desk opposite his bed, laying out his book and reading his translations over from last night. He had a good twenty or so minutes before his next session with Aeslen, so if he could try and revise as much information as he could before then, it would be a real help.

Callum was only working quietly for a couple minutes when he heard the startled noise of realisation behind him and the shifting of blankets. He smiled.

“Morning, Ray.” He beamed over his shoulder at her.

Rayla was sat up stiffly, eyes wide, her arms still cuddling a half asleep Zym to her like the little dragon was a teddy bear. Her face was a little flushed, and Callum could only imagine the realisation that had hit her as she had woken up in his bed.

She didn’t answer right away, trying to look anywhere, anywhere but him. He could feel the anxiety radiating off her.

“Hey… you okay?”
“U-Uh, yeah I just…” She rested her chin on Zym, burying her face so he could only see her eyes. Her voice as a little muffled against the dragon’s mane now. “I just remembered what happened last night. Sorry.”

“I mean I kind of deserved it.” Callum laughed it off light-heartedly.

“What?” Rayla raised an eyebrow at him.

“You… you wrestling me? Until I finally fell asleep?”

“I wasn’t…” Rayla pouted a little. “You absolutely deserved that I’m not apologising for that. I meant the… y-you know…”

Callum laughed gently. “Oh right… okay. I think I know what you’re talking about now.” He smiled as kindly back at her as he could, trying to put her at ease. “You’re fine Ray, you don’t have to apologise for falling asleep on me.”

Rayla blinked. Then her eyes softened again and she glanced away, quiet again. “You don’t feel… awkward about it?”

“Well I mean, I was a little nervous at the time when you didn’t move but I was kind of too tired to worry about it. And when I woke up you looked so peaceful, I didn’t want to disturb you. I didn’t really… I didn’t feel uncomfortable at all.” Concern started wind its way into his words now when she didn’t respond. “It’s okay Rayla, really, I’m not gonna be weird about it. You uh, you don’t have to be all tense around me.”

Rayla sighed, rubbing at one of her cheeks. “I’m… still sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Callum’s voice was firm, but kind.

There was an uncomfortable silence that hung in the air momentarily, before he heard her slide out of the bed and her footsteps creak against the wooden floor up behind him. The tension was dissipated by her change of tone.

“Are you still studying? You’ll melt your brain if you don’t take breaks.”

“I did take a break.”

“I don’t think sleeping counts.”

“Of course it counts!” Callum grinned over his shoulder at her again. She sighed and rolled her eyes as she turned on her heel and meandered back towards her bed set.

“Zym, our human is being an idiot. What are we going to do with him?”

“Well that’s not very nice.”

“I’m just saying you’re gonna burn yourself out…” Zym clambered out of her arms as she sat him down in the little nest of blankets. There was concern in her voice now. “There’s a fine line between focusing on what you can do, and working so hard you crash. Trust me… I know.”

Callum considered her words carefully. “Alright. Alright.” He closed the books, tidying them away with a little sigh. “There. I can let my brain rest for the next… Ten minutes before I have to go study with Aeslen.”

He heard Rayla stand again, trailing quietly towards the door. Something felt a little… off to Callum
“Hey are… are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah. I just figured I should get going… y’know? Stuff to do and all. I’ll see you later, alright?”

“Oh… okay. See you.”

And with that she offered him a half-hearted smile and a nod, before disappearing through the door. It seemed Callum wasn’t the only one worried about her in that moment, as Zym whined, and charged after her, just barely making it through the door before it closed behind her.

Callum watched the closed door for a moment, his eyes lingering there. His heart felt heavy. He’d woken up in such a good mood this morning, and… was she upset with him? With herself? For letting herself become so close to him? He really hadn’t minded in that moment, but it seemed to have bothered her a lot, and that… for some reason, it made his heart ache a little.

Callum decided for the next few minutes before he had to leave to try and find a distraction. And that was when something clicked in his brain. The compass. It was still in his bag, right? He had barely really thought about it since they had gotten to the island. Maybe it could offer him some much needed wisdom.

Callum searched his bag, until his fingers caught the familiar feeling of cold metal and he pulled it out slowly and carefully.

“Alright. You’re meant to tell me where I’m supposed to go, where am I going wrong?”

Callum rested the compass with a metal clink on the desk, watching the arrow spin in slow little circles before disappearing under the inky black liquid once more.

“Oh wow, thank you, that’s very helpful.” Callum huffed. “Can’t you give me any advice at all on windwalking? On Anything?” He picked it up again, turning it over onto its back. The letters that had been there before were in a strange script again, shifting slowly into something he could understand.

‘Patience holds the key,

To questions that you ask,

At peace your heart must be,

To fulfil this tricky task.’

“Hm… At peace huh?” Callum sighed, tapping his pencil against the desk. “That’s easier said than done. So how am I meant to find inner peace? Any more advice you can give me?”

The compass sat there, unmoving, unchanging.

“Fine.” Callum pouted. “You can continue to watch me struggle.” He stood from his desk, slinging his bag over his shoulder after unceremoniously shoving the compass back inside. “But right now I have to face… a different kind of struggle.”
“You can’t read Skyscript?” Aeslen stood there, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. Callum found himself shrinking under his gaze, scrolls and books hugged tight to his chest.

“I’m uh… l-learning? But I’m not very good at it…”

Aeslen glared at Callum a moment longer before pinching the bridge of his nose irritably with a sigh. “So you’re telling me you spend an entire day in here staring at the books and learnt nothing?”

“I-I learnt a little!”

“Like what?”

“…Okay to be fair you’re putting me under pressure, my mind has gone blank, a-and I can’t remember anything.”

Aeslen turned on his heel muttering, his footsteps so fast Callum struggled to keep pace. “Go sit down.” He pointed without looking at the boy. “I need to fetch some things.”

Callum did as he was told, feeling incredibly small in that moment. Small, embarrassed, and… almost afraid. Now what was going to happen? Was he going to be punished? What were the punishments in Xadian schools? Xadian Temple schools?

“Aeslen shook his head softly. “You could have told me you know. There’s no shame in not being able to read Skyscript.”

Callum’s head hung shamefully. “I was uh… embarrassed. And scared to ask for help. But I shouldn’t have lied.”

“You shouldn’t have. But it doesn’t matter now.” Aeslen waved it off gently. “At least you’ve told me now, so we can sort it out.”

Callum let out the breath he was holding. He had been so sure he was going to get scolded, or even disciplined somehow, his teachers back at the castle would have surely made him write lines all day, or clean the library by himself. But no, he had somehow gotten off lightly.

Skywing elves certainly seemed to be rather laid back.

“Here.” Aeslen handed Callum a fine looking book, much newer than the ones he had been given before. “This one is written in Common, you’ll hopefully find it a lot easier to grapple with. In the meantime, I will help get your Skyscript up to scratch. That way you’ll find a lot more of the library accessible.” His tone was surprisingly kind, Callum found. “And I suppose I could brush up on my lecturing skills if you find that easier too…”
“Thank you…” Callum threw Aeslen a grateful smile, one he found was returned in kind.

“You’re very welcome. Now why don’t we get to work?”

The day was spent a lot more relaxed than the last study session. Callum was able to make some friendly conversation with the older mage between his attempts at writing and reading.

As it turned out, Aeslen had studied under Jorani himself when he was much younger. Then, for a while, Aeslen had been a teacher here. About fifteen years prior, the temple had acted as a much more lively boarding school with about twenty to forty pupils each year.

Now it was down to one.

“I’ve missed teaching.” Aeslen hummed quietly. “It gave me a sense of purpose, but with the war getting worse over the years… it seems priorities have shifted. More now than ever families want to stay together as much as they can.”

“Do you have any family…?”

“I had one. A long time ago. Then I lost them and… well, I consider the people here my family now. That’s the nice thing about life I suppose. Even when you lose people you love, you can still find that love in others. Family isn’t always the people related to you by blood, but rather the people you choose to love and hold close.” Aeslen frowned a little. “I can’t help but feel like with gotten hugely side-tracked.”

Callum bit back a little chuckle, but he couldn’t fight back the smile. “Yeah, maybe just a bit… Anyway how does this look?”

---

It was strange when, for the first time, Callum returned from his studies to his room and Rayla wasn’t there.

It was stranger still, when he found himself wandering the temple grounds searching for her, only to have no luck whatsoever. None of the monks could offer him any help, even the gardeners who admitted to working with her that afternoon stated that she had left in a hurry and they hadn’t seen her since.

Where was she?

It hadn’t taken long for the doubts and anxieties to kick in. Had something bad happened to her? Had she injured herself during one of her chores? Had someone discovered their secret and kidnapped her? Had she fallen off the island?!

Callum’s footsteps grew faster, frantic as he paced around the island. She was fine, he kept telling himself. She was fine, he was overreacting-

He was overreacting. Callum froze suddenly, just short of the steps leading back to the sheltered patios of the temple when he caught sight of a familiar and distinct silhouette. She was sitting up on one of the balconies, staring out over the horizon, a wistful expression on her face, Zym curled around her shoulders. Callum let out a long sigh of relief, clutching his racing heart as he jogged
“Ray!”

His voice startled her from her thoughts. “Huh? What?”

“Ray, what are you doing up there? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“Callum…? I-”

“Hold on, hold on. I’m coming up.” Callum darted inside at quite a speed, down the hall and up the stairs, until he rounded the corner and there she was. It was a pretty little viewing balcony, looking out over the stone plateau training grounds, and she sat there legs hung over the edge, half turned to look over her shoulder at him as he approached.

She smiled at him, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Hey.”

Callum waited to catch his breath before responding, sucking in a deep breath and exhaling. Running upstairs really took it out of him…

“Hey…” He finished his approach a little slower, as he leant against the balcony by her side.

“How’d it go with Aeslen?”

“Not as bad as I was expecting. I thought he’d be annoyed at me but… actually I think he was kind of excited to be teaching me something so.” Callum threw her a little optimistic grin. “I’m now learning Skyscript and he’s teaching me history in lecture form now which is better, if I can manage to keep my focus on what he’s saying.”

He hopped onto the balcony and swung his legs over the edge so he was sitting next to her now. Zym purred lightly as he clambered across Rayla’s shoulder to climb onto his own and greeted the boy with a little snout bump against his ear. He giggled, the little dragon snuffling and tickling Callum’s ear curiously before settling to curl around and sit in his lap.

But… Rayla was quiet now. Worryingly quiet. Her eyes were fixed out on the horizon.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“…It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Rayla…” Callum let his hand rest on top of hers, his eyes almost pleading. He repeated his question gentler. “…What’s wrong?”

Rayla’s eyes met his, and she sighed. “Do you…” She shifted uncomfortably, hugging a knee to her chest. “Do you remember yesterday, when you asked if I was feeling homesick?”

Callum shuffled a little closer. “Yeah…”

Rayla smiled sadly across at him, her eyes glistening in the evening sun. “Well… I guess I was just thinking about things and… I’m just feeling that today.”

Callum went quiet. Then, gently, he extended his wing out again and curled it around Rayla comfortably. She flopped against his arm, curling her own around his waist as she huffed.

“I’m… sorry. I’m probably being stupid.” She muttered.
“What? No, Rayla, you’re not being stupid.” He tugged her into a little one armed hug, his other hand resting gently on top of one of her own. “I... I get it. I do. It’s kind of weird being away from home for so long. The longest time I’d spend away from the castle was over winter, and even then the Banther Lodge felt like a second home, I guess.” He paused, for a moment, but when Rayla didn’t respond, he continued gently. “It’s scary being so far from it all. I… I guess I always wondered how you dealt with it so well all the time.”

Rayla’s head shifted against his shoulder. “I have to.” She was quiet now. “I have to be strong, for you, and Zym.”

“You... uh... you don’t have to be all the time, Ray.” He smiled a little, resting his head timidly against hers. “Sometimes, you can let me be strong for you too.”

He felt her brush her thumb lightly against his shirt and she hummed a little as she considered his words. He let his hand curl around hers and he brushed little circles into her palm with his thumb.

“I mean it, Ray.” He said tenderly now.

Rayla chuckled softly. “Wow... Prince Charming is back.”

Callum blushed, a little coy now, but he smiled gently. “What, am I not allowed to look after my best friend’s feelings every now and again?”

Rayla shifted so she could look at him, her cheek squished a little against his shoulder her eyebrow raised in a playful smile. “I might be your best friend but I’m also your Royal Highness’s bodyguard.”

“Hm, that’s funny, I don’t remember hiring you.”

They were both laughing now, and as their chuckles faded, a peaceful quiet fell between them. This was nice, Callum thought, resting his wing a little more around Rayla, and he rubbed her arm gently.

“Callum?” She finally asked, almost nervously this time.

“Hm?”

“Am I uh... am I actually your best friend?”

There was no hesitation in his reply, which surprised him, as Rayla’s question had caught him a little off guard. “Of course you are.”

“Oh…” Rayla smiled. “…I’m glad. You’re... you’re my best friend too.”

Callum’s heart swelled and he tried to contain most of the goofy little grin that wanted to spread across his face. “Oh I... actually...” Callum let go of Rayla’s hand, his fingers lingering on hers a little as he did before he reached into the pocket of his jacket. “I have something for you. You just reminded me.” He felt her arms slacken around him as she sat up straighter, curious now.

“What?”

Callum laughed shyly. “I made you something yesterday.” He produced something small and woven. It was neat, laced into little diamond patterns across its length. Made up of purple and silver yarn, fitting, he had thought, or rather hoped, as both colours reminded him of the moon.

But as he produced it, a wave of nerves suddenly overcame him. Was this okay...? The last time
Rayla had worn something similar was when she had *bound* herself and that had nearly resulted in
the loss of her hand…

She wouldn’t take it the wrong way, would she?

“Sorry… I just kind of now realised it might be kind of insensitive, since the last time you had
something around your wrist you nearly lost your uh… you… y-you don’t have to wear it if you
don’t want-” But Rayla had already taken the little bracelet from his palm, her eyes wide as she
admired it delicately.

“Shut up, I’m never taking this off.” Rayla breathed, as she slipped it on over her sleeve.

Callum relaxed at her smile as she continued to admire it. “Oh good. You like it. I got worried for a
moment.”

She laughed. “Why? It’s wonderful.”

Callum smiled affectionately at her. “I guess I was a little scared about… cultural differences.” He
laughed sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. “In the Pentarchy this is a friendship bracelet.
Friends make them for each other, and I used to make them when I was little. Ez has a whole bunch
of them in our room back home. But then I realised it might mean something over here, and it’d be
awkward, or-”

“Shh.” Her finger found his lips, but she smiled warmly at him. “Listen. I promise I will let you
know if you ever do anything awkward or uncomfortable, and I won’t be mad. Because you mean
well, I know you do.”

“I do.” He repeated softly against her finger.

“I hope you’ll do the same for me then.” She laughed gently. “Please let me know if I ever make you
uncomfortable for whatever reason, okay?” He nodded, and she removed her finger from his lips.
Rayla turned back to face the horizon. “Also… thank you. I’ll treasure this.”

Callum sighed, relieved. “Hey are you… feeling better now?”

“Much better, yeah.”

