



Everwhere

Rebecca Lee

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To Mamaw

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An Illusion of Peace

Malik sighed and sheathed his swords, wiping the sweat from his forehead and gazing out over the field with sightless eyes. He didn't need to see to know what lay in front of him, the smell of death, and blood and gore was thick and the connection he had with Nali provided him with enough detail. A field stained red with the blood of many. A good portion he had put there himself. There was nothing he hated more than dragon-thralls, the mindless killing machines that gave their souls to the beasts were as bad as the dragons themselves in his mind. "Malik?"

He glanced back out of reflex, his mind's eye seeing his face through Nali's eyes before he closed the bond down, "What is it?"

"Nil asked me to interrupt your brooding to

tell you that we're about to leave.”

He frowned at her “I wasn't brooding.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed, tugging playfully at the bond “You had this open, or did you forget. You were brooding.”

He sighed and shrugged “Surrounded by this much death, one can't help but brood.”

She laughed “Malik, you brood at feasts! I'm starting to believe it's the only mood you have!”

“Wench!” He laughed and pushed her away playfully.

She flicked the bond open and he saw her bow mockingly “My apologies, oh Prince.”

Malik scoffed and rolled his eyes, prince indeed “A prince of fools perhaps.”

Nali laughed “Come now, Nil and Nal aren't that bad.”

Malik looked at her askance and fingered the scar that split his eyebrow pointedly. The brothers had been trying to juggle their throwing

knives, one had gone flying and well, Malik had been the unsuspecting victim.

“Ok, you have a point.” She conceded.

He grinned “I’m glad we agree,” He sighed “Lend me your eyes, I don’t want to trip on some poor souls body.”

The bond flared to life and he saw her grin “Yes, having you kill them was bad enough, no need add insult to injury.”

He reached out and flicked her nose, pleased when he didn’t miss. Having Nali’s vision was an unpredictable thing, colors weren’t always right, and sometimes he didn’t have any depth perception. Now the world was black and white, but it was better than nothing. She stuck her tongue out at him and he laughed, “Come, before Nal comes looking for us.”

He offered her his arm—and neither would ever admit it was more for his sake than hers—and she led them through the field to where Malik’s men were waiting, milling about, kicking at bodies to look for survivors.

“Malik!” Nil called, standing from his brother’s

side to grin madly at them “We were starting to think you’d decided to leave us!”

Malik snorted “If only I’d thought of such!”

Nal pouted, the effect ruined by the grin still pulling at the corners of his mouth “You know you love us Malik!”

Malik slapped him upside the head as he passed “Yes, like a dog loves a flea.” The insult held no heat, he would never openly admit it, but he was fond of the fools he called his men.

Nal laughed and rubbed his head, sitting back down and throwing an arm over his brother’s shoulder “Nil here would like to get back to the city, he’s got a pretty little thing waiting for him at the inn.”

Nil shoved his brother off him “No, I believe that’s you dear brother. I will be sleeping for the next fortnight.”

“You’re no fun.”

“And you’re going to catch something you can’t get rid of.”

Nali laughed and dragged Malik away from

the brothers, "Mount up!" she called "We ride for home!"

Malik hoisted himself up on his horse, a big, sturdy gelding who knew his way to the city better than half the men, he turned him to face the others "Men of Vale! We return with victory and leave another squadron of thralls dead in our wake!" cheers went up around him, "These beasts think they can best us, think we are simple men like those who came before! But they are wrong! And as long as we still draw breath, Vale will never fall!"

Malik grinned at the roaring cheer that went up at his words, and glanced at Nali, taking in her pleased look with relief. He wasn't good at making speeches, was better at insulting his enemies as his swords ripped the life out of them. If his speech pleased Nali, then Malik knew he had done something right. "Good?" he asked, kicking his horse into a trot beside her.

"You know it was, don't go fishing for compliments." She smiled.

"I'm no good at these things as you know it."

She rolled her eyes “You’re better than you give yourself credit for Malik. In many things.”

Malik frowned and looked away, clenching the reins in his hands. “Don’t lie Nali, I know my shortcomings.” He had many.

Nali shook her head but let the subject drop. Malik was stubborn, and she had been friends with him for years, she knew it would take more than a few words to break through Malik’s ingrained dislike of himself. She honestly didn’t understand it though. The man was an expert swordsman, wielding his blades like they were merely extensions of his arms. He was tall, and strong and good looking, he would have to be touched in the head not to notice the women who flirted with him on the rare occasions he ventured into the taverns.

