

# *Silverfang*

*Throne of Fire*

*Book 3*

*Erin Duffin*

# Chapter 1

Zane woke to a searing pain in his right arm. He jerked upright, terrified and disorientated. In some distant room, he heard the raw screams of someone enduring some form of torture. He looked around, blinking wildly, trying to figure out where he was.

Thinking back, to the last thing he remembered, walking down the hall at Bluescale Castle with Paige. They were finally going to finish their Desma. But something had happened. He remembered the dancing gray eyes of the overly excited guard boring into him just before something exploded. No that wasn't right. The hall had filled with a green smoke and he lost Paige.

The realization slammed into him and he started to assess his situation. He needed to escape and find her.

He was shrouded in darkness, except for a small beam of light streaming in through a small round window that came from the hall, allowing him to just make out the bareness of the room he was in. The hard floor under him was metal, not the stone he would have expected, and his wrists were shackled. When he stood, he found that he couldn't reach the door to see out of the small opening.

The chains that held him were heavy. He pulled against them with all his might, but they wouldn't budge. He then tried to transform into his dragon, only to realize he was being blocked by a quell.

Another pain ripped through his arm, followed by another scream from outside his cell. He looked down at his arm, expecting to see the throbbing limb dripping with blood, but there were no marks to justify the pain he felt. As the screams continued, he realized who they must belong to. Dread and rage of which he had never felt before consumed him, and his voice was a roar of fury when he yelled Paige's name.

What are they doing to her?

The door opened at the sound of his enraged cry. A man masked by the darkness was only revealed by the light from behind him, so Zane couldn't make out any of the man's features, only the outline of his broad shoulders and thick neck.

"So, the Lord King awakes," the man taunted as he strode toward him.

"Where is Paige?" Zane demanded, pulling on his chains, testing them for any give. There was no hope; the restraints were secure. Instinctively he stepped back as the man approached.

"The queen's receiving the royal treatment. Don't you worry about her."

Another wave of pain threatened to drop Zane to his knees.

"I will kill you all for this," Zane swore, knowing his empty threat only made him look like an arrogant fool, but he desired that outcome more than he valued his pride.

The man's answering fist landed on Zane's face.

Zane backed away until his back hit a solid surface, and it was then that he noticed a slack in his chains. The man didn't seem to register the same information, and as he drew back for another blow, Zane's eyes saw his movement as slow and weak. Before the man could redirect his hit, Zane reached out and snapped his neck. A sickening crack filled his ears before the man dropped

in a heap at Zane's feet.

A feeling of satisfaction flooded him.

But it was a short-lived sensation, as three more men entered the room and shot him with something that made the dark room turn pitch-black, and his consciousness slipped away again.

\*\*\*\*

A splash of water hit his face, jolting him awake.

Lights flooded the room, causing him to squint. He was instantly aware of his inability to move his arms, which were stretched out above him, forcing him to stand, though his feet barely touched the floor.

Paige was just in front of him, her dress torn and bloody. The sight of it sickened him.

"Heal her and start again."

A young man stepped up to a chain on the wall and turned it until Paige was lying on the floor, in the blood that had run down the folds of her dress and pooled on the floor. Zane recognized him as the server Dean had run into at the reception, the one who caused Corrine to worry for Dean's safety.

Zane had a brief moment of satisfaction, because thanks to Corrine, Dean was safe. But as Paige's eyes opened, he saw terror settle into her features, and he knew that neither of them were safe. When their eyes locked, a moment of unspoken words flew between them.

Once the man was finished burning away her mortal injuries, he jerked her to her feet, keeping a tight grip on her arm. She didn't fight or struggle against his hold. Her lack of venom against their captors shook Zane's hopes of either of them walking away. At this point, the best he could hope for was a quick death, but he doubted that was on the agenda since they were both still alive.

The young man's strange blue eyes bore into Zane's, giving him a glimpse into the horrors that were about to befall them. The more Zane looked at the man holding onto Paige, the more familiar he looked. But he couldn't quite put his finger on where he would have met the man before.

"Now, you are going to tell me where the prince is." A man stepped in front of Paige and grabbed a fistful of her hair. He was older, with thick gray hair and a wide barrel chest, like Zane's father. His face was clean shaven, making his cleft chin visible. He had deep scars on his neck, as if someone had slit his throat a long time ago. His purple eyes danced like a royal's, but the elongated pupils were wider than a normal dragon's.

"Leave her alone!" Zane growled out in the most intimidating voice he could muster. "I swear by-all-that-burns, if you lay another hand on her it will be—"

"How noble of you to volunteer." The man nodded to someone beyond Zane's vision, then there was a crack unlike any noise Zane had ever heard before. But his mind barely registered the sound when a searing pain exploded across his back. Paige screamed, then panted harshly through his gritted teeth.

He couldn't tell how long the brutal attack went on for; it felt like hours. He knew he had cried and begged for it to stop at one point, feeling every shred of pride and dignity leave his body. He was no longer a king, no longer a dragon, and no longer a man. He was nothing but the pain.

