

Sanguine:

“One, two, three...” The slow countdown was muffled in Sanguine's ears as the young vesperdrake hunkered down amidst the tough furs and cloaks of the wardrobe, fuzzy wings wrapped over him like a cocoon, as if to mimic the drab clothing around him.

“Six, seven, eight...” The dragon perked up his sharp ears, listening intently as the countdown sped up. “Nine, ten! Okay, ready or not here I come!”

Ensuring his paws were tucked as close as they could be, Sanguine coiled his tail around his hind legs, becoming little more than a tiny ball of fluff as the world beyond his hiding spot fell silent. His breath became slowed, sight darkened by the gloom, save for a sharp slit of light that beamed in through the cupboard doors. All the while he could hear little but the dull flickering of torchlight, and the distant song of the wind.

There's no way he'll look here first. He was sure, at least until the sound of tapping claws reached his twitching ears, and his body went rigid.

“Now, now, where could my prey be?” cooed a voice from outside, the very same one that had been counting just a few seconds ago. “He has to be here somewhere; I can smell him.”

No, impossible, mother made me bath this morning! Sanguine sniffed, yet all that filled his nose was the stench of worn leather and dust. *Urg, stupid old rags!*

All the while, a prickling anticipation crept up his spine as he felt the presence of someone drawing ever closer to his hiding spot. It was as if his fur stood on end, ears restlessly shifting like insect wings as he stared intently at the slither of light beaming through the doors.

“Hmm, could he be in here!?” There was a woosh and a scatter of claws on the creaky floorboards as the sound of an opposing cupboard being flung open met the hidden dragon's ears.

What followed was the sound of rummaging before, once again, silence claimed the chamber, at least until the sound of claws tapping closer added to the chill tingling in Sanguine's spine. He could hear his own breathing now, ragged both in and out as he did his best not to cough on the dust he'd inhaled. All the while, his hunter lurked closed, until a shadow passed over the slither of light, as if eclipsing the sky. The sound

of another's breath reached his senses, and without thought, the young dragon clenched his claws and folded his ears.

No, he can't have found me so soon! I have to do something!

"Sanguine? Oh, Sanguine, where are you?" purred his hunter, feigning ignorance as the glint of a scouring, sapphire-blue eye suddenly peered in through the crack in the doors. "Found you!"

"No!" Before either dragon could so much as think the doors to the wardrobe exploded open, and like a ball of fluffy lightning, Sanguine launched himself forward with claws outstretched.

That was until he felt himself stall mid-air, as if caught by an invisible grasp. The dragon before him took a regal step back, flowing like tranquil water as he lifted one foreclaw. The asserted limb glowed with a faint blue hue. A hue that perfectly mirrored that now enveloping Sanguine's body as he was suspended weightlessly in the air by an aura of magic.

What!? No, he can't do that, it's cheating! He thought abruptly. *Stupid magic!*

"Oh, would you look at you," teased the pale-blue coated vesper, smirking at his younger brother. "The fearsome ambush predator is undone by a simple levitation spell."

"Hey, this is not fair!" cried Sanguine as he kicked and thrashed, as if trying to swim without water. "You can't use magic!"

"Can't I? You used your small frame to get where I cannot, so why can't I make use of my own advantages?" countered the larger of the pair, as Sanguine flapped his wings.

"Because it's not fair, I've not got to explain why?" squealed Sanguine, as his elder sibling rolled his eyes.

"Spoken like a true prince of Noctstiriacus, brother," he observed as he levitated Sanguine close. "All things must go your way, or else?"

"Yeah, because I'm a big, strong dragon!" Sanguine declared, just about managing to reach his brother's snout, using the newfound leverage to yank himself free of the magic.

Ha, how do you like that, stinky wizard! Taken off guard by the younger dragon's scrappy whit, the elder sibling's concentration broke as the pair fell back.

“Ha, got you, Azure, now I win!” boasted Sanguine as he sat triumphantly atop the larger prince’s chest. “You let all that magic go right to your ego!”

Considering that, Azure smirked, ears folding a little as he blushed. “Overconfidence, right? I taught you about that.”

