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## CHAPTER ONE



**T**HE BATTLE BETWEEN THE DRAGONS AND the wolves was over.

Now, less than an hour later, Anders sat between his best friend, Lisabet, and his sister, Rayna, both of whom were on makeshift beds amid the bustle of the infirmary.

All the scorch dragons were in human form—the crowded cave was deep inside the mountain, not big enough for even one actual dragon. As it was, bodies were packed into every corner as medics hurried back and forth.

Anders's attention was abruptly yanked away from the flurry of activity when Lisabet groaned beside him. Her pale skin was whiter than usual right now, and even her freckles didn't look like themselves. She'd hit her head hard defending

the dragons from the wolves she and Anders had accidentally led here.

“Are you okay?” He leaned in to get a better look at her, but the answer came from his other side, in his twin’s dry voice.

“She tried to knock her brains out. She’s probably not.”

He turned to look at Rayna, who was curled up under a huge pile of blankets, only her head visible. Her warm brown skin had turned a dangerous gray when she’d first been hit by a wolf’s ice spear, and though it was slowly coming back to normal, her cheeks were still unnaturally pale, the color of ashes. *Cold damage*, the healer had said.

One of Anders’s Ulfar Academy classmates had done that to her. He and Lisabet had come here to try and save Rayna, and his class had followed in pursuit. If *only* they hadn’t followed, everybody would be safe right now.

During the long race to reach Drekhelm, Anders had been constantly afraid. Afraid Rayna was about to be sacrificed by the dragons. Afraid he wouldn’t know how to save her even if he did make it. Afraid she wasn’t his twin sister at all,

since she could transform into a scorch dragon while he was an ice wolf, and everyone knew it was impossible to find both in the same family.

But instead of saving her, he'd found her settling in just fine. He'd brought danger right to her doorstep, and he'd made enemies of the wolves he'd just learned to think of as his pack. And now he was trapped at Drekhelm, the dragon stronghold.

"I'm okay." Lisabet's voice jolted him back to the present.

"The nurse said you'd have a headache," he told her quietly. "And you have to stay awake for a few hours more, in case there's any damage inside your head that they can't see."

"Rayna?" she whispered, and Anders and Lisabet both looked across at Anders's sister, who was still shivering.

"I'm fine," Rayna insisted. "It was just an ice spear, it'll wear off eventually. I'm lucky it only nicked me. I'll probably be walking around in an hour."

Anders felt a quick rush of affection, warming him from the inside out. That was Rayna, ready

to get up and keep going, as she had been all their lives. He still couldn't quite believe he was by her side again.

But a nurse loomed up behind her, his hands on his hips. "You won't be going anywhere in an hour," he said firmly. "If you're lucky, you'll be discharged in the morning, and then it'll only be because we have others worse than you. As for you two"—and he nodded to Anders and Lisabet, his square-jawed face stern for the two wolves—"you can go to guest quarters. We've got an escort waiting to take you there. The Dragonmeet won't want to see you until the morning."

Anders followed his gaze and saw Ellukka, the blond girl Rayna had said was her friend. She'd been anything but friendly at first, but right after the battle she'd seemed to feel a little differently. She'd seen Lisabet defending Leif, the head of the Dragonmeet.

Just now, she had her arms folded across her chest and was leaning against the wall by the infirmary door. She was bigger and broader than Anders, and with her arms crossed like that, she looked like she meant business all over again.

Anders turned back to Rayna. “I don’t want to leave you here,” he said, and his concern was *mostly* for his sister.

“They won’t let me go until tomorrow,” she said. “You know where to find me. Go and get some rest, I’ll be okay.”

His instincts still rebelled against leaving his twin, but he knew she was right. She had been safe up until now, and he did desperately need to rest. He’d run with the pack all yesterday across the plains, and overnight he’d crossed a river and climbed a mountain with Lisabet. It was late morning now, which meant he’d been on the move for more than a day straight.

“Tell them to call me if you get worse,” he said to Rayna.

“If I were you,” the nurse said to Anders, scowling, “I’d be more worried about myself right now. There are going to be a *lot* of questions for you tomorrow, and if you don’t have answers the Dragonmeet likes, you can be sure they’ll extract better ones.”

“Leave him alone,” Rayna snapped, pushing up on one elbow.

With one last significant look at all of them, the nurse stalked off to see to other patients, and Rayna turned her attention to Anders. “I’ll make sure someone calls you if I get worse,” she promised. “And let’s deal with tomorrow when we get there. We’ll make them understand.”