Each painful blow tore at his mortal form, desecrating the body he lived in.

Paige was sobbing on the floor with the strangely familiar man standing over her, ready to pounce if she moved. But there was nowhere for her to go, no chance for escape from this room.

Zane was barely conscious after the round of torture. His arms burned from the weight of his body hanging from them. His feet and hands ached from where he'd clenched them to endure the pain for so long. His shirt had long ago been ripped away, his whole back now wet with blood. It dripped down his legs and onto the floor. He wanted to pass out, but he was afraid they would hurt Paige again. That fear gave him the strength he needed to force himself to cling to some level of consciousness.

"Now let's see if you value self-preservation as much as your father." The purple eyed man grabbed Zane's hair again, forcing him to look into his face. "Where is the boy?"

"Never," Zane breathed, finding even that word difficult to say.

"Heal him and start over."

As the healing fire burned away his mortal injuries, he felt a brief moment of relief. Then dread froze his blood as he tried to prepare for it all to happen again. He struggled weakly against his restraints as panic charged his adrenaline, but it was no use. He was exhausted, and his arms were too weak from being stretched over his head to do any good.

As the first blow hit his back and tore his mortal form again, his mind cried out for Paige. He was desperate for a distraction, knowing that if he allowed himself to focus on the pain it would break him. He needed her strength and her courage. She looked at him as the first blow hit and she shuddered, as if she felt the strike herself.

Paige sprang to her feet, positioning herself between Zane and his torturer. "Stop! Don't hurt him anymore." Her hand touched his side. The small contact was like a healing balm, taking his pain away, but it only lasted for a second, as Paige was struck. She fell back, landing hard on the floor. Zane was shocked that he felt with acute accuracy the exact spot the man's fist collided with Paige's face. It felt like he was the one being hit.

He didn't have time to process the information that their Desma was strong enough to cause him to feel her pain, or that she was living with his pain as well. He didn't consider what it meant regarding the way she actually felt about him or his feelings for her. But he did feel a new level of fear take hold of his spine when another lash cut across his back. Paige screamed, not because she hated to see him hurt, but because she experienced it with the same intensity as he did. In return, he felt the pain she experienced reflected back at him, as some desperate echo that demanded relief.

It went on for what Zane thought was hours, when the man once again ordered his men to stop.

"Well, Your Highness, are you ready to talk?"

Zane didn't answer. If he opened his mouth now, he was afraid he would tell them everything they wanted to know.

"String up the girl."

"Yes, sir," the server said all too eagerly.

"No," Zane tried to shout, but it came out weak.

Paige whimpered as she was forced to her feet. The server looked over at Zane, glaring at him with such accusing hatred, that Zane was taken by surprise. He was jolted from his near unconscious stupor to wonder what the man was thinking.

Zane thought strangely that the Dyad looked like he dreaded his own actions. He moved mechanically, as if he was trying not to think about what he was doing. Did he actually care that Paige was about to receive a round of torture? If he cared so much, then why wasn't he doing anything to stop it? Why willingly participate in harming her?

But the man continued to stare at Zane, challenging him to act, as if there was anything he could do to stop any of it. He couldn't tell these men where Dean was. Then a thought occurred to

him. He could tell them where Dean wasn't. He was sure the castle would be in a state of chaos looking for Paige and Dean. He would have to get these men to go to the castle, as any unknown would be stopped and tortured until they gave up Paige's location. Then someone would come to rescue them.

The man stepped behind Paige and ripped the back of her dress open. The tearing sound made her flinch violently. The man's challenging eyes once again fell on Zane, silently willing him to do something, but what?

"Wait," Zane croaked, wondering if he was going insane. What if he was imagining what he was seeing in the waiter?

"No, Zane," Paige pleaded.

"There's a secret room at the castle. The prince was taken there."

"Wrong," the man with the purple eyes snapped, his fist landing hard on Zane's face. "We have searched the room in the waterway."

The idea that these men could get into the Bluescale waterway was frightening. Zane had suspected as much, and it was a disturbing idea, but to have the information confirmed made him sick. Paige was in that waterway just hours after Dean was attacked a few days ago.

"Not that one," Zane slurred, struggling to open his mouth against the pain.

"Please, Zane, don't!" Paige screamed, her tears real. If Zane didn't know she knew he was lying, he would have thought she was really afraid he was going to turn Dean in.

"It's down in the vault, where Maze performed the spell to bring the Bluescales to Ethiolan. The back of the fireplace opens."

"How do I access the room?"

"The torch holder next to the fireplace is a lever that will open the door. He had three guards with him."

"How could you?" Paige spat, pulling free of the waiter's suddenly slack grasp. "I hate you, Zane Blackhorn." Her voice was full of fury and anguish, and the smack she landed on his already raw face rocked his head back.

It was a good show.

"Jackson," the man snarled as he addressed the waiter.

"Yes, My Lord?"