She sighed, she had vague memories of a happy, smiling boy, with bright blue eyes. A boy who didn’t care that she was a girl and was just a happy to roll in the mud with her as he was to wrestle with his brothers. She also remembered the bright, hot heat of the fire that engulfed Malik’s home. The screams she

heard through the thin walls. She remembered her father bringing Malik home, white cloth wrapped around his eyes. For the longest time she thought that boy was dead.

“I thought I was the one who brooded.”

Nali shifted on her horse and glanced at Malik “Surrounded by so much death, one can’t help but brood.” She said, parroting his earlier words.

He smirked “Except we are no long surrounded by such death, in fact, I believe Vale is within sight.”

She looked up and huffed, he was right, she could see the great stone walls of Vale in the distance, “I’ll be glad to see home.”

“Are you actually going to go home? Or spend all your free time at the Barracks?”

“There’s nothing wrong with spending time there, extra training never hurt anyone.” It was true she had one of the better houses in the city, given to her by the Royal family in exchange for her services. But it was big and lonely with only herself to fill it, and she much

perfered the loud and cramped barracks. Her soldiers were there, always willing to talk, or drink or fight.

“No, but you don’t need the training.”

“You don’t leave the Barracks either.”

Malik smirked “I don’t have a house the size of yours either.”

Nali pouted “I’ll make you a deal? I’ll go home if you come stay with me. If it’s not good for me to stay at the Barracks all the time, then it’s not good for you either.”

Malik sighed “Deal. But only if you cook for me.

She leaned out of the saddle and punched him hard in his shoulder “What do I look like? A maid?”

He smirked “Those are my terms, take them or leave them.”

“Fine.”

They rode into the city in silence, the towns folk so used to seeing them come and go

that they no longer too much notice of them. Leaving the horses with a stable boy, Nali shooed the men into the Barracks, smacking Nal on the back of the head when he tried to sneak past her and into town “Not yet. Take care of your weapons and then you can take care of your cock.”

The men laughed and Nal blushed, “Fine, fine!”

Nali rolled her eyes, she’d been leading these men for almost five years and they still couldn’t get over a woman calling them out on their shit.

Malik chuckled “If only I could get a blush out of Nal like that.”

“Grow a pair of tits and you might.”

Malik snorted “I think I’ll pass.”

“Oh well, you’ll never know what you’re missing then.” Nali joked, grabbing at her chest playfully. She smirked when she caught the light flush on Malik’s dark cheeks. She loved making his uncomfortable, breaking through that tough shell that he loved to pretend was all he was.

“Come on you harlot, you promised to feed me.”

Nali laughed “Prude.”

Nali’s house was in the rich district of the city, and they walked through the winding streets together, ignoring the odd looks they got from some of the Nobles they passed. It was rare that Nali was seen in this part of town, she favored the rougher districts, the taverns, the barracks, any place she could potentially get into a fight. Seeing Malik here was ever rarer.

Nali leaned in “I wonder how many of them think we’re fucking.”

Malik choked “Nali!”

She laughed “What? You’re blind, not deaf, I know you’ve heard the rumors. Seeing me bringing you to my house? It’s probably the first thing their minds went to.” Malik flushed, glad he couldn’t see the faces they were passing now. Nali was right, he had heard the rumors about them. It was hard not to when it seemed to be the only subject some of them men talked about. He’d been enraged the first

time he'd heard them, had dragged the two men into the training ring. He'd beaten them into the ground before they'd finally figured out why he was so mad. They'd promised all but their souls that they'd never utter a word about it again. Of course, those two men had been Nil and Nal, and everyone and their dog knew the only way those two would be quiet was if you sewed their lips shut.

"Does it bother you?"

"What?" he looked at her, frowning.

"That they think we're sleeping together, does it bother you?" Nali asked, not looking at him. She'd never considered that Malik might not care for the rumors, might not shake them off with a laugh like she did.

"It...doesn't bother me, not like you think." He sighed and grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently "It's a lucky man that gets to go home with you."

She blushed and bumped her hip against his "It's a lucky girl that get's to go home with you." She knew what he was thinking, even

without the bond, she would recognize that look on his face, that he wasn't worthy. Bullshit.

Unlocking her front door, she unbuckled her sword belt and propped it up by the door, telling herself she would clean it after the meal. Nali looked around and grimaced, there was a layer of dust over everything, and she wasn't sure she had any actual edible food in the place. She sighed and turned to Malik, kicking him in the shin when she realized he was holding back laughter. "Make yourself at home asshole, while I go see if there's any food." She glared at him "I hope you choke on a dust mite."