Anders wasn’t nearly as confident as she sounded—Rayna’s version of talking their way out of things was what had started their transformation to wolf and dragon in the first place—but he knew there was nothing he could do today, not with his sister and his best friend both almost too weak to move.

So he helped Lisabet sit up, then stand, keeping an arm carefully around her. Ellukka pushed away from the doorway to lead them outside, but despite her improved opinion of Lisabet she didn’t seem inclined to help keep her steady.

She led Anders and Lisabet down hallways carved into the dark stone of the mountain, all human-size rather than dragon-size. Anders wondered if, like the wolves, the dragons spent most of their time in human form.

The trio passed lamps that appeared to be made of solid metal, fixed to the wall by brackets. Whenever they came within a few steps of one, it began to glow softly, and when Anders looked behind him, the others had faded into darkness once more.

Lisabet was watching them as well. “That’s actually happening, right?” she asked. “It’s not just that I hit my head?”

“The lights?” Ellukka asked, looking over her shoulder. “Well of course. They’re artifacts.”

Now that Anders looked more closely, he could see the rows of runes engraved around the sconces. Those runes meant the lamps had been designed by wolves and forged by dragons—before the last great battle ten years before, no doubt.

Ellukka stopped by a cupboard built into the hallway, pulling out mismatched clothes for them in blues and greens and reds—the dragons seemed to prefer bright colors, and even in the short time he’d been here, Anders had noticed they all dressed differently. The wolves all wore the same uniform—a sign of their pack, their togetherness.

“This is the guest area,” Ellukka said, in answer to his questioning glance. “There are spare rooms, spare clothes, things like that.”

“Do you have a lot of visitors?” he asked, trying to imagine who could possibly come all the way up a mountain. Trying to find a way toward friendly conversation with this girl who seemed to know his sister so well. He needed every bit of help he could get right now.

“Most dragon families and groups move around a lot,” Ellukka said. “We live pretty spread out. There are aeries all up and down the Icespire mountain range—in mountains all over Vallen, actually—so we visit each other quite often. It’s usually easier not to carry a lot of your stuff.”

She stopped at a wooden door. Inside was a cozy bedroom with a bed on either side, each draped with a thick patchwork quilt. A rug covered the stone floor, and a glass-paned window peeked out onto the face of the mountain itself. There was another wooden door on the other side of the little room, and a water clock on the wall, a slow stream of liquid

trickling through marked tubes to show the passing of time.

*Good*, Anders thought. They could use that to keep track of how long Lisabet needed to stay awake. And how far away morning was, and with it the Dragonmeet.

“It’s warm in here,” Lisabet said, and Anders thought immediately of the hot glow he’d seen deep inside the mountain as he’d flown above Drekhelm on Rayna’s back. “And it was out in the hall too,” she continued. “But there aren’t any fireplaces. Do you use the lava?”

“What else?” Ellukka said, dumping the clothes on one of the beds and sorting them into two piles. “And some artifacts help with the temperature as well. There’s a bath right through that door there, as much hot water as you want. I mean, I know wolves prefer cold, but I assume you don’t want cold showers.”

“Not when we’re in human form,” Lisabet agreed.

“Well, get clean,” Ellukka said, folding her arms and backing up toward the door. “You smell like wet dog.”

The door closed behind her, and Anders sank down onto one of the beds. Every muscle in his body ached, but he made himself lean over to unlace his boots, and then pull off socks wet from the snow outside.

He realized he was still wearing his sister's coat. He turned his head and inhaled, and found it held that scent that was uniquely Rayna's, though now there was a hint of spicy sweetness to it that hadn't been there before. And even though it wasn't quite the same, the familiarity of it made his eyes ache.

He had done it. He was here, with Rayna. Whatever came next, he'd find a way through it, because he was with his sister again.

"You have the first bath," he said to Lisabet. He needed a few minutes to pull himself together.

She disappeared through the door, and he flopped backward onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. It was smooth stone, just like the walls. *Because this room is inside a mountain*, he reminded himself. *Because it's inside Drekhelm*.

What would the Dragonmeet say tomorrow? What answers did they want to extract?

How could he convince them to let him stay near Rayna, without betraying the wolves?

But despite the nurse's words and the fear they'd kindled, he also admitted to himself that the dragons weren't at all what he'd imagined. He didn't quite know what they *were* like yet, who they were, but the stories at Ulfar and in Holbard had always made them out to be bloodthirsty villains, living only to hurt those who weren't like them. And whatever the truth was, he now knew it was much more complicated than that. The dragons had friends here, family. They had rooms for guests and debates about the right thing to do.