“Still homesick…?”

“A little. But it’s less painful now.” He felt her lean against his shoulder again. “Because you’re
here, so it’s not that bad.”

“Aww. That’s kinda sappy.”

Rayla huffed a little. “Don’t get used to it.” Though she tried to sound annoyed, Callum could hear
the twitch of humour in her voice. He chuckled, but let another silence fall around them, as they
watched the setting sun together. Her voice nearly startled him when she spoke again.

“Callum, there’s actually been something else that’s been on my mind.”

“Hm?”

She didn’t answer right away, fidgeting a little. “Well I guess this whole situation we’ve got
ourselves in made me think. And… If you were to, hypothetically of course, marry someone.
Someone… outside of royalty. Would that make them a princess? Or prince, y’know. Keep your
“Hmm well… My mom wasn’t royalty when she got married. She was a general.” Callum pointed out. “I’m pretty sure when she married my… my dad, they made her a princess. And then not long after, he became king, and she was made queen too.” Rayla listened quietly, curious. “So uh… yeah I guess. I’ve never really thought about it all that much.”

Rayla smiled. “Hm. Interesting.” She glanced back out over the horizon, leaning back ever so slightly as she rested on the palms of her hands. A little playful grin caught her lips. “Princess Rayla… Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Haha… yeah.” Then Callum blinked, his brain registering what she had said. “Wait, what?”

Rayla’s grin widened when she caught his eye but she didn’t answer. Instead, she slid over the edge of the balcony, giving Callum a mini heart attack for a moment, until she forward flipped and landed gracefully on her feet. She gave him a little wave, before she sauntered off.

Had she meant it as a joke? Probably. She certainly loved to tease him when she had the chance. But Callum couldn’t quite be sure.

…At least she seemed to be in better spirits now.

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Callum’s heart felt a lot lighter after his moment with Rayla on the balcony. She clearly harboured no awkward feelings about him, and perhaps, he realised, she wasn’t as mad at herself over what had happened as he had thought. The girl’s heart had just been longing for her home, and that was why she had been acting uncharacteristically quiet that morning.

He thought it wise not to ask about what she had said on the balcony, though the words still whirled in his head. It had sounded almost like a proposal. An intention. But then, it was also Rayla. She wasn’t above teasing him, so it was incredibly hard at times to figure out whether she was being sincere or not.

It was probably just teasing. Right? Light-hearted, friendly teasing. Or… was it flirting? Oh, that possibility sent a flush of heat to his cheeks. He shook the thought away.

‘No, stop that. You have more important things to worry about. Rayla wouldn’t flirt with you.’

She was waiting in their room, and as Callum swung the door open, Zym chirped, diving off his shoulder and bounded over and into her waiting arms, and she laughed, kissing the little dragon between the eyes before he wriggled free to pounce around the bed set. “Hey, you’re back. You took your time.”

“We can’t all be back flipping parkour masters.” He pointed out with a light smile. “Some of us have to walk.”

“Hm… True.”

“You seem to be in a better mood.” He watched Rayla smile, pulling Zym into her arms for a little hug.
“I am.” Zym squeaked cheerfully, and she chuckled, bumping her nose against his snout before smiling back at the boy. “Thank you Callum.”

“I—I… You’re welcome.” Callum set his bag down by the door smiling before resting on his bed.

“Oh, you’re actually taking it easy this evening, are you?”

“If I don’t, I’m scared you’ll attack me again.”

Rayla laughed, a sound he realised he had missed. It was so sincere and warm. “Oh yeah, I’d watch your back if I was you.”

Callum grinned, his hand finding his sketchbook and he skimmed to a free page.

The rest of the night was peaceful. Callum lounged across his bed quite peacefully as he drew the compass, the little device turned in his hand every so often so he could study it. He wasn’t sure when exactly Rayla had dozed off, Zym cuddled up in a little ball by her side. But the gentle snores of the baby dragon and the pitter-patter of rain outside were starting to lull the boy to sleep too, and so he began to settle down for the night, setting aside the compass and his sketchbook.

That was when something strange happened.

As he started to lay down, he heard a faint hum. The compass, now resting on his bedside table, was buzzing lightly. And as he picked it up… the arrow appeared once more.

It was pointing outside.

“What…?” He whispered, eyebrow raised. He tapped the glass cover with his fingernail, as though to test it was working correctly. “You want me to go outside? Now? Why?”

Rayla mumbled softly in her sleep and he clammed up, almost forgetting the girl was sleeping.

He shook the compass gently, watching the arrow spin a little on its axis before once more pointing out the window, almost with a level of urgency. He squinted at it in the dark.

‘Alright. What could possibly be so important that you want me to wander out there in the middle of the night while it’s raining?’

But he knew better than to defy the orders of something given to him by a lady who had told him the fate of the world was in his hands. So with a little sigh, he slid off the side of the bed and as quietly as he could, snuck over to the window, peaking outside.

He couldn’t see much. But he could definitely hear something now.

Music.

Faint, soft, distant, coming from the other side of the temple. It must have been from the music hall he had passed the other day while exploring. Was that it? Was that where the compass wanted him to go?

But his broach was out of charge, he couldn’t just wander over to listen. He’d have to be quiet. Stealthy. Perhaps he and Rayla could sneak close enough from outside to figure out what it was the compass wanted from him.

He felt a pang of guilt in his heart at having to disturb Rayla’s sleep for a second night in a row, but it seemed necessary. If anyone could help sneak him around it was a trained Moonshadow assassin.
And besides… it felt like there was something rather sweet about sneaking out to listen to music in the night.

He slipped the compass into his jacket pocket then slunk over to Rayla’s side.

“Rayla…. Ray…. Hey…”

Rayla groaned, waving him off with her arm. “Huh… What…? What is it?” He watched her eyes crack open, glinting violet in the dark, and a little smile curled at his lips.

Callum didn’t answer, instead offering out his hands. When in her groggy state, she didn’t take them immediately, he curled his fingers quickly then stretched them again in an enthusiastic little ‘hey, c’mon!’ gesture.

Rayla grumbled irritably, but gave him one hand, her arms heavy and practically slapping his hand as she rolled over to give it to him. Callum didn’t mind, his fingers curling over her hand as he pulled the somewhat sluggish and floppy Rayla up.

“What… what’s going on?” She muttered. Callum led her silently to the window, the smile on his lips growing as he turned to her.

“Listen… do you hear that?”

She squinted a little, focusing, her ears pricking forward. “Music…?” Callum nodded. She raised an eyebrow at him. “Okay, that’s nice... But why.” She stopped, then sighed, almost exasperated. “You’ve got that face again.”

“The dumb idea face?” Her eyes softened and a little smile tugged at her own lips.

“Yes.”

“Well I was thinking… We could probably hear it better if we got closer you know…?” Suddenly Callum felt a little sheepish. “And I think the compass wants me to go over there for some reason.” He added hastily.

“Hm. For a second there I thought you were asking me on a date.” She teased, crossing her arms smugly.

Callum’s ears began to burn, but he had nothing to say for himself, instead he threw her a little nervous smile. Rayla nudged him gently in the arm with her elbow.

“Alright, come on… If your compass wants us to get soaked in the rain I guess we should, right?” She wandered back over to her bed set, hunching down and he watched her gently tuck the blankets around the sleeping dragon. He chirped softly, snuggling up in their warmth. “Hey lil’ one. Me and Callum have just gotta go out for a bit. You stay here, alright? We’ll be back soon.”

Zym purred in acknowledgement and Rayla smiled, giving him a scratch under the chin before she stood up again. “Alright then. Time to go along with another one of your ridiculous plans.”

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As the pair snuck through the halls and the temple grounds, a sense of exhilaration swept over Callum. He snuck close behind Rayla, but they didn’t have too much trouble at all. There was no need for guards here at the temple, and they only had to hold their breath once when a pair of monks meandered cheerfully past with stacks of books in their hands.

“This is probably a really stupid idea.” Rayla muttered quietly. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah, probably.” He smiled back. “But I’m pretty good at coming up with fun stupid ideas.”

Rayla shot him a fond little smile before focusing once more on sneaking them across the plaza. The sound of the music grew louder with each step, until it felt like the sound was passing right through his body. Rayla scanned the area, before giving Callum a little tug on the arm.

“Hey… c’mon I know where we won’t have to worry about being spotted.”

Callum followed quietly, and it wasn’t long before he realised where Rayla was leading him. Into the gardens. Through them to the back, where the little secluded bunch of trees and bushes sat, almost as though it was waiting for them.

It looked different at night.

It was the same little hidden garden, overgrown grass and long bunches of flowers, springing from the ground. The same tangled bushes all woven together between the tall trees. But everything felt so much different. For one, it was darker, the colours muted by the lack of light. And the flowers had, as Ezran would have said, ‘gone to sleep’, their petals closed away for the night. Though there was the faintest little glow about the clearing, from the bushes, the flowers seeming a little lighter than they should have been.

How poetic, Callum thought to himself, that they would find themselves here again. It was like the perfect little hideaway spot. Their little spot. It felt very private, like it was meant for them.

Beside him he noticed Rayla’s face split into a knowing smile and she raised a finger to her lips in a gesture for him to stay quiet. She took his hand, and led him very slowly into the clearing, hunkered down slightly, and as she stopped she turned back to smile at Callum again.

She leaned forwards, far past what Callum had expected was their comfortable boundaries zone and whispered so quietly it was nearly lost in the rain.

“How do you want to see something really cool?” Her eyes were glinting with wild excitement and Callum had to stifle a nervous chuckle. She didn’t wait for his reply, turning away from him as Callum let out the breath he was holding. Rayla cupped her hands around her mouth. And then she made what sounded like a little bird call.

The dim barely noticeably flickering lights of the plants around them, sparkled into life. The flora opened slowly, glittering and glowing, flowers that to Callum looked somewhat like the lilies in the castle gardens back home. But they glowed, pinks and oranges, not bright, but warm and soft.

The bases of the trees glowed in light blues and purples where little bluebell like flowers flickered, and even the fungi growing on the trees shined, brighter than the flowers, in neon blues and greens.

Callum’s face, like their surroundings, lit up. Pure joy sparked across his eyes as a little gasp escaped his lips.
“Rayla what…?”

“Shh…” She chuckled, whispering softly. “The flora here, it responds to vibrations. Sounds, movements, that kind of thing. So the more we talk or move, the more they flicker and light up.”

“Wow I… hope that doesn’t give us away.”

“It shouldn’t. We’re well sheltered enough, and with the music playing I imagine they’d just think it was that even if they did happen to see the lights.”

He could hardly feel the cold in his legs from where he was kneeling, as they snuck across the clearing and hid quietly for a moment in the bushes, just listening to the soft sweet music mingling with the pattering of the light night shower. The lights dimmed slightly as they fell silent. Callum wasn’t sure when exactly his hand had found Rayla’s, but he became far more aware of it when she gave his palm a gentle squeeze, and brushed her thumb over his knuckles. He caught her eye very briefly, a kind, peaceful smile on her lips as she glanced back up at the balcony the music was floating from.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” She asked gently, her words stirring the flowers around them again into soft hums of orange and pink.

Callum found a heat suddenly stinging at his cheeks. “Y-Yeah.” He let his eyes fall back to the temple too. “I’ve never heard instruments like these.”

“It sounds like a Xadian Harp. Lutvolins, and… maybe some Hornbows?”

“Okay I heard the word ‘harp’ and everything else was lost on me.” Rayla chuckled as Callum continued. “You know, I can play the piano. Poorly, but I can.”

“Hm. Yeah… I could see that.” He felt her elbow him playfully in the arm. “Y’know, I can actually play the Xadian Heart Lyre. Not poorly.”

“I never really took you for a musician” He smiled gently at her.

“I am an elf of many talents.” Rayla smiled proudly. “Though I kind of threw myself into my training entirely a few years ago so I haven’t played in… a while. I’m probably out of practice.”

“I’d love to hear some time… Maybe they have one in the music hall.”

“Maybe.” She hummed gently.

They sat in silence for a little bit, just enjoying the music as it played.

‘Alright…’ Callum thought, eyeing the pocket he had shoved the compass in. ‘I’m here… now what? What is it I want to do?’ He took a little peak at it watching, waiting. The arrow slowly rose to the surface.

…It pointed at Rayla.

And in that instant, Callum’s heart fluttered a little. A new thought lingered in his mind now, his head a little clearer than it had been ever since his struggles had started with his studies.

‘What is it I want to do?’

As one song ended and another started, Callum’s heart was inspired. It was a slow, peaceful song gentle as it was carried on the winds to their little hideaway.
Callum’s body moved on its own, as he shuffled back out of the bush and into the clearing.

“Hey, where are you going?”

He didn’t answer, simply offering his hands to her which she took, albeit it with some confusion, and he helped her out of their hiding place. Then, Callum found his feet slowly, tugging her gently up with him. The confusion lingered on her face.

“Callum?”

He kept a hold of one hand gently, as the other hovered a little over her side. “May I?”

“May you what?” She asked softly, her eyes glistening in the rain as they caught his gaze. Callum smiled warmly, his heart already flickering like a little flame warming him from the inside.

“May I have this dance?”

Her hand found his arm as she broke eye contact, following her hand as it gently trailed up to find his shoulder. Then she smiled shyly, glancing back up to meet his eye. “…You may.” She practically whispered above the pattering of the rain.

Callum’s smile widened as he delicately rested his hand on her side, and he tentatively pulled her a little closer to him. They stepped together, Callum leading this time. Around their feet as they brushed through the long grass, the little wild flowers hummed and glowed brighter. They moved slowly, swaying a little together in time to the lulled sounds of the music.

“This is about the only kind of dance I’m any good at.” Callum chuckled nervously. “When you’re slow dancing you don’t have to worry about all the steps you just kind of… sway to the music, you know?”

“I don’t know Callum, I think you were holding you own pretty well during the Sky Festival dance.”

“I stood on your feet. More times than I could count.” He pointed out.

“I stood on yours too a few times.” They both laughed quietly, but the sound was enough that it caused more flickers of gentle warm light around them, stunning them both by the beauty of the scene.

Callum’s breath caught as a little mist in the cool rain. Funny, he thought. He didn’t feel cold right now. In fact he’d never felt so comfortably warmed by the glow of the flowers and the warmth of the girl in his arm.

And despite all the beautiful colours around them, the neon greens and blues of the fungi sprouting from the tree trunks, the warm pastel hues of the flowers on the bushes and at the bases of the trees and springing from the grass…. It was her eyes shining brightest of all.

“It’s funny, can you imagine what the world would have to say if they saw this?” He chuckled finally breaking the quiet between them.

“Oh yeah, everyone would be having a real hissy fit.” She smiled back.

“I don’t think many people would be best pleased, but, uh...” As he spoke, his eyes watched their hands, and he slowly rearranged his so his palm was flat against Rayla’s. His fingers uncurled and he lay them flat against hers, watching as they naturally lay in the gaps of his own. She seemed so content to let Callum move her hands without any resistance at all.
“But I… I like this.” He intertwined their fingers slowly, tenderly, and brushed his thumb over hers. His eyes met hers again, and his heart fluttered a little against his chest.