Malik laughed as she stomped off, taking off his own sword belts, unsheathing his swords and digging his whetstone and cleaning cloth out of his pouch. Setting carefully on the lumpy chair as to not disturb the good inch of dust that had gathered on it. He methodically cleaned what remained of the dried blood off each blade, laughing silently to himself as he heard Nali stomping around, cursing and slamming

doors. “Regretting not coming home more often?” he called out.

“Fuck off!”

He laughed loudly then, “Just go down to the market! Someone should still be open!”

She stuck her head around the doorway and glared at him “Don’t make me cut this bond off and send you out instead.”

“You wouldn’t.”

She smirked “Do you want to bet on it?”

Malik glared “No.”

She laughed “I have food. Don’t worry.”

“Then what is your problem?”

She flushed and rubbed at the back of her neck “I don’t actually have anything to eat off of.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?” He chuckled “We’re warriors Nali, we’re used to eating without the proper utensils.”

Nali grinned sheepishly “I know, but you know...we’re back home.”

Malik knew what she meant, there was something about coming back to the city, to eating and smelling and dressing like proper humans again. “Just bring the food and a blanket. We’ll have a...what do you girls call it? A picnic.”

Their meal consisted of a thick beef stew and bread, but they ate it as if it was a feast served at the Keep. The bread was soft and the stew thick with vegetables. It was better than anything they had while on the road. Malik sighed in contentment and leaned against the wall, hands folded over his belly. “That was good.”

Nali was stretched out by his feet, spread eagle and her own empty bowl beside her “Anything better than that gruel we get on the road.” She sighed “We really need to hire a better cook.”

Malik snorted “Take it up with the King, I’ll let you be the one to tell him his cousin isn’t a good enough cook for us.”

“I’m not sure what kind of in you and the men seem to think think I have with the Royal family, but let me tell you, I can’t just walk up

to King Lucian and start a conversation.” Nali said, cocking her eyebrow at him in derision.

“Really?” Malik asked sarcastically “Because you aren’t invited to every feast, and I haven’t seen you sitting at the Royal table before?”

Nali blushed “Those were official meetings and you know it. Besides, I haven’t been invited to anything at the Keep in months.” Thank the gods for that too. The Royal family was nice and all, but there was only so much she could take of that damn simpering Princess trying to get her into dresses and the men avoiding her like she might chop off their dicks at any given moment. “You know they only gave me the house because the Queen didn’t think a woman should be living in the Barracks with all those men by herself right?”

“Seriously?” But even as Malik asked it, he knew it was believable. Queen Æsa was known for her opinions on men and women mingling. It was surprising that she even let Nali enlist in the first place.

Nali nodded “She told me it was Lucian’s decision to accept me, but if there had to be

a woman in the Warriors then she would be in her proper place, high and in a home.”

Malik wrinkled his nose in distaste. He’d never liked the Queen, not since he’d come in with Nali once and been mistaken for a house servant. Granted, there weren’t many blind soldiers. He yawned, jaw cracking at the force of it. Gods, he hadn’t slept properly since before they left over a fortnight ago, too wound up over the impending battles to do much more than toss and turn in his small bed. He had a feeling he’d sleep like the dead tonight though, and every other night they were lucky enough to be in Vale. “I need sleep.”

Nali nodded and stretched out, arching her back up off the floor, her tunic riding up to expose a tanned strip of skin. “I have to agree with you.”

Malik looked away, closing down the bond and smiling shakily. “The floor for me I assume?”

Nali shook her head and stood, tapping him in the shoulder to offer him a hand up. Pulling him to his feet, she said “No, I wouldn’t subject

you to the floor after two weeks of sleeping on the ground. I have a big enough bed, we can share.” She paused “That is, if you don’t mind. The floor is open, but I figured you’d like a real bed on your first night back in Vale.”

Malik bit the inside of his cheek, he knew what he should do, he should make a joke, but insist on sleeping on the floor. He certainly didn’t want to, he could think of nothing he wanted less than that. But it was the right thing, the gentlemanly thing to do. “As long as you don’t steal the blanket. I’ll kick you straight onto the floor if you do, I don’t care that it’s your bed.”

Nali grinned “Just don’t steal my pillows and we’ll be fine.”