The idea seemed to be more of a declaration to Azure’s self than it was to anyone else, as Sanguine grinned ear to ear. Only to pause and cock his head as the blue-coated vesper smirked back.

Why is he making that face?

“But what does Father say about my lessons?” The younger sibling barely had time to blink, let alone register the question before Azure sprung up, rolled over, and pinned Sanguine under a forepaw. “He says I’m soft, that magic is no substitute for brute strength when it comes down to it!”

“Umph, hey, get off!” the younger dragon snapped, pawing at his brother’s forelimb. “I can be stronger than you, just watch!”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that, little one, but...” Azure drew back, and with a flick of his tail, trapped Sanguine in another levitation spell. “I still believe learning from one’s mistakes is just as valuable as muscle and brawn.”

He says that like I don’t ever learn anything! Sanguine inwardly whined as, staying true to those words, Azure made sure to keep him suspended well away from anything he could grab as he prowled around him like a hungry lynx.

“I take it father’s trainers teach you no such humility, right?” he questioned, seeming to hide how disheartened that really made him feel.

“They teach me to be the best, because I am the best!” Sanguine retorted bluntly, doing his best to kick and flap. “Never let someone see you’re weak, not even yourself.”

Because I’m not weak, I’ll never be weak! He made sure to remind himself inwardly.

“I’d prefer never to let someone see I’m stupid, but I guess there’s some merit in your ideals,” cooed Azure. “Works for Violet and the rest, for sure.”

“For now, I’ll be better than all of them too someday!” Sanguine declared with a huff, frosty vapor escaping his flared nostrils. “Sis says she’ll give me extra lessons, and if you teach me magic...”

The young vesper let out a shrill eep as, with a casual flick of one foretalon, Azure dissipated the spell, and he was unceremoniously dropped to the floor.

"You have a lot to learn if you want to do magic, Sanguine," Azure began as he crept over and put a wing over his smaller brother's back. "Like some humility for one."

"You know what Father says about that kind of stuff, it's not befitting of our kind, especially royalty. We get soft, and they'll take the kingdom from us," Sanguine reasoned, playfully shrugging off his brother's wing.

"Yeah, but we get stupid, and they'll take it from us without us even knowing. You know what I think of father's brutish ways..." Azure responded, before adding grimly. "What I think of him sometimes."

"That's just you though, you think differently," Sanguine stated, making odd motions with his forepaws. "That's why only you can teach me magic and make me better than the rest of our brothers! I'll be the best of you and Violet!"

"Such ambition, that's one thing we both have in common," Azure chuckled. "But don't let sis hear you saying you'll be better than her, she'll kill us both!"

"Hehe, she can try," Sanguine giggled, while his brother rolled his eyes, a small snicker escaping his muzzle.

At least until he glanced up and paused, eyes wide for just a second before his ears fell back and he blushed.

Oh no, what's he looking at? Sanguine asked as much as he recovered from his humour, only to glance to where his brother was staring and go stiff himself. *Oh...*

"You know I can hear the mention of my name from anywhere in the castle, right, boys?" purred the low, almost dangerous voice of a deep-purple coated vesper, her emerald eyes fixed on the two brothers. "Not only that, but a slight against our father too? I should have you both arrested."

She prowled closer, claws scraping the floor like glass daggers before she was so close to the pair the pressure of her cool breath chilled their bones almost as much as her deadly aura did.

"Trialed and executed..." She flexed a foreclaw. "For treason, no less."

"Are you done threatening?" Azure finally deadpanned, face dropping flat as he stared at his younger sister.

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you, brother?” she cooed, before a fanged smirk parted her muzzle and she burst out laughing. “Hahaha, the look on your faces!”

For his part, Sanguine put on his best happy face, sure beyond all assurance that his sister didn’t scare him, even a little bit. To make that clear, as she made her way to playfully batt Azure’s side with a wing, he launched himself at her foreleg and started to paw at her dark fur.

“Violet, that’s not funny, you can’t arrest people!” he accused climbing up to her left foreknee and ruffling his fuzzy wings.