My Lord? Did that mean this man was Balaan? The Balaan? The information dawned on Paige too, and the shock of it made her face go slack. Paige backed away from Zane, crying as she cursed him ferociously. The guards in the room left her to her hysterics, turning their attention to Balaan.

Zane looked again at the man who had plagued his life for so long. Balaan was as tall as Zane, with a broad, muscled chest. The depths of his purple eyes became more significant, and Zane wondered what power he had.

"Kill the boy," Balaan bellowed.

"I'll bring back his head," Jackson assured his lord, as if Paige and Dean meant nothing to him.

Zane was filled with self-loathing. How could he have fallen for the man's pointed looks, as if they meant he was concerned about Paige? He was just playing Zane for a fool so he would give up Dean's location.

"By nightfall," Balaan ordered.

"Yes, sir." Jackson left the room, leaving Zane to stare after him, feeling a sense of betrayal. It was odd he should feel that way. The stranger had been about to string Paige up to endure the

same torture Zane had received, but the look in his eyes had been so deceptively concerned for her well-being.

Paige screamed, and as she did, she pulled the release lever that allowed Zane's arms to drop. Once the lever was down, she launched herself at Balaan, but it was a futile effort with her dragon bound. Balaan's strong arm flashed out and landed square on Paige's face. She fell back before ever laying a hand on him.

While Balaan was distracted with Paige, Zane made his move. He landed a solid kick to Balaan's chest, sending the dragon crashing to the floor. Zane pounced. Raising both his arms above his head, he laced his fingers together so he could use the bonds that still held his wrists to his advantage. He brought his joined fists down with a fury that no one could comprehend as his eyes met Balaan's. A split second before his fists met their target, Balaan disappeared, and Zane's fists collided with the solid steel of the floor below him. Crippling pain shot up from his hands and raced through his arms, until they reached his shoulders and his back, paralyzing him for several seconds as he tried to comprehend Balaan's power.

A sudden blow to his side sent Zane crumbling to the floor. He looked up to find Balaan standing over him, poised to deliver another kick to his ribs. Zane just managed to curl in on himself so that his shins absorbed the force of the impact.

"Take them away," Balaan ordered.

"No, Father, you said she was mine." A young man Zane hadn't noticed before stepped forward. He had Balaan's purple eyes and his broad shoulders. He was the spitting image of Balaan, only younger. Zane wondered if he was hallucinating. He had the same striking purple eyes and dark brown hair, cut the same as Balaan's gray locks.

"Not until I'm sure we have the boy," Balaan told him.

"You'll know where to find her," the young man said as he bent down and pulled Paige up into his arms.

"You better not hurt her," Zane spat, finding more strength than he thought he had as a fierce, protective instinct for Paige surfaced. Feelings of desperation and helplessness, followed by frustration at his inability to do anything to help her.

"She is mine." Balaan's son pulled Paige possessively against his chest. "With her power, we will finally return all dragons to their true forms." His purple eyes danced with insane triumph.

"Enough, Canaan," Balaan barked.

Canaan left with Paige, and Zane had no idea if he would ever see her again.

Zane was taken back to his cell and chained to the wall again, his wounds left untreated. He healed what he could, but there were still gaping wounds across his back.

His fear for Paige's safety ate at him as he leaned his shoulder against the cool steel wall. In the dark, quiet space, swaying along with the constant rocking, he wondered what sea they were on? How close to help were they? Would the guard see the unusual ship and investigate? Would they get to them in time to save Paige? He was unable to protect her. Again, he'd failed her. His guilt and anger terrorized him to the point he was driven to pull on his restraints like a wild animal. He twisted, pulled, jerked and screamed in his fury, all to no avail. The chains wouldn't give. He exhausted himself in his vain efforts until finally, he collapsed to the floor, defeated.

## Chapter 2

Zane jerked awake to a wave of pain rocking through his entire body. It was all-consuming, coming from everywhere all at once. Every part of his body ached, and his heart was thrashing wildly in his chest, like it would explode and rip free from his body.

Paige!

He felt small and insignificant as he curled up against the pain, trying to find a way to cope with the knowledge that Paige was in danger and there was nothing he could do about it. He wished for death. If he couldn't save Paige, then what good was he? Since meeting her, protecting her had been the one thing he'd managed to have a semblance of success with. Saving her gave him the reassurance he needed to believe there was hope, that he could be redeemed. But now he was losing what little progress he'd made on his path to winning her over. If he lost her now...

The thought was paralyzing.

He didn't know how long it went on for. Like the torture he'd received, it felt like hours upon hours. He'd pulled so hard on his restraints that his wrists were bloody. He needed to find a way to get to Paige, to save her from Canaan and whatever he was doing to her. He found the only way to deal with the pain was to embrace his rage. Visions of Canaan's body lying lifeless at his feet was the only comfort he could find.

When his cell door opened, he was ready to kill anyone who came within his reach. He quickly crouched on the balls of his feet, ready to strike. But to his dismay, Paige was shoved in. Falling to her hands and knees, she whimpered, and from what he could see of her tear-stained face, she looked broken and hopeless.