She was looking at him in a way he hadn’t really seen before. So lovingly and dear. He felt her hand on his shoulder shift, and she pulled him in, towards her, her arm now resting against his shoulder blades. Her face was so close to his now, and he could now no longer hear the rain over the beating of his own heart. His eyes were incapable of leaving her face.

She was so beautiful… How had he never noticed that before?

“Callum?” Her voice was so soft now, it would have been barely audible if it wasn’t for the fact Callum was hanging on her every single word, ears tuned to her voice.

He forgot how to breathe. “Y-Yeah?”

She closed the gap between them, pulling him ever closer, her hand now resting against the back of his head. Almost instinctively, the hand that had been on her waist trailed up her back and rested timidly there between the fabric of her jacket and her leather armour. She leaned forward, and her forehead rested against his, cold and damp from the rain, and tentatively, he felt the tip of her nose meet his as well. Her breath was warm against his lips now.

Her lips. Oh, gods. They were so close to his, weren’t they? His eyes flickered down to them. What would they feel like, he wondered silently, against his own? Soft? Warm? So gently he wanted to press his to hers, and the thought alone nearly had his heart in his throat, choking any logic out of his brain.

Were they still dancing? He couldn’t tell, but he could definitely feel his legs swaying and shaking. Maybe he could blame it on the cold. But it wasn’t the cold, Callum realised. It was her, she was doing something to him, to his heart, and only now it became crystal clear to him.

Thunder crackled softly in the distance, breaking the silence between them.

“I really like this too.” She whispered.
’I really like you.’ The words came from his heart rather than his head as his eyes glanced up again to meet her closed eyelids. He could just barely make out the sensation of Rayla gently rubbing the back of his head affectionately. The following rang through his mind. ’Oh Great Spirits above. I… I really, really like you Rayla.’

His mind was too afraid to use the word ‘love’. But it was still a realisation that shook him to his core. Callum was suddenly overwhelmed with complete and utter affection for Rayla. Selfless, wholesome adoration. His heart soared, and in that moment, Callum’s troubles felt so far away. He almost felt as though he was floating.

“Rayla…” His voice was just above a whisper, so soft and tender. He watched her eyes flutter open, half lidded and dreamy for a moment. She looked as love struck in that second as the boy felt. And then, for a second Callum thought she was fluttering her eyelashes at him. But her expression changed to one of surprise.

She wasn’t batting her eyelids, she was blinking, startled, her eyebrows raised. “Callum are… are you taller?”

“…H-Huh?” His little trance was broken. She was right. While Rayla would usually have about an inch on him, his eyes were a smidge above her eyelevel now. And then the second realisation of the night hit him. There was no ground beneath his feet.

He was floating.

Only a couple of inches, but it was enough to surprise the pair. It was that confusion and surprise that was his downfall however. Quite literally.
Callum’s heart lurched as suddenly the air beneath him gave way, and his legs buckled as his feet suddenly crashed to the floor again. He started to fall backwards, losing his balance, but Rayla’s hand in his tensed, and as he slipped backwards, he felt himself suddenly yanked forwards again. The hand on the back of his head guided him into a sudden, stiff hug, his face half buried against her tender, scarred shoulder.

They stood like that, awkward and in shock for a while, until Callum felt the tension in his muscles relax a little and finally he was able to breathe again.

“Callum…?” Her voice was soft again, and he felt her own arms loosen. “What… what was that?”

Callum paused, his mind racing. He wasn’t entirely sure himself. But he had some theories. He pulled back just enough so that he could look her in the face. A soft little smile found his face, and he couldn’t quite contain the gentle excitement lacing his voice.

“Rayla I think… I-I think, for a moment there… I was windwalking.”

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Callum had insisted Rayla take the bed that night, and that he sleep on the floor.

“It’s only fair,” He argued. “After I kept you awake last night with my studying and dragged you out tonight too.”

Rayla only put up minimal resistance. It seemed she was too sleepy now to deal with any arguments, so with a soft grumble, she conceded.

The main issue now was how cold and damp they were. The rain had utterly soaked them both through, it would be a miracle, Callum thought, if neither of them caught colds.

Tiredly, they both hung up their jackets over the end of the bed. Callum dried his hair off as best he could on one of the blankets, and it seemed that Rayla, though tired, was happy to poke gentle fun at his fluffed up hair afterwards.

Neither of them had any spare clothes either, so Callum did what he could to rub down his soaking shirt and trousers on the blanket before discarding it in a little heap at the foot of his bed. Rayla sat, watching, wrapped in her own blanket shivering, teeth chattering a little.

Alright, perhaps dancing in the rain hadn’t been their smartest idea.

“You okay?”

“’M cold.” She muttered bitterly. Sympathy pulled at Callum’s heart now, as he wandered over slowly to sit next to her.

“Your hair is still dripping wet.” He pointed out.

“Mhm.” He watched her shoulders hunch more around her neck, the blanket pulled tight around her. She had wrung out most of the water before they had stepped back into the halls of the temple, but she hadn’t made any attempt past that to dry her hair, and it clearly wasn’t helping. His room was drafty too, even with the shutters half closed against the wind. (Callum had discovered them some nights ago, and he had them half closed at night to try and help with the cold, but peeked open just enough to charge his broach in the moonlight. They also acted as a good safety barrier to stop the
broach from falling out the window again.)

Perhaps she was too cold to move, trying to retain any body heat within her little blanket cocoon.

He did have a spare blanket, on the little bed nest on the floor, and as he glanced it over an idea formed in his groggy brain. “D’you want me to dry your hair for you?”

“What?”

“I-I mean-” Callum panicked suddenly. “Sorry, I know you’re more than capable of drying your own hair but-” He was cut off when Rayla slouched over, her head bumping against his shoulder.

“Please do.” Her mumbled. “I don’t want to move my arms from under the blanket.”

“Hah… alright.” Callum smiled, relieved, his tension dissipating. He scooped up a dry blanket, careful not to disturb the sleeping dragon prince, and very gently draped it over her head. Suddenly he felt a little timid as he ruffled at the back of her hair, but Rayla didn’t seem bothered at all.

“Just be careful of my horns.”

“O-Oh, right, yeah.” Callum felt a bit nervous now suddenly. “I uh, Rayla am I okay to touch them at all? I don’t want to be rude.”

“Huh? Oh yeah, I mean you can if you want, it’s fine, I meant just be careful you don’t catch yourself on them.” She laughed. “They’re not all that sharp, but I’d feel bad if you managed to cut yourself on them.”

Callum relaxed a little. “Oh, okay.”

“It’s not like an intimate thing or anything if you were wondering.” She mumbled sleepily. “I mean it’d be considered very weird to purposely touch the horns of someone you don’t know very well, but we’re friends so you’re fine.”

“Oh, well that’s a relief.” Callum laughed softly. “Hey, while we’re on the subject do you mind if I ask something?

“Hm?”

“Can you like… Do you have any feeling in them?”

“Is this the five questions game?” She muttered with a little tired smile.

“I mean it could be.”

“I think I’m a little too tired for games. But to answer your question it’s uh… hard to describe in words. Yes and no?” She raised a hand, sort of pawing at the air, searching for something. She found his arm, and trailed along it until her hand was on his. He paused his ruffling of her hair for a moment, and let her fingers trace along his. Then he felt her gently tap one of his fingernails. “It’s like that. It’s like the feeling of someone touching your nails.”

“Oh, I see.”

She yawned and he felt her head starting to loll a little bit. “You can’t feel much. Unless you whack them on something. Oh, that hurts, trust me. That hurts a lot. Or if you get sick.”

“When you get sick?”
“Yeah. Like when you get a bad cold. You can get hornache, and that’s the worst because there’s not much you can do, it just makes your whole head throb and… and…” She yawned again.

Callum smiled softly, pulling the blanket down the back of her head so it draped around her shoulders. Her hair was a little fluffed up in places now too, and he absentmindedly smoothed her hair back down a little for her.

“Well, let’s hope we don’t catch colds from our little stunt in the rain, hm?”

She smiled sleepily back. “Mm… Yeah.”

“You tired?”

“Mhm…”

A mischievous little smile found Callum’s lips. “Sleepy Elf.”


“Okay… we’ve dried off as best we can. We should try and get some sleep now.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Rayla wrapped the blanket more around her and flopped very suddenly backwards and away from him, sighing when her head hit the pillow. Callum smiled. And then he felt something, her foot against the side of his leg. She gave him a gentle shove. “Go on. Shoo.”

He laughed quietly, letting himself slide off the edge, and curled up on her bed set on the floor. It was comfy, not quite as soft as the bed he had given up, but it was warm and cozy. He found himself able to get rather comfortable after curling around the stubborn little dragon, despite the cool, still damp fabric clinging to his skin.

“You okay down there?” Rayla’s voice mumbled. He could just make out her violet eyes in the dark peering down at him. He smiled back.

“Yeah. Still a little damp though. You okay?”

“I’m fine. My blanket is all sodden wet though. Might have to get some more covers tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Maybe we should look into that…” Callum yawned now, and as he did he heard another little stifled yawn from above him. “Anyway… goodnight Rayla. Sleep well.”

She huffed, but it sounded fond this time. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and wistful. “G’night… Soft Prince.”

Callum’s heart fluttered in his chest again and his lips twitched into an affectionate smile. He thought it would be left at that.

But then, he heard something next to him, and as he turned his head, there was Ray’s hand, draped out of the bed, just like Callum had done a few nights prior.

It was almost like a silent request.

He indulged her, letting his hand slip into hers, and when he did, she gave it a little gentle squeeze and brushed her thumb over the backs of his fingers. She fell asleep rather quickly after that. Callum’s mind however, was still racing, going over and over their dance in the garden. His heart
kept fluttering wildly, remembering her smile, her eyes, the feeling of her nose and forehead tenderly against his own...

He’d…. He’d wanted to *kiss* her. In that moment, when their faces had been so close, part of him had so desperately wanted to put his lips to hers. Callum could feel the heat radiating off his face as he curled up into a little ball, embarrassed, covering his eyes with his arm.

Oh no… there was no way he could deny it anymore. He was completely enamoured with her, wasn’t he?

It took him a while to calm down. But even still, sleep refused to find him. He stared up at the ceiling, his mind a whirl. Oh ancestors, what had he gotten himself into? This was ridiculous, utterly ridiculous. In the space of under a month, he had grown feelings for this girl, an *elf*, who he had been raised his whole life to be afraid of.

…So much had changed though since then, hadn’t it? So quickly too. *Everything* in his world was changing. It was scary. But it was also a kind of perfect and beautiful fear. Was that possible, he thought? To be so scared, and so excited at the same time about the possibilities, about the *future*?

As Callum finally started to relax, he turned his head towards her hand again.

Perhaps it was subconscious. Perhaps it was because he was so tired he couldn’t think clearly, or he was simply too tired to be afraid. But just before Callum let himself drift away, he gently pulled Rayla’s hand a little closer. Just close enough. And then, he brushed his lips ever so softly against her knuckles, planting a gentle little kiss there.

It was a tender gesture. One that from Callum’s heart said ‘*I’m devoted to you. Truly.*’

…She had not only his hand in hers now, but his heart too.

And with that last thought, Callum finally drifted off to sleep.

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**Chapter End Notes**

IT’S HERE. The chapter i’ve been excited to share with you guys for AGES!
So Callum's finally accepted he has feelings for Rayla... Let the mutual pining commence.
Also fun fact, this is so far the LONGEST CHAPTER in TMC. It's over 10,000 words!
That’s a lot more than the average 7000-8000 words! I think it’s what Callum deserves since it's his birthday today, right? (Happy birthday Callum, your gift from me is the gift of realisation.)

Anyway thank you so much for all your support so far. And a MASSIVE HUGE THANK YOU TO DANI (piecesofarose on twitter) for the art in this chapter. Please please please go show her some love she deserves it so much. <3 <3 <3
When she first woke up that morning, Rayla had nearly forgotten about what had happened the night before. It almost felt like it had been a dream. A very nice dream. One that brought a sleepy smile to her lips as her brain caught up with her.

And then she remembered. It hadn’t been a dream. All of that had actually happened, she was pretty sure of it. She was in his bed, and as she searched through her groggy memories she did remember Callum offering it to her after they had come back soaked from the downpour, the downpour they had been dancing in.

She was still a little damp even, and the smell of rain lingered on her skin and the sheets of his bed. So it must have been real.

And if it had been real then…

Oh.

Oh gods.

She had kissed him yesterday. She had kissed him, and he had no idea.

Rayla’s face went red. The act of pressing ones forehead and nose to another’s was considered a very tender, and very intimate gesture in elf culture, and was considered to be the same level of affection as a kiss, so much so many people simply called it a kiss. It could be platonic, with just a little bump, often a greeting between close friends or family.

But she had held it. For an extended period of time. That had some very deep and sincere romantic implications. Rayla covered her burning face with her free hand. Why had she done that?! Well, she knew why, but that was a little too bold wasn’t it?

In the moment though it had… it had felt so right. And then he had said her name so tenderly, and… and she had broken the mood by pointing out that he was floating. She wondered silently, what might have happened if she hadn’t. Would he have said something? What was going on in his own mind in that moment…?

Rayla’s fingers twitched, perhaps nervously, and that was when she realised where they were. She peered at the boy over the edge of the bed.

Callum’s fingers were tangled loosely in her own. And her hand was sandwiched gently between both of his, cupped on each side. He held her there, so close to his face, his cheek squished a little against his knuckles. He was still fast asleep, she could even feel his breaths gentle against the back of her wrist.

He was practically cuddling her hand.

She twitched her fingers again to see if he’d respond. Unconsciously, she felt his own fingers twitch a little before relaxing and she smiled. Ever so gently, she straightened out her fingers, slipping them carefully from his own and out past his palms. His hands curled a little, but he didn’t wake up, simply sighing in his sleep against his pillow. The backs of her fingers found the hair at his cheek,
and she smoothed it down gently, before repeating the motion against his skin, curious to see if he’d wake up.

He did seem to stir, but only to smile sleepily, lean against her touch and immediately fall asleep again. She lay there quietly, gently stroking the side of his cheek peacefully for a while. Then he shuffled and she paused, almost pulling away, but his hand found hers again and he pressed her palm back against his cheek.

She watched with a fond little smile for a moment as Callum held her hand gently and he turned his face a little. For a second, she was sure her heart has stopped beating. Because in his half asleep state, Callum pressed his lips to the palm of her hand with a dumb goofy little smile, lingering there for a few seconds, before he started to doze off again.

She stared at him, eyes wide, unable to quite comprehend what had just happened, the heat burning at her cheeks and ears.

Then Callum’s own eyes shot open, very wide awake, and very aware of what he had just done.

For a human, Callum made a very inhuman noise in that moment.

“Ackagaugh!”

He shot backwards as though he had just been burned by a flame, squawking in alarm, and as he scrambled away Rayla watched as he whacked his head hard against the edge of the bedside table. She winced as he crumpled with a yelp, muttering and clutching his head.

Oh dear. That couldn’t have been a very nice way to wake up.

“Callum, are you okay?” There was concern in her voice, any shock from his action discarded momentarily and replaced by worry.