They made their way up the stairs, Malik taking them one step at a time to avoid any unfortunate and embarrassing accidents. He hadn’t been in Nali’s house enough to know that layout well enough to be comfortable. He didn’t even think he’d ever been upstairs at all, and if he had, he certainly didn’t remember it. Malik knew he could always just open the bond back up, but he knew what would

happen when they got to her bedroom. Nali would strip, not caring at all that Malik was in the room, not caring if he had sight or not. He'd seen enough of Nali's bare skin during the skirmishes, when she would strip with the other men to bathe in the river, washing away blood and dirt. He didn't think he could handle seeing any more of her.

Malik sighed and stripped his shirt off, laying at the foot of the bed as he sank down onto the soft mattress. He needed to get his emotions under control. Needed to get away from Nali long enough that he could push them back down where they belonged. They weren't anything new, Malik had always felt things for Nali that he knew he shouldn't be. It wasn't that there was a law forbidding relations between soldiers, hell, Malik knew for a fact that Nil was in a relationship with two of the other men. But Nali was...Nali. Special and vibrant and fierce. The best warrior on this side of the sea, she possessed powers that hadn't been seen in Everwhere for an age. And he was just Malik. A blind man who happened to be able to wield swords

well. There was nothing special about him. Malik knew Nali deserved someone better, someone who wouldn't hinder her. Someone who wasn't him. So he buried his feelings, and acted like the best friend and shield brother he was supposed to be. And tried to make himself believe that that's all there ever would be between them.

"Malik?" Nali asked, climbing on the bed next to him.

"Hmm?"

"Are you alright? You've been acting off all evening."

Malik leaned into her with a sigh "I'm fine Nali, just...tired is all. Tired and worried. These attacks...they keep getting closer and closer to Vale and the skirmishes closer and closer together. How long can we hold them back?" He wasn't lying per say, he thought about it every day, how they were going to hold the kingdom against the growing hoard of dragon thralls. He fell back against the pillow with a sigh, raising his arm and letting Nali cuddle close as he felt her settle next to him.

“We’ll die before we let them take Vale.” Nali said, pillowing her head on Malik’s shoulder and wrapping an arm around his waist. “We swore we would.”

“And if we die? Who defends Vale then?”

Nali sighed, “Let’s not think of it now. We’re exhausted and such talk can wait until morning.”

“...You’re right, I’m sorry.” He grabbed the blanket and pulled it up over them, “Good-night Nali.”

“Sleep tight Malik.” She whispered into his chest.

Nali woke as the first light of dawn seeped through the thin curtains that covered her bedroom window. She groaned and squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself to go back to sleep, she didn’t need to be awake for several more hours, and it was even longer before she was needed anywhere. But it was no use, her body was trained to rise with the sun. She sighed and sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she yawned wide. Malik grumbled

in his sleep beside her and flung his arm out over her legs. She grinned and decided she'd let him sleep awhile longer, content to just sit here for a time. Drawing her knees up—carefully letting Malik's arm slid onto the mattress—she rested her chin on her kneecaps and stared thoughtfully at him. He was a handsome man, tall and lithe, with arms that showed his prowess with his swords. His dark skin was a rarity in Vale—she vaguely remembered her father telling her that Malik's family had come from the desert lands to the south, lands that had long since fallen to the dragon's armies—and his black hair was rather curly when he let it grow out of the cropped style he normally preferred. His small goatee suited him, Nali thought, better than the full beards some of their men sported. His eyes were what truly enchanted her though. After the fire, they had lost their dark blue hue, and had faded into a pale, almost white blue—he'd often been told that their color was sometimes the only thing that gave his blindness away, after all, such a color could hardly be natural—that took on a hint of green when they were

bonded.

Their bond. She smiled, sometimes she thought that their bond was the only thing that kept her sane. Her powers had developed when she was only thirteen. Suddenly, she could hear what her parents were thinking as they ate breakfast, could hear the dirty, disgusting thoughts that one stable hand had. Nali had thought she'd gone insane. She'd locked herself in her room, curled up on her small bed and tried to make the voices go away. It hadn't worked, and Nali was in tears by the time Malik had made his way around the back of their house, prying the window open and climbing in, only to fall on his ass. She'd giggled then, and he'd grimaced, but he had climbed in the bed with her, had wrapped himself around her and told her to concentrate on his voice.

“Just listen to me Nali, ok? Just breathe and listen to my voice.” Nali sniffled and nodded, letting that newly found...thing in her mind reach out toward Malik. It latched on, drawing Malik’s comforting presence into her head.

Can you hear me?