He reached for her, pulling her into his arms. As she clung to him and cried, almost instantly, the physical pain left his body. He was left only with the sores that were unhealed on his back and the mental anguish of knowing they had hurt her, and he wasn't able to protect her.

"It's okay, I have you," Zane whispered in her ear as she sobbed. She smelled like soap and her hair was damp. She was no longer dressed in the long gown, but in Earth realm jeans and T-shirt.

"They...they found...Dean," she croaked.

Guilt hit him like the violent thrash from a dragon's tale, colliding with his body and knocking the wind out of him. It took him several minutes to process her words and recover enough to ask,

"How? I gave them the wrong location."

"I don't know. That guy showed Balaan his...his head. He made me—" Her voice broke, and Zane pulled her more tightly against him, as if he could somehow consume her pain with his body. They cried together for some time, the loss of Dean beyond tragic.

"We need to get out of here," Zane finally said.

"How?"

He could already hear the defeat in her voice. Dean had been her one tether to life, her sole reason for living. Without him, she didn't have a purpose. Her will to keep fighting would slip away faster than Zane could imagine.

"Stay with me, Paige. We have to fight. We need to avenge Dean and the rest of your family. Balaan has to pay for what he's done to you."

"He's already won," she said, hiding her face in his shoulder. "Canaan sent me in here to finish our Desma so he can have me all to himself."

“Paige—”

“He’s going to let you go.”

“What about you?” Zane lifted her chin so he could look at her face. He could just make out the shadowed outline in the nearly dark cell.

“I have to stay.”

“That’s not really an incentive to finish the spell.”

“What else can we do? If we don’t finish the spell, he’s just going to keep torturing you until we finish it. I can’t watch you go through that again.”

“I don’t know…” Zane didn’t have any ideas on how to get away from Balaan. He was chained to the wall and powerless with the quell around his neck. But he wasn’t ready to give up like she was. “Heal my back. Do you know how their power works?” he asked as Paige began healing his wounds.

“They can teleport between locations and between the realms without a spell.” That explained how Balaan had slipped Zane’s attack.

When she finished healing his wounds, he scooted back until he was resting against the wall. “Check the door. Can it be opened?”

Paige crossed the room, her shadow crossing through the beam of light from the window in the door. “It’s locked.”

“Do you think there’s another way out of this room?”

“Can you get out of your chains?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” He didn’t want to admit to her that it was hopeless. He needed to distract her from her heartbreak, and trying to escape seemed like the only thing that would be a strong enough motivation.

“So you can’t.” She sat down next to him and leaned her head against the steal wall.

“Don’t give up on me now, Paige. I need you.” He leaned his cheek against her head. She twisted out from under him and leaned back to look at him. Then her shadow loomed in closer to him, and suddenly her lips were on his.

Blazes! Kissing her only got better and better. Every kiss with her seemed to be more thrilling than the one before, claiming the new ranking as the best kiss he’d ever experienced. He drove his fingers into her hair as he pulled her closer, his whole body consumed with desire for her. Passion like he’d never felt, not even for Lavender, crashed over him, driving out every thought of why they should not do this.

It was several minutes after he’d pulled her up onto his lap that a small voice in his head registered. Not here. Not now. It was almost an insignificant thought that he barely comprehended as his fingers followed the arch of her back, down to the curve of her hip. Her fingers ran over his bare chest and shoulders, digging into his biceps as she pulled him closer, seeming to be lost in the same need he was in.

Not here. The thought repeated, this time more persistent. He pulled away from her. “Paige, we can’t do this.”

“We have to, or he’s just going to keep hurting you.”

“I can’t let you do this just so you can put yourself in danger. I’m not Dean. You can’t protect me from the bad things. We will find a way to get out of this without falling for their games.”

“Oh, Zane,” she moaned as she pressed her face into his neck.

A blinding overhead light flickered on just as the door opened. Canaan entered, followed by Jackson, Dean’s murderer. Zane tightened his hold on Paige and lifted her with him as he rose



to his feet, trying to shield her from the two men.

“Don’t touch her.” Zane’s voice was menacing.

“I would never hurt her.” Canaan’s anger was evident, but it was the crazed look in his eyes that cut through Zane like white hot daggers, igniting his rage. When he felt Paige tremble in his arms, it only added to the fire that was burning inside of him.

The door slammed shut, confining the two men in with them. Zane saw this as an opportunity, and he fell back to the wall, pushing Paige behind him to block her from Canaan’s reach as he silently measured the distance between them. He just needed him to step into his circle so he could end his life.

“Canaan, stop screwing around. Your father isn’t here to see the show, and if you’re not careful, Zane is going to murder you.” Jackson pointed at the empty space between Zane and Canaan.

Canaan looked down at his feet, assessing the gap between them, and took a deliberate step back. “Dying was not on the agenda.” He flashed a smile at Zane, which only made Zane hate him even more. “Not for anyone in this room at least.”

