

The Steeds of Kai

C. S. Beryl

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To those who carry the weight of the world, may you find your floral shirt and ride the wind.

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Cast of Characters

The Travelers

Kai (formerly Kaelen): Once a desperately overworked, ulcer-ridden Royal Courier bound by endless deadlines. After a freak accident involving a falling gargoyle, he wakes up with total amnesia and a wonderfully carefree, deeply optimistic new outlook on life. Convinced he is simply on a well-deserved holiday, he sets off to explore the world with an open heart and a relaxed stride.

Barnaby: A gentle, polite, and sweet-natured Unicorn bound to a pearlescent runestone. He communicates telepathically, loves peaceful meadows, and is incredibly fond of apples.

Aethon: A tempestuous, fiercely competitive Pegasus bound to a swirling crimson runestone. Bold and spirited, he is always eager to race the wind, kick a cloud, and test his speed against the sky.

Lyra: A shimmering, graceful Hippocampus bound to an aquatic teal runestone. She possesses a playful, bubbly telepathic voice and a deep, comforting connection to the ocean.

Pip: A miniature, genetically modified “Junior Variant” of a fearsome bio-weapon species known as the Exomorph. Roughly the size of an angry pug, his mild, organic-targeting acid is highly ineffective against metal but absolutely brilliant for polishing boots, sanitizing camp dishes, and boiling Kai’s tea.

Thalassa (familiarily known as “T-Dog”): An ancient, immortal sea deity boasting a majestic aura and a list of grand, ocean-faring titles as long as the coastline. Though capable of summoning terrifying typhoons, she finds her dramatic composure thoroughly disarmed by Kai’s relentless cheer.

The Adversaries & Instigators

Lord Malacor: A ruthless, unyielding tyrant who rules the smog-choked Dismal Fens. Clad in an eye-searing, highly coordinated ensemble of lime green, deep violet, and burnt orange, he seeks to rid the realm of all magical hybrid creatures in his obsession with “purity.”

Duke Oris: An ostentatious, fabulously wealthy Wizard-Duke with an incredibly sharp temper and a dazzling, solid orichalcum front tooth. He is the original owner of the three elemental runestones, and he will stop at nothing to get them back.

Silas Blackwood: An elite, highly professional tracker hired by Duke Oris to hunt down the “thief” who made off with the Duke’s prized runestones. He is relentless, shadow-born, and severely undercompensated for travel expenses.

The Silent Sentinels: Lord Malacor’s imposing, heavily armored elite guards.

1. The Gargoyle & the Getaway

Royal Courier First Class Kaelen had three active ulcers, and he had named each one after a different aristocrat.

At the moment, the Duke Oris ulcer was making itself known, burning like a hot coal under Kaelen's ribs as he climbed the sprawling marble steps of the Duke's estate. The steps were impossibly steep. Honestly, they felt less like architecture and more like a personal attack.

It was Tuesday afternoon. The sun pressed down hard enough to flatten shadows, and Kaelen was seventy-two hours into a fifty-hour shift. His royal-issue uniform had been designed for ceremonial dignity, not for hauling a fifty-pound, heavily shielded canister up an incline that could have humbled a mountain goat.

He stopped on the seventy-fourth step to wipe sweat from his eye and check his silver pocket watch.

2:14 PM.

If he failed to get a signature by 2:30, the delivery would be marked as a logistical failure. A logistical failure meant a demerit. Three demerits meant a disciplinary hearing. A disciplinary hearing meant losing his courier license and being reassigned to the postal sorting dungeons, where the air smelled of stale wax and broken dreams.

"Just a signature," Kaelen muttered, chest heaving as he adjusted the strap of his heavy satchel.

Inside sat the sealed metal canister. Its surface had been etched with the sort of warning that made reasonable people walk in the opposite direction.

HIGH CROWN SECURE TRANSPORT. BIOHAZARD CLASS 4. LETHAL FORCE AUTHORIZED.

Kaelen did not know what was inside, and he had no interest in learning. His job was to deliver the terror, not understand it.

He finally reached the landing of the eastern portico, a gaudy, overdesigned terrace held up by crumbling marble pillars and crowned with gargoyles large enough to suggest deep insecurity. Kaelen leaned against a pillar to catch his breath. His heart hammered a frantic rhythm against his sternum.

Above him, a voice boomed from the second-story balcony. A voice trained by money, rank, and years of never being told no.

Duke Oris.

"I don't care if you weep blood, Count Vane!" the Duke shouted.

Kaelen peered up through the balustrade. Oris was a portly man wrapped in shimmering layers of silk so impractical they looked personally offended by movement. He was yelling into a hovering scrying mirror, which projected the pale, distressed face of a rival noble.

"The southern trade routes belong to me!" Oris sneered.

He lifted a small velvet pouch and shook it with nasty little delight.

"Do you see this, Vane? I have them. The elemental runestones. The greatest magical steeds in the realm, sitting right here in my palm."

Please, Count Vane begged from the mirror. The steeds have belonged to my family for generations. You stole them in the night. My military's aerial flank is crippled without the Pegasus.

"I didn't steal them, Vane. I creatively relocated them."

Duke Oris laughed, and the afternoon sun flashed off his solid orichalcum front incisor with such force that Kaelen briefly saw spots.

"Sign over the trade routes by midnight," Oris said. "If you don't, I'll sell the Hippocampus to the highest bidder and grind the Unicorn into potion powder. Consider your blackmail thoroughly delivered."

With a flick of his hand, Oris shattered the scrying projection. He tossed the velvet pouch into the air, caught it, and leaned against the stone balustrade, chuckling at his own ruthless brilliance.

Below him, Kaelen squeezed his eyes shut.

His head pounded. The stress had grown so sharp, so total, that for one strange second he felt detached from his own body. Like ink on a page. Like a man trapped in a story, observed through some invisible pane of glass by a sympathetic reader.

If anyone is out there reading this, Kaelen thought, a hysterical bubble rising in his throat, please skip to the part where he signs my manifest and I get to sleep.

Above him came a terrible, grinding *crack*.

Duke Oris had spent lavishly on silk, blackmail leverage, and magical-gold dental work, but he had skimmed on maintaining his masonry---something he had gotten at a discount in the first place.

The balustrade beneath his elbow gave way.

The Duke shrieked and scrambled backward as the stone crumbled. The heavy gargoyle perched on the railing tipped over the edge. As Oris flailed, the velvet pouch slipped from his grasp and tumbled after it.

Kaelen looked up.

Oh, his highly trained, deeply anxious mind managed. That's going to...

SMASH.

The shift from unbearable anxiety to profound, oceanic calm was surprisingly painless.

When the courier opened his eyes, he was lying on his back in a manicured, thornless rosebush. Sunlight filtered through the leaves and spread warm gold across his face. A soft breeze stirred the hedges. The air smelled of jasmine, damp earth, and crushed petals.

He did not know who he was. He did not know where he was. He had no idea what he did for a living.

He felt absolutely fantastic.

"Wow," he whispered, smiling slowly. "What a beautiful day."

He sat up and brushed a few rose petals from his dark, stiff uniform jacket. The jacket felt much too rigid for such a lovely afternoon. He unbuttoned the collar and let his neck breathe.

His head did not hurt. If anything, there was a pleasant, buzzing numbness near the crown of his skull. The tight, burning sensation that had always lived under his ribs had vanished completely.

He looked to his left.

A massive stone gargoyle lay in pieces across the marble patio.

"Watch your step," he said, then chuckled to himself.

A deep, unshakable peace settled through him. Clearly, he was a man of leisure. Why else would he be napping in a garden on a Tuesday afternoon?

Was it a Tuesday? It felt like a Tuesday.

Beside the shattered gargoyle sat his satchel. He pulled it open. Inside was a heavy metal canister with intense red writing all over it. He could not quite bring himself to care what the words said.

It looked like a thermos.

Excellent, he thought. A vacation always requires a good beverage.

As he slung the satchel over his shoulder, a soft glint caught his eye.

Tucked into the roots of the rosebush, right where it must have fallen from the sky, was a plush velvet pouch. He reached for it and tugged it open.

Three smooth, heavy stones rolled into his palm.

One shone pearlescent white, catching the light like a trapped star. One swirled deep crimson with flecks of blue. The third glowed a calm, aquatic teal.

They were beautiful. Perfect little souvenirs.

His bare thumb brushed the pearlescent stone.

A voice chimed inside his mind. Bright, ringing, and full of golden-retriever wonder.

Hello! Oh, it is so nice to feel the sun again! Are you the new stable master?

The man blinked and looked around the empty garden.

"I don't think so," he said aloud, not remotely alarmed by the telepathic interruption. "I don't think I have a job at all."

Well, you have a very nice voice, the presence replied politely. I am Barnaby. I am a Unicorn. I like running in meadows, and I am very fond of apples. Have you got any apples?

"Not on me, Barnaby," the man said.

He smiled and tapped the crimson stone.

If we don't have apples, we should have a race! a second voice crackled through his head, much louder than the first. It buzzed with stormy, competitive excitement. Let us out! I want to race the wind! I want to kick a cloud! Let's go, let's go, let's go!

Quiet down, Aethon. You're going to give our new friend a headache.

The third voice rose gently, melodic and cool, washing through his mind like a tide.

Hello there. I am Lyra. Do you like the ocean? I feel like you would like the ocean. You have a very relaxed aura.

"I think I love the ocean, Lyra," the man said, and laughed.

It was a rich, carefree sound. He slipped the three stones into his breast pocket, right over his heart. They hummed there with a warm, comforting magic.

What is your name, new friend? Barnaby asked.

The man paused.

He searched the sunny, empty meadow of his mind. Nothing surfaced. No titles. No deadlines. No clients. No sharp little hooks of worry.

He noted the embroidered "K" on his tunic.

Just one soft syllable, easy as a cool breeze, popped into his mind.

"Kai," he decided. "My name is Kai. And I think we're going on a road trip."

Hurrah! Barnaby cheered.

Kai stepped out of the rosebush, dusted off his trousers, swapped out his tunic for a floral shirt that he found in his satchel, and began to amble down the winding dirt path away from the estate. He whistled a jaunty, aimless tune.

He had a thermos, three magical voices in his head, and absolutely nowhere to be.

Ten minutes later, the heavy wooden doors of the grand front entrance burst open.

Duke Oris, panting and red-faced from stopping to lay a generational curse on his stonemason and then finally sprinting down the stairs, rushed to the fallen remains of the broken balustrade and stared at it.

"My gargoyle!" he cried, taking in the smashed masonry.

Then his eyes widened.

He dropped to his knees and pawed frantically through the crushed rosebushes.

"The pouch. The runestones. Where are they? They must be here!"

His hands came up empty.

But then his eyes caught on a small piece of cloth that looked torn from a royal courier uniform.

"Aha!"

Oris looked down the grand, sweeping steps of his estate. But the courier was gone. The runestones were gone. His leverage over Count Vane, his guarantee of the southern trade routes, his most prized magical possessions---gone. All vanished.

He stood slowly, fists trembling with an unholy rage.

"The courier stole them," the Duke whispered.

The realization twisted his face into a mask of pure fury.

"Vane didn't refuse the blackmail. He hired an elite operative. He sent a master thief disguised as a Royal Courier to steal the steeds right out from under me."

Oris spun toward the manor, his voice echoing across the manicured lawns.

"Guards! Call the Trackers! Put a bounty on the courier! I don't care if you have to burn the continent to the bedrock. Bring me the man with the torn courier uniform, and bring me my runestones!"

As he screamed, the sun caught his face one last time. His solid orichalcum tooth flashed like a beacon of terrible, expensive vengeance.

Far down the road, entirely oblivious to the geopolitical crisis he had just casually ignited, Kai paused to smell a wildflower.

It was shaping up to be a truly spectacular Tuesday.