Rayna had found a home here in a way he'd never imagined possible. He wasn't sure what that meant for him, or for Lisabet.

He was still lost in this thought when Lisabet came out of the bathroom. She was clad in a dragon shirt, tunic, and trousers, her black curls wet. There was color back in her face now, her skin a little less white and a little more pink beneath her freckles, but she was nibbling her lip in the way she did when she was worried.

“Anders,” she said quietly. “What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know what we *can* do,” he admitted. “If the Dragonmeet has questions for us, and we can’t answer them ...”

“I know.” Her words were barely audible. “But we can’t go home. Somehow, I thought we’d be taking Rayna back with us, even though I suppose there was never really any chance that we’d manage to ... I mean, the pack was always going to follow us. Professor Ennar would never let us go alone. And what would we have done with a dragon once we got back to Holbard?”

Anders felt another deep pang of guilt at the thought of Ennar, their combat teacher, who had put herself and all the class in danger, coming after them. If only, if *only* they hadn’t followed.

“Rayna likes it here,” he said, not quite knowing what he made of that fact.

“How can she?” asked Lisabet. Lisabet had always been the one to stand up for the dragons in class, to ask questions about how they could be as evil as their teachers claimed, when they’d once worked alongside wolves to produce the

magical artifacts found all over Vallen. But now she looked small, and scared.

“She’s had weeks,” he said. “It doesn’t sound like very long, but I was at Ulfar for the same amount of time. And we got to know each other pretty well.”

“Of course,” Lisabet said. “You’re my best friend. She’s had the same time to get to know the dragons, I suppose. She’ll want to stay here.”

“Well, besides the fact that she made friends here, the Wolf Guard tried to kill her last time she was in Holbard,” he pointed out. “She’ll want us to stay too.” She’d want *him* to stay, at least—he’d make her see about Lisabet. “I don’t know if it’s safe, but we don’t have anywhere else to go. We stole the chalice. Or at least I did, but they won’t believe you had nothing to do with it. Not after the fight. They saw you defend Leif.”

“I had to,” she said helplessly, sinking down onto the bed opposite him. “If the head of the Dragonmeet had been killed, it would have started a war big enough to make the last great battle look like a game. Anyone can see that.”

“Anyone can when you explain it,” he agreed. “But you saw it straight away, and nobody else stopped to think at all.” That was Lisabet, always clever, always solving puzzles. “What do you think would happen if we did try to go back?”

“Exile,” she whispered. “Stealing the chalice and fighting just now was a betrayal of the pack. They could put us on a ship out of Vallen, never to return.”

They were both quiet, imagining that total loss of their home, that separation from everything they knew. In her own way, Lisabet had lost even more than he had.

Lisabet was the daughter of Sigrid, who was the Fyrstulf, the leader of Ulfar—of all the wolves. And though Sigrid was sometimes terrifying, usually overwhelming, and possibly less than honest, she was still Lisabet’s mother. Anders knew firsthand what losing family was like, but he had Rayna back, at least for now. Lisabet’s loss was only beginning.

Anders could picture the Fyrstulf’s cold, pale stare as clearly as if she were right in front of him. The fact that Lisabet was her daughter wouldn’t

save them from her wrath, or from exile, if she got her hands on them. Lisabet had to deal not only with the loss of the pack, but with the knowledge that her own mother wouldn't allow her to return to it.

“Go and wash,” she said eventually. “I promise I won't fall asleep while you're gone, I'll follow doctor's orders. You'll feel better once you're clean.”

He gathered up his half of the fresh clothes, making his way back into the bathroom. It was a small room with a stout wooden tub, a rail laden with towels, and another window, though the view outside was hidden in mist or cloud. He discovered there was a showerhead above the tub and also a spout lower down, in case you wanted to fill the bath. He passed on the idea of standing under the shower and instead turned on the spout, peeling off the rest of his clothes and climbing in carefully once the water was most of the way up the sides of the bath.

The hot water came up to his chin, his fingers and toes tingling as they warmed up, his skin itching as it adjusted to the temperature. And

then the heat was soaking into his exhausted bones, finally warming him up completely for the first time since he'd left the wolf camp at the cache. Back at Ulfar, even warm weather had made him feel woolly-headed and tired. Now, heat just felt good. That was strange. What had changed?