“Only little boys who can’t protect themselves die tonight,” Zane spat. Paige choked on a sob and clutched his arm, her nails digging into his flesh. “I’m sorry,” he breathed.

“Dean is not dead,” Jackson claimed.

Zane scrutinized him, wanting to believe him, but he didn’t trust either of Balaan’s men. He felt like it was a sick game they were playing. Paige had been convinced that Dean was gone, and she was not one that could easily be fooled by a lie.

“He’s telling the truth,” Paige murmured, peeking her head around Zane’s arm to look at Jackson. She was studying him with her yellow eyes, her brows furrowed as she concentrated all her power on him.

“Are you sure?” Zane asked, wanting to believe her, but afraid to get his hopes up. Zane looked down at her, watching her intently, studying her reaction as she read Jackson’s mood and the truth of his words.

She gasped, then whispered, “He’s still alive.” A new round of tears stole Paige’s strength, and Zane had to catch her when she started to collapse.

“I’m almost as good as my grandmother when it comes to a glamour,” Jackson declared with pride.

“Okay, enough small talk. We are running out of time,” Canaan growled. “Let’s go, Paige,” He held his hand out to her. She tensed in Zane’s arms and pressed herself close to his body.

“She’s not going anywhere with you,” Zane spat.

“Yes, she is. We all are,” Canaan said. “We better go now before Balaan comes looking for the two of you.”

“Come on, Paige, just trust me here.” Jackson looked suddenly shy and vulnerable.

“Paige, do you think we can trust them?” Zane asked.

“Yes,” she exclaimed, nodding her head.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Zane held up a shackled wrist. Jackson stepped forward and held up a key.

“Don’t kill me,” Jackson quipped, stopping just outside of Zane’s kill circle. It was tempting to kill Jackson once he came close enough, but Canaan would get away before he could unlock the shackles and stop him.

“I can’t make any guarantees for the future, but right now, you can keep your life.” Jackson laughed. “I see why my sister is so smitten with you.”

Zane didn't want to be friends with either of the two, even if they were saving his life, so he didn't acknowledge Jackson's statement. Zane didn't really care who he was related to, he just wanted to get Paige far from Balaan, as fast as possible.

"Now what?" Zane asked, once the shackles hit the floor.

"Now I escort you out." Canaan once again held his hand out to Paige. "You first. Let's go."

Zane's arm tightened around Paige. The idea of being separated was almost unbearable, though he couldn't see any other options. "Where are you taking us?" Paige asked, her arms still around Zane.

"The Earth realm," Canaan informed her.

"No." Zane was adamantly opposed to the idea.

"There are more places to hide there," Jackson insisted, as if this was a reasonable option.

"What about Dean?" Paige asked as her arms loosened from around him.

"He'll be fine. Maze knows what's going on," Jackson said confidently.

"How do you know Maze?"

"We go way back. She taught me everything I know about glamours." Jackson laid his hand across his chest, tucking in his smallest finger. Paige gasped as she stepped away from Zane.

"I've been looking for you!"

Paige's memories struggled to take over Zane's mind. He tried to push them away, but he still relived a moment from Paige's childhood when she was looking at the family photo that had caused an argument between her parents.

In the picture, Dean was about three years old. He was sitting on her father's lap with the rest of the family gathered around. Her mother sat next to him with Charlotte and Ariaah on the floor, holding their two newest children, while Paige and her brothers stood next to and behind their parent's chairs. Kaison's hand visible, with his small finger tucked in, a symbol of Kaison's missing son.

*"Must you ruin every one of our family photos with that symbol?" Aminah demanded.*

*"Yes. Until we return home and he is with me, my family is not complete," Kaison replied.*

*"Our family is complete."*

*"I miss him."*

*"And you make sure I never forget it." Aminah pointed to her heart. "I was forced to endure two heartbreaks over your selfishness."*

Zane shook the memory away, then looked to the man staring back at Paige. Zane could see it now, the strong family resemblance. He looked very much like an older version of Dean, with a slight difference in the width of his chin and the heavy set of his brow. But Zane could see strong Bluescale features running through the man. This was Javon, Paige's Dyad brother.

"You were in our room," Zane accused.

"I had to see Paige in her dragon form. I knew you practiced in the field during the day, and I wanted to see for myself."

"Why did you run?" Paige asked.

"There would have been too much to explain, and I couldn't let any rumors get out that I had come to visit you. If Balaan found out who I really was..."

Paige nodded her head as she stepped away from Zane. Reluctantly, he dropped his arm from around her as she took another step forward. Shifting her head slightly to the side, she studied him with her sensitive Yellowback power. "You can't keep working for Balaan. He is destroying your soul. Father wouldn't be happy if his son didn't survive."

The mention of their father did something to the armor Javon used to keep his identity a secret. Letting out a long breath, he abruptly turned his back on her.

A thick silence filled the room as everyone looked at the back of Javon's head, as the man took several calming breaths at Paige's insight.