Through gritted teeth he hissed, still rubbing the offended area. “Mm… Y-Yeah… Ow…”

Zym had woken to the bang of Callum’s head against the wood, and the poor dragon whined, clambering over his knees and pawing at the boy’s chest, licking his chin in an attempt to help. She watched at Callum’s grimace twitch in amusement at the little worried dragon and he wrapped an arm around him in a little comforting hug.

“It’s alright, I’m fine Zym. I’m fine.”

Rayla tried to smother a chuckle against her arm. Unfortunately Callum heard, and she caught the hurt in Callum’s eyes as he glanced back at her. Rayla’s smile was gone in a second.

“Oh. Oh no Callum, I’m sorry, I’m not laughing at you because you hurt yourself, I promise.”

Callum shrunk away from her shamefully. It was quiet for a moment, neither quite knowing what to say. “I’m… sorry.” His voice was small now. “I… I didn’t mean to… y-y’know? I was still asleep a-and I wasn’t thinking and… I…”

“Callum, it’s okay. I mean I… uh…” Rayla glanced down sheepish, feeling her own cheeks starting to glow. “I probably shouldn’t have woken you up like that… I’m sorry too.”

Callum suddenly became defensive, whirling around to face her more. “No, you don’t need to apologise! It… it was nice.” He rubbed at his cheek, still rather red in the face and he curled in on himself, unable to look at her.
A very awkward atmosphere hung tense around them, and the little dragon in Callum’s arm looked between the pair clearly confused.

“Are you sure your head’s okay?” She asked, her voice soft.

“Oh no, my head’s a terrible mess at the moment.” There was a pause. “O-oh you- you mean where I hit it-”

Rayla chuckled, beckoning him over. He hesitated, but shuffled ever so slowly, his eyes still fixed on the ground. Once he was within arm’s length, she reached out and, with a moment of hesitation, let her hand rest against the back of his head, rubbing it gently. Callum twitched in pain, but then relaxed a little, letting himself lean a little against her hand, eyes half lidded.

Still, he couldn’t look her in the eye.

“Dummy… You don’t need to be so jumpy around me.” She mumbled gently. Callum offered her a rather pitiful look. “Think of it like… we’re even now.”

“What do you mean?”

“For when I fell asleep on you the other night. I was a mess that morning, I was so embarrassed. Well, now we’re even. So you don’t have to worry about it.” She watched his face relax a little, and when he glanced back at her and caught her eye, her lips twitched into a kind smile. “See? You’re fine, we’re fine, everything’s fine.”

“You’re sure…?”

“Mhm.” Rayla closed her eyes, finding herself surprisingly getting lulled back into the comfort of the mattress beneath her and the feeling of Callum’s soft hair against her hand and between her fingers. She heard and felt Callum shuffle a little closer, so he was resting against the side of the bed, and he sighed a little.

That as when she felt a scaly snout wriggle into her palm and she opened her eyes again, surprised.

“Wh- Zym…” Callum pouted a little, but the dragon prince grinned, a toothy little dragon grin, as he pressed his head against Rayla’s hand.

Clearly the little one had become envious of the attention Callum was getting. Rayla laughed, and scooped Zym up and off Callum and into a little cuddle. “Aw, you wee lil’ jealous thing you. C’mere.” Zym squeaked happily as he was engulfed in Rayla’s arms and settled there.

If Rayla had been looking, she might have caught the fondest of smiles on Callum’s face as he watched them over his shoulder. After a moment, Rayla sighed against the dragon’s mane.

“We should get up soon.”

“Yeah… I guess so.”

Neither of them made any effort to move.

“Wow. Clearly we’re very motivated to work today.” Rayla mumbled. Callum chuckled under his breath. “Alright, I guess I have to be the responsible one here, don’t I?” She sat up slowly, and slipped the little dragon over Callum’s shoulder into his arms. She pulled on her boots and as she stood, she absentmindedly ruffled Callum’s hair again as she walked past him.
Callum went a little stiff, his eyes focused on the floor, lost I thought. He looked like he was trying to
make sense of something, but whatever it was, was eluding him entirely.

“Hey.” He looked up at her voice. “I’ll get us some breakfast alright?”

“O-oh… yeah. Yes. Thank you.” He offered her a nervous smile.

Rayla lingered, her hand on the door handle. “Hey uh… Callum?” He regarded her with a little head
tilt. “I don’t think I said last night but um…” Her thumb brushed timidly over the brass under her
fingers. “I had fun last night. I like dancing with you.”

Callum’s cheeks went a shade pinker. His voice cracked a little when he responded. “I-I really like
dancing with you too. You’re-” Whatever Callum was about to say got caught in his throat and he
stopped himself very suddenly, looking abashed.

“I’m?” She queried.

Callum mumbled softly into his elbow. Perhaps he thought if he did, she wouldn’t be able to make it
out.

But she did.

“Wonderful.”

Rayla’s face softened and she glanced back to her hand, the one Callum had kissed that morning. As
she opened the door, she smiled back at her princes. “I think you’re wonderful too.”

What Rayla didn’t see after she rounded the corner and set off down the hall was Callum sitting there
stunned for a moment, before grabbing a pillow and screaming into it in a flurry of overwhelmed
emotions, or Zym giving the human prince a concerned look.

And what Callum didn’t see was the giddy little smile on Rayla’s face as she pressed her own lips
gently to her hand where Callum’s had kissed her prior.

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Breakfast was a little more subdued that morning, both the elf and her boy left stirring in their own
thoughts. Still, Callum was put a little more at ease when Rayla decided to sit next to him to eat,
making light conversation. It seemed she really didn’t hold any ill will about him kissing her hand,
thankfully.

In fact, Rayla seemed to be in high spirits that morning. It was nice to see her so relaxed. It was what
she deserved, Callum thought. He snuck her a few little soft smiles whenever he thought she wasn’t
looking.

Perhaps she did catch him a couple times. He noted the hint of a knowing smile on her lips. “What
are you grinning at Callum?”

“H-Huh? Oh nothing.”

“Hm. Must be a nice nothing.”
Callum chuckled nervously. “Yeah…. Yeah I guess…”

She paused, her eyes on his face for a moment before she shuffled a little forward. “Hey, come here a second.”

“Huh? What?”

Rayla scooted closer, her fingers finding their way into his hair, and for a second Callum instinctively moved away, getting a little annoyed tut from Rayla, before he realised what was happening. He could feel her weaving his hair carefully.

“Rayla, what are you doing?” Callum asked amused.

“Shh. Hold still.” She laughed. “It’s for good luck.” Callum relaxed, letting her work, as she tied the small tight braid into his hair, just behind his ear. “There.” She hummed satisfied, sitting back on her heels to admire her handiwork. Callum offered her a little shy smile.

“For good luck, you said?”

“Yeah. It’s a Moonshadow elf thing. It’s kind of like uh… a good luck charm? It means you’re going to be okay, and you’ll succeed in your mission.”

Callum’s thoughts trailed back to when he had first met Rayla. She had had a braid back then, hadn’t she? Was that perhaps what that had been for?

“Oh… thanks Ray.” His fingers brushed gently against it. How sweet. “I’ll make you proud.”

Rayla chuckled. “You make me proud every day, Callum.” Callum felt his heart swell a little. “And I know you can do this. Last night we found out that you can windwalk. So it’s just a matter of you figuring out how to do it again.”

“Probably easier said than done but… it is a confidence booster.” He smiled.

Rayla nodded, then stood, offering her hands to help him to his feet. “Well, you’re not going to figure it out sitting around here.” He let her lift him up and watched as a happy little Zym jumped up onto her shoulder as she did. Her hands lingered in his a little before they fell to her sides again.

…He sort of missed them immediately.

“You’re going do great things today. I know it.” She smiled fondly.

He would, he decided to himself. For her.

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It had become a pretty typical daily routine for Rayla at this point. Every morning she would wander down the corridors to the main hall, ask the monks lingering who needed help today, and then… go do that. It was usually the library or the gardeners.

Today was different though.

Today as she approached, the monks suddenly grew quiet. Nervous even. And it put her more on
edge with each step as she approached. Zym rumbled curiously in her ear.

“Hey! Alright! So, where am I needed today?” She tried to sound cheerful, but was met with worried side-eyes and the sound of nervous shuffling feet. “Hey, what’s with those faces…?”

“I requested you help me today.” Came a dark voice from behind. Rayla stiffened, and slowly turned. She knew who it was before she saw him.

Karajh.

Up close, he was a little taller than she had expected. In the council room he had been the shortest of the high mages, but still he hovered a few inches taller than her. Several scars ravished his bare arms and a long jagged one marked his face from the centre of his forehead, just at the start of his jet black hairline, down to just below his left cheek. His hair was cut short on the sides, but was a little longer on top, tied back in a short ponytail. He regarded Rayla coldly with piercing dark blue eyes.

“Oh. You. Joy.” Rayla groaned, half turning to the rest of the anxious monks. “Anyone else want my help today? With literally anything? Anything at all?” She was met with silence. “Of course. Alright fine, what are we doing?”

Karajh grunted, but didn’t give a straight answer. “Follow me.” Without waiting, he turned on his heel and started down the hallway. Rayla watched for a few seconds before sighing, resigned, and trotted after him.

She was a lot tenser now, her hand fidgeting at her side, ready in an instant. He wouldn’t attack her, she told herself. But you could never be too careful. Zym seemed on edge too, stiff on her shoulder with his mane puffed up a little more than usual.

She planted a quick and gentle reassuring kiss against Zym’s cheek. ‘Don’t worry lil’ one. I won’t let anything happen to you.’

And yet. There was a look on Zym’s face. A look of grim resolve. The dragonling didn’t look afraid, he looked defensive.

He wanted to protect Rayla.

Karajh led Rayla outside, past the gardens, across the plaza, until he slowed a little. Rayla craned her neck back a little, squinting in the sunlight. The main temple spire. Was… was that their destination? It was even more breath-taking up close, sprawling up into the morning sky. And Rayla noted, now that she could see it more clearly, a little wooden windmill attached to its side. Curious, she thought.

Karajh turned to look at her grimly. “I need to do some maintenance work. You will sit still and be quiet. Don’t touch anything.”

Rayla raised an eyebrow. “So you requested my help to… do nothing.”

“I requested your presence so I can keep an eye on you.” He growled. “Let me make myself perfectly clear. I don’t trust you. I don’t like the fact you’re running around freely, it makes me very uncomfortable.”

‘Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Right.’ Rayla thought with a little eye roll. She sighed, hand on her hip. “Fine. Whatever. Let’s go.”

Karajh’s eyes lingered on Rayla for a moment before leading the way inside.
It was a little surprising.

Unlike its exterior, smooth and white, the interior was cobblestone mason work, almost as though it had been built and the exterior had been formed around it much later by a different architect. In fact, it wasn’t unlike that of a clock tower. Cogs and wheels turned in rhythm. But even Rayla could feel the immense levels of magic radiating from inside, pulsing like a heartbeat, almost like it was alive. Up above, Rayla noted the crystal, glittering and splendid, as the light hit it through the open window frames casting cascades of little rainbows down against the back walls of the spire opposite the walls of cogs.

Wooden beams and rafters contrasted against the stony interior holding up platforms rather haphazardly. And something sat in the centre. Something rather strange, advanced, and huge. So huge in fact, it stretched high up, and a railing was placed around it as it reached down into a basement level as well. It was a contraption made of metal and stone, with pipes sticking out at jaunty angles up into the spire, and down below into the island itself. It was a bit like a giant furnace, but without a roaring fire within. Still, it hummed quietly, and Rayla regarded it with awe and fascination.

“So… how does this place even work?” Rayla asked curiously.

Karajh pointed skyward at the rafters and the little platform above. “Magic crystal. Makes the island float.” He was short and to the point. But when Rayla continued to blink at him with curious eyes he sighed and grumbled. “The windmill outside turns the cogs which powers the big machine. The machine draws power from the wind energy created by the mill, and amplifies the power of the crystal so that the entire island continues to float. Without this, everything outside of a 20ft radius of this tower would collapse.”

“Huh… Cool. I-I mean not the island crumbling part, the… never mind.”

“Oh yeah, you seem like a real chipper sort.” Karajh shot Rayla a cold look and she raised her hands defensively. “Look. All I’m saying is that you seem to have decided you hate me without even getting to know me. I’m not that bad, you know.”

“You’re a Moonshadow elf.”

“Yeah? So? I don’t get why that’s such a big deal. I know we kind of tend to keep to ourselves a lot but… We’re not as dark and scary as people think.”

“Moonshadow elves are full of lies and deceit, and only look out for themselves. You’ll abandon whatever you need to regardless of any morals if it suits your work.”

Karajh’s words and tone bristled Rayla and she narrowed her eyes at him. “No, we-”

“Child, tell me.” Karajh silenced her, turning to meet her eye. “Do you have a family? Do they truly love you? Think carefully. How quickly would they leave you to take care of something in the name of their so called duties? How quickly would they turn on you if they were told to?”
Now he was really rubbing Rayla the wrong way. Her knuckles whitened as she clenched her trembling fists. That had struck a nerve. A very painful nerve. Clearly her silence was all the answer he needed, as he glared at her and turned to continue his work on one of the cogs.

His words hurt. Still, she found her voice, quiet but calm. “We do what we have to do, regardless of sacrifice.”

“Then what would you be willing to sacrifice to achieve your goals? What of the boy?”


“Tch. So you’d bend your oaths on a whim if it suits you. You’re all so contradictory. Your people are a disgrace.”

Rayla tensed, her teeth gritted together, ears pinned back. “My people have honour! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“If they had honour, he wouldn’t have abandoned me at Kaldor’s Peak!” Karajh yelled.

Rayla would have asked who. But she didn’t get the chance. Because as he shouted, in his fury, Karajh smashed his fist against one of the giant turning cogs and it wobbled. She watched his eyes widen in panic a he realised what he had done.

The cog continued to quiver. Then grind. Then there was a horrible grating noise as it jammed. Everything went still for a moment. And then the giant cog screeched and flung from its place, and all the cogs around it began to buckle.

Karajh cried out in alarm.

Instinctively, Rayla darted forward, watching as Karajh grabbed a hold of the cogs to try and keep them in place.

There was a horrible rumbling noise. Bits of dust and debris shook loose from the ceiling.

And as Rayla was running forward, she found herself beginning to feel lighter.

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On the other side of the island, Callum was having his own issues.

When he had first met with Jorani that morning, the elder had suggested something new. “How would you like to learn some new today spells Callum, hm?”

The offer was tempting. Very… very tempting. But now Callum had his heart set on his goal.

“Actually, if it okay… I’d like to try windwalking again first?” Jorani offered the boy a concerned look. “Look, I know I didn’t have much luck before but I know I can do it now. I hovered a couple inches off the ground yesterday!”

Jorani’s eyes lit up with surprise. “You did?”

“I did!” Callum chimed proudly. “So I just need to… y’know. Do it again!”
Jorani blinked, a little startled and slowly nodded. “Very well then, if you feel your heart is in it, please go ahead.”

Callum paused carefully, thinking first about how to approach it. He just had to have a clear mind… right?

