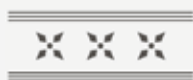


FLAMEFALL



ROSARIA MUNDA





Penguin
Random
House

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
DK FLIP, an imprint of Dorling Kindersley Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

The authorised representative in the EEA is
Dorling Kindersley Verlag GmbH, Arnulfstr. 124,
80636 Munich, Germany

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
001–352605–Jul/2025

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
ISBN: 978-0-2417-7126-6

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom

www.dk.com



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*For my father and my brother,
fellow dreamers*

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NEW PYTHOS

GRIFF

Julia's missing, and I'm in a terrible mood. Not improved by the weather, which is cold and damp, but in New Pythos, it's always cold and damp. I'm gutting fish in a back room off the dragon lairs when Scully comes to find me.

"Dragonlord here to see you," the lair-master says.

That's the one way to make my day worse. Bran and Fionna, the other two squires on fish-gutting duty, exchange a look. We're up to our arms in bits of fish bone and scales; the stink of the fish oil will follow us out of the lairs, and now I'm going to miss the one perk that comes with prepping dragon feed—sneaking the remains home. I rise, wiping my hands on the work rag.

Scully hates the sound of my perfect Dragontongue, which is why I always try to use it. "Which dragonlord"—I pause just long enough for him to wonder if I'll add—"sir?"

Scully scowls. This is why he keeps putting me on fish gutting. Lip. Not to mention our clans hate each other. "The one you serve," he says in Norish.

Most days, that would be good news. Today, I just wish it were Julia.

On the balustrade outside, Delo Skyfish waits for me.

I remember as a child being struck by the Callipolan exiles, when they arrived on New Pythos: at the ghostly pallor of the Stormscourge survivors, at the warm brown skin and tight curls of the Skyfish lords. Delo Skyfish no longer looks like the ragged urchin that washed ashore ten years ago, but he's still striking, and at the sight of his fur cloak and freshly coiffed hair, I'm conscious of my own stinking state.

I bow low.

"Your presence is an unexpected honor, my lord."

Delo mutters, "As you were." I straighten; Delo is scowling at me, like he knows I'm trying to discomfort him. He's my age, taller than I, but slenderer. "The Triarchy-in-Exile wants to speak with you."

I hug my arms around my chest, shivering from the sea spray coming in off the water. We're dwarfed by the cliffs above and the citadel atop them, and by the limestone pillars of karst that jut from the sea into the sky. "Did they tell you what for?"

I use the formal *you*, and when Delo answers, he uses the informal. When we were younger, and I was still figuring out Dragontongue, he tried to get me to use the informal, too, or speak to him in Norish, which he was learning at the same time, but I refused. In trials of will with Delo, I win.

"They want to question you about Julia," he says. "She's missing."

As if I haven't noticed.

“Why would I know where Julia is?”

Delo hesitates. “Ixion—told them.”

From the way he says it, I don’t have to ask what.

The last time I saw Julia, her lips were on mine. In the dark I could feel, not see, her smile as she bunched my shirt to raise it. She always smiles, like what we’re doing is a game, and it amuses her to win.

Ixion told them.

I’ve stopped walking, and Delo stops, too, turning back to me. His face says everything I need to know about what’s about to happen in the Glass Hall. He doesn’t say *I’m sorry*, and I don’t say *Ixion had no right*. By now, I’m no stranger to the humiliations Ixion devises.

Like being called before the Glass Hall as Julia’s peasant lover stinking of fish.

As if he’d heard me think it, Delo reaches into his satchel. “I brought you a fresh shirt.”

Most of Delo’s clothes are blue, the color of his House, but this shirt is plain, undyed—appropriate for a peasant. Even so, it’s finer than anything I’ve ever owned, and I’m likely to ruin it with muck. I pull it over my head, and when I look up, Delo’s watching me. He looks away, down. The shirt smells like him.