“Not yet, but we all know I’ll be guard captain soon enough,” she boasted with a flick of her head, rough mane swaying. “Just as you’ll be court wizard,” she added with a wink at Azure.

The eldest of the siblings blushed hard, earning another laugh from his sister while Sanguine pouted.

“Hey, what about me!? I can be cool too!” he called, and the two dragons peered down at him, first seeming confused, then to think hard as he declared. “If you two are all those things, then I can be king!”

“The only thing for you right now is to go to bed, young one.” Came a new voice, a voice that stole all the dragons’ attention as their heads perked and they glanced to the chamber doors.

The stone archway was awash with torchlight, while the dark sky beyond was cracked by the dying light of evening, and marred by fleeting dashes of light snowfall. The purple and orange glow of the setting sun was put to shame by the twilight coat of the vesper silhouetted there, however. Her frame larger and slender, she was at least twice the size of any of the adolescent dragons before her. Even Azure in his age, barely reached her gaze as she peered down at them with motherly affection. An affection that was met by awkward shuffles from Violet, and a blush from Azure. While Sanguine just sat between them with bubbling irritation.

I thought she said I could stay up late tonight! He recalled, yet the more he considered, the more he realized that even *late* was still earlier than his siblings. *Stupid sleep time!*

“But I don’t want to go to bed!” Pouted the young prince, wings ruffling as he stomped a forepaw and huffed. “It’s not even completely dark yet!”

One glance outside and it was clear the late hours said otherwise, as the group’s mother smiled and coiled a wing around her youngest son.

“No, but dark or not, I say it’s bedtime,” she declared, and despite her soft tone, the look in her eyes made it clear there was no arguing. “Say farewell to Violet and Azure, Sanguine.”

“Fine!” huffed the smallest vesper, slouching as his mother placed him upon her back. “See you later, guys.”

“Don’t worry we’ll be here in the morning,” Azure assured, earning a sly glance from his sister as she added.

“Sure we will, but it’s my turn to teach him a few things next time, okay, smart-wings?” She batted his side with a wing for good measure, receiving a huff from Azure.

Their mother chuckled at the pairs’ antics, while Sanguine wanted nothing more than to stay with them, even as their mother made it clear neither were to be awake too much longer either. The two huffed at that, seeming to agree for once, at least until the tapping of claws on stone rang out, and all looked to the open archway.

“Message for prince Azure, your father requests your presence in the throne room at once,” announced a flustered messenger, a smaller vesper clad in midnight-black armor.

“He wants me, now?” Azure asked, a forepaw pressed to his chest as he glanced at the rest of his family with uncertainty. “Why?”

“He didn’t say, my lord,” replied the messenger, only adding to the uncertainty as he bowed to the royals.

“Maybe he’s finally ready to give you that magical promotion,” joked Violet as she ruffled her wings. “How about I come with you?”

“Forgive me, my lady. But the king specifically said it was to be Azure alone,” panted the guard as he recovered from what was clearly a hurry to get over here.

“Yeah, like I’m going to listen to that. Father’s always glad to see me,” she laughed, running a forepaw through her fur as if to make it more presentable as she glanced at an increasingly nervous-looking Azure. “So, big brother?”

“No, I’ll go with him,” declared their mother suddenly, earning shocked looks from the siblings and a bow from the messenger who appeared as if he’d never dare question the queen. “Your father can hardly ever deny me,” she added with a wink.

The wave of relief that fell over everyone at that was clearly visible as each dragon relaxed. All save for Sanguine who perked up and added giddily.

"Does this mean I don't have to go to sleep now?" He practically cheered, yet such hope was short-lived as his mother set him down and looked to Violet.

"Can you take him? Some experience with young ones will serve you well, daughter." Looking flustered for only a second, Violet reluctantly nodded as she trudged over.

"Sure, I can always catch up with you later," she groaned as she cupped Sanguine in a wing. "Come on, little bro."

"No, I don't want to, sis!" called the younger dragon, but with a huff, Violet took the struggling young vesper by the scruff of his neck like a lost puppy and heaved him up. "No, Vi!"