2. Pocket Dimensions & Perfect Tea

The King's Wood was, in Kai's fresh and untroubled opinion, a triumph of landscaping.

Sunlight slipped through the canopy of ancient oaks and landed in warm patches on the dirt path. Moss hung from the branches in soft green curtains. The air smelled of pine needles, damp bark, and wildflowers blooming wherever they pleased. It was exactly the sort of afternoon that deserved a slow walk, preferably with no destination and excellent company.

Kai had both.

Did you see that squirrel? Barnaby's voice rang brightly in his mind, full of pure, baffled delight. *I think it challenged me to a race. Should I show it how fast a unicorn can gallop? I am very fast.*

"Let it have the victory, Barnaby," Kai said, leaning back with his hands behind his head while the unicorn picked his own careful way down the path. "We're on holiday. Rushing is strictly forbidden."

If we were flying, squirrels wouldn't matter at all, Aethon crackled from the crimson stone tucked in Kai's breast pocket. *We could race clouds. Or birds. Or the sun. Please, Kai? Just one little loop? A tiny one?*

"Patience, Aethon," Kai said, tapping the stone fondly. "The sky isn't going anywhere."

From the teal stone in his other pocket came Lyra's soft, bubbling voice.

The air tastes like salt. Are we near the big puddle? I love the big puddle.

"I believe we are," Kai said.

A moment later, he heard it. Waves. Slow, steady, and close.

The trees thinned, then opened completely. The forest gave way to a sweep of clean white sand and glittering blue water. The ocean stretched all the way to the horizon, sapphire in the deep places and turquoise where the sun touched the shallows.

Now, traveling with an aquatic beast of myth should have been a logistical disaster. Dragging a massive fish-horse across dry land would have ruined the mood for everyone involved. Bad for the sand. Worse for the fish-horse. But Kai, sliding off Barnaby's snowy back onto the beach, once again admired the five-star brilliance of the runestones.

Pocket dimensions. Honestly, what a concept.

"All right," Kai said cheerfully. "Shift change."

He tapped the pearlescent stone.

Barnaby vanished in a soft chime and a swirl of warm, sparkling light, tucked safely back into whatever impossible little sanctuary lived inside the runestone.

Oh, Barnaby reported at once. *It is very soft in here. I am going to nap on a cloud.*

"Excellent plan."

Kai waded ankle-deep into the surf and tapped the teal stone.

Sea-foam light shimmered across the water. Lyra appeared with a joyful whinny, tossing her head as the tide rolled around her silver forelegs. She was magnificent, all gleaming mare from the chest up, with a powerful iridescent dolphin tail flashing beneath the surface.

SPLASH! Lyra cried in his mind, her voice fizzing with happy bubbles. *The water is perfect. Look at the tiny crabs. Kai, get on. We must ride the waves immediately.*

Kai saw no reason to argue.

For the next hour, the world became salt spray, sea wind, and laughter. Lyra skimmed along the crests of the gentle waves with effortless grace, cutting through the water as if the ocean had been built for her personally. Barnaby and Aethon supplied commentary from the cozy comfort of their extradimensional lounge. Barnaby praised every seabird. Aethon ranked the waves by speed and aerodynamic potential, despite having no idea what that meant.

It was, without question, the most relaxing afternoon Kai could remember. Admittedly, he could not remember many afternoons. Still. Strong showing. Eventually, his stomach gave a polite little rumble. “Tea,” Kai decided.

He guided Lyra into a quiet cove tucked between two weathered rocks, tapped her runestone, and let her return to her nap. Then he waded ashore, found a broad piece of sun-bleached driftwood, and settled onto it like a man with serious plans to do very little.

Only then did he turn his attention to the heavy metal canister in his satchel.

He had been carrying it since the rose bush. It looked sturdy, expensive, and rather dramatic. Red wax seals covered the lid. Severe lettering had been engraved into the side.

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Kai squinted at it.

“Must be imported,” he said.

He patted the canister. “A good thermos is essential for travel. Let’s see what the chef packed.”

The latches gave a satisfying clunk. Kai pried off the pressurized lid, and a thin hiss of trapped gas slipped into the salty air.

He leaned over, expecting soup. Possibly herbal tea.

Two glowing green eyes blinked up at him from inside the dark cylinder.

Something wet went *snick*.

A small, black, aggressively chitinous creature scrambled out of the canister and landed on the driftwood.

Objectively, it was a nightmare. It had the sleek, biomechanical carapace of a deep-space predator, a segmented tail tipped with a razor stinger, and a mouth that opened to reveal a second, smaller mouth dripping neon-green saliva. It was an Exomorph: a genetically engineered bio-weapon designed to melt through starship bulkheads and wipe out infantry battalions.

Fortunately for Kai, this one was a Junior Variant.

Some noble family, in a decision that probably involved too much wine and no common sense, had bred it as a novelty pet for a child. So instead of towering over him and liquefying the coastline, the creature was roughly the size and shape of a very angry pug.

It flared its cranial crest, arched its back, and made a ferocious little sound.

“Pip!”

“Well, hello there,” Kai said, beaming. “A complimentary pet. The amenities on this trip are staggering.”

The tiny Exomorph froze.

It had clearly prepared for screaming. Possibly stabbing. It had not prepared for a warm welcome.

After a confused pause, it tried again to establish itself as a killing machine. It lunged forward, opened its jaws, and spat a glob of glowing acid directly onto Kai’s scuffed, mud-caked courier boot.

The acid struck the leather with a violent hiss.

Kai watched with mild interest as green sludge bubbled over his toe.

The Junior Variant’s venom had been heavily reduced by its creators to prevent awkward drawing-room incidents. At proper battlefield strength, Exomorph acid ate through living tissue with horrifying enthusiasm. This version had been tuned for organics too, but at a much more polite household level. Leather, food scraps, mildew, grime --- anything soft or once-alive. Metal, not so much.

Instead of burning through Kai’s foot, the acid stripped away mud, swamp grit, and old organic scuff marks. It sank into the leather just enough to soften it, then evaporated in a faint green puff.

Kai looked down.

His left boot gleamed. The leather shone as if a master cobbler had spent three hours on it with wax, brushes, and deep professional pride.

“Oh, that is incredibly handy,” Kai said.

He lifted his other foot and presented it to the miniature bio-weapon. “Would you mind terribly? Symmetry matters.”

The Exomorph stared at the boot.

Then it stared at Kai.

Then, with a frustrated little “pip,” it spat another drop of acid.

The second boot sizzled clean.

Apparently unwilling to be reduced to a shoe-polishing device without one last protest, the creature spun around and spat a concentrated glob of acid onto the heavy metal lid of the Class 4 canister.

The acid hit the steel.

Nothing happened.

Well, almost nothing. It fizzed against a strip of red wax sealant and ate through that in a flash. When it reached the bare metal underneath, the acid beaded up and slid off like rainwater from a duck's back.

The lid remained smugly intact.

"Ah," Kai said, pulling a tarnished camp spoon from his bag. "Calibrated for organics and loose grime. Terrible for steel. Brilliant for dishes."

He held out the spoon.

The little creature hesitated, then spat a tiny drop onto it.

The acid vaporized dried oatmeal and tarnish at once. The metal underneath came away spotless and perfectly sanitized.

Kai applauded. "Wonderful. I shall call you Pip."

Pip appeared to consider this.

Then, perhaps realizing he was not about to be yelled at, caged, or dropped into a battle simulator, he hopped off the log, curled against Kai's thigh, and began to purr. It was a low mechanical sound, like a kettle thinking about boiling.

A steady heat radiated from his small body. The biological furnace inside him, originally designed to power devastating thermal blasts, had apparently found a calmer calling.

Kai's eyes lit up.

He rummaged through his satchel and produced a tin cup, a canteen of water, and a little packet of dried tea leaves. He filled the cup, then nestled it carefully against Pip's warm, chitinous side.

Within thirty seconds, the water reached a rolling boil.

"Perfect," Kai said.

He added the tea leaves, let them steep, and stirred the cup with his freshly cleaned spoon.

Is the new friend nice? Barnaby asked sleepily in Kai's head.

"He's lovely," Kai thought back, taking a contented sip while the sun dipped lower over the shining water. "He's an absolute wiz with laundry, his acid doesn't scratch the silverware, and he boils a kettle faster than a tavern stove."

Does he like apples? Aethon asked.

"We'll have to find out."

Pip made a small purring chirp and tucked his tail closer around himself.

Kai sat on the beach with clean boots, hot tea, a purring bio-weapon in his lap, and three telepathic mythological steeds dozing in his pockets.

He sighed, long and peaceful.

Whoever he had been before the gargoyle hit him, that poor fellow clearly hadn't known the first thing about taking a proper vacation.

3. Coconuts & Ancient Titles

The next morning brought weather so clean and bright that Kai felt it deserved a generous tip.

The sun hung over the secluded cove like a warm gold coin, baking the white sand and turning the sea to glass. Waves had spent the night nosing softly at the shore, and that steady hush had lulled Kai into ten solid hours of sleep on a bed of moss and palm fronds. He woke renewed, unbothered, and carrying exactly zero urgent responsibilities in his chest, which he assumed was simply how being alive worked.

Now he sat on his sun-bleached driftwood log and supervised breakfast.

“Just a little off the top, Pip, if you please,” Kai said, tapping the hard green shell of a freshly foraged coconut.

Pip, the miniature Exomorph bio-weapon, let out a chittering purr. The little monster scrambled onto the log, raised his segmented tail, and snapped his razor stinger down in three quick flashes.

Schwing. Schwing. Schwing.

With almost insulting precision, Pip sheared the top from the coconut and left a smooth hexagonal opening behind.

“Marvelous knife work,” Kai said, tossing him a small piece of dried fish.

Pip caught it in his inner jaws with a wet snap, then settled beside Kai and radiated the fierce, cozy heat of a space-faring impulse drive. Kai tucked his tin cup against Pip’s chitinous back to keep his morning tea warm.

I would like a coconut, Barnaby said from the pearlescent runestone in Kai’s pocket. *Can unicorns drink from coconuts? I have never tried. If I cannot, I would still like to wear one as a hat.*

“I’m sure we can arrange a hat, Barnaby,” Kai said, smiling as he slid a hollow bamboo reed into his drink.

If I dive-bombed a coconut from very high up, Aethon cut in, his voice crackling with competitive delight, *I could crack it open with my hooves. I could crack a hundred coconuts. We should declare war on the trees.*

The trees are our friends, Aethon, Lyra said gently from the teal stone. Her voice bubbled soft and cool. *Besides, the ocean is making the best sound today. Listen. It is pulling back.*

Kai paused with the bamboo straw halfway to his lips.

Lyra was right.

The gentle slap of waves against sand had stopped. The water was retreating fast, sliding away from the shore and exposing long stretches of wet sand, glittering shells, and several very confused crabs.

The bright morning dimmed as if someone had drawn a veil across the sun. The air cooled. A thick sea mist rolled in from the water, unnatural and slow, threaded with glowing blues and purples.

Pip stopped purring. His smooth, eyeless dome turned toward the ocean. He hissed low in his throat, and a drop of highly specialized, organic-eating green acid gathered at the corner of his terrifying little mouth.

“Now, now, Pip. Manners,” Kai said, patting his carapace. “Looks like we have company.”

A figure emerged from the heart of the glowing mist.

She did not walk. She drifted, hovering inches above the damp sand. Her robes looked woven from living water, forever spilling and cresting in tiny waterfalls. Her skin held the deep violet-gray of a storm at dusk. Her eyes glowed abyssal blue. In one hand, she carried a massive staff of frosted sea-glass and twisting coral.

Ancient magic crackled around her. Her aura pressed against the beach with the sort of force that could level cities, or at least ruin everyone’s breakfast.

She stopped ten paces from Kai’s driftwood camp, struck the butt of her coral staff against the sand, and the sound cracked like thunder.

