



DRAGON BLOOD

INSATIABLE SERIES BOOK II
JANE APATOVA

DRAGON BLOOD
(INSATIABLE SERIES BOOK
2)

JANE APATOVA

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CONTENTS

Trigger & Content Warning

Dedication

Kindle Vella Cover

1. CHAPTER 1

2. CHAPTER 2

3. CHAPTER 3

4. CHAPTER 4

5. CHAPTER 5

6. CHAPTER 6

7. CHAPTER 7

8. CHAPTER 8

9. CHAPTER 9

10. CHAPTER 10

11. CHAPTER 11

12. CHAPTER 12

13. CHAPTER 13

14. CHAPTER 14

15. CHAPTER 15

16. CHAPTER 16

17. CHAPTER 17

18. CHAPTER 18

19. CHAPTER 19

20. CHAPTER 20

21. CHAPTER 21

22. CHAPTER 22

23. CHAPTER 23

24. CHAPTER 24

25. CHAPTER 25

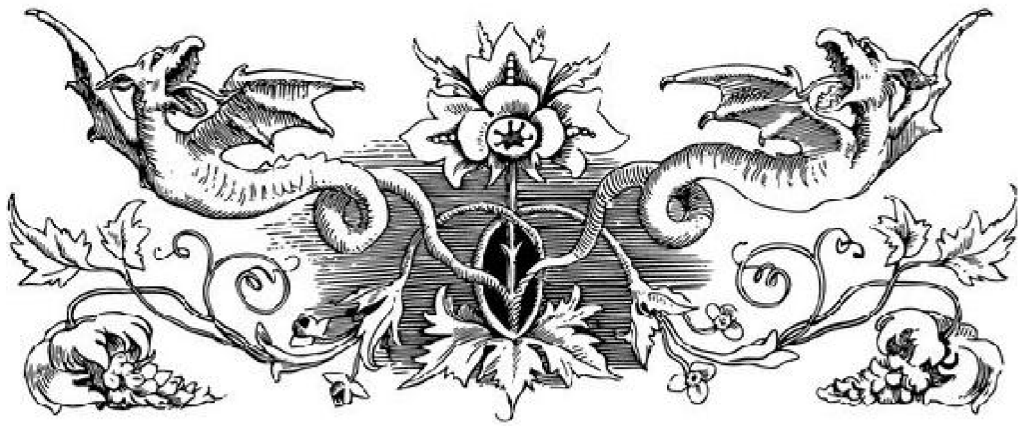
26. CHAPTER 26

Map of Drakon

Glossary

Acknowledgements

Links



TRIGGER & CONTENT WARNING

This story contains the following content that may be triggering to some readers.

Explicit sexual scenes, forced foreplay, voyeurism, dub-con, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, mentions of death of parents, abusive parental relationship, profanity, kidnapping, divorce, pregnancy, loss of pregnancy.

Mention of suicide off-page, blood, and violent scenes.

If these topics are of a triggering nature, then this book is probably not for you.

First and foremost, this book is a fantasy, the trigger warnings provided

are not exclusive to only one character. There may be other topics of a triggering nature that are not listed. If you find

anything that is not listed that can and should be, feel free to
email

your concerns to JaneAwriter1@gmail.com so the content
page can be properly updated.

To my husband
thank you for the late nights of reading,
and re-reading,
for feeding me and caffeinating me,
and for letting my imagination
run away with my harem of book husbands.

To my insatiable darlings:
May you find satisfaction
in the book worlds you've immersed yourselves in.
And in the book boyfriends we didn't know we needed.
May the smut gods shine on you.