"I'll come to check up on him later," commented their mother, seeming to approve of her daughter's form as Violet mumbled something around the scruff in her teeth.

The last Sanguine saw of Azure was a shy wave as the two disappeared behind the arch and Violet carried him along the snow-bitten battlement towards the nest chambers. It was a wonder she didn't just fly, yet the young dragon suspected that she cared for him enough to be as careful as she could, even if it meant inconvenience. Not only that, but after a few long minutes of hanging from his ruff, legs folded grumpily, she set him down before his nest chamber.

Like most rooms in the castle, it was formed from stone walls, lit by torchlight, and warmed by a fire. Not that the frost vesper needed to stay too warm upon their mountain home, their elemental power protected them from most of the cold. Nevertheless, aside from the multitude of scrolls and tomes, along with the odd stuffed ice-drake plushie, the royal nest was fitted with a regal assortment of silks and robes for the young vesper to sleep upon. All things Sanguine ignored as he rounded on his sister.

"Don't give me that look, Sangie," she deadpanned as she sat in the doorway to prevent his escape. "You know I don't want to be doing this either."

"Hey, I told you not to call me that!" Was the first thing the young dragon shouted, flaring his wings with an indignant huff, before he added. "And if you don't want to make me stay here so much, why make me go to sleep!?"

"Oh, I don't know, because Mother wants me to be good with kids," Violet joked, flexing a forepaw in the air before she reached down to nuzzle her brother. "Too bad I'm only good with little, Sangie brothers!"

"Gah, no, sis!" squealed Sanguine as she pinned him down and blew raspberries into his belly. "Hehehe, stop, that tickles!"

"Oh, is that so?" she cooed, before adding to her assault with wings and tail. "Poor ticklish little prince won't go to bed for his big sis!"

"Okay, okay, I'll go to sleep, just stop!" the young prince managed to force through his exertions, panting hard as his sister withdrew and bundled him into bed. "You're a big meanie!"

"Oh, you wound me, Sangie." Violet dramatically winced, a claw to her breast in mock heartbreak as she feigned fainting. "Looks like I'll just have to be tougher."

"Can you teach me while you're at it?" her younger brother asked, putting on his best puppy eyes as he beamed at her. "I still want to be the best of both of you!"

"Oh, Sangie," his sister sighed, expression soft as she assured. "Someday you will, I hope. And I'll be proud of you."

"You better be!" giggled Sanguine as he pressed a forepaw to the tip of her snout. "I kept hold of your lucky coin and everything!" he went on, retrieving an old silver coin from under his pillow, turning it in his forepaws to show her the sides.

On one, was a dragon, fanged mouth wide and spewing fire, whereas on the other, molded into the metal was the face of one of the ancient tribal humans that used to roam the lands.

"Oh, so you did," Violet muttered, seemingly taken aback for a moment as she regarded the silver trinket like it were a lost gem.

What is it, what's wrong, is she not happy to see it? Sanguine wondered in a sudden panic, saying something similar only for his sister to shake her head.

"Of course I am, silly, but it's yours now, you keep it safe," she suggested, gently placing it back against his chest. "It's still worth quite a bit in more than just sentiment."

"Well, I don't need that kind of worth," the prince exclaimed with a roll of his eyes. "The castle has more than enough treasure. Besides, Azure can just magic some gold out of stone!"

"That he can, that he can," she muttered under her breath, casting a long stare to the walls around them.

“And soon I’ll do the same, once he teaches me!” Sanguine declared, drawing his distant sister back with a laugh.

“Haha, after all those boring sessions learning magic at least one of you better be able to. Night knows I’ve not got the patients for it,” she joked, chuckling to herself.

“They’re not so bad, we mostly just play games,” assured Sanguine, but his sister shrugged.

“Maybe someday I’ll play games, but I’ll focus on what I want to be first. Then I can relax,” she stated, looking her brother in the eyes. “One day, you’ll see what I mean.”

“I will?” he asked, and she nodded.

“I sure hope so. But that’s not a worry for now,” she assured as she pulled the covers over him. “Goodnight, Sangie.”