Right. He could do this.

He took a step, to no avail.

Hm.

His mind trailed back to the dance. He had definitely done it before. Maybe he had to... mirror the movements? Or was it the feelings he needed to mimic? A little heat stung at his cheeks. No, he wasn’t quite ready to let his heart dive into that again.

Don’t think about how close she was, or her smile, or how soft her voice was or-

‘Am I distracted?’ Callum frowned to himself, his cheeks stinging more now as he nearly tripped over his own feet. ‘Maybe I’m a little distracted…’

It took him a while to clear his mind again. To his credit, Callum was getting closer. There were a few instances where he felt himself step and rise up for a few seconds, before falling back to the ground. But still, he couldn’t take more than one step before collapsing back to the paving slabs below.

It was… progress, right? Jorani seemed to think so, smiling proudly at Callum and giving gentle words of support from the side-lines.

And then the ground began to rumble. Very quietly. Very subtly. But little loose pebbles and chips of pavement gently rattled against the ground and it caught the older mage’s attention.

Callum, was far too preoccupied to take notice.

As Callum felt himself grow lighter, he gasped a little, excited. His feet left the ground and he beamed. “Jorani! Jorani look I’m doing it!”

But something felt wrong. Very wrong. The mage was silent. “Jorani?” Callum looked up. That was when he realised, the banners and leaves of the trees around them were, for some reason, not obeying the laws of gravity, but flittering upwards.

He wasn’t floating.

“H-Hey is… is the island sinking?” Callum glanced across at Jorani.

The look in the horrified mage’s eyes was all the answer he needed. And it wasn’t the answer he had hoped for.

The mage flew forward and Callum found himself winded as Jorani’s arm wrapped around his waist. He could hardly collect his thoughts as he felt the older mage gently press Callum against one of the marble pillars on the outer edge of the plateau.

“Hold on tight.” Jorani’s voice was firm. “I’ll come back for you as soon as I can.”

Without another word Jorani was off, leaving Callum clinging in panic to the pillar.
“Oh. Yeah. Okay.” He watched Jorani disappear around the edge of the island. “This is fine, this is *totally fine.*”

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It took some serious parkour skills for Rayla to make it all the way to the wall Karajh was at whilst the ground was coming away from her feet, as he desperately held the cogs in place to stop them falling apart.

This was a mess. A terrible mess. And with the horrible sounds coming from the machine, the pressure hissing through gapes in the pipes… At this rate, the whole tower was going to come apart.


“I’ll hold these.” Her voice was firm. “You go keep that big machine from exploding.”

“Don’t give me orders, *child*—“ Karajh spat, but Rayla cut him off angrily.

“Fine! Don’t! I guess we’ll both die then, since I don’t know how that *thing* works!” She hissed. Karajh looked taken aback. Then he frowned, muttered something angrily and as Rayla’s hands found the brass coated machinery, he let go and flew over to the machine, aggressively turning dials and cursing.

The cogs were heavier than she had anticipated and she almost buckled, but she stood her ground hissing as her arms trembled under the weight. They needed a miracle to survive this. From Rayla’s shoulder Zym whined in panic, his eyes darting around, before she felt the weight of the dragon leave her and he fluttered away.

“Wh- Zym! No! Come back!” But she daren’t move, her arms were already locked in place to hold up the gears. She was shaking with exertion.

Oh gods.

She was going to die here wasn’t she?

No. Not like this she wasn’t.

She took a deep shaky breath and exhaled. Okay. The missing cog. Where was the cog?

“Karajh!” She shouted over the noise and mayhem. “Karajh the cog!”

“I can’t move from here!” He shouted back. She could hear his straining. “If I let go of this valve this whole island goes!”

Zym cried out over the uproar and a protective instinct in her jerked her head to check where he was. He was with the missing cog, but it was stuck, wedged between two pipes and he couldn’t dislodge it. He was squeaking and whining for help, but no one could.

That was when Jorani appeared, his figure silhouetted in one of the windows casting a huge shadow over the mess the group were in.

“What-” His voice was horrified. “What happened here?”
“The cog!” Rayla yelled, almost in agony. “Help Zym!”

Jorani’s eye caught on the dragon and in an instant Rayla felt the rush of wind past her as head as Jorani whizzed past in a blur. There was a clattering from behind her, and then she felt a reassuring hand on her back, Jorani at her side with the cog under his arm and Zym wrapped around his shoulders.

With a final push of strength, Rayla lifted the cogs up, just enough for Jorani to replace the missing piece, and as it fell back into place, Rayla crumpled. If it wasn’t for the fact the island was falling, she would have slumped down, but instead she found herself drifting upwards a few inches before Jorani, holding onto the cobblestone wall grabbed her arm and anchored her.

The cogs however, didn’t turn.

Jorani’s face looked grim, and he pulled Rayla closer. “Hold on.” The elf sprung from the wall to Karajh’s side, clinging to the railing. “Karajh?” The gruffer Skywing was growling under his breath, knuckles white as he desperately held one of the valves in place. “Karajh what can we do to help?”

The words had scarcely left his lips before there was a horrible screech and crash from their left. One of the pipes had come apart from the machine, hissing. Karajh jerked his head with a noise of pain.

Rayla pounced for it, over the railing, scrambling for purchase against the slick metal coating of the contraption and grabbed a hold of the pipe before it could pull away any further from its place. She pulled, desperate to try and reposition it, but it put up resistance.

There was a rumble overhead and a nasty crashing and grinding sound as something else gave way. She heard Jorani and Karajh talking in panicked tones before Jorani rushed up to what seemed to be another broken pipe, desperately shoving and holding it in its position. Rayla just barely managed to get her own pipe back into its place, but had to hold it with all her might to stop it from slipping under the pressure.

“The crystal must have come loose.” Karajh shouted. “It doesn’t matter how much we hold this place together, if the crystal isn’t in position… It’s the end of Libertas.”

“Well then someone has to fly up there and put it back! Preferably someone with wings!”

“I’m a little preoccupied.” Karajh snapped. “Jorani?”

A little worried noise from the older mage rung back down, followed by a shrill, “Everything’s coming undone up here, I can’t move!”

There was only one other being in the building who could fly.

And it seemed he had realised it too.

Zym sprung off Rayla’s shoulder, and with a steely determination, ascended, climbing up and up the tower until Rayla could no longer see him.

The little dragon rested on the platform, circled the crystal and began to head-butted it slowly back into position. It was slow progress, the crystal being about the size of the little wyrmling and twice as heavy, but eventually as Zym scrabbled against the wooden platform and gave it one last mighty push, it wobbled, glowing gently again as it stabilised.

The noise, the chaos began to subside, the pressure in the pipes ebbing away, and the cogs clunked, slowly, before whirling around again. The descent of the island began to slow, and Rayla felt the
relief of gravity anchoring her back down once more. She smiled relieved as Zym glided back down cheerfully landing in her arms.

“You little hero.” She whispered, and he squeaked happily, nuzzling against her cheek and clambering up back onto her shoulder.

But gravity had another unfortunate implication. The rubble shaken loose in the carnage was now falling, and Jorani called out in alarm as it fell all around them. Rayla barely twitched her head out of the way as a large cobblestone whizzed past her, cutting her cheek on its way down, and others grazed past her arms as she tensed, bracing herself. Zym whimpered, stretching his wings protectively over her head.

Everything went quiet again, but for the hum of the machine and the clicking of the cogs as they continued to turn, as if nothing had even happened.

“I-Is… is that it? Are we all good now?” Rayla hoped irony wouldn’t bite her for saying that.

It very nearly did.

Rayla’s ears twitched at a sound overhead, and watched as part of the roof that had caved in began to come loose. Part of the timber and a few stone slabs teetered from where they were held, and gave way.

Her body moved on instinct, another rush of adrenaline flowing through her, as she dived for Karajh barrelling him out of the way. The man’s yell of confusion was only drowned out by the crunch of the large wooden beam cracking the floor where he had previously stood, and the following alarmed cry of Jorani as he hopped back. Karajh lay stunned for only a second before shoving Rayla angrily off of him.

“Get off of me!”

Rayla staggered back to her feet with a little frown. “Wow, you’re welcome.”

Karajh glared at her for a moment before he glanced away, brushing his hands on his knees before standing himself. He mumbled something tetchily.

“… Thank you.”

Rayla smirked. “Oh I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you, what was that?”

Karajh growled, but a stern look from Jorani put him in his place. “Thank you.” He repeated clearer, though the words were still dripping with spite.

Rayla grinned smugly. “You’re very welcome.”

She turned when Jorani sighed, watching as the grand mage’s hand glanced across one of the walls. “The damage is extensive. It’ll hold for now, but we should dock the island as soon as we can and send a hawk to the mechanic’s guild.”

“Wait.” Jorani turned at her voice, as a terrifying realisation dawned on Rayla. “Weren’t you supposed to be with Callum today? Where is he?”
Callum was, in fact, right where Jorani has left him. When the island had stabilised, he has sunk from the pillar to its base, and when he had felt a little more secure, peeled himself away from it anxiously and sat there, waiting.

The boy was a wreck of nerves. He had been there huddled in on himself, wings wrapped around him for far too long. The island had seemingly settled, but the worst case scenarios kept haunting his thoughts. Had anyone been injured? What was taking Jorani so long? And was Rayla okay?

He hadn’t realised he had been holding his breath until he released it in a huge relief when he spotted a trio of elves and a little dragon from afar, albeit sluggish and exhausted in their movement. He shot to his feet, and the movement alerted the girl, who’s straightened up, and practically sprinted over, with a newfound energy. The dragon at her feet bounded over close behind.

“Ray-! Hurf-!” Callum’s greeting was cut short as his friend practically body slammed him into a tight hug.

“You’re okay! Oh, thank the stars… you’re okay.”

Callum relaxed in her arms with a little sigh, resting his chin on her shoulder. His arms and wings both wrapped around Rayla. She cuddled him a little tighter in response, her hand gently rubbing his back. “Yeah… I’m okay. Are you okay?”

She pulled back a little, just enough to smile at him. It looked like she had a few scuffs and scrapes, but other than that she seemed well. “I’m alright. We just had a little uh… incident in the tower. It’s fine though.”

Callum regarded her with concern. The tower? Did she mean the main spire with the crystal on top? “Is that what caused the island to start sinking?”

Rayla glanced away almost ashamed. “Uh… yeah… something like that.”

Callum tentatively raised a hand, the backs of his fingers hovering a little over the cut at Rayla’s cheek. He let them rest there gently, and Rayla flinched with a soft hiss. “Ow.”

“O-Oh- I’m sorry I just-” But as he went to pull his hand away she stopped him, her own hand curling into his and holding it there. He felt her press her cheek a little against his touch. “No no, you’re fine, it’s fine.” She chuckled softly. She met his eye again and gave his hand a little squeeze. “We’re fine.”

Callum sighed quietly and smiled. “Yeah… we’re fine.” They were allowed a brief, gentle moment to hold each other, and Callum felt little claws on his back as Zym climbed up him to rub a little dragony nose against his cheek.

Then Callum saw the other two figures walking over. He recognised Jorani, but stiffened a little when he saw the other, his feathers fluffing up and his wings and arm closing a little more protectively around his dear friend. Rayla must have seen the glowering look he was throwing over her shoulder as Karajh approached, because she turned her head a little to follow his gaze before meeting his eye again.

“Did he do this to you?” Callum’s voice went lower, a little scowl lining his features.
“What? No, Callum he didn’t. Just some stuff fell on me is all.” Callum’s face softened a little as he searched her eyes. She gave his hand a little reassuring squeeze. “Relax, you softie.”

“Callum!” Jorani called out, the older mage walking at a brisker pace towards the pair. “Callum my boy, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Master Jorani.”

Jorani smiled, relieved, wiping a few beads of sweat from his brow. “Oh thank goodness. I’m so sorry I left you like I did, but I needed to check on the tower, and well…”

“It’s fine.” Callum smiled. He was a little aware that his arm and wings were still around Rayla, and he shuffled nervously. Rayla, sensing the tension, pulled away a little so that she was standing next to him instead, her arm still draped around his shoulders. In return, Callum kept his arm tentatively around her, his hand resting on her back.

Karajh kept his distance, eyeing the pair, but made no comment.

Jorani sighed, his eyes darting around and back towards the temple. “You two should head back towards the main plaza. Who knows what kind of damage the fall has done to the island itself… Myself and Karajh will round up the monks and let them know what’s happening. We don’t want a panic on our hands…”

Karajh nodded, arms crossed. “I’ll take the west and the gardens.”

“Very well. I’ll take the east and the temple interior.” Karajh nodded and with a spread of his wings, was off. Jorani however, lingered. “I need to make sure the buildings are still structurally sound. Please… be careful.” And with that, Jorani’s wings spread and he too, glided off and away.

Rayla, Callum and Zym stood watching them go and for a moment, everything fell quiet. Then Callum heard Rayla sigh a little under her breath. “Come on. We should get moving.” Her arm fell slowly from his shoulders but she gave him a gentle tug forwards before it fell completely to her side.

“Are you… you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah.” She offered him a half-hearted smile. “I’m just thinking about who annoys me more at the moment, Karajh or Soren.”

Callum chuckled softly. “Oh no.”

“See on the one hand, Soren tried to kill me. On the other hand, Karajh struck some painful nerves and brought up-” She paused anxiously. Callum’s hand found her back again gently. She sighed. “… Some insecurities I have, I guess.”

“What even happened in the tower?” He pressed softly.

Rayla huffed and shook her head. “We had a bit of a heated argument. It ended up in Karajh knocking something loose and everything went haywire. We managed to fix it though, with a little help from Zym.”

Zym chirped proudly, puffing out his chest. Callum chuckled softly, scratching the little dragon on his cheek. But still the thoughts swirled in his head. “What did Karajh say that got you all worked up?” He felt her stiffen. “I… It’s okay if you don’t…”

She slowed a little, and he gently rubbed her back reassuringly. “Look I… I may or may not have a
couple of… abandonment issues.” The words were muttered rigidly, as though she had a hard time getting them out. “But I don’t really want to talk about it. Let’s just say some of Karajh’s comments hit a little too close to home.”

The idea hurt Callum’s heart a little. How many times had she felt like she’d been deserted…? He watched Zym rest his chin comfortably against her shoulder.

“Hey uh… Ray?”

She looked a little apprehensive. “What?”

Suddenly Callum felt a little sheepish and he glanced away. “I um… you know I-I won’t…”

He felt her relax a little. “It’s okay.” When he looked back she was smiling a little. “…I know. You’re far too soft for that.” Callum felt a little warmth stir in his heart and he smiled.

They walked together quietly for a little while, meandering slowly in the general direction of the temple’s plaza. They were still on the outskirts of the main buildings when Callum finally spoke up again.

“…Well, this morning has certainly been… exciting. A lot more exciting than rearranging a library or gardening, I imagine.”

“Oh yeah, I love nearly plummeting to my death. Really gets the blood pumping, y’know?” She elbowed him in the arm.

“Oh I know.” Callum laughed. “I bet you’ve been bored senseless since we got here. A fearless warrior with nothing to challenge her?”

