

THE AMULET KING

“DRES IS THE RIGHTFUL KING, Lacy. He was not always terrible.”

Lacy glares like the setting sun on a midsummer day. “I know that, Ryn, but once he took up with that - that witch of a woman - he has left us no choice.”

It’s an old argument, one that I don’t want to push, knowing Lacy will just lead me in dizzying circles with her opinion. I open my mouth to protest Lacy’s use of the word witch but shut it. They are coming. Lacy senses it too. The air pulses. Tingles like electricity move up my fingers like icy water. I reach for my vile of primstone just as Lacy does the same. Only the elite warriors of the kingdom, the Prim, can handle the primstone dust touching their skin. Well, the

elite Prim *and* the witches, of which I am the former. There is a long-standing dispute between my parents about witch blood in the family, but the argument became irrelevant when I decided to become a Prim. And Lacy is right. Ranna *is* ruining the good name of witches.

Ranna is a witch. No one is disputing *that*. I blame Dres's father, the former king, even though the old boar has been dead three years now. He neglected his youngest son, pushing Dres into more self-destructive tendencies. If Ranna hadn't scooped up the danger-seeking, adventure-lusting young king, it would have been some other power-hungry socio-path.

Though perhaps that was a tad preemptive. Dres had always been wild, even before Ranna. But now, with Ranna at Dres's side, the two of them wreaking havoc through the realm, the Amulet King's reign needed to end. Even if it meant prying the Amulet from Dres's handsome face with primstone blades, it was the Prim's duty to keep the realm safe, and with Ranna influencing the king, the realm tittered on the edge of chaos and dissent.

"I can't see them," Lacy says, turning her face into the wind.

"They are almost here."

"You sound certain."

I shrug. "Ranna hates me. She will not pass the chance to kill me."

Lacy's eyes widen, then narrow. "So that is why Omisor

chose you as bait. I did wonder. But why does Ranna hate you so much?”

I don't answer. Anger filled the hole of heartache in my chest long ago.

Lacy stares at the horizon. “I had heard rumors that you and Dres were lovers.”

I bite my tongue to keep from swearing. I have bled to keep those dratted rumors (true as they might be) silent. My relationship with Dres had been little more than lusty young angst, but still, as a Prim, I never wanted to be known as the initiate who warmed the prince's sheets. I had been such an idiot. I had been a foolish girl to fall in love with a handsome, charming young prince. And that vivacious, wild prince had been all too eager to toss me aside when Ranna, beautiful and perfect and hungry, crossed his path. Then the prince became king, and Ranna curled her claws into him. Maybe he deserved his fate.

“It was a long time ago,” I tell her. Lacy has her own secrets, so I trust her as much as I trust anyone.

“We may have to kill him, you know.”

“I know, Lacy.”

The tingling intensifies, becoming almost painful. Ranna's witch magic is like a stench. It grows with her proximity. I pour the vile of primstone dust into my palm. The ground powder is cool and silky to touch. Magic flares as the dust dissolves into my pores, igniting a blue light that dances across my skin like a waterfall of shooting stars. Lacy does

the same, though her fire is yellow and gold, not blue-green like mine. I pull my sword from its plain scabbard. The light from my skin flows from my hand down into the metal blade, making the steel glow green and blue. A Prim's sword is forged with primstone dust.

“There!” Lacy jerks her chin toward the sky.

Ranna is riding a fucking dragon. Before I can even begin to fathom where the woman found the beast, I see another form behind Ranna on the large animal's neck. Dres. His dark hair whips in the wind. From his forehead the Amulet glows red like a blood moon. He is a sight. A king. A king I need to kill.

Lacy is one of the best. She doesn't flinch when the dragon lands, even when the vibrations echo through the ground, making us nearly lose our footing.

Ranna slides off the beast's neck with so much fucking grace I want to run my blade through her long, perfect throat. Dres slides down to stand beside his queen. Gods, what a pair they make. Dres with his dark skin and black hair and blue eyes. Ranna with her proud, chiseled cheekbones. There are rumors her mother was a goddess. (I believe them.) (But if she is the abandoned daughter of a goddess, I am still going to kill her.)

Ranna saunters over to us. With a flick of her hand, she sends the dragon to sleep. She must have spelled it. Given their extreme rarity, I don't know very much about dragons, but it looks like a huge, wild, winged, toothed, meat-eating

predator - how could anyone control it without magic? I vow to release the dragon from Ranna's vile magic.

"Ah, Ryn," she says like we are friends, "I am surprised to see just the two of you. I was expecting more of a fight." Ranna smacks her lips.