"Let's go," Canaan interrupted, looking pointedly at the door. He was right, they were wasting time. Everyone started to move at once, and Zane was grateful for the change of subject. What Paige had said about Javon's soul made Zane uneasy, and weary of fully trusting the Dyad, even if he was her half-brother.

Handing Paige over to Canaan went against everything Zane thought was right in the realm. But there was no time to second-guess or prolong Canaan and Javon's plan, because the instant Canaan had a hold of her outstretched hand, they both disappeared. In the instant she vanished, Zane felt a petrifying numbness spread through his stomach. What had he done? How could he have let her leave with Balaan's son?

"Relax, brother, it takes a few minutes," Javon advised when Zane started to pace the floor.

Zane rushed Javon, slamming him against the wall. "If I get wherever he takes me and Paige is not there, I will kill him. So, if you two are planning to double-cross us, it will not end well for either of you."

"Nobody is double-crossing anyone. Well, that's not exactly true, as Canaan and I are double-crossing his father." Zane relaxed some of the pressure he had on Javon.

"Why would Canaan—"

"Never mess with the woman a man loves, right?"

A menacing rumble, born from the fire of his dragon, escaped Zane's mouth as he glared at Javon.

"I see the gods have chosen Paige's companion wisely when they put you in her life." Zane loosened his hold on Javon as guilt ate at his conscious. It was not the gods that put them together, it was his momentary lapse of sanity.

"Everything okay here?" Canaan asked from behind Zane, causing Zane to flinch. He hadn't heard him return.

"As long as you take me to Paige, everything will be fine," Zane huffed, releasing Javon and turning to Canaan.

He had the body of an unconscious guard with him. Canaan and Javon worked together, like they did this sort of thing all the time. They propped the guard against the wall and put the shackles on his wrists.

Javon then knelt to put his hand on the man's wrist. "Give me your hand. It helps if I have a physical connection with the source." Zane held his hand out to Javon, wishing they could just leave and he could be sure Paige was okay. The fact that he was not feeling any pain did little to ease his anxiety. Javon grabbed his wrist and started to chant under his breath. Zane watched as the guard transformed into a mirror image of himself.

"Can you take this off?" Zane asked, pulling on the quell around his neck. He was tired of being treated like a caged animal. Javon granted his request. Pulling out a small key to unlock the quell, he then put the blasted thing around the glamoured guard, adding the final touch to the ruse.

"What about Dean?" Zane asked.

"He will stay with Quinn for now. Maze is going to talk to him and put a glamour on him so he looks like a commoner. The realm will learn of his death and the queen's disappearance," Javon explained.

"What will she tell him about Paige?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask." Javon shrugged, as if it didn't matter.

“She should tell him the truth, because Paige would. She says he deals with things better if he has the truth. My sister Ellie will take him if Quinn can’t keep him for long.”

“I’ll try and get a message to her,” Javon assured him.

“You’re not coming?” Zane asked.

“No, I have much to do here. But I’m sure our paths will cross again.” There was a knowing arrogance in his smile that made Zane wonder what he had in mind for defeating Balaan. But before he could ask, Canaan’s hand clamped down on Zane’s shoulder, and he felt a sickening pull in his stomach. Just when he thought he couldn’t take it anymore and was going to vomit, the sensation stopped, and he was in an entirely different location.

He looked around wildly, expecting to see Paige, but she was nowhere in sight. All he saw was a dark forest with strange looking trees, unlike he’d ever seen, but he knew them from Paige’s memories that they were called Maple trees, with a few pines of some kind. He smelled the air and unfamiliar scent of Earth wafted in. For a moment he was in a daze from the overload of new information, but he shook it off quickly.

## Chapter 3

“Where’s Paige?” he demanded.

“There.” Canaan pointed to a clump of trees beyond, where a small light could be seen in the distance.

“Don’t play games with me,” Zane shouted, grabbing Canaan and throwing him up against the nearest tree. Canaan used his power to escape Zane’s hold almost instantly, leaving Zane frustrated and empty-handed.

“I’m not messing with you. I swear, she’s there and she’s safe,” Canaan snarled from behind him. Canaan sounded like he was telling the truth, but Zane had a hard time trusting Balaan’s son.

They started walking toward the light. Zane could have easily covered the distance alone in a fraction of the time, but he wanted to keep Canaan close in case something went wrong, and he didn’t want to miss the opportunity to snap Canaan’s neck.

“You know, you have a bad temper?” Canaan quipped.

“I’ve had a bad night.”

“I’m just saying, there are a lot of rumors about your cruelty. You better not ever mistreat Paige.”

“They are just rumors. There’s no truth there,” Zane said bitterly, hating that the fear his staff at Blackhorn felt toward him had somehow reached Balaan’s son, who was now lecturing him on how to treat his companion.

They fell into a long silence as they walked; Canaan seemed just as anxious to reach the light as Zane did, and didn’t complain about the brisk pace Zane maintained, even though Canaan had to jog to keep up.