“Goodnight, sis,” mumbled the young prince, not entirely satisfied with going to sleep so soon, but snuggling in nonetheless.

His sister placed a wing on his side lovingly, before, without a word, she slipped out. The slow closing of the door and the clunk of its lock was the only sign she was gone as the tapping of claws on stone led off into the distance. At that moment, Sanguine’s eyes were wide open, he stuffed his coin back under his pillow and sat up in a flash.

No way am I going to sleep yet, not until I find out what the others are all up to!

Waiting only a few moments in case his wary sister returned, the young vesper sprang up and quietly slinked over to the door, finding his secret method of bypassing the lock as he often did. The latch was way above his head, but with a flap of his wings and a kick of his paws, he was able to acrobatically shove the thing free. Landing on all fours as the door gave a satisfying click and creaked open just a little.

His escape now open to him, he made sure to stuff his plushie into bed, so to mimic his sleeping form lest anyone investigate. The illusion set, he crept out, making sure to close the door behind him as he scampered along the empty hall. Naught but cold, grey stone touched by frost greeted him, with the odd fur pelt and candle to break up the cold monotony. The doors to his siblings’ nests were all sealed, their intricate frames lapped by torchlight.

Nevertheless, not one to make his way back the way he’d come, Sanguine prowled deeper into the castle, until he moved from the nest chamber hall, to the private royal dining chamber, sneaking under the neatly decorated long table and through the large

doors on the far end. His objective was the throne room, where he knew a crawl space Azure had told him about would allow him a great view of what the others were up to.

There's no way any of them will know I'm there, and as soon as they're all done, I'll sneak back. They'll be none the wiser! Even as he prowled, with a fur rug under his paws, great arched windows to his left, and stands of royal armor looming like silent guards to his right, his mind raced with ideas.

Father hardly ever requested for Azure. The two were distant and colder than even ice elementals should be. Though as Violet had said, propositions for the eldest of the king's sons to be made into the court wizard were strong. Azure was almost sixteen winters, and heir to the throne, he couldn't remain a simple conjure of cheap tricks for long. Regardless, no matter Father's opinion, to Sanguine, the two soon-to-be wizard and captain were nothing more than big brother and sister.

That in mind, he quickened his pace, reaching the end of a hall and turning left. There he reached an impasse, the sound of armored talons coming from around the next corner. The young dragon froze for a second, claws clenched at the fur under him. Yet just as he'd done with his brother, he used his small size to his advantage, quickly ducking down behind a small archway. The moment he did so, the pace of the guards quickened. His ears pricked up, there was shouting, he was sure, but it was muffled. Not that he had much time to think about it as the clatter of the guards passing ahead sounded seconds later, talons thundering as the patrol of at least eight passed by.

That's odd, I've never seen so many dragons going somewhere so urgently. He noted, sure the patrols often consisted of only three or four at most. *Where are they even heading, to the far battlements?*

Even so, the moment they'd passed he crept out, only for something else to stop him in his tracks. The floor was wet, rug stained by a cold patch that his paw fell right into. Surprised for but a moment, he glanced down to see the dark stain, and not just one. A small trail of odd prints led in from an open archway, trailing in a path of melted snow from the mountain slopes outside.

Huh? Who would ever come in that way? The dragon inwardly muttered as he crept after the trail, almost able to make out the vague shape of paw prints. *Did a mountain lion get in here again?*

The sound of more guards coming from behind him quickened his curiosity, and without thought he scampered after the prints, following them down a small arched corridor into the gloom. He lost sight of the wet patches within seconds, as did the floor fade into darkness. So much so, that moments later, the invisible surface fell out from under him

and with a small yelp, he was sent toppling down a squat set of steps, before thudding to a stop with a dusty crash.

“Urg...” The dragon moaned as he sat up, rubbing his head as he shook away his daze. “Who put those damn stairs in my way?” He hissed, lashing his tail in frustration as he glanced around.