His thoughts swirled around like the hot water as he scrubbed himself clean, a mix of relief at knowing his sister was nearby again—that he could walk down the hallway to find her whenever he liked—and worry, and regret for his friends at Ulfar. He'd begun to find a home there, and now he'd never sit around the table in the dining hall with them again, watching Sakarias try to wheedle his way into everybody's spare dessert, while Viktoria quietly put vegetables on his plate while he wasn't looking. No more suffering through combat class with everyone else, running endless laps around the gym under Professor Ennar's watchful eye.

He *had* begun to find a home there, and now he'd lost it—and he had no idea if he could find a home here instead. He was an orphan, and he

was used to making do wherever he had to, but would the Dragonmeet even consider it? What would happen if he couldn't—or wouldn't—answer their questions?

He leaned down to pull out the plug and slowly dried himself. The clothes Ellukka had grabbed for him were soft and well-made: a pair of dark-blue trousers, a light-blue shirt, and a dark-green tunic to go on over it. As practical as his wolf's clothing, though more casual.

He pushed open the door and found Lisabet sitting on her bed eating a bowl of thick stew.

"Ellukka came back with food," she informed him around a mouthful.

Anders's bowl was sitting on the small table by the door, and he picked it up, sinking down onto his own bed, the soft patchwork quilt giving beneath him. For the next few minutes everything was quiet as they dunked dark-brown bread in the thick gravy of the stew and chewed their way through beef and carrot and potato.

When they were done, Lisabet still had a couple of hours to stay awake, so they tipped their boots over to rest the leather against the

warm stone floor, hoping they'd dry, and leaned back against their pillows. Anders was dying to crawl under the quilt and close his eyes—because he was exhausted, and because falling asleep would give him a break from the thoughts and questions racing around his head. But he made himself keep his eyes open.

“So,” he said, trying the words out loud. “We’re in Drekhelm.”

“We’re lying in their beds,” Lisabet agreed. “Pack and paws, we couldn’t be more in Drekhelm if we tried.”

“I wish you hadn’t come,” Anders whispered. “Not that I don’t want you here,” he hurried on, when he heard her hurt intake of breath. “But now you can’t go home. I’m used to moving to new places, to finding my feet wherever I go. But Ulfar’s always been your home.”

“We don’t even know if they’ll let us stay,” she said quietly. “You heard that man in the infirmary.”

“That’s what’s worrying me most,” he admitted. “What if they want us to tell them things we can’t?”

“We might not have a choice. And they’re not just going to ask questions about Ulfar’s secrets, they’re going to have questions about your icefire as well.”

“I have questions about my icefire,” Anders said. “I don’t know how I did it, but I can tell it’s ... gone. I don’t think I could do it again, I don’t know how.”

“Maybe we can tell them that,” Lisabet whispered. “They’ll think we’re less of a threat.” She didn’t sound very hopeful.

But the idea was starting to take root in Anders’s mind. “We don’t have to just wait around,” he said quietly. “We’ve been talking about how we can’t go back to Holbard, but maybe there’s an option in between going there and staying here.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Rayna’s better in the morning, she could help us get somewhere else. Somewhere they can’t find us, at least until we know what they’ve got planned for us,” he suggested.

“Do you think she’ll be well enough to move?” Lisabet’s tone said she was already

seriously considering the idea, which told Anders she'd been as worried as he was.

"I think we should go see her as soon as the sun comes up," he said. "And find out."

As the evening drew on, the only noise in their room was the slow trickling of the water in the clock, and the occasional soft click as a tube filled up completely, and the hands ticked on to show another quarter hour, draining out the water to start again.

Every so often he checked to make sure Lisabet was still awake, and she always was. Eventually the clock had counted off the hours they'd been told to wait, and it was late in the afternoon, almost a day and a half since they'd last woken up. They left the blinds open so the morning light would wake them, and each climbed under their quilts.

Anders waited for sleep to take him. The mattress was luxuriously soft, and the quiet trickle of the water lulled him. Against all the odds, and in defiance of every story he'd ever heard growing up, this was the most comfortable bed he'd ever slept in. Sleep tugged at his eyelids.

Whatever tomorrow held, he'd have to be ready to fight. If Rayna could hide them, that would buy them more time to learn the Dragonmeet's intentions and try to make a plan. If she couldn't, he'd have to face down the Dragonmeet and do something he'd never imagined he'd want to—he'd have to find a way to convince the council that he and Lisabet should be allowed to stay at Drekhelm.