I laugh. "Lacy is just here for fun. *I* am here to end this."

Ranna cocks her head and her glorious hair tumbles over her shoulder. "Dres, kill the blue Prim. She is here to steal your crown."

Dres already has his sword in his hand. It has been years ago since I sparred with him at the academy - he was always good practice. I know then king Amulet makes him stronger, but I am stronger too. And he is not the first man I've had to kill.

Dres comes at me like a stalking cat. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lacy flare her primstone. Her gold light is blinding. Good. Lacy should be able to keep Ranna distracted. Ranna is evil, and I want to kill her myself, but if I can separate her from Dres and his Amulet, Ranna's power will diminish.

Dres's blade clashes against mine. The sound is harsh, and with my heightened primstone senses, I notice the sleeping dragon flinch. Dres's Amulet flares, red light pours over his face. I feel it pulse, calling to the primestone dust in my veins. Dres's steel meets mine again. This time, it knocks me back a step. I lunge, my swing nearly striking Dres's thigh. We circle each other, looking for weak points. I use the moment

to breathe in and out, urging oxygen to my muscles.

“I always liked sparring with you,” Dres says, shifting his blade in his hands. “You never let me win. It was nice. And the other bits were nice too.” The corners of his eyes crinkle as he grins at me.

“How do you know I never let you win?” I counter, unable to resist smiling back.

Dres narrows his eyes, but his smile doesn't fade. And I see it. Dres lowers his arm, like we are back in the practice ring instead of fighting for the good of the kingdom. Dres has left himself vulnerable. Can he not see death waiting for him at the end of my primstone blade? I strike. I knock Dres's sword to the ground, leaving a gash across the back of his hand. Dres cries out, cradling his injury against his chest. He stumbles. The Amulet dims. It's far from a fatal wound, but a primstone blade is like poison, and that poison is seeping through Dres's skin. Not even his Amulet can protect him now.

Dres falls onto his back. I can't help myself; I kneel beside him, cradling his head in my hands. Anger rises, raw and hot, but I am not angry with Dres. Ranna did this. Ranna trapped Dres as easily as she trapped that dragon. I look up, but I can't see Ranna anywhere. Lacy is limping toward me, her face bloody, her streaks of gold prim light is fading fast.

“She's gone.” Lacy spits blood onto the ground. “Coward.” She looks at Dres who's breathing is labored, his eyes closed. “He is dying.”

I nod.

“Cut out the Amulet,” Lacy says, handing me her dagger.

The King Amulet is set into the flesh of Dres’s forehead, but it no longer bursts with light. I swallow my disgust and rest the tip of the dagger where the crystal meets Dres’s skin.

Dres’s hand comes up and wraps around my wrist, but his touch is soft, pleading.

“No,” he whispers, opening his eyes. “If you do that, all the primstones will lose their power.”

I’m not sure I heard correctly. The King Amulet gets its power from the primstones, not the other way around. I look to Lacy, but Lacy is facing the other way, rubbing her hurt leg. For being a warrior, she has a surprisingly weak stomach.

“Dres, what are you saying?” I lean closer to Dres so Lacy can’t hear me.

Dres gives a weak smile. “Ranna wants you to do this, to take the stone. Ranna planned this,” he hisses, his fingers still wrapped around my hand. “She knows if you take the Amulet by force, the Prims will lose their power, and no one will be able to stop her.”

“Dres ...” My gut churns.

Dres’s eyes harden, he tries to sit up, but pain makes him gasp. “Listen to me. I know you have no reason to trust me ... after what I did.” His voice is bitter and sharp. “I ... I - I couldn’t fight her. I couldn’t stop her ... Ryn.” The way he spoke my name makes me sick with longing for those sunlit days when we had been ... when we had been *something*.

“Ryn.” His voice is desperate. “Ryn.” He clenches his teeth against the onslaught of pain. I let him pull my hand and push my palm against his Amulet. It feels extremely intimate.

Something rushes through me like an invisible wind. Light bursts from the Amulet, green and blue light - my light. Something hot and scorching moves through my fingers up my arm into my spine, bursting in my head. I gasp. I touch my forehead, my heart fluttering as my fingers brush the hard oval of the Amulet embedded in my flesh, a crown that only death can remove. I jerk my hand away.

Dres is breathing easier. The poison left his body when the Amulet attached itself to me - to me! The King’s Amulet is stuck in my forehead.

Dres opens his eyes and stares at my face.

“What. Did. You. Do?” he asks, arching precisely one eyebrow.