“MORTAL,” she intoned. The word rattled in Kai’s teeth. “YOU DARE MAKE CAMP UPON THE SACRED SHORES OF MY DOMAIN. TREMBLE, FOR YOU STAND IN THE PRESENCE OF THE AZURE NOMAD.”

Kai blinked, still holding his coconut.

“Hello. I’m Kai.”

The ancient being did not appear to hear him. Her eyes flared brighter.

“I AM THALASSA, THE TIDE-WALKER. SHE WHO BREATHES THE MIST. THE KEEPER OF THE DEEP.”

“That’s a lovely title,” Kai said. “Very evocative.”

“I AM THE LADY OF THE CORAL THRONE,” she boomed, and the ocean thrashed behind her in time with each word. “THE WEAVER OF THE MAELSTROM. THE SOVEREIGN OF THE SUNKEN SPIRE. THE FIRST DROP OF RAIN AND THE FINAL CRASH OF THE WAVE.”

Kai settled more comfortably on his log. This, he sensed, might take a while. He took a sip of coconut water.

Perfectly chilled. Lovely.

“I AM THE LEVIATHAN’S WHISPERER,” she went on, pacing across the sand as her liquid robes streamed behind her. “THE UNYIELDING CURRENT. THE MOTHER OF PEARLS. THE BANE OF SHIPS AND THE ARCHITECT OF THE ABYSS. THE GATHERER OF DROWNED SECRETS. THE STORM-BRINGER. THE...”

For five full minutes, the immortal entity listed her honorifics.

She described ancient krakens she had humbled, armadas she had sunk, and her absolute authority over every drop of saltwater on the continent. She explained the unfathomable depth of her power, the ages she had survived, and the countless mortals who had collapsed weeping at the faintest glimpse of her shadow.

At last, chest heaving mostly for dramatic effect, she struck her staff against the sand one final time.

“AND I DEMAND TO KNOW,” she roared as the mist spun around her, “WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF, INSIGNIFICANT FLECK OF DUST?”

The echo faded across the beach.

Kai sat quietly for a moment. Then he reached into his satchel, pulled out a second coconut, and tapped the shell.

Pip hopped over, went *schwing-schwing-schwing* with his stinger, and popped the top clean off.

Kai slid in a fresh bamboo reed, stood, dusted sand from his shorts, and walked straight through the ancient being’s terrible magical pressure as if it were a warm breeze.

He held out the coconut.

“I have to say,” Kai said, smiling up at her, “that is a staggering resume. Honestly, good for you. But you must be absolutely parched after all that talking. Coconut?”

The immortal being stared at the coconut.

Then she stared at Kai.

The bioluminescent mist sputtered. A few feet away, a small wave slapped awkwardly against the shore, as if it had arrived late and wanted nobody to notice.

“You... you do not weep?” she asked. Her voice dropped from hurricane roar to bewildered alto. “You do not beg for mercy?”

“On a day like this?” Kai looked up at the patch of perfect blue sky beginning to show through her storm clouds. “The humidity alone is too nice for weeping. Come on, take a load off. I’m Kai. The little fellow making tea over there is Pip.”

Tell her I said hello, Lyra chimed in his mind. *The Lady of the Coral Throne makes the absolute best tide pools. So many starfish.*

Ask her if she wants to race, Aethon added.

She is very sparkly, Barnaby said, delighted.

“And the voices in my head say hello as well,” Kai added, gesturing vaguely toward his chest pocket. “Also, with a list of names that long, I’m just going to call you T-Dog, if that’s all right. Shorter for travel.”

“T-Dog,” she repeated.

The syllables clearly had no business in her ancient mouth. The mortal’s total lack of terror seemed to be causing a small traffic jam in her millennia-old mind.

She looked at the coconut again. Carefully, as if it might explode, she reached out with a hand ringed in living water and took it.

She sipped through the bamboo reed.

Her glowing eyes widened.

“Fresh,” she murmured.

“Right? Found them just past the tree line.” Kai gestured back toward the driftwood log. “Have a seat, T-Dog. It’s too nice a morning to spend it yelling.”

Thoroughly derailed from whatever majestic trespasser-terrorizing speech she had planned next, the ancient guide floated to the log and sat. Her liquid robes pooled beautifully over the dry wood.

Pip, unimpressed by divinity in general, trotted over and spat a tiny, precise drop of acid onto the base of her sea-glass staff. The acid ignored the frosted glass completely. Instead, it ate through a stubborn crust of millennia-old barnacles with a soft sizzle and left the base spotless.

Thalassa watched the terrifying miniature Exomorph perform staff maintenance. Then she looked at Kai, who was sipping his drink like all of this made perfect sense.

For a long moment, the ocean behind her softened into a quiet, steady hum.

The grand hostility drained from her shoulders. Something older remained. Heavier, too. She lowered her coconut and looked at Kai’s chest pocket, where the teal stone had begun to glow.

“There is a song in your pocket, mortal,” Thalassa said softly. Her abyssal eyes dimmed to the melancholy blue of old sea-glass. “A song I have not heard in a very long time.”

“Oh, that’s Lyra,” Kai said, tapping the pocket. “She’s a Hippocampus. We met yesterday. Big fan of your tide pools.”

Thalassa stared at the stone. Her expression went still.

“A child of the foam,” she said. “I thought them all driven into the deep, or bound in iron by the lords of the mainland.”

She sighed, and the sound was a tide pulling back over smooth pebbles.

“I have guarded these shores as a sentry for ten thousand years. Kings have offered me fleets of gold. Sorcerers have sacrificed their own eyes just to glimpse my shadow. But I was not always only a watcher. Once, I was a protector.”

She traced the freshly polished base of her staff.

“The first hippocampi were my wards. The ocean itself entrusted them to me. During the First Sundering, the magic of the land turned hostile. I could not pull the tides fast enough to save their nesting grounds. I failed them.”

She looked out over the water. The weight of ages settled across her face.

“It is a debt the ocean does not let me forget. And it is a debt I have never repaid.”

Kai listened, his coconut resting in his lap.

The calm the gargoyle had given him did not make him blind to sadness. If anything, it made room for it. No panic crowding the edges. No frantic need to fix everything in the next ten seconds. Just sadness, clear and simple, sitting there between them.

“That’s a heavy thing to carry, T-Dog,” he said gently. “Ten thousand years is a long time to beat yourself up.”

“The currents are shifting, Kai,” Thalassa murmured.

She turned toward the dense, smog-dark tree line to the south.

“The water in the estuaries tastes of iron and ash. Something foul is brewing in the Dismal Fens. A shadow that hunts the hybrid children of the magic I once failed to protect.”

“Well,” Kai said.

He stood and brushed sand from his shorts. Then he patted his pocket, feeling Lyra, Aethon, and Barnaby hum together in warm telepathic concern.

“My friends and I are on a road trip. No schedules, no smiting, no roaring at the sky. Just good vibes, fresh tea, and seeing the sights.”

He held out a hand to the ancient, guilt-ridden entity.

“We were planning to head south anyway. If there’s a shadow bothering your old friends in the Fens, maybe we can swing by and politely ask it to chill out. You’re more than welcome to tag along. Consider it a working vacation.”

Thalassa looked at his hand.

Then she looked at the clear sky, the pristine beach, and the perfectly polished bottom of her staff. She took another sip of coconut, the sweet water bright against all the salt she had breathed for ages.

“A vacation,” she said softly.

The last of her imposing mist thinned into the warm morning air. She stood and gripped her staff.

“Yes, Kai. I think I will.”

4. A Vibe Check in the Dismal Fens

The shift from the sun-drenched coast to the Dismal Fens was less a gentle fade and more a geographical face-plant.

By midafternoon, the white sand and blue water had vanished behind gnarled mangrove roots, curtains of weeping moss, and thick mud that smelled faintly of eggs, rot, and bad decisions. The air sat heavy and wet on Kai's skin. Oversized insects whined in the reeds with the confidence of creatures that had never once been swatted by anyone important.

Kai, naturally, found the whole thing charming.

"It's very rustic," he said, lounging on Barnaby's broad white back while the unicorn picked his way through the muck. "A real back-to-nature sort of place. You can feel the earth breathing out here. Or burping. Hard to tell, honestly. Either way, very organic."

Thalassa floated a few feet to his left, holding her liquid robes tight around her ankles. She stared at a patch of bubbling, algae-choked water with ancient, personal disgust.

"This water is an insult to moisture," she said. "It is stagnant. It has forgotten the tide. If I were not on vacation, I would summon a monsoon and scrub this entire biome until it apologized."

"Now, T-Dog, every ecosystem has its charm." Kai adjusted his floral shirt and glanced down. "Isn't that right, Pip?"

Pip chirped from the mud beside Barnaby. The miniature Exomorph was having an excellent afternoon. Whenever a swarm of swamp flies dropped toward them, Pip opened his secondary jaws and released a tiny aerosol sneeze of green acid. The flies fell at once, neatly dissolved before they touched the ground.

My hooves are getting muddy, Barnaby noted in Kai's mind. Even now, his telepathic voice stayed painfully polite. *I do not mind mud as a concept, but this mud smells like old cabbage. Are we going to sleep in the old cabbage mud, Kai?*

"We'll find dry ground soon, buddy," Kai said.

I would simply fly over it, Aethon declared from his runestone. *Mud is for creatures who have not discovered the sky. No offense, Barnaby.*

None taken, my tempestuous friend.

I wonder if there are fish in the cabbage mud, Lyra mused from the teal stone, her voice bubbling pleasantly. *I could swim in the mud if you need me to, Kai. I am very versatile.*

"You're perfect where you are, Lyra," Kai said, and tapped her runestone with one finger.

He was just about to ask Thalassa whether she knew any decent swamp-camping recipes when a sound tore through the humid air.

A shriek.

High, panicked, and entirely animal.

The chatter in Kai's head died. The runestones in his pocket went cold so fast it made his chest tighten.

Kai, Aethon said. His usual thunder had gone thin. *Kai, what was that?*

It hurts, Lyra whimpered, and grief rolled through the link like a black tide. *Something is hurting them. Please make it stop.*

Kai's easy smile faded.

The deep calm that had followed him since the gargoyle met his skull did not leave him. It changed shape. It sharpened.

"T-Dog," he said quietly. "Did you hear that?"

Thalassa's abyssal eyes narrowed. The soft magic around her shifted from sea breeze to storm front. "I did. There is malice in these woods."

They followed the cries.

Barnaby moved with unnatural care, placing each hoof where the mud would take him silently. Thalassa dimmed her glow to a faint shimmer. Pip crept low through the roots, tail curled tight. The runestones in Kai's pocket tugged him forward like a trembling compass.

At last, they reached a curtain of drooping moss. Kai parted it with two fingers.

Below them, sunk into the marsh, lay a clearing.

And just like that, the lovely little bubble of his vacation burst.

The clearing sprawled with rusted iron, bubbling vats, steel cages, and arc-lamps that cast everything in a hard, sickly glare. Pipes ran over the mud like exposed veins. Machinery clanked and hissed. The place looked less built than infected.

Guarding it were Exomorphs.

Full-sized ones.

Pip let out a confused, high-pitched trill.

The creatures below had his shape, more or less, but they towered eight feet high. Their black chitin was scarred and plated like armor. Their eyeless heads swept back and forth with awful precision. Heavy ropes of acid hung from their jaws and dripped onto the catwalks, where the liquid hissed through iron like hot knives through butter.

These were not novelty pets. They were not boot polishers. They were living siege engines, bred to melt blast doors and tear infantry lines apart.

But the Exomorphs were only the muscle.

The true horror hung above the mud.

Iron cages swung from cranes and chains. Dozens of magical creatures had been crammed inside them. Griffons with their wings bound. Chimeras slumped under heavy sedation. Pegasi shaking against cruel restraints. Hippocampi trapped in shallow tanks of filthy water, their scales rubbed raw, their manes clotted with blood and slime.