“It’s not been that bad.” She pointed out gently. “Our little secret has kept me on our toes. And it’s been fun at times. If anything it is kind of nice not having to worry about getting attacked by monsters or bounty hunters.”

“Yeah. We can relax a little. When the island isn’t about the crash into the ground.”

“Only a little. You have important studies and magic to work out. And I need to—“

_Crack._

Rayla paused, confused. What was that noise? They both came to a stop, and Rayla glimpsed down. There was a thin little crack in the ground between them.

Rayla glanced up at Callum, confused. “Cal-”

_CRACK._

Then there was a horrible roaring sound. The sound of ripping and tearing and crumbling. The ground beneath Rayla gave out. And suddenly, horrified, Callum was watching as Rayla, and everything around her, was falling away from him.

She reached out in alarm to grab hold on him her face still startled, the realisation not quite hitting her yet. Rayla’s palm brushed against Callum, but as he went to close his hand around hers it snapped shut around thin air. Her eyes went wide. Afraid. The world went dead silent around them. It fell slow. Tauntingly slow, time distorting as he searched her face desperately for as long as he possibly could, hoping for a miracle. Callum could feel his heart thumping wildly out of control in his chest.
And then she was gone from his sight.

He was sure in that moment he screamed something. Her name? Was it her name? But it didn’t matter. Callum’s legs moved entirely on impulse. He didn’t think.

He threw himself after her.

Chapter End Notes

-sweats nervously-
Oh yikes what a cliffhanger huh?
Also hopefully this chapter makes sense, its the middle of a really nasty heatwave in England and so i'm a little out of it at the moment.
What could possibly happen next? ....Guess you'll have to wait and see.

As always thank you so much for your support, please consider leaving a comment and letting me know what you guys think! They always make me incredibly happy to read <3 Love you guys!
This was stupid.

This was a stupid, terrible decision.

In fact, if Callum had to rank all of the terrible decisions he had made during his soon to be very short life, this would be at the top of that list.

They were both going to die now.

Those were the thoughts that sprung to mind as the toe of Callum’s boot sprung from the safety of the ground and he leapt over the edge.

He didn’t care. His brain was far too rushed with panic and adrenaline, his heart thumping loudly in his ears.

Zym cried out in alarm, pouncing off Callum’s shoulder and he hovered in shock for a moment before the severity of the situation caught up with him, as he watched both his beloved caretakers plummet to their sure demise. He circled back to stand on the edge of the island, as Callum and Rayla fell further and further away.

The little dragon let out a bellowing, grieving sound. Rayla and Callum didn’t hear it.

It only took Callum a few seconds of freefalling to reach Rayla, his hand snagging on hers. She seemed to be in a daze until that moment, snapping back to reality at his touch. His hand squeezed hers, knuckles whitening, and he pulled her towards him until both his hands were wrapped around her waist.

“Callum what are you doing!?” She cried over the rush of the wind around them. “You idiot! You absolute idiot!” She hissed, pounding her fists against his chest. He only held her closer. She didn’t fight it, as he felt her fingers curl into his jacket, firmly grasping the fabric in her fists. “You stupid… stupid…!”

Callum closed his eyes tight. When he spoke, it almost didn’t sound like him. He sounded far too calm, given their predicament, and the pounding of his heart. “Yeah. Yeah I know.”

Rayla’s breath shook a little against his ear. “I hope you have a plan.” She mumbled.

Callum swallowed. He opened his eyes again. How long did they have? Minutes? Seconds? Callum didn’t want to admit that he had flung himself off the island without a second thought, or that his plan right now was to just… hold her for as long as he could.

“You don’t, do you?” She asked softer now.

“…N…No.”

He felt her sigh, but the sound of it was lost to the winds. “Callum…”

“At least you know what I said is true though.” Callum chuckled bitterly.
“I didn’t mean like this!” She hissed, pulling back suddenly to look him in the face. Her eyes were intense. “I didn’t mean for you to die for me!” As the words left her mouth suddenly her expression changed. A dawning of realisation. Of shock and fear. He knew what was crossing her mind, he could see it in her eyes.

She had just realised they were about to die. And there was nothing they could do about it.

Her fingers dug painfully into his arm, her eyes not leaving his, terrified. What was he supposed to say? His brain couldn’t find the words.

She broke eye contact first, grimacing painfully. “Ray-?” He was cut off as she pulled him into her arms, face buried against his shoulder. His own arms slowly curled more around her, realising with a horrible dread that this would be the last time he ever held her.

The calm subsided when he looked down, his body suddenly very aware of what was happening and with a sharp intake of air, it acted out in impulse. His wings flapped in panic. His legs flailed. But his arms? His arms stayed wrapped tight around Rayla, squeezing her desperately close to him. Perhaps it was instinct making him thrash out in fright now, the primal impulses of a terrified boy who wanted desperately to live. Rayla scarcely moved in comparison, muttering something over and over desperately, muffled by his scarf. Was it some kind of Moonshadow prayer? Calming words? Whatever it was clearly wasn’t offering her any comfort at all, as her fingers plunged deeper into the muscles in his back.

At one point he caught the words ‘already dead’, and that did very little to help the terror lashing out against his own heart. But slowly the panic began to fade, replaced by a strange empty numbness. His movements slowed. What was this…? Acceptance? No he couldn’t accept this… He didn’t want to die, and he certainly didn’t want Rayla to die- It wasn’t fair, why did this have to happen? Why?

His memories went by in a flash, he saw his mother, King Harrow, Ezran, Claudia, Soren, Rayla, all the good times, the bad times, and everything in between, and that was when he realised how much he still had left that he wanted to do with his life. He’d never see Ezran again. He’d never get to end the war. He’d never grow as a mage. He’d never… He’d never see his home again. Never wander the halls or the libraries, never take an excited Ezran to the markets or festivals of their kingdom, he’d never get to show Rayla around the castle…

Callum closed his eyes. Maybe… he could imagine the future instead. It would be the closest he could get to experiencing it now.

Images sprung to mind of Katolis, of Ezran. A little older with a cheesy grin, their father’s crown balanced on his head. He imagined peaceful days of them hanging out in the castle, Ezran stealing the odd jelly tart or two, or five, diplomatic meetings with Xadia… there was no more war. Dragons were a sign of wonder, not fear as they flew through the sky now, in fact, he imagined a future where Zym was a frequent visitor to their lands. He imagined him and Ezran riding an older Zym, soaring through the sky, laughing in joy.

There were so many happy thoughts that Callum let run through his mind. And then he imagined himself on a balcony, standing looking out over a peaceful kingdom, united people, elves and humans alike mingling, and… everyone was so happy. He was happy. Someone was walking up beside him from behind, someone familiar, someone he loved.

He imagined a hand in his now. Fingers intertwined with his own. Four fingers.

…Rayla’s hand? He could feel the cool touch of metal around one of her fingers, a ring. He didn’t get a chance to look at her face before he opened his eyes, startled back to reality. But there was a
newfound peace in his heart now from the thoughts of his loved ones.

He had too many regrets, his heart heavy with them. But maybe there was one last thing he could do with the little time he had left.

“Rayla? If this is it, t-there’s something I… I need to tell you.”

“Shh.”

“No Rayla, I can’t die like this, knowing I never told you that I-”

“Callum, shh!” It was a little harsher, more urgent this time.

Callum’s heart broke a little. Did she really not want to hear it? But he could feel her shifting in her arms, looking around. Her hands relaxed against his back, and he guessed she must have regretted the harshness of her tone because she pulled back a little, pressing her forehead to his temple. Her lips were close enough to his ear that she only needed to mutter for him to hear her over the roaring wind rushing past them.

“We’re not going to die.” There was something in her voice, a certainty, a calmness that somehow made Callum believe her.

He turned his head a little so his cheek brushed against hers. “How are you so sure?” He whispered back. She twisted her head away to look back over his shoulder, and he tilted back a little to avoid her horns.

“Callum, look.” She muttered, her voice nearly lost to the wind. “We’re… We’re not falling anymore.”

“W-We’re… What?”

“Callum… You’re running.”
He hadn’t noticed.

But sure enough, her words cut through the foggy panic and he became far more aware of his surroundings again. She was right. They weren’t sinking anymore, and Callum’s legs were moving, he was running. And they were moving forward as he did.

Callum was windwalking.

Or perhaps more accurately, he was wind-sprinting-for-their-lives. Rayla was staring in shock over his shoulder, and he felt her squeeze him gently.

He dared himself to steal a glance back. Sure enough, there was a little light blue trail behind them, two in fact, fading slowly at their tails after a few seconds leading towards him, to his feet. His brain was a whir, confusion clouding his mind.

What…? Was this actually happening? How…?

Callum wasn’t sure what it was that caused him to misstep. Perhaps his concentration was broken. Or he was overwhelmed with the rush of confusion or panic. But suddenly the once solid feeling air beneath him gave way and with an alarmed cry, they somersaulted forward, plummeting again.

It was only seconds before they hit the treeline. And oh, it hurt. The pair crashed through branches
and sharp, pointy leaves for what felt like an eternity. At one point the continuous impacts involuntarily caused Callum’s arms to come loose and Rayla fell away from him.

He was only able to let out half a cry of alarm before something smashed him hard against the back of the head and everything went black.

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When Rayla came to, she was lying on her back on a soft forest floor of freshly fallen leaves and grass. Her vision was a little blurred at first, the tall pines swaying a little more than they naturally would, looming over her as though they were concerned for her welfare. She groaned closing her eyes again.

Everything ached.

Oh, gods, the pain throbbed all through her. Through her muscles, her bones, there were surely even more scrapes and cuts on her skin now from the fall. But pain meant one good thing, right? Pain meant she was alive. She shuffled. Despite the ringing soreness she was able to move her legs.

Oh good, at least she wasn’t paralysed either. That was nice.

With all the strength she could muster she pulled herself up, slumping forward into a sitting position.

“Ngh… Ow…” It took her a few minutes for the ringing in her ears and the stars before her eyes to settle.

Alright. Okay. She pulled her gaze skyward, through the trees at the titanic island slowly floating overhead, casting a giant shadow across the ground.

Rayla had no idea at all how on earth they were going to get back up there.

…They.

Her blood ran cold as a fear took hold. Where was Callum? She vaguely remembered getting separated in the treetops, so he couldn’t be too far away, right? She clambered to her feet regretting it with a cry of pain as her ankle gave out beneath her. She took a moment, hissing and cursing under her breath, before she pulled out one of her blades. With a soft ‘thwip’ the metal retracted and she dug its point into the earth, using it as a makeshift crutch. Her legs trembled under her.

“Callum?” She yelled out into the empty forest. Not the wisest move, she knew this. It could attract all manner of terrible creatures after her. But she was desperate. That desperation only boiled further into panic when there was no response. “Callum where are you?”

Silence for a moment. Then she heard something overhead and to her right snap in the trees. Her hand impulsively twitched to her other blade. It sounded like something heavy had fallen from a branch, disturbing a few disgruntled birds from their perches, but it didn’t hit the ground, snagging on something else.

She gritted her teeth, approaching.

Oh stars… please.
Rayla could only make out the silhouette of something caught in the tangle of branches above her. She would have to get higher up to make it out. With a sigh, she begrudgingly gripped the bark of a tree and put away her blade, climbing up with her twisted ankle trailing uselessly behind.

‘You’d better be alright.’ She thought. ‘I swear. If I don’t see your stupid face grinning back at me because you’re playing another dumb trick on me like you did with Zym, I’ll…’

She didn’t finish the thought... because she didn’t know. The idea scared her too much.

With a heavy exhale, Rayla came to a rest on one of the branches and glanced across at the tangled mess of branches and leaves and the figure within.

…It was definitely Callum. She could make out a familiar wing, and his scarf fluttering in the breeze. She frowned across at him.

“Callum? Hey, are you okay?” She called over. No response. “If this is another stupid joke I will hit you.” Silence. Frustration caught in her voice now. “This isn’t funny you kn-” Callum slipped again a little. His arm fell completely limp from the branches, blood trickling down his fingers. Rayla swallowed back a horrified, startled sob that caught in her throat.

Reality set in. Callum wasn’t okay.

In fact, not only was he not okay, Rayla caught a glance of the boy’s pale face as he slipped, and for a horrible, blood chilling moment, she thought he might even be dead. Rayla hunched, frozen on her branch, sure that her heart had stopped. And then he started slipping again and she twitched back into the moment at hand.

As it looked as though he was about to cascade from the tree’s limbs she dashed forward, ignoring the screaming pain of her ankle and pounced forwards with all the grace and agility she had honed from her years of training. The collision was slightly less graceful and agile, as her shoulder crashed against a tree trunk and her hand found the fabric of his shirt, yanking him desperately towards her. Callum flopped limp into her arms and she held him there stunned for a few seconds before gently turning him to look him over.

His skin was flecked with cuts and scratches, a thin, now slightly dried trail of blood running down his hairline. There was bloodstains on his jacket from his side, and his face was devoid of emotion, of pain or fear… just blank. She touched his cheek gently. He was cold and completely unresponsive. Her blood ran cold, fingers and heart trembling. Her hand found his and she gave his fingers a little squeeze.

No reaction, not even the faintest twitch.

“Callum.” His name left her lips faintly. “D-Don’t. Don’t you dare be dead, or I swear I’ll…” Her jaw clenched tight, and she could feel the warmth of tears on her cheeks now. “I’ll hate you forever.” She choked out. It was a complete lie and she knew it as she feebly rubbed her face against the back of her hand. “I will, I’ll see you in the afterlife one day and I’ll slap you for leaving me here like this.” It was a weak threat. “Open your eyes, you idiot, I need you to-” her voice choked on a sob, cracking with emotion. “I-I need you to tell me you’re going to be okay. I need you to smile, and make some stupid, adorable comment, I- Just squeeze my hand back, please I’m…” She trailed off. Her head found his chest, her feelings becoming too much for her to handle as she dampened his shirt with tears.

But slowly her trembling eased to the sound of something soothing. A heartbeat. Callum’s heartbeat.
He was alive.

She shot back suddenly. “Callum?” There was still no response, but her fingers gently pressed against his neck. There it was… his pulse. Slow, but steady, ticking away defiantly against the odds. She focused her breathing, trying to calm herself, as she cupped his cheek tenderly. Her hand slid gently back over his feathered ears and through his hair, in what she hoped was a soothing gesture, even if he was unable to feel it. But as she reached the back of his head she froze, alarmed.

His hair was damp, and as she pulled her hand carefully away she was met with a red smear against her palm. Her ears pinned back again. He must have hit his head badly in the fall. Fear began to set in again. If he had a head injury, it could be potentially life threatening. A future flashed to her mind, where Callum was comatose, never waking up again. A future without his laugh, or his smile, his eyes… it pained her so much she physically flinched out of the thought, her eyes finding his face again.

“Callum?” She whispered now, her voice trembling, hand settling against the side of his head. “Hey… Come on, please wake up…” She swallowed, her thumb brushing gently against his hair. It felt like a rather hopeless effort, he hadn’t responded to her at all, why would he now?