“If Javon finds out that you’ve hurt her, he will have your head. And don’t think the good will he has for you now will last long if you lay one hand on her.”

Canaan was serious. He even seemed a little afraid of Javon. Paige’s comment about Javon’s soul came to mind, causing a shiver to run down Zane’s back. What horrors was the man capable of?

“What has he done for your father?”

“Whatever he’s had to. It’s not easy for someone to get as close to my father as Javon has.”

Zane could sense he wasn’t going to get any more information about Javon’s efforts to get close to Balaan out of Canaan, at least not without resorting to threats and violence.

A log cabin came into view. Its dark outline solidified itself in the shadows from the sparse lights on the outside. Canaan entered first without knocking, not even pausing to welcome Zane in or direct him on where to find Paige. He had a focus all his own.

“Kinsey,” he called out, moving swiftly toward a door at the back of the cabin.

“Another door opened from the other side of the house, this one was covered in glass—a French door, Zane recalled from Paige’s memories.

Paige stepped inside, her eyes glassy with unshed tears, and Zane was at her side, wrapping his arms around her before she could take in a breath to say his name. Her arms came around his waist and she leaned her head against his chest.

“Kinsey?” Canaan asked her.

“She’s on the deck.”

“Outside—” Canaan didn’t look happy as he walked by the couch, grabbed a blanket that was lying over the back, and passed by Paige and Zane as if they weren’t there.

Now that Paige was in his arms, he didn’t care about anything else. He just stood there holding her, happy to be breathing in her soft sea scent and enjoying the feel of her arms willingly around him. Zane watched as Canaan strode up to a girl sitting on the deck and covered her with the blanket.

“How are you?” he heard Canaan ask through the open door, his voice full of concern. ‘Never mess with the woman a man loves.’ Javon’s reason for Canaan betraying his father came back to Zane. Was she Canaan’s reason for double-crossing Balaan?

“The same.” She reached out and ran her long, slender fingers across Canaan’s cheek.

“You look tired.”

“It was a long night.”

“Zane is here now?”

“Yes. Why don’t you come inside where it’s warmer and you can meet him?”

“I’m sure if his night was as bad as Paige described, he’ll want to take a shower and go to bed. I can meet him in the morning.” She patted the seat next to her, and Canaan accepted, wrapping his arms around her as she snuggled into his side. “See? It’s not cold at all,” she said as he kissed the top of her head.

Paige pulled away before Zane was ready. The sight of her weak and bloody flashed in his mind, and his arms tensed to pull her back. “I drew a bath for you.”

“You did?” Zane was shocked. Since when did she do things like that for him? He wasn’t sure how to react or what to say. “Thank you,” was the only appropriate response that came to mind.

“You look awful,” she said as she led him into the bedroom, past the bed and into the attached bathroom. She pointed out his towel and a change of clothes, then promptly left him to get cleaned up. He’d thought she seemed rushed and nervous as she showed him his supplies, but when he looked in the mirror, he figured it was just because he looked like death. His corps-self walking around, his whole torso, most of his face and arms, were covered in dried blood. His skin shimmered in a sickening way.

He shed his trousers and stepped into the hot water, instantly sinking into the large tub until his face was covered. After he washed all the blood away, he leaned back against the wall of the tub and enjoyed the way it curled to fit his body. The hot water released so much tension that he’d been keeping that he soon found it difficult to keep his eyes open.

Paige was already in bed. When he laid down, she immediately snuggled up to him as if it was the most natural thing for them to do. He wrapped his arms around her and felt her body relax into his as the contact eased the persistent need to finish the Desma.

He was almost asleep when she woke him with a surprising statement. “We almost died today.”

“Shh, we’re safe now.”

“We don’t know that. Balaan could so easily figure out where we are. He could have someone here in no time.”

“I don’t think he’ll take us by surprise again.”

“He could have a sniper with a high-powered rifle shoot you the minute you walk out that door. You would never see it coming.”

“Paige, please, calm down. You know we can’t predict what will happen next. Can’t you

just be happy we're alive right now?"

"No, Zane. Do you know there were times tonight when I thought he was going to kill you? Do you know what that would mean?"

"Yes."

"No, you don't, or you wouldn't be laying there trying to sleep right now. You would be stripping me down to finish this Desma."

"What?"

"Dean is too vulnerable to be left unprotected. I can't have my life tied to yours for another minute."

"Paige—"

"I'm serious, Zane. I want to do this right now."

"I can't," Zane admitted.

"What do you mean, you can't?" There was a harsh accusation in her voice that made him angry.

"I mean I can't. I'm too tired. Seriously, if you want to finish the Desma, we can do it in the morning before we leave this room. But you need to give me time to recover from everything."

She huffed and rolled away from him, although she stayed close enough that her back was plastered against his side.

\*\*\*\*

He awoke to sunlight streaming through the window and Paige in his arms. Without thinking, he leaned over to place a kiss on her forehead. She stirred a little, and he kissed her cheek. When her eyes fluttered open, he kissed her nose. She reached out, cupping his face. The feel of her palm against his skin so willingly was exhilarating. She was so soft, so warm, and so alive.