And pacing before the cages, proud as a peacock in a house fire, was the man who had built it all.

Lord Malacor demanded attention mostly because looking at him hurt.

He wore a heavy velvet cape in deep, bruised violet. Under it, his cuirass blazed neon lime green. His boots and gauntlets were a violent burnt orange. The whole outfit screamed from every angle. He looked like a walking argument between three paint merchants who hated each other.

"Process the eagle-lions next!" Malacor shouted. His voice carried across the clearing, nasal and flat and empty of mercy. He pointed a burnt-orange gauntlet at a cage of whimpering griffons. "Separate the beaks from the paws. If we cannot isolate the bloodlines, dump the lot into the vats."

No, Barnaby whispered.

The word trembled in Kai's mind.

Malacor strode toward a dapple-gray Pegasus whose wings had been pinned to its sides with iron clamps. In the next cage, a Hippocampus thrashed weakly in a narrow tank, barely deep enough to cover its tail.

"Look at this," Malacor sneered. His lime-green chest puffed out. "Abominations. A crime against nature. A horse belongs to the earth. A bird belongs to the sky. A fish belongs to the sea. Mashing them together is an insult to the fabric of the world. Magic is no excuse for a mutt."

He turned to the Exomorph guards.

"I will not have the purity of this world muddled by crossbreeds. Preserve the pure horses. Preserve the pure birds. Cleanse these magical abominations from my Fens. Into the acid with them."

One of the giant Exomorphs stepped forward. Its scythe-like arms reached for the cage door.

In Kai's pocket, the runestones screamed.

Aethon battered himself against the boundary of his pocket dimension, wild with rage at the sight of bound wings. Barnaby's horror came through soft and shaking. But Lyra's grief nearly knocked Kai breathless.

The bright, bubbly Hippocampus sobbed through the link. She could feel them. The terror of her kin in those tanks. The poison in their water. The bite of iron against their scales. Their confusion, too. That was the part that hurt most. They did not understand why anyone hated them enough to do this.

This was no predator in the wild. No accident. No ugly misunderstanding.

This was planned. Systematic. A machine built to erase them because one hateful little man had wrapped his cruelty in the word purity.

Thalassa's hand closed around her coral staff.

The pressure dropped so fast the swamp water began to bubble.

"I shall crush his bones to dust," she hissed. Her eyes flared with the wrath of a tidal wave. "I shall drown his lungs in the darkest trenches of the deep. I shall peel his name from the memory of the sea and leave him forgotten in the black."

"T-Dog. Stop," Kai breathed, catching her arm.

Thalassa turned on him. The storm in her eyes spun dangerously. "You would stay my hand? You see what he does."

"I do." Kai pressed one palm over his breast pocket and sent as much warmth as he could through the link. "But if you call a hurricane right now, you'll drown the captives in those cages before you kill him. We need a minute."

For a heartbeat, Thalassa looked ready to argue.

Then her gaze flicked back to the suspended cages. To the shallow tanks. To the griffons packed wing to wing. Her jaw tightened.

Kai tugged her away from the ridgeline and motioned for Barnaby to follow. They slipped back through the moss and into the dense cover of a hollow cypress grove, hidden from the clearing.

The swamp felt colder there. The shade pooled deep between the roots. Kai sat on a dry, twisted cypress root and pulled his legs close. He lifted Pip from his satchel and set him in the middle of their small circle.

Pip seemed to understand the mood. He curled into a tight ball. The glow inside his little body brightened, and a steady, smokeless heat spread from him like a tiny campfire.

For a long while, nobody spoke.

The only sounds were the faint crackle of Pip's shell, the distant clank of Malacor's machines, and the low drone of insects that did not know enough to be quiet.

Kai, Lyra said at last.

Her voice barely held together. No fizz. No bubbles. Just a thin thread of pain.

The water in their tanks tastes like despair. They are so frightened. They don't understand why they are hated.

"I know, Lyra," Kai whispered.

I want to kick down the iron, Aethon raged. His thoughts came jagged with sorrow. I want to trample that orange-and-green tyrant into the mud. But there are so many of those giant bugs.

We are only a few, Barnaby said softly. His sweet optimism had gone dim. How do we stop something so big and so cruel?

Across the warm glow of Pip's body, Thalassa sat perfectly still. Her liquid robes had darkened to the bruised purple of a midnight sea. She stared down at the little Exomorph, but her eyes were somewhere else. Far away. Far back.

"The iron chains," she murmured. "They are the same."

Kai looked up. "The same as what, T-Dog?"

"I told you I failed my wards once," she said.

Her grip tightened on the frosted sea-glass staff until her knuckles paled.

"A millennium ago, during the Purge of the Shallows, a mainland king decided magic belonged only to men. He called the beasts of myth a plague. He used iron nets and acid, just like this one. He drove the hippocampi into a crescent bay."

She closed her eyes.

One drop of saltwater slid down her storm-dark cheek.

"I was arrogant. I thought my title would frighten him away. I thought a warning from the Tide-Walker would be enough. By the time I understood that words would not stop him, by the time I called the deep, it was too late."

Her voice thinned.

"I washed his armada from the world. Then I stood on the shore and watched the water turn black with the ash of my wards. I have guarded empty coasts ever since. Punishing myself with the silence."

She opened her eyes.

The ocean inside them no longer looked theatrical or grand. It looked endless, and wounded, and ready to break the world.

"I will not watch the children of the foam burn again," she said. "Not today. Not ever."

Kai sat in silence.

The vacation was, undeniably, in trouble.

A man with no memory, a floral shirt, a baby monster, and a questionable thermos sat a quarter mile from a mechanized army of bio-weapons. The laid-back tourist who had napped in a rose bush should have been terrified.

But as Kai looked at Thalassa's tears and felt the trembling sorrow of the steeds in his pocket, something strange began moving through him.

The calm did not leave.

It condensed.

It hardened from a warm current into ice.

Without meaning to, Kai straightened. The loose slump went out of his shoulders. His eyes shifted toward the clearing, no longer admiring the scenery, no longer drifting. He began measuring. Distances. Patrol rhythms. Sight lines. The angle of the rusted catwalks. The probable load-bearing points. The central control console Malacor had stood beside. The way the Exomorph pack moved when he gestured.

Cold clarity filled him.

Four heavy targets on the perimeter. Cages suspended by secondary hydraulics. Warlord's console controls the pack. Catwalk corrosion at the south brace. Entry through the drainage culvert if the tide line holds.

Kai blinked.

That was oddly specific.

He shook it off. Maybe he was simply a very organized person. A good tour guide, really. One who had become deeply and fundamentally offended that someone was ruining the itinerary for his friends.

"Nobody is burning today, T-Dog," Kai said.

His voice did not sound like a tourist's voice.

It had dropped low and crisp, stripped of its breezy wander. Calm remained, but now it carried steel underneath. Authority. Impatience. The kind that did not ask the road to clear. It simply walked.

Kai did not recognize the tone.

But the reader would.

It was the voice of a Royal Courier with a delivery to make, and absolutely no patience for obstacles.

5. Floral Shirts & Fortress Breaches

Lord Malacor's fortress rose from the Dismal Fens like a monument to bad moods.

Jagged iron ribs framed the walls. Black stone wept oily streaks down every tower. Smog-belching chimneys coughed into the humid air, turning the sky above the fortress the color of old dishwater. The whole place looked less designed than threatened into existence by someone with a grudge against windows.

Kai stood at the edge of the tree line with his hands on his hips, taking it in.

"It's a bit gloomy, isn't it?" he said, brushing a flake of dried swamp mud from the pink hibiscus pattern on his shirt. "Needs fairy lights. Maybe a wrap-around porch. Something to let the breeze through."

Thalassa hovered beside him, her coral staff humming with barely contained oceanic fury. "I can let the breeze through," she said. Her voice carried the weight of trenches where sunlight had never been. "I can summon a localized hurricane and peel the mortar from those stones. I can scatter this tyrant's fortress across three archipelagos."

"T-Dog, please." Kai lifted one hand. "We're guests. Uninvited guests, yes, but still. No need to be rude. We're doing a quick pickup. Stealth mode."

I am not built for stealth, Kai, Barnaby said gently in his mind.

The unicorn stood in a patch of mostly dry reeds, his white coat glowing softly in the swamp gloom. He looked like someone had dropped a moonbeam into a bog.

I am a symbol of purity and grace. I practically glow in the dark.

"You're doing great, buddy," Kai said aloud.

If he sees us, let me out, Aethon crackled from the crimson runestone in Kai's pocket. *I will kick a hole straight through his horrible green armor.*

I can bite his ankles, Lyra offered. Her sweet, bubbling voice made the threat sound weirdly soothing. *Do tyrants have sensitive ankles?*

"Let's keep that in reserve," Kai murmured.

He scooped a sleepy Pip from his satchel and settled the miniature Exomorph on his shoulder like a horrible little parrot.

"All right," Kai said. "Let's stroll in and see where they keep the keys."

The fortress entrance yawned ahead, a gaping arch of dark steel flanked by two of Lord Malacor's elite guards.

The Silent Sentinels.

They were, admittedly, very committed to the look.

Each stood seven feet tall in heavy spiked plate that obeyed Malacor's eye-searing color scheme with painful loyalty. Deep violet armor. Burnt orange trim. Neon-lime visors glowing in the shadows. Their halberds were the size of young trees, and their gauntleted hands did not twitch.

They looked like statues built by someone who hated subtlety and loved workplace intimidation.

Thalassa raised her free hand. Water vapor gathered around her fingers, sharpening into thin, glittering icicles. "I shall freeze the blood in their veins before they can sound an alarm."

"Whoa. Ice away." Kai stepped out of the reeds. "Watch and learn. It's all confidence."

He walked up the rusted ramp toward the gate.

No crouching. No tiptoeing. No dramatic hand signals. His floral shirt stirred in the damp breeze, and his hands rested comfortably in his pockets.

The Sentinels did nothing.

They did not cross their halberds. They did not ask for identification. They did not turn their lime-green visors toward him. They simply stared straight ahead, rigid and silent.

“Afternoon, gents,” Kai said, and walked between them.

Not a twitch.

Thalassa floated after him, her eyes wide with ancient confusion. She passed the guards and turned to stare at them over her shoulder.

“Why do they not strike?” she whispered. “Have they been petrified by my aura?”

“Nah,” Kai said at normal volume as they entered the gloomy, torch-lit courtyard. “They’re background guys.”

“Background guys?”

“Sure. Muscle. Their job is to stand around looking menacing while their boss gives speeches. They’re built for ambiance, not initiative. Unless you attack them or someone rings a big bell, they’re basically set dressing.”

To prove the point, Kai stopped beside two more Sentinels guarding a cell-block entrance. Barnaby followed behind him, still glowing with gentle and completely useless stealth. The guards remained stiff as posts.

Kai leaned his shoulder against the breastplate of the Sentinel on the left and scraped a clod of swamp mud off his sandal.

“So,” Kai said loudly, his voice carrying down the corridor, “if I were a megalomaniacal warlord storing a bunch of kidnapped magical creatures, where would I keep the master keys?”

The Sentinel continued staring at the opposite wall.

Pip leaned off Kai’s shoulder, opened his secondary jaws, and spat a tiny drop of green acid onto the Sentinel’s burnt-orange boot. The acid hissed through a layer of swamp grime and old polish, then beaded harmlessly on the metal beneath. Pip used his tail to buff the surface to a ridiculous shine.

The Sentinel did not look down.

“Good boy, Pip,” Kai said.

They wandered deeper into the fortress.

The corridors twisted through iron arches and dripping stone. Torches burned in wall brackets, their flames greenish and mean. Every few yards, another Silent Sentinel loomed in the gloom, radiating threat without doing a single useful thing.

They were halfway down a grated passage when a shadow detached itself from the ceiling.