And yet as she did, she watched his face tic a little. Pain slowly found his features, a little twitching frown lining his brow, and a weak little noise escaped his lips. Relief washed over Rayla like a wave, warming the cold in her veins and steadying her hands a little.

“Callum…?” She whispered softly. She watched as he registered her voice, his face softening a little.

“…Ray…” His voice was slurred, confused and pained.

“N-Ngh…” He winced, fingers twitching. “Ow…”

Rayla smiled softly, a tiny sad, but thankful chuckle escaping her. “Yeah… that was pretty much my reaction when I woke up too…”

“My head…” He mumbled, his face screwing up tense.

“Shh… shh….” Callum settled slightly as Rayla’s palm cupped his cheek again. His eyelids fluttered a little, and they opened just a crack for a moment to reveal dazed, unfocused eyes. She offered him a little smile, but he seemed too confused and pained to return it. He groaned, clenching his eyes shut again as his body twitched.

The poor boy had clearly taken a far worse beating from the fall than she had.

“Okay… Callum just take it easy okay? I’ve got you. We’re… we’re going to be fine.”

She was lying. Not only to him but to herself with those words. How? How were they going to be fine? They’d fallen off the island, floating overhead. Within a few hours it’d be gone, drifting away to who knows where. And now they were stuck, injured, in the middle of a forest. Utterly and completely lost.

All of their supplies were on the island.

Zym was on the island.

Rayla fought back the panic threatening to take her over, taking a hand and running it through her
Okay. Logic. Think Rayla, think. The island, they said it’d be docking somewhere for repairs…
right? So if they could just… keep up pace, follow the island then maybe…

She glanced down at the very broken looking boy laying limp in her arms.

No, that wouldn’t work. Not in their current condition. Even if she carried him, she wouldn’t be able
to keep up with a colossal, flying island. She sighed, leaning back against the tree’s trunk and she
curled her arms a little more protectively around Callum.

“R-Ray…?”

“Hm?”

“A-Are…” His voice cracked a little. “You okay…?”

“I’m sore but I’ll be fine.” She sighed. “I think uh… I think you broke my fall when we hit the trees,
so you took most of the impact.”

“Mm… t-that’s fine…” He mumbled blearily. “I’d rather… me than you.” His words were slurred,
and from the state of him, her mind immediately begun to fear for his health. Rayla pursed her lips
and as tenderly as she could felt the back of his head. He hissed immediately, tensing in her arms.
“Ow, ow…”

“Sorry just… try and hold still okay? I just need to check to make sure it’s not… bad.”

It was a nasty gash, but not deep, thankfully. Still, it was bleeding quite a bit, he would need to get it
treated, and as soon as possible… The last thing she wanted was him succumbing to blood loss or
infection.

“I-It hurts…”

“I know.” She whispered. “I’m sorry.” She held her hand there in a feeble attempt to stem the blood
flow. He was pale, cold, his face contorted with pain, and it was scary, as she watched him flicker in
and out of consciousness, mumbling and delirious.

She lost count of how many times he asked her feebly where they were, or why everything was
spinning.

It broke her heart when he asked where Ezran was.

He only quietened down again when Rayla softly hushed him, telling him to save his strength. She
wasn’t sure how long she sat there in that tree, holding him. But with each passing minute, she felt
her hope diminish, watching as the island drifted slowly further away.

But when things seemed at their darkest, that was when she noticed the dot in the sky. A little flying
dot, and it seemed to be on a mission. It was flying with purpose.

And it was approaching them quickly.
It was Karajh. *Again.*

She wasn’t sure what she felt when he was close enough for her to recognise him. Perhaps a bit of disdain, but also utter relief. Even if he hated her, surely he wouldn’t leave Callum to suffer here… would he?

The mage didn’t spot them right away, circling vaguely in the area they had fallen. She couldn’t exactly blame him, the forest trees were thick, obscuring the pair in its branches.

“Hey!” She shouted. It took restraint to not shout something insulting up at him. “Karajh!”

Karajh glanced down frowning, squinting as he circled lower. Finally his eyes locked onto her and then they widened, as he swooped down. He settled on the branch, hunkering down to her level.

“Oh gods, you’re somehow actually alive.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” Rayla quipped back with a little smile. She watched his gaze flicker down to the boy in her arms, eyes widening a little. “He’s alive b-but…” Her voice went small. “Karajh look, I know you hate me but please… he needs a healer.”

His eyes met hers, and perhaps it was the light, but the frosty edge of his glare of his seemed to be thawing a little. He huffed, stretching out his arms. “Fine.”

“Thank you…” She briefly hesitated to hand Callum over, and the boy whimpered a little when she finally moved him away from her.

“R-Ray…?”

“Shh… you’re okay. Callum, you’re gonna be okay.” She dropped him as delicately as she could into Karajh’s waiting arms. The Skywing’s nose wrinkled and he pulled his head back slightly when she leaned forward into his personal space, but she ignored him. She tenderly brushed the hair from Callum’s face and his eyes fluttered open again briefly, half lidded and weak. “Karajh is gonna get you back to the temple, and they’re gonna take care of you.”

She felt a hand brush against her palm, and his fingers curled into hers. “Y-You…?”

Rayla gritted her teeth, glancing back up at Karajh. It was a questioning look. Uncertain. One that read; ‘What’s going to happen to me?’

It was hard to read Karajh’s face. “I’ll send someone for you.” Rayla felt the tension in her shoulders relax a little as she gave the man a thankful nod. Karajh rolled his eyes a little. “I’m not a *monster,* I’m not about to strand an injured child out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Aw. You do care.”

Karajh glanced away muttering something in Skywing. Whatever it was, probably wasn’t pleasant, Rayla thought. Callum’s eyes hadn’t left her face but they were barely open, struggling to stay awake.

“You hear that Callum? I’ll come find you as soon as I can… okay?” She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

Callum hardly seemed to be put at ease. He looked so frightened and confused still. “Rayla…”

“It’s going to be okay.” She sounded a little more confident now. “I promise.” She felt Callum’s
thumb gently brush over hers one last time before Karajh stood, and his hand peeled away from hers reluctantly. They stuck a little, and as his hand slipped from hers, she glanced down at her palm. Dark, red, and sticky from drying blood. Her nose twitched, ears drooping.

“Please take care of…” She was cut off as Karajh leapt from the branch, ascending into the sky. “…Him.” She finished quietly.

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It felt like hours before she saw anyone again, but in reality it had only been about thirty minutes. There had been a part of her that nearly gave into the fear that Karajh would just abandon her there to die. Perhaps he’d tell the temple residents she hadn’t survived the fall, or that somehow this was all her fault, and that she was a danger to the island…

Her heart sank. But if there was any silver lining… it was that Callum would be safe. He could continue his training, take care of Zym, he would be okay.

She slumped back with an irritated breath. Today had been a complete disaster. Rayla closed her eyes. The solitude only left her time to reflect on how much pain she was in. When she had held Callum in her arms, she had been so focused on him that she had momentarily forgotten her own injuries from the fall.

At the very least nothing seemed broken. Sprained perhaps, her ankle was throbbing painfully, and she still felt a little winded, her chest and back aching dully. In fact her entire body rang true with the stinging of opened wounds and the aches of her battered muscles.

And then she heard the sounds of wings on the air, and she spotted a figure, silhouetted as she squinted in the sunlight.

This definitely wasn’t Karajh, and it wasn’t one of the monks either.

“Miss Rayla?” The lady landed far more gracefully than Karajh had in front of the young Moonshadow elf.

“Yup… that’s me…”

The lady smiled gently, offering out a hand to her. “Come on. Let’s get you back.”

Rayla slung her arms over the mage’s shoulders from behind as she ended up carried in a sort of piggyback fashion. It felt a little embarrassing, Rayla thought, but eventually she relaxed. The fatigue of the day had begun to take hold and she soon became too tired to care about being self-conscious at the idea of being carried like a young child.

“I remember you from the meeting.”

Rayla twitched out of her bleariness at the woman’s voice. “Huh?”

“You certainly put Karajh in his place. That was fun to watch.”
“Oh… oh yeah…” Rayla smirked through her sleepiness. “The guy kind of had it coming…”

“He really did. Ugh, you wouldn’t believe what a nightmare it is to sit through those things with him. He’s a real stick-in-the-mud.”

“Pfft.” Rayla stifled a chuckle. “We can agree there.”

The lady smiled at Rayla over her shoulder. “Apologies, I believe I haven’t introduced myself properly. I’m Madrana.”

“Pleasure to meet you. I’d shake your hand but… y’know.” A beat of silence fell between them. “So I haven’t really seen you around much.”

“Oh yeah. I oversee timetables and schedules mostly from my office…”

“Schedules? Aren’t you like this grand important mage?”

Madrana chuckled. “You’d be surprised. Despite being High Mages, we don’t do very much High Mage-y stuff. At least we haven’t since people stopped coming to the school here.” Madrana paused. “So to keep ourselves busy we kind of act as overseers to stuff going on. Jorani’s kind of the head, in charge of everything, I deal with schedules and events, Aeslen runs the archives, Norru, oh, you probably haven’t met him yet, he’s away at the moment, he deals with stock and supply routes, and Karajh grumbles around and does maintenance. A fantastic job he did there today, clearly.”

Rayla’s lips pursed. “He would have done better if I hadn’t been there.”

“Don’t blame yourself. Karajh has a real temper problem. This isn’t the first time it’s gotten him into trouble.”

“Yeah but if I had just sat there quietly and not provoked him then-”

“Rayla?” The girl fell silent. “No one is going to blame you for what happened. Karajh is a jerk, and his anger got the best of him. I’m just sorry you had to put up with him this morning, especially given his distaste for you.”

“Yeah…” Rayla’s eyes trailed back to the forest canopy, getting further and further away from them. “…He did come save Callum though. So I guess he’s not completely terrible.”

“He… means well.” Madrana sighed. “He’s a complicated man, that one. If you knew what he’d been through you’d… probably understand why he’s got that thought process. It doesn’t excuse his attitude at all, but…” She trailed off, shaking her head. “Anyway, let’s just focus on getting you to the healers. And your dragon.”

Rayla’s heart lurched. “Zym- Is he okay?!”

“He’s fine, if not a little traumatised. Jorani’s with him.” Madrana’s voice went soft. “We can pick him up first on the way to the healers if you want. The poor little thing was still crying when I left to get you.”

Rayla’s heart sank and she nodded, wrapping her arms a little tighter around Madrana’s shoulders. Alright… Zym first. Then she’d see Callum.
She heard Zym before she saw him. As she limped through the hallways supported carefully by Madrana, (Rayla had opted to try and ‘walk it off’ after they landed.) she could hear the cries of a little baby getting louder and louder, wailing so mournfully it physically pained Rayla even more than the injuries she had sustained that day.

Madrana was practically jogging to keep up with her by the time they got to the door. Jorani was sitting there, cradling the crying dragon, looking frazzled and exhausted, trying desperately to soothe him.

“Zym!” Zym cut himself off mid cry, temporarily confused. His head perked up enough for Rayla to see that sure enough the little dragon’s eyes were sore and streams of tears were trickling down his scaly cheeks.

So dragons could cry… who knew?

“Oh thank goodness… You’re okay…” Jorani’s face lit up kindly.

Zym cried out again, this time scrambling desperately out of Jorani’s arms and he bolted for Rayla, who collapsed to her knees. He nearly knocked her onto her back, and her arms enveloped him tightly, tears pricking at the corners of her own eyes now. She could feel the dragon bury his face against her neck, whimpering, his body trembling.

“Oh Zym… I’m sorry, I’m so sorry… I-I’m here now, shh, I’m here…” Zym yipped softly between his crying. She pet his mane gently, rocking him gently from side to side until eventually he fell quiet, or at least quieter than before.

She sighed, burying her face in his fur. “I’ve got you.” Zym continued to tremble. “Callum’s… Callum’s gonna be okay too. We’re gonna go see him, okay? We’ll go see our idiot who thinks throwing himself off the edge of floating islands is a good idea.” Her brow furrowed a little. “I’m going to have some strong words for him when he wakes up. I might have to cover your ears. Do you have ears under all that fur?”

Zym eased a little, still moping with his face pressed against her, making her neck damp with his tears. She smiled gently up at Jorani. “Thank you for looking after him.”

Jorani nodded, concern flickering in his eyes. “It’s quite alright. I’m just sorry I couldn’t console the poor little thing for you. How are you?”

“I’ll live. Is Callum with the healers?”

“Yes, from what Karajh said.” Rayla staggered back to her feet, Zym curled protectively in her arms. She nearly buckled under her throbbing ankle before Madrana caught her arm and pulled her carefully up. Rayla nodded in thanks. “Rayla?” She glanced back to Jorani. He looked anxious. “Please give Callum my regards… It sounds like the poor boy needs it.”

She nodded, with a nervous smile. “I will. Thank you, Master Jorani.”

“And get yourself looked at too… alright?”

“And I will.”

And with that, Rayla limped out, Madrana following tentatively behind. “You uh… need a hand?”
“Yeah just… if you could get me to the healers that’d be great. Thanks Madrana.”

Madrana was quieter on the walk towards the healers, a thick tension hanging over the three of them. “Are you going to be okay…?”

“Oh yeah I’ve survived worse.”

“No I mean like…” Madrana frowned. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Alright but if you ever need anything at all you can come find me, alright?” Madrana’s voice went soft now, almost motherly. “If you want to talk or… just anything.”

Rayla pursed her lips glancing down at the baby dragon clinging desperately to her. She gave him a light squeeze. “I’ll be fine. It’s my… It’s Callum and Zym I’m worried about.”

“No I mean… are you going to be okay?” Madrana frowned. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks again for… y’know. Everything.”

Rayla offered the woman back a gentle smile as they reached the medical wing of the temple. “Thanks. I’ll… bear that in mind.”

Madrana nodded and gave a polite little bow of her head. Then she did a little jog before ascending into the sky, up in a spiral towards one of the temple’s several towers.

Rayla hobbled inside alone now, all but for the sad little dragon curled in her arms.

“You’ve got some explaining to do, Miss Rayla.”

The halls were still quiet. A nagging unease formed in the pit of her stomach now… something wasn’t right. She limped slowly through the halls to where the rooms were, her hand on the wall, leaning some of her weight against it. One of the treatment rooms was in use, the door closed. Her ears pinned back in worry. Were they still taking care of Callum? How badly had he been injured…?

She hovered, unsure about what to do. Should she… knock? She didn’t want to disturb them. So she waited silently, comforting the once more restless whimpering dragon in her arms.

She didn’t have to wait too long. Perhaps ten… fifteen minutes? Something had slipped Rayla’s mind however, until the moment the door opened again.

Something very… very important.

As the door opened, Rayla caught a glimpse inside of the boy lying on the bed. Only the most fleeting glance. But it was enough. She saw his arm, sleeve rolled up, wrapped in bandages, pale skin, his hand curled at his side. She also just caught his sleeping face. There was no soft down or curled golden marks under his eyes. No horns sprouting from his hair.

…He looked human.

Rayla’ brain stalled, but she realised what had happened the second she saw the grim expression on the healers face. Her heart dropped. The lady’s tone was harsh, eyes cold.