I follow Delo up the winding outer stairs, carved into the side of the cliff and looking out over the North Sea, that connect the lairs where I work to the citadel at the summit. Both were built by the ha’Aurelians in the original conquering, when they invaded Norcia with their dragons, subjugated my people, and renamed our island New Pythos. The dragons’ bloodlines dried up in the cold not long

after, but the lords remained.

And now, for the first time in generations, they have dragons again. Twenty-five dragons, brought as eggs by the Callipolan exiles ten years ago.

Dragons for revenge.

Dragons for the exiles' surviving sons. Dragons for the sons of the lords on whose hospitality they imposed. Titles for their children in a future, greater Callipolis.

But there weren't enough sons. The exiled Triarchy was forced to present the remaining hatchlings to others. Female dragonborn, like Julia. Bastards, who trickled in from Callipolis's vassal islands, once despised for their illegitimacy but now needed.

Dragons were still unclaimed.

So, with a fleet not yet filled, the dragonborn resorted to a measure few believed would work.

They had the remaining dragons presented to the sons and daughters of their Norcian serfs.

And the dragons Chose.

They call us *humble-riders*.

* * *

Delo and I enter the Glass Hall, and in the moment it takes to draw in a breath I'm able to observe the room. A great expanse of rippled glass windows look out over the karst pillars rising from the North Sea, and the combined dragonborn courts of my ha'Aurelian rulers and the Callipolan exiles surround us in a ring of stiff-armed chairs. In the center sits Rhadamanthus ha'Aurelian, the Greatlord of New Pythos, who also assumed the vacant title of Aurelian triarch after

the Revolution. No Aurelians from Callipolis survived to contest it.

Three chairs to the edge of the ring seat the highest-ranked dragonriders of the Three Families. Ixion Stormscourge, Rhode ha'Aurelian, and—the seat is empty, waiting for him—Delo. The three Triarchs-presumptive. When Callipolis is regained, and reunited with New Pythos, they will share the triple throne.

I kneel, place my palms flat on the floor, and stare at the stone between them.

Delo says, “I present to the Glass Hall my squire, Griff Gareson of Clan Nag, humble-rider for the Pythian Fleet.”

He remains by my side, leaving the waiting chair beside Ixion empty.

“Welcome, Griff.” I don’t have to see the man speaking to picture him: Rhadamanthus is a bear of a man, his auburn hair graying, his golden skin lined. “Ixion informs us you might have . . . privileged information about Julia.”

Rhadamanthus is known in the clans for being a hard man, but I have found, compared with the whims of the Callipolan exiles and their dragons, his rule measured if harsh. I keep my eyes trained on the flagstones between my hands. “I’m afraid Lord Ixion is mistaken, Your Grace. Lady Julia has never treated me as her confidant.”

Ixion snorts. Rhadamanthus’s son Rhode, who does everything Ixion does, snorts, too.

Lady Electra’s voice comes crisp with disdain. She is Ixion and Julia’s great-aunt, a Stormscourge widow since before the Revolution, and the choice to draft Norcian dragonriders has always sat poorly with her. “I always find it unnerving when they speak Dragontongue too well.”

Delo shifts weight in his boots beside me. I ask my hands, “Would my lady prefer that I speak in Norish?”

“No. Thank you. This is a waste of time, Rhadamanthus.”

“I don’t believe him.” Ixion’s voice cuts through the adults’. Cold, frayed, like the very words he says bore him even as he speaks. This many years into training with him, his voice alone has the power to make me break into a cold sweat.

I know to associate Ixion’s voice with certain things: pain, fear, and humiliation.

“Rack your brains, Griff, see if she didn’t let something slip while she was rutting with you—”

“Ixion,” says Rhadamanthus sharply.

Rhode has caught Ixion’s drift and decides to play, too. “How’s Agga?” he asks. “Maybe she’d help you remember? We can have her brought in. With her brats.”

I watch my fingers, splayed on the stone, curl beneath themselves. I wait for someone to say *That won’t be necessary*, but no one does.

They only took on Norcian riders who have families. Ixion and Rhode figured out why early on. They learned my sister’s name fast.