She'd flinched away then, Malik's voice too loud in her head. He'd shushed her and apologized, trying again, but this time at a whisper. Can you hear me? "...yes..."

Don't speak it, Nali.

...yes... she repeated, biting her lips nervously. Malik had smiled You haven't gone mad, don't be afraid.

What's happening to me?

Malik had smiled sadly My mother had something like it. I can remember her whispering in my head sometimes. Papa said she was touched by the gods.

Nali had scooted back into Malik, burying her face in her pillow Could she control it? I don't want to go around hearing everyone like this. It hurts my head.

They stayed there for hours, until all Nali could hear was Malik and the pounding in her head subsided. Nali shook herself out of the memory and smiled, Malik had snuck into the Royal

Library after that, had taken all the coin to his name and bribed one of the assistants to loan him any books they could find on the subject. It had taken years before Nali had mastered the art of the Mind, she'd had no one to teach her, after all, such powers hadn't been seen in Vale in over a century. She'd often daydreamed about leaving Vale, searching out others with the same talents. Maybe one day, after the threat of dragons and thralls had passed, she still would.

“Mmph, Nali?” Malik grumbled, eyes cracking open “Too early, go back to sleep.”

Nali grinned and laid back down, Malik was right, it was too early to be awake.

The next time she woke was to Malik rolling out of the bed and grumbling to himself about the late hour. She stretched out and hitched the blanket over her shoulder, turning on her side to watch him “You’re the one who told me to go back to bed.” She giggled as he gestured rudely over his shoulder at her.

“We need to get to the Barracks, gods only knows what will happen if they’re left by

themselves for too long.”

Nali snorted and rolled off the other side, standing up and stretching again, “Nil’s probably still at the tavern...or passed out in a gutter.”

“We’ll send Nal after him if he hasn’t dragged his sorry ass home by now.” Where Nali might put up with the brothers antics, Malik wouldn’t, he didn’t have the time or humor to put up with them.

They didn’t bother with breakfast, Malik was in too much of a hurry, and Nali promised (threatened) to drag him back after they met with the garrison for a proper meal. They left their swords as well, sick of carrying the heavy weapons where ever they went. Instead Malik strapped a long, wickedly curved dagger to his side, and Nali tucked away a few throwing knives. It wasn’t like they really needed weapons inside Vale, the worst thing that happened in the city was a few drunken brawls when the taverns closed for the night.

Nali sighed and looked up at the sky, watching a few fluffy clouds float by. It was almost

summer, and she wished she had more time to enjoy the spring weather while it lasted. Soon it would get unbearably hot, the unforgiving sun shining down on them all hours of the day. The creeks and streams would dry up, and training sessions would be postponed until the sun set, lest her soldiers drop like flies in the heat. She hated summer, she much preferred the cool months of fall, and the snowy days of winter. No one ever attacked during the winter, the snow fell too deep and too fast, and the temperatures were too low.

“Has the sky done you a grievous wrong?” Malik asked laughingly.

She flicked him and smiled “You know my feelings about summer.”

He nodded knowingly “Ah yes, soon you will be unbearable to live with and everyone will pray for the return of winter so they may escape your wrath.”

“Bastard.”

Malik laughed and held his arm out, waiting until she'd looped her own arm through his to

continue through the quiet streets. It was still too early for the rich nobles to rise from their comfortable beds, and Nali and Malik walked through the streets leisurely.

The Barracks were tucked into the center of town, where the poor, middle and rich districts met, a short walk for the soldiers who lived there to visit their families no matter what class they came from. Nali had always thought it an odd place to put it. Why not on the outskirts of town, where the soldiers would be closest to the gates if there was an attack on the city?

“Come, you round the men up, and I’ll—” she was cut off by the black shadow that passed over them, and the roar that echoed throughout the city.

They stopped, looking up at the sky in growing horror as the giant dragon circled the sky, flames licking at its teeth as its mouth opened wide. Nali screamed, went down on her knees and Malik’s borrowed vision went black, a searing pain as the bond was ripped away nearly sending him to his knees as well. He felt

the heat, and heard the screams as the dragon rained death down on them. Malik didn't need to see to know what was happening, he's seen it before. It's deadly mouth wide, breathing fire down on them. On the Barracks! Malik turned toward the building in horror, knowing that many of their men were still inside. Dragon fire burned fast and hot and he knew that there was little chance of anyone escaping from the Barracks.

He didn't have time to contemplate though, as a rush of heat and a loud explosion threw him back. His ears popped painfully and he only had time to hope Nali would be ok before his head cracked against hard stone.