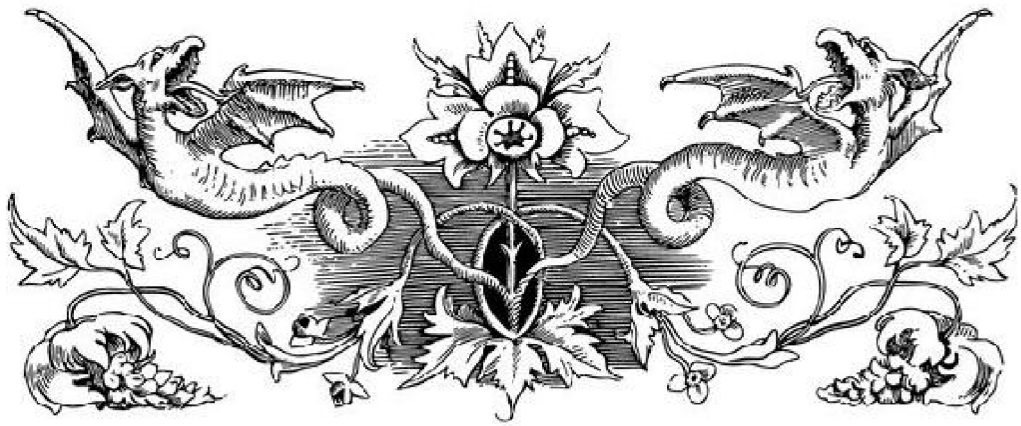


Dragon

Blood:

BY JANE APATOVA

Insatiable



CHAPTER I

More than a millennium had passed since the land known as Drakon was discovered by humans. The story is still told today to remind the people of this land of the choices that were made. They say the future is not set in stone. But what of the path? Is the path a choice, chance, or destiny?

“Tell me of the story your father has taught you,” a woman in a black hooded cloak asked a small boy standing beside her. “The history of your people.”

The boy nodded and led the woman to a large carving of the map of Drakon on the floor of the throne room. “Father said that the humans came from the land to the west of Isle of Volos,” his young and bright voice was eager, as he used a ruler to show the isle and the west lands marked further away. “He said it takes several weeks by ship to travel here.”

“Yes, it does,” the woman replied. “But what prompted the humans to travel all the way here? What led them to take the

unknown path?” The boy looked up at her, shrugging his shoulders. “You do not remember or do not know?” He pressed his lips into a thin line and shook his head. “I see. Then, let me tell you the true history of how we came to be.” The woman led the boy to an enormous painting of six intricately painted dragons, hanging directly across the throne room. “The human lands of Meijos are weeks of travel by sea. Even our dragons can’t fly that far without needing rest,” she said as she glided her hand across the protective glass that covered the old painting.

She continued to tell the story while the boy studied her hands. The only feature of her he could see. “One day, the high priestess of this kingdom lead a prayer to the ancient gods to bring prosperity to the lands. To bring the earthly elements to life. To bring the gods themselves to earth. Not but days later the blue sky was cleaved by a dark storm. Darkness opened up above, and from it, creatures began to descend. But as quickly as they had fallen, as quickly they were drowned in the sea, or some were spirited away by two large creatures that followed them through the rupture in the sky. One of these winged creatures appeared as bright as light, while the other was as dark as the deep night ... do you know who they are?” she asked the small boy.

The boy scratched his head in contemplation and murmured. “Tiamat and Asterot?”

“That’s right!” the cloaked woman exclaimed and ran her hand across the boy’s raven black hair. “One of the princes of Meijos and the high priestess had made the decision to follow them across the Tertane Sea. But the further they sailed the less they believed they would find where these creatures went. So, they returned home.”

“But they did find them at the end?” the boy said.

“After nearly a decade of figuring out the routes. Building large ships that can withstand prolonged journeys. Gathering all the necessary supplies they sailed again. Weeks of voyaging led them to a magnificent site. A land they had never seen before,” the woman said. She took the boy by the hand and lead him back to the map. “Do you know where they landed?” she asked.

The boy smiled and pointed to a beach area on the map of the Isle of Volos. The woman placed a hand across her heart. “The land was barren. Not like now. No castles, towns, cities, or buildings. Just vast beautiful lands, green, lush, abundant in flora, and medicinal herbs,” the woman rambled on, but the boy giggled. His eyes were wide with adoration for the woman while he enjoyed listening to her storytelling.