Delo’s voice comes from close, lowered. Bracing. “Griff, think. Anything from Julia that seemed a little . . . off?”

Off. Julia’s always been so unpredictable, *off* seems like a meaningless word to use about her. But then I remember something.

“She was writing a letter. Recently.”

“And?”

Julia’s half-dressed form, curled over her writing desk, her long hair let down for the night. I remember noticing, at the time, how her

night-robe had fallen from one shoulder to reveal a sloping angle of bare, burn-scarred skin. At the sound of my tread, she jumped and turned, one arm flattening over the letter behind her. But when she saw me, it relaxed. *Oh. Only you. Come here . . .*

“She didn’t want anyone to see it.”

Rhadamanthus’s chair creaks as he leans forward. “But you saw it? Did you see to whom it was addressed? Its contents?”

I did see it. I could see it from her bed. She left it lying unfolded atop her writing desk when she pulled me onto her mattress. Open, every word exposed to my eyes, this letter she didn’t want anyone to see.

“I don’t . . .”

I am gripping the stone, the explanation thick on my tongue though it has no reason to be. I wait for someone else to remember it; but, absurdly, they don’t. As if I speak Dragontongue too well for them to remember to associate the laws their people enforce on mine with me. Delo, beside me, shifts, as if he understands. But Ixion beats him to it. He sounds torn between amusement and irritation.

“Griff can’t read.”

Lord Nestor speaks for the first time. “This is pointless, Rhadamanthus. I told you it would be a waste of time to question the boy—”

Nestor is Delo’s father and our drillmaster, strict with his riders in the air and stricter on the ground. He is a sky-widower: a rider who lost his dragon. Delo says it’s a loss you never recover from and the cause of his father’s foul temper.

I’m pretty sure Nestor would have his temper toward *me* either way.

I force the words out through anger. “She seemed agitated. Afterward. She talked about . . . family. And loyalty.”

Julia’s fingers in my hair, absently pulling curls straight, our bodies wound together beneath blankets softer than any my family has ever seen. *Would you always love your sister? Even if she betrayed you? What would you do, if she betrayed you?*

The strange, unexpected dampness on my shoulder, so unusual I did not realize at once what it meant. That Julia was crying.

Rhadamanthus drums fingers on the arm of his chair. “You’re suggesting she was writing Leo? The cousin who rides for the Usurper? We forbade her contacting him, after his last refusal.”

Delo speaks, his voice a murmur, as if he’s realizing as he speaks. “But when has Julia ever listened, when something was forbidden her?”

Silence meets his words. As if the others weigh Delo’s point. And all the while I kneel in front of them, proof of it.

Ixion’s cold voice trickles over me, breaking the silence.

“Didn’t see fit to report any of this earlier, did you, Griff?”

I lift my head and look at him. Ixion’s face is an elongated, lined version of Julia’s: the same jet-black hair, the blazing eyes set in a pale face, the same thin mouth prone to laughter. But where Julia’s laughter can be cruel for being uncaring, Ixion’s is just cruel.

Don’t say it.

But then I do.

“I did not think it my place to share the Firstrider’s business with her Alternus.”

For a moment the only sounds are of the gulls, whose cries come muffled through the windows, and the echoing of my own stupid,

reckless words in the glass-walled room.

Ixion leaps to his feet, his mantle rippling.

“Gareson should be flogged *for his tone*.”

Though I should feel fear, all I feel is fury. *Do it, Ixion. Settle it on the ground. The only place you’ll ever be able to beat me.*

Beside me, Delo takes a half step forward, between Ixion and myself. Another mistake: The last thing Nestor needs is further reason to suspect that his son has grown soft toward his inferiors.

“Enough,” Rhadamanthus says. “We’re wasting time. We need to deploy search parties south.”

I wasn’t always Delo’s squire. In the beginning, I was Ixion’s.