He came to with a groan, setting up slowly and rubbing the back of his head. He was surprised when his fingers came away dry, it seemed he would only have a painful lump to remind him of his collision with the stone. Malik leaned against the wall, panting, sightless eyes wide as he tried to pinpoint where he was. How long had he been unconscious? The explosion had thrown him a ways, and his

ears were ringing, screwing with his ability to orientate himself. He needed to find Nali and his swords. Preferably in that order. The acrid smell of smoke and dragon fire filled his nose and he fought down his panic. Now wasn't the time to let his issues take hold. But a dragon attack! There hadn't been a dragon attack since...since he was young, the beasts much preferred letting their thralls do the dirty work. But that had been a dragon flying low over the city, Atrox, if the brief glimpse he saw before the bond had been all but snapped. The great Dragon Lord hadn't been seen in decades, and there had even been rumors that he'd died. Malik wondered what brought him to Vale now.

Taking a deep breath and willing the ringing in his ears to subside, he took stock of what he could feel. Dirt under his feet instead of cobblestone. He reached out, feeling the broken, mangled thing beside him. It felt like one of the training dummies. Was he in the training ring? It would make sense, he had been on his way there. He wondered if Atrox had only attacked the Barracks, or if the rest of the city

was burning as well.

He pulled himself to his feet, keeping one hand on the stone wall. He knew his way around this part of the city well enough that he shouldn't need Nali's vision, as long as he was careful, and didn't manage to trip and impale himself on and debris. He needed to find Nali, needed to make sure she was safe. She shouldn't have been thrown far from him, should still be within hearing distance. "Nali!" he yelled "Nali answer me!"

Nali! His mind called out as well Nali! Nali!
NALI!

"Malik?" It was faint, but Malik turned, trying to pinpoint where her voice had come from. Damn his ears! "Is that you?"

"Nali? Where are you?"

She coughed and groaned, and Malik caught the shifting noises she made, as if she was trying to get up and couldn't. "Hold on, this may hurt."

The bond flared to life and Malik clutched his head at the white hot pain that arced through

it. The bond felt ragged and torn, like that cursed dragon had ripped it apart with its claws. But he could see, it was blurry and unstable, but he looked around frantically, until he spotted Nali pinned under what looked like part of the Barracks roof.

He dropped to his knees at her side “Are you hurt?”

She grimaced “I don’t think so, well, not physically at least.”

Malik nodded and stood, gripping the beam that kept Nali’s legs pinned and lifted. It moved only inches, but it was enough for Nali to wriggle out from underneath it, rolling free moments before Malik’s arms gave out and the heavy beam came crashing back down. Stumbling back from the wreckage, he helped Nali to her feet, running his hands over her, not trusting her own word about not being injured.

Nali grabbed his hands in hers “Malik. Malik, I’m fine!” She frowned “But you’re not.” She reached out, touching the blood that trailed from his ears. “Your ears are bleeding!”

Oh. He raised a hand, staring at the blood that was smeared on his fingertips. Well, that would explain the ringing.

“Can you still hear?”

He nodded “Yes...yes, they’re just ringing.” He stared at her, then pulled her into a tight hug, tucking her head under his chin.

She shuddered and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his shirt. Trying to blink back the tears. Her head was pounding, and her mind felt violated.

“What happened with the bond?” he asked “It felt like it was torn apart.”

She shook her head “I don’t know, the dragon, Atrox, he was in my head. I think he was trying to enthrall me, only...he couldn’t.”

“So he attacked the bond instead?” They had always known Nali would be immune to the magics the dragons used, but they never thought it would be tested.

“I think he thought it would lower my barriers. He was wrong.” She had felt Atrox’s rage

as he slammed up against her mind, unable to get past the natural barriers her abilities provided. He had roared in anger, his terrible voice filling up her head. She swallowed back her fear and stepped away from Malik “We need to look for survivors. Find as many able men as we can and head to the Keep.”

Malik nodded and frowned “Do you think he attacked the Keep as well.”

“Before I blacked out...he was headed that way, I can only assume he’s trying to cripple Vale.” She grimaced “He must have gotten tired of his thralls failing and decided to attack us himself.”

“Let’s arm ourselves first. Our forces are scattered, now would be the perfect time for Atrox to send in his Thralls. It’s best not to let ourselves be caught unaware.”

“Right.” Nali said, glancing around at the wreckage that surrounded them. “Come then, the armory should still be standing.”