“My apologies I seem to have gotten away with my thoughts. Now let’s see, where was I? Oh, right ... the prince of Meijos made this very area his first outpost. But they

wanted to travel further to find these creatures or at the very least some trace of them. They took one of the ships and sailed for 3 days when they landed here,” she traced a path with the ruler from the Isle of Volos to a spot on the large continent. “Here they landed. Here they saw the beautiful cliffs of what we know as Uther, the capital of Orlean,” she continued. The boy squatted, placing his hand on the spot. “And here they finally found what they were looking for. Two enormous, scaly, winged beings. Large claws, and razor-sharp teeth. One as white as snow, and the other black as the color of your hair.”

“Were the people not afraid to see the gods? To look on them?” he asked curiously.

“Of course, they were afraid. But Tiamat, as ever the enlightened one, was the first to connect with the humans. To open up her mind and use it to find a way to communicate. To find a common language,” she said. The woman placed the tips of her fingers on the boy’s temples. His eyes widened at first with surprise but then gradually he tucked himself against the woman’s long cloak, embracing her. “Asterot on the other hand would take a protective stance, protecting Tiamat around the humans. Only answering obeying her.”

“Is that why we call him the black knight?” the boy asked.

“You are so smart,” she said, watching a blush appear on the boy’s face. “Why are you being shy? I know your mind is just like Tiamat’s and Asterot’s. Strong, capable of understanding things others can’t. Decipher quickly what people want, and need, and most importantly control what you desire. Don’t you want to learn more, Gareth?” the woman let go of the boy’s face.

“Will you teach me more of our history?” he asked.

“It would be my honor ... my prince,” she said. The sound of heavy footsteps jolted the woman. Turning to face the entrance to the throne room, she pushed the boy behind her.

“What are you doing here, priestess?” the growl of the King permeated through the large hall. “Never mind, where is he?”

“Your majesty, please. Let me have this time with him. To teach him about his abilities,” the woman said.

“Do I look like I take orders from you? You will do as you are told. He is my son, and I am more than capable of educating him,” the King bared his teeth. With just two swift steps, he was hovering over the priestess.

“Father no!” the boy came around the woman’s back and pushed in between them.

“Gareth! Do not ever stand between me and my decisions. One day you will be King of Drakon, and every single step you make will be for the betterment of this continent,” he grabbed Gareth by his forearm. “Good thing is, I have assigned you a tutor, a protector of your own. Klaus!” the King shouted.

A tall young man, in his early twenties, with short bright auburn hair swiftly entered behind the King while keeping a few paces back. “My King,” he bowed deeply.

“Klaus Polignac, second son of Duke Polignac of Valance has been assigned to be your protector, and tutor,” he said to Gareth. The boy hung his head, with obedience. “He will reside here in the palace until Gareth is of age to join the training all young princes go through in Aketh. So, you see priestess, I do not need your input on my son’s development and education. All he needs to know will come from me. The King. Klaus, take Gareth to the library and continue his history lesson.”

Gareth turned to look up at the priestess, but she stood silent, her hood still covering her face. Klaus took the little boy by the hand, and both walked out of the throne room. “Wait I want to say goodbye to the priestess.” Gareth stopped, but Klaus wouldn’t let go of his hand.

“My prince, please don’t. I promise you the priestess will return. We just need to be more cautious around your father next time,” Klaus pleaded with him.

The voices coming from the throne room were clear and loud enough to stop the little prince. “Carlyle, you are being ...” the priestess was interrupted by the King’s growl.

“How dare you speak my name so informally? I am your King. I told you and the high priestess before. He is my son. I will do what is necessary. I do not need your advice,” the King practically shouted.