A man dropped into Kai’s path with preternatural silence and landed in a flawless three-point crouch. He wore sleek enchanted leather armor and a dark cowl that hid half his face. Twin serrated shortswords gleamed in his hands. A silver badge on his chest bore the unmistakable crest of Duke Oris, and a magical compass on his belt pointed directly at Kai’s breast pocket.

“Going somewhere, Courier?” the man hissed.

His voice had gravel in it. Deliberate gravel. Practiced in mirrors, probably.

“I am Silas Blackwood, Elite Tracker of the High Court. Duke Oris sends his regards. He demands the return of his runestones.”

Thalassa raised her coral staff at once. The air pressure plunged so hard the torches guttered.

Silas tensed. His eyes flicked toward the glowing woman floating beside Kai, and his face did the very quick math of a professional realizing he had walked into the wrong room.

Kai beamed.

“Silas. My goodness, man.”

He stepped right past the points of the shortswords, reached out, and vigorously shook the tracker’s wrist.

“You tracked us all the way from the Duke’s estate? Through the King’s Wood, over the coast, and into the Fens? That is incredible mileage. You must be exhausted.”

Silas blinked. “I . . . what? I am a shadow in the night. I do not rest until . . .”

“You need tea,” Kai said sympathetically.

He slipped his satchel off his shoulder, pulled out his tin cup, filled it from his canteen, and tucked it against Pip’s warm chitinous side.

“Seriously, look at your posture. Terrible. You’re favoring your left knee, too. Let me guess. Oris made you march through the swamp and refused to cover a mount?”

Silas lowered his left sword by half an inch.

“He said the tracking bounty was flat rate,” he muttered. “Travel expenses were out of pocket.”

“Classic Oris.” Kai sighed and shook his head.

Somewhere deep under the fog of amnesia, the old instincts of Kaelen the Royal Courier flared with sharp, practical outrage. Not panic this time. Empathy. A courier's bone-deep hatred of rich men who considered blisters a personal budgeting choice.

"He drops a gargoyle on me, cuts your travel budget, and expects professional results. Honestly, the man has no respect for the working class. Here. Chamomile."

Kai handed the steaming cup to the bewildered assassin.

Silas stared at the tea.

Then he stared at Pip, who purred on Kai's shoulder like a kettle full of knives.

Then he stared at Thalassa, whose expression suggested she had lived ten thousand years and somehow still had not prepared for this.

"I am supposed to take your head," Silas said weakly.

"And deal with the paperwork?" Kai asked. "Silas, it's Tuesday. The humidity in here has to be ninety percent. Do you really want to start a high-stakes magical skirmish with an ancient ocean deity, a glowing unicorn, and a baby nightmare lizard? Or do you want to take five minutes and rest your knee?"

Silas looked down at the cup.

Kai softened his voice. "You know you don't actually have to do what Oris says. You can stop."

The words sat in the damp air between them.

Silas Blackwood had spent his life following trails, orders, contracts, blood marks, warrants, and coin. Nobody had ever spoken to him as if stopping were a real option. Nobody had ever handed him tea in the middle of a job, either.

He took a careful sip.

The tea was perfect.

His shoulders dropped.

"My lower back," he admitted, "is actually killing me."

"I knew it," Kai said. "Take a load off, Silas. If you head back out the main gate, there's a lovely beach about ten miles north. Tell them T-Dog sent you."

"T-Dog," Silas repeated, dazed.

"That's me," Thalassa said, with the flat resignation of an immortal who had lost control of her own branding.

"Right." Silas sheathed his shortswords, found a relatively dry wooden crate, and sat down heavily. "Okay. Good luck with the... whatever this is."

"Prison break," Kai said.

Silas closed his eyes and began massaging his knee. "Naturally."

"See?" Kai whispered to Thalassa as they rounded the next corner. "Communication."

They emerged onto an elevated metal catwalk overlooking an immense holding bay.

The smell hit first.

Ozone. Blood. Fear. Old iron. Sour water.

Below them, cages hung over bubbling vats and filthy drainage channels. Hundreds of cages. Griffons, chimeras, pegasi, and hippocampi huddled in the rusted shadows. Wings folded wrong. Scales dulled by sludge. Beaks clamped. Tails crammed into tanks too shallow for comfort and too dirty for dignity.

At the center of the catwalk stood a heavy control console covered in levers, arcane dials, and flickering indicator crystals. A large iron key ring hung from a hook helpfully marked with a little engraved plaque.

MASTER KEYS.

Flanking the console were four Silent Sentinels.

Of course.

"Perfect," Kai said.

He walked straight to the console, squeezed between two hulking guards, and plucked the key ring from its hook. The keys jingled loudly.

"Excuse me, just sneaking past," he murmured to the Sentinel on his right, brushing around the guard's halberd for a better look at the controls.

He found the largest lever almost immediately. It was painted a truly aggressive lime green.

"Subtle," Kai said.

He pulled it.

A heavy hydraulic groan rolled through the chamber. Chains rattled. Gears clanked. Far below, cage doors began to slide open one by one.

For a moment, none of the captives moved.

They stared out through the gaps, trembling, waiting for the trick. Trauma had taught them that an open door did not always mean freedom.

Kai turned to Barnaby.

“You’re up, buddy. Let them know it’s safe.”

Barnaby stepped to the edge of the catwalk.

He made no sound.

Kai felt the pulse go out anyway. A warm golden wave rolled from the unicorn and spread through the holding bay. Comfort. Safety. Gentleness. The deep, wordless reassurance of a creature that had never lied in his life and could not imagine starting now.

Below, a dapple-gray Pegasus eased its head out of a cage.

Then one griffon.

Then another.

A hippocampus lifted herself from a filthy tank and blinked through the steam.

Within seconds, the bay filled with movement. The hybrids poured out of their prisons. Some stumbled. Some helped the weaker ones. Griffons braced chimeras under the shoulders. Pegasi nudged open warped cage doors with their noses. Hippocampi slid into drainage channels and pushed one another toward the larger water troughs near the loading doors.

They are free, Lyra whispered in Kai’s mind.

Her voice trembled with joy so bright it hurt.

Oh, Kai. You did it.

“We did it,” Kai said. “Now we quietly slip out the back, find somewhere dry, and have a late lunch.”

A bell exploded overhead.

CLANG. CLANG. CLANG.

The sound slammed through the holding bay, magically amplified and painfully loud. The catwalk shook under Kai’s sandals. Red emergency lights flared to life and painted the whole chamber in a pulsing hellish glow.

Thalassa tightened her grip on her staff. “It appears the quiet portion of our holiday has ended.”

Around them, the four Silent Sentinels finally moved.

Their heads snapped toward Kai in perfect unison. Their halberds lowered with the synchronized whir of shifting armor.

“Ah,” Kai said, hands still in his pockets. “Someone rang the big bell.”

Before the Sentinels could advance, a voice shrieked through the fortress’s magical address system.

“MY PURITY! MY PERFECT ORDER!”

Metal doors burst open on a balcony above the bay.

Lord Malacor stormed into view.

In the swamp’s gray light, his outfit had been painful. Under red emergency lamps, it became a public health concern. Deep violet cape. Neon-lime cuirass. Burnt-orange boots and gauntlets. The colors clashed so violently that Kai felt they should apologize to the concept of sight.

Malacor gripped the railing and stared down at the stream of magical hybrids escaping toward the loading doors. His face twisted into a snarl.

Then he saw Kai.

“You,” Malacor shrieked. “You dare contaminate my facility? You dare release these genetic abominations back into my pristine world?”

“Malacor, right?” Kai called up.

Four halberd blades hovered inches from his face. He seemed mostly concerned with being heard over the alarm.

“Quick feedback on your resort. The decor is a little heavy. Your staff is severely under-reactive until bells get involved. And honestly, the whole purity thing is a total vibe killer. You need to chill out.”

Malacor’s eyes bulged.

Something in him seemed to crack under the sheer relaxed audacity of the floral-shirted intruder standing in the middle of his fortress conducting a prison break.

“Kill him!” Malacor screamed at the Sentinels.

Then he threw both hands into the air. Dark magic gathered around his fingers, oily and sharp.

“Awaken the Onyx. If my world cannot be pure, I will melt it to the bedrock and begin again.”

The Sentinels lunged.

At the same time, a sound like a mountain tearing itself open erupted beneath the fortress.

The metal grating under Kai’s feet lurched. Rust rained from the ceiling. Somewhere outside, the swamp began to boil, not from Thalassa’s magic, but from something vast and ancient stirring under the mud.

Something crystalline.

Something awake.

Kai ducked neatly under a sweeping halberd and grabbed Pip before the tiny Exomorph could try to polish the blade.

“Well, T-Dog,” Kai said, a small and genuine smile tugging at his mouth as the fortress shook itself apart around them. “Looks like it’s time to take the scenic route.”

6. The Onyx Dragon & the Phantom Strike

The four halberds came for Kai at once, sweeping through the humid holding bay in one clean, deadly arc.

Kai did not panic.

He flicked his thumb against the glowing white runestone in his pocket. Barnaby vanished in a swirl of warm gold light, tucked safely back into his little pocket dimension half a breath before a blade split the metal grating where the unicorn had been standing.

In the same motion, Kai tapped the deep crimson stone.

The air in the chamber slammed inward.

A crack of thunder split the room, and Aethon appeared.

The Pegasus did not need a briefing. He was born ready, and honestly, he had been waiting all day for an excuse. He reared with a furious whinny that rattled the emergency lamps, then drove both front hooves into the burnt-orange chestplate of the nearest Silent Sentinel.

The guard flew backward and crashed into the control console in a knot of armor, sparks, and offended dignity.

Kai vaulted onto Aethon's storm-blue back. His pink floral shirt snapped in the sudden downdraft of the Pegasus's wings. Pip clung to his collar with all six little claws, squeaking in what was either fear or mild enthusiasm. Hard to tell with Pip.

"T-Dog!" Kai shouted, pointing toward the bay doors, where the freed hybrids had started to bottleneck in their panic. "I'm taking the heat. Keep the VIPs safe."

Thalassa did not hesitate.

She slammed her coral staff against the catwalk. "The ocean protects its own!"

Her voice rolled through the chamber with the crushing depth of the abyss. Water burst from the swamp-thick air, gathering from mist, breath, rust, and sweat. In seconds, a shining dome of seawater arched over the escaping griffons, hippocampi, chimeras, and pegasi.

Above them, the fortress finally gave up pretending it had structural integrity.

The ceiling groaned. Iron beams twisted. Sheets of metal tore away as the Onyx Dragon forced itself through the fortress from below.

It was enormous.

A living mountain of jagged black crystal and obsidian scale, all angles and hunger. Its hide caught the red emergency lights and threw them back in a thousand broken reflections. Its claws dug into the fortress walls as if the rusted iron were wet paper. It hauled itself upward, opened a mouth full of violet fire, and exhaled a blinding cloud of black, corrosive acid into the sky.

The acid met the smog overhead with a furious hiss. A sizzling rain fell across the battlements, chewing through iron, stone, and anything unlucky enough to be standing still.

On the balcony, Lord Malacor threw his arms wide. His lime-green armor flashed under the red lights. His violet cape whipped around him like an angry bruise.

"Purge them!" he screamed. "Purge the impure from my sight!"

"All right, Aethon." Kai patted the Pegasus's neck. "Looks like we're on distraction duty. Let's show big, dark, and spiky a little hospitality."

Aethon snorted steam.

Finally! he roared in Kai's mind. *Let us trample the sky!*

He launched them upward.

They shot through the ragged hole in the ceiling and burst into the toxic air above the Dismal Fens. Wind hit Kai hard enough to flatten his shirt against his ribs. Below, Malacor's fortress smoked and buckled. Beyond it, the swamp stretched out in black-green veins under a sky full of poison clouds.