Lacy gasps. “Ryn! What - how - what the *fuck*? You were supposed to kill him, not take the Amulet - the *throne!* - for yourself! *How* did you even?”

I narrow my eyes at Dres. “You! *You* did this somehow! You put my hand over the Amulet and - and did something!”

“I - I-” Dres stammers. “I don’t know what I was thinking The poison ...”

Gods, everything is going wrong. I groan. Then I try to pry the stone from my skin. Prying my eyeballs from their sockets would be easier, so I stop.

“The Amulet chooses,” Dres says.

“Bullshit,” Lacy remarks.

“It’s the kingdom’s most guarded secret, but it’s true. Do you think I *wanted* to be king? The fucking thing chose me. Then so did Ranna. And now here we are. And my hand *hurts*. Which is your fault.” He glares at me. Unfortunately, he is still rather appealing to look at when he is angry.

“Shut up,” I snap. “Just be thankful I don’t need to kill you anymore. What am I going to do?”

For the first time I can recall, Lacy is out of remarks.

“The people will accept you. The greatest queens and kings have come from the Prims,” Dres offers. “And you are not just a Prim; you are the best. Everyone knows your name.”

I groan again. The story of queen Olla and her twelve suitors is suddenly all I can think of. Twelve suitors set on seducing her to get her pregnant forcing her to make them king.

“You were a good king, Dres, before Ranna,” I say. Then an idea strikes me as potent as Prim light. “If I am going to be queen, then *you* are going to help me. You are going to be my king,” I push my finger into Dres’s chest with enough force he yelps, “Whether you like it or not.” But I can’t look at Dres’s face. I have just released him from his bind to Ranna, only to bind him to me instead. Am I any better than Ranna?

“If that is your wish ... I suppose it’s better than being dead,” Dres mutters. I still can’t look at him. Also, I might vomit. “Can you at least heal my hand?”

I sigh and turn to face him, holding out my hand for his. He places his brutalized hand in mine. It looks incredibly painful. The deep gash oozing blood resembles tenderized meat. I try not to look at his face, but fail because I notice he has a small scar on his forehead where the Amulet previously resided. My primstone is almost depleted, but the King - Queen? - Amulet in my forehead makes what little is left in my veins flare and stretch. I use it to heal his hand, watching his skin knit together, the shattered bones return to their original conformation. His long, shapely fingers are no longer swollen. I ignore the sensation of his now smooth skin under her fingers. I tell myself it's just my primstone-heightened senses. Dres sighs in relief as the last of his pain disappears.

“Lacy.” I do the same for Lacy’s leg, where Ranna hit her with a nasty spell. Lacy was right. For a witch, Ranna is a vile one. “Let’s see if we can help this poor dragon.”

“No need.” Dres saunters - yes, he saunters like a cat too - over to the dragon. He places his hand on the beast’s flank and whistles softly. The dragon opens its eyes and yawns, then stretches, turning its deep purple eyes on Dres with a tenderness I did not expect. Lacy jumps out of the way as its tail rakes back and forth.

“The dragon is yours?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“Yup. I found him a few years ago as a pup, but when Ranna bound me to her, she bound Ori as well. But now that you have freed me, you have freed him too.” Dres looks

at me the same way the dragon looks at him, and something flutters in my gut. Maybe it's just the possibility of riding the dragon back to the city.

"I haven't freed you!" I argue. "On the contrary, I have just enslaved you."

"I have heard that marriage is the best form of slavery," Dres says with a flash of his teeth. "And you, Ryn, my wife-to-be, are a far cry from Ranna."

"I almost killed you. On purpose."

Dres shrugs. "I forgive you. And if you are nice to me, I will even let you ride my dragon." And the bastard winks at me. Dres, not the dragon.

"Are you flirting with me?" I demand.

"Nonsense," he scoffs.

"He *is* flirting with you." Lacy pipes up as she picks her nails with the tip of her primstone dagger.

My cheeks burst with heat. "This is the worst day of my life."

Dres reaches out and pulls my hand to his lips. "Well, Ryn, this is the best day of my life. I am free from Ranna, and I get to wed the only woman I have ever pined for."

"You are lying. You are not the kind of man who 'pines.'"

Dres's face shifts. His blue eyes are piercing. "Have I ever lied to you? Did I ever lie to you?"

"No," I admit.

"And I vow that I never will. This is a good day, my queen. Weird, I will admit, but good."

Dres leans close to me like he might kiss me, but he doesn't. The corner of his mouth twitches, just a little. It's a bit irresistible, so I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and pull him toward me. His lips curve into a smile as I kiss them.