“You’ve got some explaining to do, Miss Rayla.”
There was no point in lying anymore. Right now, the only option Rayla could see that would perhaps give them a chance… was to come clean.

So Rayla explained everything. Though there was fear in her heart at the possible reaction, the truth came tumbling out, about how Callum was a prince, how they found Zym as an egg, that he was the heir to Xadia, and they were desperately trying to stop the war by getting him back to his mother. How Callum had received a quest on the way that had led them here, to Libertas, to try and stop a catastrophic disaster by learning magic. The more the words came out, the most anxiety tore at her heart. Her story must have sounded ridiculous. More lies, they would think.

But Callum’s life was on the line. Both of their lives.

When she finished she stood stiffly, not breaking eye contact with the healer. Her expression was far too hard to read.

Rayla was almost ready to accept defeat. Her voice went small. “I sound crazy, don’t I?”

“You do.” The woman’s voice was hard. “But… It’s only about as crazy as any other possible explanation I can think of for why there is a human in our medical bay.”

Rayla held Zym a little tighter to her. “S-So… what happens now?”

“That’s a good question.” She replied. “You are very lucky I made an oath when I became a healer, to do everything in my power to help the injured, regardless of my own feelings. I can’t say too many other people on the island would be pleased about this development. There’d probably be a panic if you were discovered.”

“Please, no one needs to be afraid, Callum is the kindest, sweetest gentlest person I have ever met.”

“Regardless,” The healer cut her off. “He is a human.” She pointed out. “I understand what it is you are trying to do but really? Letting one of Xadia’s sworn enemies into our land? You’re putting everyone here in danger.”

“Well maybe humans shouldn’t be our sworn enemies in the first place! Look at him… Does he look like a danger to you?” Now the healer went quiet, her eyes a little surprised. Rayla’s voice softened. “Does he?” She repeated, quieter.

The healer glanced down, clearly uncomfortable. Finally she sighed. “I don’t approve of your actions. Deceiving everyone like this… it makes me uncomfortable. But I suppose I…” She shook her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I suppose I understand why you’d be hiding his identity. And you’re sure you can trust him?”

“I’m sure.”

“Then we will keep your secret, for your safety. If word got out it’d surely reach the mainland once we dock the island for repairs.”

Rayla’s shoulders relaxed. “Thank you I-“
“On one condition.” Rayla fell silent. “I will not tell a soul of this, but you should at least let Master Jorani know. It would be better for you to tell him yourself, than for him to discover by accident as I have done.”

“R-Right. Yeah, of course.” The lady nodded, her face finally softening. “Can I see him? Please?”

The healer’s face twitched into a frown again, glancing Rayla up and down. “I’d rather check you over first. Not to be rude… but you look a bit of a state.”

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Thankfully it didn’t take too long for Rayla to be given the all clear by the healer, (whose name Rayla eventually asked, and was given as Eshmar,) as the worst of her cuts were cleaned and patched up, and she was provided a crutch to walk while her damaged ankle was examined and bandaged. Zym was fidgety, reluctant to leave the safety of Rayla’s embrace for the entire time his elf was being checked over. He yipped a couple times irritably, almost as if to say;

‘When are we seeing Callum? I want to see him!’

“Shh… It’s not much longer, Zym.” Zym grumbled softly in response.

“I’m going to tell you to try and stay off that ankle for a while, even though I know you’re going to ignore me.” Eshmar grumbled with a shake her head. “Just… if you can keep it elevated at night and try not to put too much weight on it that’d be ideal. Come check in with use tomorrow, and we can take a look at how it’s doing.”

“Thank you.” Rayla stood carefully, Zym still cradled in one arm, the other supporting her weight on the crutch. She was a bit wobbly at first, like a new-born deer, but steadied herself after a few seconds.

“I’d recommend you head back and get some well needed rest.”

“Can’t we see Callum first? Please?”

Eshmar’s nose wrinkled and she sighed shaking her head. “Very well… But you’ll have to make it quick. Ugh, Great Spirits, I’m going to have to explain this all to Calarsi…” She muttered, reluctantly leading the way back to Callum’s room. She left her there with a little nod before speeding away at a brisk rate, likely to the head healer’s office to explain the situation.

Rayla steeled herself. It seemed Zym could feel the lingering tension, as she felt a little arm reach up and drape over her shoulder, almost like a small hug. She planted a little kiss against Zym’s forehead. “It’ll be fine, lil’ one.”

She entered the room slowly, quietly, and it was pretty evident immediately that Callum was lying completely unconscious on the bed.

He still looked in a poor way, but a little better than the last time she had seen him, his head bandaged up neatly, and dressings on some of the worse cuts and grazes. His jacket and scarf had been removed, folded neatly on a table nearby, and his shirt was undone, revealing a larger dressing against his side. It was already tinged slightly red… And Rayla’s heart did a nervous skip when she realised how deep the cut must have been there.
She approached, and immediately the dragon in her arms grew a little more restless, cooing quietly. She smiled sadly at him. “You wanna cuddle up to him…?” Zym blinked back with big pleading eyes. “Fine, just be careful with him… okay?” She leaned over, letting the dragon climb out of her arms and onto the mattress, and Zym immediately clambered over Callum’s legs like a little obstacle course, waddling up to his arm. She watched him bury his face under it, poking first his nose then the rest of his head through, so he was cuddled in the crook of the boys elbow, and he rested his head ever so delicately on his chest, his head rising and falling with the rhythm of Callum’s breathing.

Rayla smiled fondly for a moment. Her ‘strong words’ would have to wait for now.

She inched closer, fiddling a little nervously with the fabric of his shirt. It felt a bit… weirdly intimate to see him like this. She couldn’t quite do his shirt up, Zym was in the way, and she was still leaning her weight on her crutch, but she wrapped it a little more around him. ‘So he doesn’t get cold’ she told herself, though it was also partly because she felt the poor boy would be embarrassed at being so exposed in front of her like this.

It was just a bonus that she could no longer see the scratches and bruises littering his skin, or the red stained bandages. It didn’t stop her worrying though. She hoped desperately that they would still give him the best care possible, despite his race.

“You poor idiot…” She whispered gently, her hand lingering a little on his chest. “What am I going to do with you? You’re going to drive me mad if you keep doing stupid things like this.” Callum stirred quietly, mumbling in his sleep, and his brow twitched into a pained little frown. “…Callum…?”

He groaned, eyes fluttering open in a daze. “Oh…” When he finally spoke, his voice was still slurred, dripping with exhaustion. “Wow… everything’s… really blurry…” He flinched, raising a hand weakly to his head. “Ow…”

“Hey…” She perched on the edge of his bed, and he blinked slowly, his eyes gradually finding her.

“Oh… Ray…” He squinted a little, eyes darting either side of her. “Y-You’re swaying a little…”

“I’m not. You just took a bad blow to the head.”

“Oh… did I…?” He slurred.

“Yes… you did.” She frowned a little, the concern eating away at her. “Callum do you remember what happened?”

“U-Uh…” His hand slid to his face and he slowly, sluggishly rubbed his cheek. “I… I don’t… did we fall…? I remember falling…” It took him a moment, eyes closed, as he attempted to recall the events of the day. Finally they opened again, clearly upset. “You fell off the island.” He muttered weakly.

 “…Yeah.” He glanced up at her, a little more focused.

 “…You’re hurt.”

“Well yeah… it was a pretty bad fall for both of us. I think you took the brunt of it though.” She pointed out gently. “I’ll be fine though, before you start panicking. The worst thing I have is a sprained ankle.”

She watched him drag his hand tiredly down his face, then pause, frowning. He pulled his hand away, and she watched the clunky gears turn in his head as he peered at his five fingered hand.
Rayla, where are we…?

The medical wing. In the temple.

He was quiet for a moment, his hand falling slowly to Zym’s head as he affectionately rubbed the top of the dragon’s head. Callum voice was small, his eyes on the broach laying on his scarf, neatly folded on the table a few feet away. “They know… don’t they…?”

“…Yeah. Yeah, they know.”

Callum’s eyes flickered up to her, scared. “What are they going to do to us?”

“Oh Callum…” She scooted closer, and she let her fingers run comfortingly through his hair. “It’s fine. We’re gonna be fine. I talked to the healers and… I explained everything. They’re not exactly thrilled about it but they promised not to tell anyone, as long as you tell Jorani the truth when you’re feeling better.”

He was quiet, thoughtful, his face relaxing a little as he glanced to the doorway. “Okay… Okay. I’ll do that as soon as I can.”

Rayla nodded, and a sombre silence fell between them. A strange juxtaposition of emotions took place in Rayla’s heart at that moment. Feelings of relief collided with feelings of irritation that began to boil within her again. How foolish he had been, to be so willing to throw everything they had worked for away without a second thought for his own safety… Her fingers twitched and her jaw clenched. Oh, she could feel those strong words in her heart desperate to claw their way out.

“I’m pretty mad at you, you know.” She finally muttered. “Pulling a stunt like that.”

Callum opened an eye, a little annoyed frown on his face now. “If I hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

She pulled her hand away slowly, pouting. “You got very, very lucky. If you hadn’t started windwalking when you did, we’d both be dead.” Zym whimpered at the word, curling more into Callum’s chest. Rayla’s eyes flickered to the dragon, then back to Callum. “What would have happened to Zym, huh? Did you think about that?”

“I don’t know, but you shouldn’t have dived off the island like that! You’re not allowed to die!”

“Well neither are you!” He snapped back.

“Callum, don’t you get it? I’m expendable, you’re not!” She hissed. “It doesn’t matter what happens to me! You have to be the one to give Zym back to his mother. You have to connect to the primal sources to save the world! If I die along the way it doesn’t matter-”

“It does matter Rayla! You do matter!” His hands were on her arms now, giving them a brisk angry shake as he glared furiously up at her. There was a tense silence between them, neither backing down, before Callum cracked again. “Rayla, if I lost you, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself for the rest of my life. I’ve lost too many people I care about to this stupid war. F-Far too many.” His teeth gritted and she realised his hands were trembling on her arms. The fire in Rayla’s eyes was extinguished, suddenly her heart twinging. Aching. “Please Rayla, I am begging you not to disappear on me. I care too much about you. It would devastate me.” He hung his head, hair
obscuring his face for a moment before he looked up with a bitterly sad chuckle. “I think I’d probably die of a broken heart. Like… like Argenti.”

“Callum…”

“…Rayla if I have the chance,” He continued, his eyes softening. “No matter the risks, no matter what, I will try and save you. Every single time.”

There was a different kind of silence now. It was a strange moment, Rayla thought to herself, as she found herself looking at Callum like she was falling in love with him all over again.

“Then you’re a brave idiot.” She muttered, her voice fond despite her words. Her hand reached out to brush the hair gently from his face.

A little smile found Callum’s lips now. “You’d do the same. You know you would.”

“I would.” She agreed. “So I guess that makes us both brave idiots.”

“I’d say the ratio is different though. You’re more brave and I’m more idiot.” Rayla chuckled now. She leaned over a little, and her arms slipped around him as she pulled him up a little and into her embrace. His own arms pulled her closer.

“At least I know your brain isn’t too badly broken. Otherwise you wouldn’t have been able to give a speech like that.” She heard him chuckled faintly. “I’m… sorry I yelled at you.” She mumbled. “I just worry about you is all. But I shouldn’t have… lost my temper like that… Not while you’re like this.”

She felt him give her a little reassuring squeeze, his chin resting on her shoulder. “It’s… okay. I get why you’re mad at me. I’m really sorry I scared you like that.”

“You should be apologising to Zym too.”

She felt him laugh quietly, and he pulled back a little. Zym clambered under their arms into their hug and buried his face against Callum’s neck. Callum freed a hand carefully, the other still around Rayla as he pulled the little dragon’s body close to his chest. “I’m sorry Zym… I’ll make it up to you somehow, okay…? I’ll make it up to both of you.”

Rayla shook her head. “You don’t need to do that for me. You’ve already saved my life. I think that’s more than enough.”

“Are… you sure?”

Rayla thought carefully for a moment. “Well, if you really want to make it up to me, then you’ll get some rest.” With a playful smile her hand found his chest and she gently pushed him until he was lying down again. Callum huffed a little as his head hit the pillow. “And don’t do anything else stupid for a while.”

“Rayla?” His voice was quiet, nervous again. “W-we’re gonna be okay, right?”

She took his free hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, her thumb brushing circles into his palm. “Yeah. We’re gonna be fine, Callum. I promise.”

That was when Rayla’s ear twitched at a noise, footsteps approaching. It was Eshmar, who appeared in the doorway with parchment in hand.
“Alright… Callum we want to keep you here overnight to keep an eye on you.”

“Is it serious?” Though he tried hard to sound calm, Rayla could detect the hint of panic in his voice.

“You’ll make a full recovery. In theory.” Rayla glanced a nervous grimace from Callum out of the corner of her eye. “But I’d prefer not to move you about to much in your current state. Especially with a head injury.”

“…Can Ray stay?”

The healer wrinkled her nose, glancing between them and the parchment. “Not… ideally, no. We need space to work.”

“Callum… it’s fine. You’ll be fine.”

Callum looked hesitant, but sighed softly. “Okay…”

Rayla smiled, and pulled his hand up a little way, and without really thinking… she planted a little tender kiss against his knuckle. “It’s just for one night.”

She watched as Callum blushed, a little stunned, before he smiled, more relaxed. “Y-yeah… alright. Thanks, Ray.”

“Ehem.” Behind them, the healer cleared her throat. Rayla felt the heat rush to her ears in embarrassment. Oops. She had almost forgotten the lady was standing there to witness that tender moment.

“Oh. Sorry. Did you need something else?”

“Yes, if you could maybe leave now that’d be great. Visiting hours are over, and I need to run some more checks now that he’s awake.”

“Oh… right.” Rayla’s face twitched with exasperation as she turned back to Callum. “Come on Zym. We’ll see Callum in the morning.” She reached over and wrapped her arms around the little dragon, tugging him away. Zym whined, his claws putting up resistance as they clung to his shirt, but one by one they gave way. She held him to her chest but the little dragon pawed at the air yelping sadly for his human.

“Hey… it’s okay, I’ll be fine Zym.” Callum gave a half-hearted smile back, as the healer strolled over and placed a hand on Rayla’s shoulder to guide her away.

Rayla’s face couldn’t help but fall a little as she walked away, lingering a moment in the doorway, her hand on its frame. “Goodnight, Callum. See you tomorrow.”

“Sweet dreams, Ray.”

Oh… Parting was such sweet sorrow. Unfortunately, it was going to be a long night for all of them.

Chapter End Notes

It's here! Sorry for leaving you all in suspense...
I hope the pacing of this chapter is alright. I came over a bit ill while editing, but I really
wanted to get this chapter out today!
What an emotional rollercoaster! These poor kids, I put them through a lot. Anyway thank you again so much for all your kind words they really boost my morale and make me want to keep writing for you guys. Also I really hope you liked the art I did for this chapter, I put a lot of effort into it! You'll hopefully be seeing more illustrations in future chapters by me and my wonderful friends <3
Don't forget to drop a comment if you're enjoying the story! I get excited seeing you guys excited! See you guys again soon!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!