

“The dragons are calling us. We have to go, Raznith.”

“There’s nothing more you can do for them besides inform the dragons, come.”

“The royals will know what to do. This war isn’t over with.”

The royals. The dragons. It always comes back to select key individuals holding power to make decisions like the one lying in front of him.

“The dragons?” he questions, his voice hardly above a whisper, “what can they do besides lead more of us to death?” Those standing behind him remain quiet, whether out of fear of speaking out against the mighty beasts that rule them or due to the lack of answers on their part. “Was it not the dragons who sent our families to this land to be slaughtered so easily?”

“They were only runts,” he hears one of them mumble, and his vision goes red. The next minute was not ruled by him but by the hand of another. Perhaps a grieving son who could only lash out to those who know no better. Or maybe that of a soldier who realizes his duty kept him from protecting those he cared for. Either way, he finds himself kneeling before a dead body, his eyes seeing through the recently deceased as his body shakes with rage, still unsated. The others have given him a wide berth, eyes wide as they seem at odds on what to do.

They will report him. Not because they believe his actions unjust but because they fear the same creatures they themselves can turn into. Raznith attempts to breathe, but the smell of burning flesh and the memory of holding a charred corpse of a family member he could no longer identify causes him to choke. He releases a strained scream that sounds far more like a creature in pain than in mourning. And he cares none. He cares little for his audience and what they may think of him.

His family is gone, and all he can do is scream out. The thought causes a rage directed at himself to rise. He should’ve fought more. Should’ve remained at home, never to become a soldier. He should’ve been here. He should’ve helped. He should’ve requested more soldiers to fill the village for safety.

Should’ve.

Should've.

Should've.

They're dead. He could've and should've, but the unfortunate truth is that he didn't. And now they're dead.

The next time he looks up, he finds himself alone, and the sun has parted from the sky. The moon has refused to show herself, leaving him to feel the pain with no witnesses.

*To die here*, he wonders as he lies on the ground staring at nothing in particular, *to die here with the others, would it right this wrong?* Would his family approach and accept his sacrifice, or will they shun him? Will he even see them? Those who can shift constantly make it sound like runts are vile creatures that will face judgment upon death. All of these questions caused a head already aching to intensify. He has always seen this 'gift' as more of a curse. A curse that he, alone in his family, was forced to bear. It separated him from them against his will, and as if tired of him fighting, it has made that separation permanent.

But he can right this wrong. No matter how selfish it may be. He can fix this. His eyes wander to his sword, still resting where he had slain the soldier. The body no longer lay there, but his mind did not linger on that thought. He inches closer, gripping the hilt tightly in his palms.

*Lean forward. Bring it to your neck.*

How many times have his superiors teased him and the other recruits about tripping on their swords? Snickered about how they would all fall on their own blades well before an enemy could skewer them? But then, they had made it clear that they found distaste in the weapon. Why study the art of sword fighting when one can shift and snap their opponent in half or crush them beneath their foot?

The guards will return. And if they do tell their superiors what has happened, they will return to haul him to jail. Why not? Why not end it? At least one is far more merciful.

And yet, the thoughts bring him no closer to the deed. He barely registers the changing of the day or the numerous scavengers that bustle through in hopes of finding scraps. Some approach him, and few stay, watching him with keen eyes as they await his death. He will starve. He will die of dehydration. The sword is right there in his grip. Why not end it all?

“It will seem you will never use that sword.” His voice sounds strange, and he shudders at the inner thoughts, begging them to leave him be.

“You are confused and delirious. But I can help you.”

“Bring the sword to my throat,” he says hoarsely, finding himself too weak to lift it. Weakness. He cackles at that. Perhaps he was always weak. A much stronger man would not have been dragged off against his will. He would have protected his family no matter who gave the orders.

“No.” A cool hand rests atop his, “it is not your time.” He stares at the discolored hand, far too scared to glance into the eyes of whoever stands there.

“Mother?” he questions. His breathing picks up, and his dry eyes sting.

