

‘Orkaan,’ Kyndra said. ‘Go ahead and eat him.’

The soldier bristled, lifting his sword. His red plate shone in the sun. ‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘Try me.’

*You know I don’t like eating humans, Char told her silently. Besides, it does nothing for my people’s reputation.*

*Are you a dragon or not?* she replied in the dispassionate way she said everything. *Hurry and eat him.*

‘Do you know who I am?’ The soldier drew himself up. Fifty or so men were arrayed behind him, their expressions hidden in helms. ‘I am Captain of the Fourteenth. I am –’

‘You are obstructive,’ Kyndra said. ‘Sartya is no longer an empire. It does not need a standing army the size of the Fist. Your regiment is dissolved, as of this moment.’

‘Preposterous,’ the man sneered. ‘On whose authority do you act?’

‘My own,’ Kyndra said. *Eat him, Char. If you insist on following me around, make yourself useful.*

*Why can’t you just burn him up?*

*Too quick. I need to make an example to the rest of them.*

‘And who are you precisely?’

Char winced. It was true that, with a hood shadowing her face and her long red hair tumbling out of it, Kyndra did not look especially threatening. ‘You will wish you hadn’t asked,’ he rumbled.

Kyndra smiled. It wasn’t really a smile, just a flexing of the muscles around her mouth. ‘A woman trying to put this country back together,’ she said.

The words themselves weren’t ominous in the least. It was the way she said them, Char thought, in the dismissive tone one might use for somebody who would be dead soon and thus not worth wasting breath on. It still chilled him, after all these months.

*You can’t just kill people who don’t agree with you, Kyndra, he thought at her. That’s what dictators do...and emperors.*

*If you eat him, it won’t look as bad.*

Char gave a silent sigh. *This* was why he followed her around. Because for all her power, she was still young and stubborn and – he admitted despairingly – heartless. Despite her ideals of peace, it was not a good combination. In her hands, peace was a sword. Not for the first time, he wished Hagdon was still alive. He could have told her all of this in a way she might have listened to.

*Fine*, he thought. *But this is the last time. Make the most of it.* His head snaked out and grabbed the offending soldier. Char tried to make it quick, but the stupid Sartyan armour was tough and there were more screams than he would have liked. He swallowed, knowing he'd have a bellyache later. *The things I do for you.*

*Appreciated*, Kyndra said. It had all happened so fast that the rest of the regiment hadn't had time to draw their weapons. Not that they would have made a difference. Kyndra regarded them sternly. 'Iresonté is dead. The war is lost. These things cannot be changed. But you have a choice.' She pushed back her hood to reveal the constellations on her face: the power etched into her skin. A murmur spread through the watching soldiers. Some fell, horrified, to their knees, armour ringing off the hard stone of the uplands. 'Either accept and live. Or die for a world that is dead.' The stars stared out of eyes colder than the void.

One brave soul said, 'But what are we to do if not soldiering? Many of us have no other skills.'

'I suggest you learn some,' Kyndra replied and then seemed to relent. 'Speak to my associate, Irilin. She is in charge of the dissolution of the military. She will help you find the means to start anew.'

Poor Irilin had her work cut out for her, Char thought. At least Mikael had stuck around to help. Hagdon's brother didn't have his authority, but neither did he have his grimness. For the moment, at least, Char felt they needed the levity more.

He watched Kyndra as she gave out instructions and thanked all possible gods that the most she ever felt about her opponents was impatient. He was beginning to understand the reason why Starborn were not permitted emotions. An angry one could annihilate the world on a whim. He shuddered. The thought of Kyndra angry was terrifying.

'Where next?' he asked her when she'd finished frightening the soldiers.

'Parakat,' she answered at once. 'Avery and Irilin both wanted it torn down as soon as everything useful was removed. Possibly a waste of a good outpost, but I promised.'

'And Starborn keep their promises to humans?'

She gave him an odd look. 'Of course. Besides, it'll only take me a moment.'

Since they were a scant hour from the fortress, as the dragon flies, Char managed to persuade her to travel like a normal person for once. He wasn't really sure why it mattered to him. She had never been normal, couldn't even go back to a semblance of it. But it made him feel as if he were still part of her life. He laughed harshly at himself. None of the dragons in Magtharda understood why he followed her. But they hadn't lived as a human for twenty years. They hadn't met her before she was Starborn.

*Sounds like you're thinking too much again,* she commented from his back.

*You can hear me think now?*

*Only if I want to.*

*Please don't then.*

He felt her shift. *Ah, we're here.*

Char banked once over the ugly building and landed just before the bridge. Autumn was coming on in the north and snow flecked the air. He felt Kyndra slide neatly off his back. 'I don't sense anyone inside,' she said. 'Good.' Without wasting another second, she lifted a hand and the whole edifice snapped like a dry twig.

Char watched the towers crumble into the abyss, the bridge flaking and falling with a roar. His chest tightened. Despite the fact he had seen what Kyndra could do, he still felt a kind of horrified awe at her casual exercise of power. 'Gods.'

Kyndra dusted her hands off. It was quite bizarre, as if she'd done no more than throw out some rubbish. She still had the habits of her old life, Char realised. Maybe she'd dusted her hands down the exact same way while cleaning her mother's inn. The image was too dislocating to entertain.

'I've probably been away from home long enough,' he said reluctantly. 'Mother is trying to teach me the language and I said I'd practise.' It was reluctant because he never knew where to find her again and she didn't always reply when he called her silently.

'I have to drop by Naris anyway,' Kyndra said. 'And can't afford the time it takes to fly.'

'You truly have a gift for making one feel appreciated,' he muttered. Kyndra, of course, merely blinked and patted him farewell.

'I will need to speak with Sesh about the ambertrix treaties before long,' she suddenly offered and it was Char's turn to blink. 'So I will see you sooner rather than later.' In an instant, she was gone.

She wasn't Kyndra, he told himself, as he took flight for home. She was the human-shaped avatar of thousands of soulless beings. The wind howled across his wings and ice began to form on their tips, but inside, Char was warm. Because there were times he suspected that the woman he had known still walked beside him, just out of sight.