The Onyx Dragon's multifaceted eyes locked onto the lone Pegasus.

It roared, a sound so deep Kai felt it in his teeth, then kicked off the crumbling fortress and came after them.

What followed was less a tactical dogfight than a deeply unsafe carnival ride at altitude.

Aethon banked hard, rolled sideways, and dropped toward the swamp in a dizzying spiral. Kai's stomach floated somewhere near his ears. A second later, Aethon snapped his wings wide and pulled up so sharply that Kai flattened against his mane.

Behind them, a jet of black acid burned through the air exactly where they had been.

Oh my, Barnaby said from the safety of Kai's pocket. *Please be careful of the jagged bits. That acid looks terribly unhygienic.*

Do a loop-the-loop! Lyra cheered, her bright mental voice somehow still full of bubbles. *Wheee! We are flying like birds!*

"Just catching some serious updrafts, guys!" Kai shouted over the wind.

The dragon's jaws snapped shut inches from Aethon's tail.

"Aethon, buddy, keep it loose. We're just giving him the scenic tour."

Pip decided to help.

The tiny bio-weapon leaned around Kai's collar, opened his secondary jaws, and burped out a thimble-sized glob of green acid. It sailed backward and splattered directly on the Onyx Dragon's nose.

It did absolutely no damage.

It did leave one small, glossy, beautifully polished spot on the dragon's dark snout.

The dragon went rigid with insult.

Then it beat its massive wings.

The shockwave slammed into Aethon and threw him sideways through the air. Kai clamped his knees tight and grabbed a fistful of crimson mane.

Below, Malacor's voice boomed through the magical amplifier.

"Stop playing with it! Swat the fly!"

The dragon obeyed.

It stopped breathing acid and twisted its long body in midair, building momentum through every black, crystalline coil. Its spiked tail lashed around in a brutal arc.

At the very tip, a cluster of life-draining black crystals pulsed with violent light.

The tail cracked like a whip.

One shard broke free.

It did not simply fly.

It tore across the air as if the world had failed to get out of its way.

It hurtles straight off the page.

SMASH.

The jagged black crystal comes right at the camera.

You flinch before you can help it. For one awful blink, the impact seems to land between your eyes. White light floods everything. Your ears ring. Your skull aches with a pain that feels borrowed from someone else.

But you did not take the hit.

Kai did.

The crystal struck with supernatural precision, hitting the exact point on his skull where Duke Oris's falling gargoyle had rearranged his entire life.

Kai flew backward.

He slid down Aethon's flank, one hand clawing uselessly at the Pegasus's mane. The white light in his vision cracked, splintered, and vanished.

Then the ocean of peace inside him evaporated.

Panic rushed in.

Not worry. Not nerves. Panic.

Kaelen gasped.

His eyes snapped open, and the soft, unfocused calm that had made him Kai was gone. In its place came fifty-hour shifts, missed delivery windows, Duke Oris's blackmail, the sealed bio-hazard canister, and three stomach ulcers burning like live coals under his ribs.

The world hit him all at once.

He was not napping in a rose bush.

He was three thousand feet in the air, riding a mythological storm horse above a poisoned swamp, dressed in a hideously bright pink floral shirt.

"Oh gods," Kaelen choked.

His chest seized. His lungs forgot how to work. The air felt sharp, like ground glass.

"Oh gods, the manifest. Where is the bio-hazard manifest? Duke Oris is going to execute me."

His hand slipped.

The vertigo punched through him so hard his fingers opened on their own. Aethon's back dropped away. Kaelen slid over the Pegasus's side, legs scrambling against smooth muscle, and fell into open sky.

Kai! Aethon shrieked.

The telepathic bond, which had been warm and friendly and frankly delightful, became a blaring alarm inside Kaelen's skull. The Pegasus snapped his wings shut and dove after him.

He is falling! Lyra screamed from the pocket dimension. Her bubbly joy had shattered into terror. *Catch him, Aethon, please!*

Kaelen tumbled through the air.

His vision narrowed.

Voices, his mind catalogued with frantic precision. *I am hallucinating voices. I failed the delivery, and now I am hallucinating voices.*

He squeezed his eyes shut.

The old anxiety wrapped around him like a lead blanket. Thick. Familiar. Suffocating.

He was just a courier. A small, exhausted courier who survived by keeping his head down, meeting deadlines, and avoiding powerful people with bad tempers. He did not belong in the sky. He did not belong in a war. He did not belong anywhere near dragons, tyrants, or magical horse-based logistics.

Something clamped down on his collar.

The jolt nearly tore his shoulders apart.

Kaelen's eyes flew open.

Aethon had caught him by the floral shirt, teeth locked in the fabric just below his neck. The Pegasus's wings beat hard, fighting their fall while the Onyx Dragon circled overhead, roaring in triumph and lining up for another strike.

Pip, somehow still clinging to Kaelen's front pocket, peered over the fabric and made a tiny, worried sound.

"Pip."

He nuzzled Kaelen's chin.

Kai, please! Aethon's voice strained with the effort of holding a full-grown man in midair. *I cannot fly like this. You have to climb back up.*

Breathe, my friend, Barnaby said.

His voice did not shake. It came through steady and warm, an anchor in the noise.

You are safe. We have you.

Kaelen dangled above the Fens.

He looked up at Aethon's fierce, storm-bright eyes. The Pegasus had dived after him without hesitation. He felt Pip's small furnace warmth against his chest. He heard Lyra's fear, Barnaby's faith, Aethon's desperate strength.

The anxiety screamed at him to quit. To freeze. To curl inward and become the terrified courier again, the one who obeyed schedules and feared signatures and measured his worth in completed routes.

The training was there too.

That was the weird thing.

Under the panic, his old mind had already started working. It measured wind shear. Dragon speed. Wing angle. Bite radius. Distance to Malacor's balcony. Distance to the control tower. Probable weak points in crystalline armor.

The skills had returned with the fear.

If he became only Kaelen again, they would all die.

If he tried to be only Kai, breezy and unbothered, he would not survive the next five seconds.

Kaelen closed his eyes for one short, brutal moment.

He reached for the peace the amnesia had given him. Not as a hiding place. As a handhold.

He forced his lungs to open.

In.

Out.

Again.

He did not shove the courier's mind away. He did not try to erase it. He took the sharp reflexes, the route planning, the Crown training, the miserable practical knowledge beaten into him by years of impossible work.

Then he anchored all of it to Kai's heart.

I am not late for a delivery, he told himself.

Another breath.

I am protecting my friends.

His eyes opened.

The panic did not disappear.

It hardened into something useful.

Kaelen reached up, grabbed the rough leather of Aethon's makeshift harness, and hauled himself up with the ugly, practiced strength of a man who had carried fifty-pound mail sacks up mountain roads in ceremonial shoes.

He swung one leg over Aethon's back and locked his knees against the Pegasus's flanks.

He was sweating. His hands shook. His heart hammered hard enough to hurt.

But his eyes fixed on the Onyx Dragon.

"I'm here, Aethon," Kaelen said.

His voice was not Kai's lazy drawl anymore. It was not the frightened squeak of a man begging the world to stop, either.

It was crisp. Steady. Unyielding.

The voice of a Royal Courier who refused to fail the route.

Thank the stars, Aethon breathed.

He released Kaelen's collar and banked away from a descending claw.

What do we do?

Kaelen's mind moved fast now. Cleanly.

He saw Malacor at the fortress console. He saw the dragon's turn radius. He saw the stagger in its left wingbeat, the timing between acid breaths, the way the life-draining crystals at its tail needed three full seconds to pulse before firing.

He knew exactly what came next.

"Vector three, Aethon," Kaelen commanded, the wind tearing at his floral shirt. "Drop pitch by seven degrees."

Aethon angled hard into the storm.

Kaelen leaned forward.

"We're taking this delivery straight to his front door."

7. Memories, Cleaned Consoles, & True Names

The wind over the Dismal Fens felt different now.

A moment ago, it had been part of the ride. Fresh air in his face, chaos below, dragon behind him. Scenic, in a deeply unsafe way.

Now Kaelen felt pressure shifts in his teeth. He tracked the updrafts rolling off the toxic swamp and mapped the thermal columns rising from the black water below. His eyes cut through the smoke, measuring distance, angle, velocity.

“Vector three, Aethon,” he snapped.

The easy drawl was gone. In its place came the clean, hard voice of a Royal Courier First Class, the kind of voice that expected weather, nobles, locked gates, and common sense to get out of the way.

“Pitch down seven degrees. Prepare for a high-G evasive maneuver on my mark. Drop.”

What is a vector? Aethon roared in his mind.

The Pegasus dropped anyway.

He tucked his wings and plummeted, and a sweeping arc of corrosive black acid sliced through the air where they had been half a breath before. It hissed as it passed, black vapor curling behind it.

“Just trust me,” Kaelen shouted.

He flattened himself against Aethon’s neck to cut wind resistance. The pink hibiscus shirt snapped against his ribs, loud and ridiculous in the gale. Terrible combat wear. Truly awful. He shoved that observation aside.

His mind felt like a filing cabinet someone had kicked open. Tactical training, royal decrees, delivery schedules, and old panic all spilled out at once.

He remembered the weight of mail sacks. He remembered Duke Oris’s blinding orichalcum tooth. He remembered signatures, penalties, deadlines.

More useful than any of that, he remembered how to take apart a hostile target.

Oh my stars, Barnaby said from the pearlescent stone in his pocket. *Your inner thoughts have become very sharp. Are you quite all right, Kai? You sound terribly tense.*

He’s playing a new game, Lyra said brightly from the teal stone. Somehow, she still sounded delighted while an apocalypse with wings chased them through the sky. *Go faster. We are the wind.*

“I’m fine, Barnaby,” Kaelen said, eyes scanning the fortress below. “And it’s Kaelen. For now. We are shifting from defensive evasion to offensive strike. Aethon, stall and bank hard left.”

Aethon threw his wings forward.

The sudden deceleration hit like a wall. Kaelen’s bones protested. His stomach tried to leave the conversation. But his body remembered what to do. He shifted his weight, braced through his knees, and held them balanced as if he had been born in a saddle instead of a sorting office.

The Onyx Dragon was too huge to stop.

It shot past them, black crystalline scales flashing, multifaceted eyes widening with slow, offended surprise. Kaelen used the opening.

Below, Lord Malacor stood on the balcony, hunched over a massive blinking control console. His burnt-orange gauntlets twisted dials and slapped switches as he tried to coordinate the full-sized Exomorphs still waiting in the lower pens.

“That console is broadcasting the control frequency,” Kaelen said.

He reached up and plucked Pip from his collar.

The miniature Exomorph chirped. His secondary jaws clicked with mild, acidic enthusiasm.

“Pip,” Kaelen said. “You’re up, little buddy.”

Pip puffed his little chest out like a nightmare pigeon.

“Aethon, thread the needle.” Kaelen pointed straight at Malacor’s balcony. “Low pass. Maximum speed.”

Now you speak my language.

Aethon folded his wings and dove.

They became a streak of crimson and storm-blue against the poisoned gray sky. The fortress rushed up to meet them. Malacor looked up from the console, saw them coming, and shrieked. His lime-green cuirass flashed under the emergency lights. His violet cape snapped behind him like an angry flag.

He fumbled for a sidearm.

Too slow.

Kaelen had spent years delivering sealed Crown parcels to paranoid aristocrats, fortified estates, and towers where even the door knockers had opinions about trespassers. His timing was miserable, overtrained, and perfect.

Aethon pulled up with his hooves missing the balcony rail by an inch.

Kaelen leaned down and tossed Pip.

A clean delivery. Beautiful arc. No wasted motion.

Pip landed squarely on the center of the control console with a soft plop.

Malacor froze.

Pip looked up at him, sneezed, and sprayed a concentrated stream of green acid straight into the console’s primary cooling vents.