“No.” The hand moves, and a figure places itself in front of him. He studies her in confusion. She looks like a walking corpse, clinging to life due to sheer willpower. Dark veins run across skin that can neither be described as pale nor dark. Sickly, his mind hums, and he nods in agreement. If someone was to tell him that she had dug her way out of her grave, he would believe them.

“The sight of me is ghastly, I’m sure. But I am no apparition.”

“You are Death?”

“Careful,” she sighs with a slight chuckle, a raspy and forced sound. “Darkness does not suffer fools keen on taking his job.”

“Who are you?”

“Who I am means little at the moment. What truly matters right now is what you intend to do with that sword.” He only now remembers that it still lies in front of him.

"I intend for it to be what kills me. You are a stranger, and this is much to ask, but please -"

"Hush," she silences, "I will not be killing you."

"Do it!" he roars, lunging towards her but finding his energy has deserted him. He lands on the ground, hardly moving an inch. A face full of dirt and ash blinds and chokes him, and he lies there, believing that this is where he is meant to be.

"Please," he murmurs into the ground.

"If you wish to kill yourself, you must do it with your hand."

"I am too weak."

"A mind game. Pick your sword up and do as you wish with its edge." It lies underneath him. If he angles it just right and applies pressure, it will tear through flesh, and that will be it. He'll be free. The idea pleases him, and yet, he lies there motionless. He screams into the ground. He believed he had the power to save his family when he couldn't even do this? No. He was always meant to lose them because he never had them.

To wish for death but then be unable to achieve it. To grasp it ... What does one do?

"Your thoughts are ones I've had before as well."

"Leave me," he roars.

"My village went up in flames, much like this one. There was no warning. No kind-hearted alert for those within to evacuate. In truth, there was no reason behind it. No reason besides chaos reigning."

"War is chaos."

"Life is chaos," she answers. "Once, I tried to right that. Why allow chaos when peace could prevail."

"I surmise that you failed?"

“Failure is a matter of perspective. I simply realized that peace and chaos were not the same.”

“Explain.”

“Opposites. Hot and cold, up and down. Peace and chaos, I believed the same as those. One disappears when the other presents itself. Peace is a branch of chaos, there simply to fan the flames because it will always fail. Chaos will not.” She remains quiet a while longer before finally saying, “we seek something similar. It is chaos, but it is also freedom and righteousness.”

“You do not know what I seek.”

“I know so much about you that if I was to tell you all of it, you would know less about yourself.”

“You speak in riddles.”

“Life is a riddle,” she sighs, her body shaking as if that reply had taken from her something she may never get back.

“How did you find yourself here?”

“All those who die under the might of true fire find their way to me. I hear their laments at all hours of the day. And they guide me to where their tears and screams went unheard, or at least uncared for. It is a curse that I bear alone but will bear until my work is done.”

“What work?”

She smiles, “my work means little at the moment. What truly matters right now is what you intend to do with that sword.” He glances down, unable to figure out how he keeps forgetting its presence. “What is your intention?”

“My intention and what will likely happen are two different things.”

“Then speak the former. Speak what you could do if nothing, including yourself, is holding you back.”

"I would pierce the hearts of every dragon who shouts orders to those below them. Every dragon who dared look at runts and see them as less. Every fucking royal dragon would die by my hand. I would take my revenge."

A hand reaches out to him, "then I believe we have work to do." For the first time since he met the woman, she smiles. A motherly one but twisted. It is not due to her appearance that gives what would be a soft gesture the crooked form, but ... something else. Something about her is no longer there, no longer something he can identify. And a part of him feels envious.

"You cannot give me what I seek."

"Are you willing to lie here upon your sword instead of finding out?" She speaks in cold confidence, and he realizes that following her will allow him to find atonement even if he dies.

"Why me? Why help me?"

"I am not without selfish reasoning. But aiding you, in the end, aids me. As I said, we seek similar endings to stories that were never ours to write. To become what I must, I need those like you. Those who have seen the truth of it."

"You have others?"

"Only one so far have I chosen to bring to my side. But I do seek more. Perhaps I will find them. Perhaps I will not. But I have already set myself down this path."

"Will you change me?"

"Into what I have become?"

"Yes."

"No." She turns and walks away, "you will do that to yourself."