Regardless of who’d placed the obstacle in his path, he knew he should have recalled the stairs had been there, and he recognized his new surroundings almost instantly. Even shrouded in the gloom he knew the castle’s kitchens when he saw them, the many days he’d spent in here sneaking away with free food or having Violet offer him the adult drinks he was never supposed to have.

Hehe, she always liked me after I drank those. It always felt so funny! He reminisced giddily, as he sprang to his paws.

At that, he resumed his creep along the gloomy aisle between the counters. It was odd no one was down here; the kitchens were located right beneath the great hall and often bustling late into the night preparing the next day’s meals. Regardless, the light of the hall above suggested not all was so quiet, as it peeked down in tight shafts through gaps in the hefty floorboards. Sounds too, muffled by carpet, but there, met the prince’s ears. Yet the sheer scale of the room above stole any decipherable words with its echo. What Sanguine could make out, however, was the glint of water, shimmering in the needles of light.

More prints? The dragon mentally declared, eagerly bounding over, following them to the far end of the kitchen. *I bet the beast snuck in here to raid the pantry I...*

The trail led up out of the kitchen, away from the food stock, and up to the main hall.

But if it wasn’t after food, then what? The dragon thought, suddenly growing far more anxious.

A cold woosh filled the air, the hair on the back of the prince’s neck standing on end as if a million icy ants were crawling all over him. Despite all his boldness and brashness, for a split second Sanguine felt a deep pit of dread in his gut. Then it was gone, and a loud bang rang out as something heavy hit the floor above.

Dust shook from the rafters, while the young vesper almost leaped out of his skin at the abrupt disturbance. He staggered, panting hard as the rush of adrenalin lanced to the ends of his nerves like lightning. Tears were in his eyes before he knew it, yet not of sadness as he sniffed and wiped them away. He wanted nothing more than to be with

someone, to be safe, not alone. Instinct took hold and he bolted as fast as his tiny legs would carry him, scampering up the stairs toward the great hall.

If any of his family would be anywhere, it was there. The hall was right near that of the throne, surely his mother or Azure would be waiting there! That was all the dragon hoped for as he regretted ever creeping from his room and tracking the odd beast through the castle's underbelly.

He didn't regret any of it half as much as he regretted the next few seconds, however. Floundering up the winding steps to the great hall, he flopped hard against the door, causing the ajar frame to swing open and deposit him onto the carpet in a heap of fur and wings. One forepaw caught under another, and with a pained yelp, twisted, before he finally staggered to a stop and glanced up.

"Oof, help there is something down in the kitchen and there was this loud sound, and..." The words died as did any semblance of reason in the dragon's mind.

The smell of death wasn't new to Sanguine. Father had assured he was strong enough to witness many public executions. But nothing prepared him for what lay before him. Blood stained the red carpet a deeper shade of crimson, trailing in steaming gushes from stabs and slashes in the torn neck of the queen. That alone would have petrified the young prince to the point he'd have been no more than the statues looming around him like grizzly witnesses. But what hit harder was the dragon above. Face smeared with blood, fangs dripping with beads of red, Azure was unrecognizable.

The bloody brother's attention snapped to Sanguine in a flash, eyes burning with a malice he didn't think possible from Azure. It was like fire, a beam of energy more searingly hot than that conjured by the fire drakes of the south, and it pinned the young prince to the floor like an ant under a boot. All the while, the world made no sense, everything felt off.

Mother's fallen, Azure is covered in blood and standing over her and...

"What in the night's name is..." It was Violet's voice, Sanguine knew it better than anyone and the moment he was able to turn his head, he saw his older sister stunned. "A... Azure..."

She looked as if she could shatter like glass at any moment, eyes wide, mouth agape, and wings tight at her side before, with one rear of her head, she screamed. It was the most horrifying sound Sanguine had ever heard. He fell to the floor, forepaws over his head, and cowered under his wings. The sound of armored claws came next, as if summoned by Violet's scream. guards finally flooded in, yet the blood-stained Azure

seemed ready, rearing up with a flap of his wings before, in a flash of bright magic, he was gone. There were no words in Sanguine's head as the blinding light faded, naught but the image of his dead mother and bloody brother forever scorched into his mind.