The acid hissed. It ate through the leather trim. It vaporized the organic wax seals. It stripped away swamp grime so thoroughly the panel looked newly installed. For one promising second, the console stuttered, lights flickering as the softened insulation sagged around the inner housing.

Then the green sludge hit the enchanted copper wiring and the solid metal conduit relays.

Nothing much happened.

The acid beaded up. The metal gleamed.

Pip licked it, offended.

As they had learned on the beach, his adorable murder-spit was calibrated for organics. Leather, wax, mildew, food scraps, grime, excellent. Metal, not so much.

The console kept humming.

Malacor recovered from his flinch and stared at the tiny Exomorph polishing his equipment.

Then he laughed.

“A domesticated cleaner?” he shrieked. “Against High Elven engineering? You fool. My machines are impervious to such pathetic tricks.”

Kaelen clicked his tongue.

“Right. The metal.”

He did not freeze.

The old Kaelen would have locked up. Kai probably would have offered Malacor a coconut and hoped that improved the mood. This version of him simply saw a problem that required a manual override.

“Aethon, drop me.”

He slid from the Pegasus as Aethon skimmed the balcony.

Kaelen hit the stone in a clean roll, took the impact through shoulder and hip, and came up already moving.

Malacor yanked out his heavy neon-green sidearm.

Kaelen stepped inside his guard.

He used a standard courier evasion technique originally designed for slipping past drunk nobles at court receptions. Redirect the wrist. Turn the shoulder. Let the idiot’s own momentum do the embarrassing part.

Malacor stumbled backward into a potted swamp fern.

The fern lost.

Kaelen stepped to the console.

Glowing copper. Humming conduits. Decoy levers. Secondary mana lines. A locking structure based on Crown containment logic, as if the maker had been arrogant enough to assume nobody outside the Ministry would recognize it.

Bad luck for him.

Kaelen had once carried three Bio-Hazard Class 4 lockboxes across the capital during a dock strike, a rainstorm, and a duel between two barons over a pastry chef. He knew the seal family by smell.

“Arcane seal protocol, tertiary bypass,” he muttered.

His hands moved fast.

He ignored the obvious switches, reached into the polished wiring, twisted two copper relays into a short-circuit knot, and yanked the master mana-crystal from its housing.

The console gave a sad, descending whine.

Then it died in a puff of acrid smoke.

Down in the swamp, the heavy metallic clanking stopped all at once.

The full-sized Exomorphs froze. Their heads sagged. Their scythe arms lowered. Without the control signal driving them, the massive bio-weapons slumped into the muck like puppets with cut strings.

“No,” Malacor wailed from inside the fern. “My perfect order.”

The victory lasted about three seconds.

Above them, the Onyx Dragon bellowed.

Without the control collar forcing its obedience, it was no longer Malacor’s weapon. Unfortunately, it was still enormous, terrified, furious, and airborne. A bad combination in any weather.

“Thalassa,” Kaelen shouted over the balcony rail. “The collar is dead. It’s running on instinct. Ground it.”

In the courtyard below, Thalassa looked up from the seawater dome shielding the rescued hybrids. Her eyes met his.

No grand speech this time. No list of names.

She nodded.

She stepped out from beneath the dome and stood alone in the toxic mud. Then she struck her coral staff against the ground.

The sound rolled through the swamp.

She drew in a breath that seemed to pull moisture from the clouds themselves, and spoke a single word.

The Onyx Dragon’s true name.

It sounded like tectonic plates grinding in the dark, threaded with the lonely call of a whale so far beneath the sea that sunlight had become a rumor.

The name hit the dragon like a physical blow.

The beast froze in midair. The violet glow in its chest dimmed. Its wings faltered.

Then its jagged obsidian scales flared brighter than before.

The dragon shook its head. Its eyes snapped open, burning with fresh rage. It roared so hard Thalassa’s seawater dome shattered into mist.

The rescued hybrids cried out.

Thalassa stumbled back, shock cracking through her ancient calm.

“Impossible,” she breathed. “That was the name from the First Sundering. The root has shifted. The epoch has shifted.”

The Onyx Dragon tucked its wings.

It dove straight at her.

Its mouth opened. Black acid gathered in its throat, violet and blinding, ready to tear through Thalassa and the huddled hybrids behind her.

Kaelen’s heart hammered.

His mind went cold and clear.

A memory surfaced, stamped with red seals and wrapped in Crown secrecy. A heavily redacted defense manifest. Obsidian siege drakes. Ancient classification. Sensory weaknesses.

“They navigate by barometric pressure,” Kaelen said. “Blind spot under the jaw.”

He vaulted onto the stone railing.

“Aethon. To me.”

The Pegasus came in like a storm.

Kaelen leapt. Aethon caught him cleanly, and they shot upward together.

“Intercept course. Full speed. Target the atmospheric membrane beneath its jaw.”

I do not know what an atmospheric membrane is, Aethon roared, wings beating hard enough to twist the smoke around them. *But I know how to kick.*

“Honestly, that’ll do.”

They drove straight into the path of the falling dragon.

The heat from the acid gathered ahead of them, harsh and chemical. The dragon’s jaws opened wider. Violet light peaked.

At the last possible instant, Aethon slipped beneath the teeth.

He reared in midair and slammed both front hooves into the soft cluster of unarmored scales beneath the dragon’s chin.

The blow did not injure the beast. It was far too large for that.

But it jolted the pressure-sensitive membrane hard enough to trigger a localized shockwave.

The dragon’s sensory organs shorted out.

Its breath weapon misfired, blasting harmlessly into the sky. Black acid tore a hole through the clouds instead of the courtyard. The dragon thrashed, confused and furious, its dive broken.

“T-Dog,” Kaelen screamed, clinging to Aethon’s mane as they pulled away. “Age of Ash. Try the modern root.”

Thalassa did not waste a breath.

She closed her eyes. Theatrical grandeur fell off her like shed foam. What remained was older and better. Listening. Learning. Feeling the shape of a world that had kept moving while she guarded her lonely shore.

She inhaled.

Then she spoke the current true name.

This one was sharper. Iron under pressure. Deep stone cracking beneath the sea.

The name struck the Onyx Dragon like an anchor dropped through its soul.

The violent violet glow in its throat went out.

Its jagged obsidian scales softened, their razor edges smoothing into a deep twilight purple. The dragon shuddered once, then gave a low, mournful croon.

Slowly, gently, the apocalyptic beast descended into the swamp outside the fortress walls.

It folded its wings. Tucked its massive head down. Went still.

Not dead.

Asleep.

The Dismal Fens fell quiet.

For once, even the insects seemed to know they should give everyone a minute.

Then Pip chirped happily.

He had climbed up Kaelen’s leg during the whole thing and was now tucked safely into his front pocket, radiating smug little warmth.

Kaelen guided Aethon back to the balcony. The Pegasus landed light as a thrown shadow.

Kaelen dismounted and rolled his shoulders.

The old tension was still there. He could feel it in the back of his neck, in the part of him that wanted a checklist and a signed manifest and three contingency routes out of the swamp. But the warmth of the steeds pressed gently through the runestones, and Pip purred against his chest.

The tension no longer owned the room.

Lord Malacor dragged himself out of the crushed fern.

He looked over the balcony.

His dragon slept. His Exomorphs lay useless in the mud. His gleaming machine of hatred had collapsed into smoke, loose wires, and one very clean patch of console.

He turned back to Kaelen, who was brushing soot from his bright pink floral shirt.

Malacor panicked.

“You cannot do this,” he shrieked. “I have allies. I have shell companies.”

He bolted for the spiral stair leading down to the courtyard.

Kaelen did not chase him.

“I really wouldn’t go that way,” he called mildly.

Malacor ignored him.

He sprinted down the stairs, violet and green cape whipping behind him, and burst into the gloomy courtyard.

“Out of my way, you filthy mutts,” he screamed, hunting for an exit.

The Silent Sentinels stood frozen. Their programming apparently had no idea what to do with a fleeing master, which felt about right.

The courtyard was not empty.

The freed hybrids had not run.

They waited at the base of the stairs. Griffons, chimeras, pegasi, and hippocampi. Dozens of them. Bruised, filthy, exhausted, and alive.

They formed a tight half-circle around Malacor.

He stopped short.

For one last miserable second, he tried to become a tyrant again. He puffed out his chest.

“I am your lord,” he spat. “You are abominations. I command you to...”

A dapple-gray Pegasus stepped forward.

The same one whose wings had been clamped in the cage.

It did not attack in rage. It did not rear or scream. It simply walked up to Malacor, lifted one heavy iron-shod hoof, and planted it on the edge of his velvet cape, pinning him to the swamp mud.

Malacor gasped and clawed at the fabric.

A scarred griffon gave a piercing shriek and snapped its beak inches from his face. With one neat movement, it plucked the wand from his burnt-orange gauntlet and tossed it away.

From a flooded drainage ditch, one of the rescued hippocampi surfaced. She slapped her powerful tail against the water and sent a filthy wave of algae-choked swamp straight over Malacor’s head.

His neon-lime cuirass was ruined.

Honestly, an improvement.

The hybrids closed in.

They did not tear him apart. They did not give him the drama he wanted. They trapped him in silence, eye to eye with the creatures he had tried to erase.

The victims, not the heroes, delivered the judgment.

Kaelen leaned against the balcony rail and watched.

Pip chirped in his pocket, warm and content.

Brilliantly handled, Kaelen, Barnaby said gently in his mind. *Though I must admit, your administrative skills are rather breathtaking.*

Kaelen smiled.

The amnesia was gone. He remembered who he had been. The stress. The ulcers. The endless routes. The way his whole life had once shrunk down to signatures, deadlines, and fear of powerful men with expensive teeth.

But he also remembered the beach.

Coconut water. Clean boots. Lyra laughing in his head. Barnaby asking for apples. Aethon begging to race clouds. Thalassa learning the word T-Dog with deep personal suffering.

He looked down at his ridiculous floral shirt and felt the steady, impossible warmth of his friends.

He did not have to choose between Kaelen and Kai.

He could keep the competence.

He could leave the fear behind.

8. The Runestone Rental

Lord Malacor was not taking defeat with the dignity one usually hoped for in a megalomaniac.

His control console was dead. His ultimate weapon was asleep in the swamp. His wand had been confiscated by a griffon with excellent instincts and a clear taste for justice. Now the warlord lay pinned in the muck beneath the hoof of a massive dapple-gray Pegasus, looking less like the architect of a new pure world and more like a color-blind turnip having a very bad afternoon.

“You haven’t the faintest idea who you’re dealing with, Courier,” Malacor spat. His lime-green and deep-violet cape sank deeper into the algae. “I have allies in the High Court. I have shell companies. You can’t just leave me in the mud.”

“Actually, Royal Post Regulation 4B, Section 12 covers the interception of illicit magical contraband,” Kaelen said from the balcony, smooth as cream. He checked the silver pocket watch he had found in his trousers after his memory came crashing back. “I’m fully authorized to detain belligerent parties until the Inquisition arrives. And since I know the regional patrol schedules better than any sane person should, the Fourth Paladin Cavalry will pass the edge of the Dismal Fens in exactly three hours. I’ll leave a flag on the main road.”

Malacor went pale. “The Paladins? But they have no aesthetic appreciation whatsoever. They’ll confiscate everything.”

“They do tend to get fussy about systemic genocide,” Kaelen said.

He felt no sympathy at all. Honestly, none. He turned from the railing, the bright pink hibiscus flowers on his shirt rustling in the swamp breeze.

“I must say,” a gravelly voice said from the shadowed balcony door, “that was an exceptionally weird fight to watch.”

Kaelen turned.

Silas Blackwood, Elite Tracker of the High Court, leaned against the stone archway. He had pushed back his dark cowl, revealing a face lined by years of professional stress and probably too much squinting from rooftops. In one hand, he held Kaelen’s tin cup of chamomile tea.