Ixion was imaginative in his cruelty. *Do you want to know where I learned this?* he would ask. The answer was always the same, even when it couldn’t be true: *Palace Day. From peasants like you on Palace Day.*

By the time Julia and Delo found out, and told Delo’s father, the abuse had escalated to the point that injuries interfered with my riding. Nestor Skyfish doesn’t care much about humble-riders’ well-being, but he does care about the well-being of the fleet. I was transferred to Delo; Ixion was deemed unfit to be served by a squire.

Ixion never forgave either of us for it.

Outside the Glass Hall, Delo and I make our way to the exiles’ extension of the citadel known as the Provisional Palace. Each of the Three Families has their own armory, with an interior entrance to the lairs.

“That was rash,” Delo murmurs, when he sees that the Skyfish

armory is deserted, and we're alone. "You shouldn't have pulled rank on him like that."

"I can't pull rank on him. I'm not ranked."

Humble-riders didn't participate in the First rider Tournament. Delo lifts an eyebrow. Like he knows I'm just being stupid on purpose.

"Julia isn't here to protect you," he says.

You think I don't know that?

Our gear hangs on hooks along the stone wall. I fetch Delo's armor while he shrugs on his flamesuit. His armor's been polished recently, by me; the Skyfish lilies are shining in their crest. I've served as Delo's squire for years now, but the one thing that's become less, not more, comfortable over the years is arming him. He holds his breath. I talk, a lot. "What was he like?" I ask as I work my way down his side, clasping buckles and tightening straps. "Leo? You must have known him, before."

Delo is staring fixedly at the wall, past me. "I always thought," he says, and pain enters his voice, "that Leo had a good heart. But I thought that about Ixion, too, before Palace Day."

When he's armed, I step away from him and he unfreezes. I hasten into my own flamesuit—a castoff from Delo, tight in the shoulder, long in the leg, but serviceable. Then I gather our gear before following Delo down the spiral stairs to the lairs, carved into the rock and lit by narrow windows that face out over the sea. Our dragons are stabled side by side, and Delo always makes a point—though he clucks a greeting to his skyfish, Gephyra, as he passes her—of accompanying me to Sparker first.

Sparker, like all the dragons ridden by Norcians, is chained and

muzzled.

The muzzle is a safety measure. It was a precaution put in place when we sparked. I'd be flattered if it didn't make me and Sparker so miserable.

The muzzle doesn't come off, but the chain does, and Delo keeps the key.

I'm used to it—lords know I've had years to get used to it—but even so, the sight of Sparker straining against that muzzle, choking himself with the collar as he strains to reach me, never stops hurting. And as if Delo knows it, he always blocks the sight from me. Unchains Sparker with quiet cluckings to calm him. And then jumps out of the way as Sparker bounds toward me.

Sparker's a stormscourge, *my* stormscourge, black as the night, oversized and overspirited, and when I embrace him, he leans into it so hard he nearly bowls me over. His wingspan, pride of the aerial fleet, is already so large that when he twitches his wings open, they beat the stone walls on either side of us.

"Missed you, too," I murmur.

He growls, the most his muzzle permits him to do, and I hold him tighter, and wish for the thousandth time I could tear the damned thing off. They keep it loose enough in the jaws so he can eat, but not breathe fire. I reach up, rub where it chafes, and he lets out the smallest pleading grunt that makes everything inside me ache.

"I know."

I've thought, more than once, how it would have been easier for everyone—Sparker, me, and the Triarchy included—if he'd Chosen a different rider. A dragonborn rather than a Norcian. Then I would have lived the peasant life I was born to: fishing like my father on a

ha'Aurelian charter, lost in an untimely storm on the North Sea. Sparker wouldn't have been muzzled or chained.

But Sparker never seems to blame me, and for all the ways it makes my daily life hell, I've never felt anything but pride at the fact that Sparker is mine, and I'm his.

Most of the dragonborn hold it against us both.

Delo is watching us, something stirring in his eyes, but when I meet them, he looks away.

I saddle Sparker in silence, take up my pike and shield, and follow Delo's lead as we launch out the lair mouth and take to the air over the crashing waves.

We turn south in search of Julia.