She pulled herself closer to him so her body was stretched out along his. He wound his arms around her as her lips met his again and again. They collided and pulled away in a fog of desire. He lost himself in Paige, not caring what it would mean to finish the Desma. He didn't worry about how she would see him or treat him after. All that mattered was that the need for her was becoming impossible to deny.

Even if this was the only blissed out, kiss-drunk moment they ever shared, it was going to be truly memorable to him.

He rolled onto his back, pulling Paige with him. Immediately she started working with the new position and her kisses deepened.

I need you, he thought.

"Zane," she pulled away, just enough to say his name. He wondered if it had been more than a thought and he'd somehow said those words out loud.

"Yeah?" he murmured into the soft skin at her neck. Unable to keep his hands off of her, even if she was upset about what he said.

"Slow down," she breathed.

Paige's reality crashed into him, and he was suddenly overthinking his every move. His hands threatened to come off her body. He wanted to hold her tighter to prove he wasn't freaking out, but his hands couldn't maintain the proper amount of pressure. Paige could sense his awkwardness and she pulled away in a huff.

"No, Paige, please don't stop...I need you." He leaned in to kiss her again, but she pushed him away as she rolled off of him.

She sat on the edge of the bed with her back to him, and for a long time, neither of them spoke.

“Paige, I’m sorry. I thought you wanted to finish the Desma,” Zane finally said, hating that he never knew where he stood with her, that she had all the power in their relationship. That he didn’t actually have a relationship with her beyond the need to finish the Desma.

“What about Indeara?” The abrupt change of subject confused him.

“Indeara? What does she have to do with any of this?”

“Do you want to know what she said at our reception?”

“No, I don’t really care.”

“She said she loved you, and that you had asked her to enter the Desma.”

“That’s a lie.”

“She wasn’t lying. I would have been able to tell if she was.”

“Blazes, Paige, if you don’t want to finish the Desma, just say so.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that she believes it to be true?”

“It’s all smoke,” he fumed. The more she talked about Indeara, the angrier he became. “You have all my memories. You know I hardly know her. She has to be lying.”

“How can you be such a coward?”

“Coward?”

“Yes, when it comes to Indeara, I think you are.”

How could she say that after what he went through last night?

He wished he could think of her words as nothing more than the buzzing of some annoying insect, but they were biting, poisoning him. They knocked the wind out of him as he stared at the back of her head in stunned silence. His fists balled around the sheets, squeezing so hard his fingers ached. She lifted her hand, rubbing her fingers as if she was in pain too.

He jumped off the bed and bolted for the bathroom before he did something he would regret. Slamming the door behind him, he prayed she wouldn’t start yelling at him through the wall.

His breathing was erratic as he leaned his weight against the door. There was nothing he could do to redeem himself. Even after enduring what he did last night to protect Dean, she still couldn’t see him in any better light as the night he entered the Desma with her.

Blazes, I’m a fool, he thought

He should have known that it was only the intense need to finish the Desma racking their bodies that had caused her to be more affectionate. She needed him physically, but that didn’t mean that she liked him any more than the day he destroyed her hope.

He had no idea what to do now. There was no course of action that seemed to work with her.

Maybe his dad had been right about finishing the Desma with her, then find a mistress who would return his affections. How many girls wanted to be with a king? Strangely, the idea turned his stomach. He could hardly hold the idea in his mind without thinking of Lavender’s betrayal. She had never loved him. She only wanted his crown.

Paige never cared about my title. Stop! he ordered himself. He couldn’t allow himself to think of her in a way that gave him any sort of hope of the future he’d once envisioned. He needed to get away from her, away from his thoughts of her. His urge to fly was making his muscles twitch. He strode out of their room and through the house, headed for the door and open sky.

“You can’t fly here.” Paige’s voice stopped him with his hand on the doorknob. She didn’t sound angry anymore, just sad. He turned the knob and opened the door as if she hadn’t spoken.



“Zane,” Canaan called out, alarm in his voice.

“Let him go,” Paige said as the door closed behind him. With the click of the latch, his heart twisted in his chest. Ignoring the pain, he turned toward the lake he saw behind the cabin, deciding if he couldn’t fly, then he would run at his top speed. He didn’t return to the house until he thought he could tolerate being in the same room with Paige.

\*\*\*\*

There was near silence when he entered the cabin through the back door. He didn’t call out for Paige or the other two house occupants. He just went to the kitchen and started grabbing everything edible in sight.

Paige slipped silently into the kitchen, pressing her back against the wall, looking vulnerable and small. The sight of her standing there, so exposed, angered him for some reason. He didn’t want the love he had for her to soften his anger. He wasn’t in the mood to forgive her for what she’d said. And this time, he didn’t want her pain to override his.

She took a step toward him, reaching out to touch him. “Zane, I—”

“Don’t touch me,” he said, as if the words were a curse.