He looked down into the courtyard, where the freed hybrids shook out their wings, stretched sore limbs, and splashed through the drainage ditches while the Silent Sentinels stood frozen and useless in the background.

“Silas,” Kaelen said warmly. “You didn’t leave for the beach.”

“I was going to.” The assassin took a careful sip. “Then the swamp started boiling, a crystal dragon ripped the roof off, and you jumped off a flying horse to short-circuit a bio-weapon control console with your bare hands. It felt unprofessional to leave before the finale.”

He tipped his cup toward Malacor.

“So. Are we turning him in for the bounty?”

“I think the Paladins can handle the paperwork,” Kaelen said. “I’m officially off the clock.”

Silas nodded slowly.

He looked at his twin serrated shortswords. Then at the silver badge of Duke Oris pinned to his chest.

With a quiet grunt, he unfastened the badge and tossed it over the balcony. It landed with a soft *plop* in the mud beside Malacor.

“You know,” Silas said, “the travel expenses really were the last straw. And my knee feels fantastic after sitting down for twenty minutes.” He glanced back at Kaelen. “You mentioned something earlier. A road trip?”

“The Whispering Mountains,” Kaelen said. “There’s a thermal spring.”

“Hot water,” Silas murmured, almost reverent. “I haven’t had a proper bath since the Third Era. I’ll wait by the gate.”

The newly retired, heavily armed tracker gave him a polite nod and wandered off down the hall, whistling a little off-key.

Kaelen scooped Pip off the railing, where the miniature Exomorph had been trying with great enthusiasm to polish a rusted gargoyle. The tiny bio-weapon chirped and nestled into Kaelen’s front pocket, where he immediately began giving off cozy, vibrating warmth from his little biological furnace.

Kaelen tapped the crimson runestone in his left pocket and sent Aethon back to the plush, gravity-free sanctuary inside it.

A magnificent tactical victory, Aethon bugled sleepily in Kaelen’s mind. *Though I admit my hooves are quite tired.*

Rest, my tempestuous friend, Barnaby said, soothing as warm honey. *You saved our Kai.*

“Kaelen,” he whispered to himself.

The name still felt heavy.

He stepped into Malacor’s office to find writing materials. The room was exactly as tasteful as expected, which meant not at all. Violet drapes. Lime-green lamps. Burnt-orange upholstery. A decorative skull wearing a tiny military hat. Truly, a crime scene before anyone had even touched the paperwork.

As Kaelen rummaged through the warlord’s desk, he caught his reflection in the dark window glass.

He stopped.

For the first time since the crystal had struck his skull, he took a long, quiet look at himself.

The amnesia was gone. Every locked door in his mind had been kicked open, and the crushing weight of his old life sat right there on the floor where he could see it. Seventy-hour work weeks. Constant fear of disciplinary action. Ulcers. Sleepless nights. The slow suffocation of living at the very bottom of a ruthless aristocratic food chain.

The old Kaelen would have been hyperventilating by now.

He would have been terrified of Duke Oris. Terrified of the stolen runestones. Terrified of the ruined uniform, the missing manifest, the inevitable hearing, the raised voices, the signatures, the penalties, all of it.

But as he studied the tanned, relaxed face in the glass, framed by a ridiculous floral shirt, the panic did not rise.

The combat training was still there. The arcane logistics. The patrol routes. The seal protocols. The courier’s cold, exacting eye for distance and danger and delay.

All of it sharp. All of it useful.

The fear, though?

The fear had been a cage. Men like Duke Oris had built it bar by bar and convinced him it was professionalism. The gargoyle had shattered the lock. Kai had stepped out.

He did not have to throw away the competent courier to keep the carefree traveler. He could be both. Keep the edge. Keep the training. Leave the anxiety where it belonged.

Behind him.

Kaelen drew a slow breath and let his shoulders drop. A smile spread across his face, easy and real.

Are you all right? Lyra asked softly from the teal stone. *Your thoughts feel like a tide settling.*

I’m perfect, Lyra, Kaelen thought back.

And the weird thing was, he meant it.

He uncapped an inkwell, pulled a sheet of thick gold-leaf parchment toward him, and wrote in the swift, elegant hand of a Royal Courier First Class.

To His Grace, Duke Oris,

Please find enclosed payment for the temporary acquisition of your three elemental runestones. After a thorough field test across land, sea, and sky, I can confirm they remain in excellent working order.

Your stonemasonry, however, does not. I strongly recommend having the gargoyles above the eastern portico inspected for structural integrity.

I have decided to extend my vacation indefinitely. Therefore, I am retaining the steeds. Consider the enclosed sum a one-time rental fee.

Best regards,

Kai

He reached into his coin purse, pulled out a single standard-issue gold piece, and folded it into the parchment. Then he dripped a blob of purple sealing wax onto the fold.

“Pip, if you please.”

Pip poked his head out of Kaelen’s pocket, gave a tiny sneeze of focused heat, and melted the wax perfectly smooth.

Oh, my stars, Barnaby said, chuckling warmly. *A single gold coin? For artifacts of immeasurable ancient power? The Duke is going to be exceptionally cross.*

Let him be, Lyra giggled. *He has too much precious metal in his mouth anyway. It must be terrible for his buoyancy.*

Kaelen smiled and stepped back onto the balcony.

Down in the courtyard, Thalassa stood among the freed hippocampi. The aquatic-equine hybrids nuzzled her liquid robes, clicking and whistling in ancient, joyful recognition. Behind her, the Onyx Dragon lay curled like an enormous crystalline cat, snoring softly in a puddle of swamp water.

Kaelen descended the stone stairs, his boots still immaculately polished by Pip and silent on the steps.

“So, T-Dog,” he said as he approached. “We’re heading for the mountains. You coming?”

Thalassa turned.

The immense, terrifying pressure of her aura had faded. In its place was a stormy warmth, deep and radiant. She looked at the hippocampi, then at the towering, sleeping dragon.

“No, Kai,” the ancient wizard said softly. “The Lady of the Coral Throne guarded empty coasts for ten thousand years. I called it penance because I thought I had nothing left to protect.”

She rested one hand, woven of living water, on the scarred snout of a hippocampus.

“But my wards have returned to me. The children of the foam need the ocean’s shield again. And this overgrown lizard needs someone to teach it manners.”

She struck her frosted sea-glass staff against the mud.

Where it touched, bright green sea-grass sprang up at once, pushing back the toxic sludge.

“I am no longer only a sentry,” Thalassa said, her abyssal eyes shining with old purpose renewed. “I am a protector again. I will stay in the Fens. I will wash the ash from the soil, and I will make this land a sanctuary.”

Kaelen felt respect swell in his chest, solid and warm.

He reached out and shook her hand.

“I’ll bring coconuts next time we pass through.”

“See that you do, Courier,” Thalassa said, smiling.

Kaelen crossed the courtyard and walked toward the heavy iron gates of the fortress. He paused by the exterior wall long enough to slide his sealed letter into the Royal Outpost drop-box. Convenient, really. The Crown could be awful about many things, but nobody beat its mail infrastructure.

Silas waited on the rusted ramp, leaning against a stone pillar.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Absolutely.”

Kaelen tapped the final runestone.

Pure prismatic light burst across the swamp grass, and Barnaby materialized in the middle of it. The majestic unicorn tossed his silver mane, his pearlescent coat gleaming like a trapped star against the grim fortress behind him.

Silas stared at the mythical beast.

“I’m going to have to walk, aren’t I?”

“The cardio will be great for your lower back,” Kaelen said cheerfully, swinging onto Barnaby’s back.

The magical saddle shaped itself perfectly to his posture. Pip settled on the pommel and chirped a quiet little tune.

Miles away, in a sprawling gilded estate, a courier would soon hand a wax-sealed letter to Duke Oris. The eccentric Wizard-Duke would tear it open. The single gold coin would clatter onto his pristine marble floor. Oris would scream with pure, unfiltered rage, sunlight flashing off his solid orichalcum front tooth so brightly it would terrify his prized peacocks for a week.

Kaelen would not be there to see it.

For the first time in his life, he did not care.

He was a Royal Courier First Class with no schedule, no destination, and all the time in the world.

Where to, Kai? Barnaby asked, his voice full of pure, unhurried optimism.

I hear the Whispering Mountains are lovely this time of year, Kaelen thought back, looking toward the clearing sky. *Lyra, how do you feel about mountain lakes?*

Water is water, Lyra cheered from her pocket dimension. *And we are on vacation.*

“Yes,” Kaelen said aloud.

Leaving the Dismal Fens, the ranting warlord, and the ghosts of his old life behind him, Kaelen nudged Barnaby forward.

The unicorn broke into a smooth, effortless canter, and together they rode toward the horizon, bound for a permanent, wonderfully stress-free holiday.

Author's Note

Have you ever had a Tuesday so overwhelming that you genuinely wished a piece of masonry would fall on your head, just so you could justify taking a nap?

That was the exact, exhausted thought that birthed *The Steeds of Kai*. This novel began as a daydream about escaping the relentless, ulcer-inducing grind of modern life: the endless emails, the impossible deadlines, and the “Duke Oris” figures of the world who demand everything while giving absolutely nothing in return. I wanted to write a story where the protagonist simply unplugs from the nightmare of hustle culture and goes on a well-deserved, magically facilitated vacation.

But as Kaelen's journey as “Kai” unfolded, the story became about more than just dodging responsibilities in a floral shirt. It became an exploration of anxiety and healing.

Amnesia is a classic fantasy trope, but for Kaelen, it was a sudden, total reprieve from a nervous system that was constantly on fire. His time as Kai allowed him to experience joy, build genuine connections with Barnaby, Aethon, and Lyra, and find the kind of stillness that his career as a Royal Courier never permitted.

However, true healing is rarely about erasing our past or pretending our trauma doesn't exist. When the Onyx Dragon's crystal shatters Kai's idyllic bubble, he is faced with a terrifying choice: revert to the panicked, subservient courier he once was, or integrate his past with his present. He realizes that his hard-earned skills, his hyper-competence, and his deep protective instincts are not the enemy. The fear was the enemy. He learns to wield his Kaelen-level competence while maintaining his Kai-level peace.

Through Thalassa's ancient guilt and the freed hybrids' rejection of Malacor's bigotry, this book also touches on how we face the systemic cruelties of the world. You don't have to lose your joy to fight back, and sometimes, offering a terrified assassin a cup of chamomile tea is as revolutionary as drawing a sword.

I hope this book serves as a reminder that it is entirely okay to step off the path, to take a deep breath, and to enjoy a coconut on the beach, even when the world insists you should be rushing.

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Writing a novel is a journey that requires excellent company, and I am fortunate to have my own metaphorical runestones to draw upon when the road gets steep.

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To the baristas at my local café, thank you for providing the endless caffeine that powered these pages. You boil water almost as efficiently as Pip, and I promise none of you remind me of an egomaniacal warlord.

To my family and friends, thank you for listening to me ramble about pocket dimensions, floral shirts, and telepathic fish-horses for the better part of a year. Your support means the world to me.

And finally, to you, the reader. Thank you for packing your bags and joining Kai, Barnaby, Aethon, Lyra, Pip, and T-Dog on this ridiculous, wonderful road trip. I hope it brought you as much comfort and joy to read as it brought me to write.

About the Author

C. S. Beryl is an author of comedic fantasy who firmly believes that saving the world shouldn't have to ruin a perfectly good vacation. When not writing about neurotic couriers, telepathic mythical steeds, or highly unmotivated background guards, C. S. can be found hiking coastal trails, attempting to bake the perfect pastry, and hoarding an impressive collection of aggressively bright floral shirts.

Beryl currently lives near the ocean, keeping a careful eye out for ancient tide-walkers and hoping to one day discover a pocket dimension of their own to nap in. *The Steeds of Kai* is their latest novel.