“You are only doing a disservice to him by keeping him here instead of letting him experience the rest of the world he is meant to rule! He will need my help with his abilities!” the priestess exclaimed.

“Take it ... you asked for this ring ... it’s yours. I have no need for it. I know what I must do, now leave!” his tone calmed but his rage was still felt through the air.

“Please, allow me to see him?” the priestess asked again, her tone gentle.

“You know the rules. I am expecting you to follow them. He will be fine ... priestess ...” the King’s voice lowered, and

Gareth looked to his tutor. Klaus nodded, and both walked down the hallway toward the library.



Gareth's eyes were directed onto the floor of the throne room. He scanned the carved map of Drakon, analyzing each curve of the massive continent. The memory of his first history lesson lingered in the back of his mind. The priestess doing her best to keep him sated, happy, and preoccupied with positive thoughts at a very young age. While his father wanted to leash his power, to control it and him at the same time.

Gareth thought of Klaus. How diligently he worked between the King's orders and allowing the priestesses to visit Gareth in spite of the King.

'As if it were just yesterday the priestess lectured me about Tiamat and Asterot. About their eventual union with the humans. Their dragon and human mixed offspring protected the continent and the people that made this place their home for centuries. My own direct ancestor, Volos, was the first to be born of both Tiamat and Asterot and their power. While the other dragon gods hatched in this world, and through their elemental powers took rule of each piece of land. The only one we still fear to this day, the one that almost wiped out everything the humans and the ancients worked to create. Samael. Seems like we will never forget him.' Gareth thought

long about all that has happened right in the very throne room he now sat in. He observed the magistrates and Alister, lay out the plans for the upcoming royal dragon gathering, but he remained silent.

“Your silence is deafening, brother, are you well? You have been very quiet during this meeting with the magistrates,” whispered Alister as he placed his hand on Gareth’s shoulder to get his attention.

“I can hear everything. You do not need to elicit a reaction from me,” Gareth sighed.

“Regarding the gathering, your majesty, do you think it is wise for you to arrive earlier than the rest of the royal and noble families? It is their job to welcome you, not the opposite way,” Magistrate Diego breathed out.

“Arrangements have already been made with Magistrate Orson and Captain Broone. His majesty wishes to travel in two days’ time. However, only a small number of people know of the King’s early departure from the Isle of Volos and early arrival to Orlean. The wyverns have been sent to the Palace in Uther for the head of the household, Charles, and his trusted team to start preparations,” Alister continued to respond instead of Gareth.

“Yes, your Grace we do understand. We just wanted to verify the protocol. And what about Finnigan, will he be returning to the Isle in the King’s absence, or is he to remain in Valance?” Magistrate Diego was concerned for the safety of the Island, and the people residing on it.

“Volos’s borders are well protected and we have wyverns for lookout. There has not been a Dunne presence here in over a decade,” Gareth glared at Magistrate Diego. “I think you’ve gone soft, magistrate. All that time in Valance, under the watchful eyes of all of our dragons. There is no need for Finnigan to return in my absence. My departing early will not change that,” Gareth stood up from his throne, towering over the men standing in front of the dais. “You have your orders. Everyone is dismissed. Brother, stay behind,” Gareth said as he walked down from the throne to the bar perched by a wall of paintings.

As the throne room emptied Alister waited for Gareth to speak. “Do you know what today is, Alister?” Gareth asked whilst pouring two glasses of whiskey.

“Yes, and I am sorry brother, but we had to hold the meeting today. You wish to depart in two days am I right? And we have not finalized all the details...” Alister stopped speaking as Gareth held out a glass for him to take.

“It has been a year since her death,” Gareth continued, taking a sip from the glass in between his words. “And even now I feel nothing. Nothing but regret for years spent, not my years, but hers. I knew before we married that nothing would come of this marriage. The Meiji predicted it beforehand.” Alister took the glass from Gareth and watched as Gareth sighed and approached the large painting of six dragons. His shoulders tensed, as he intently glowered at the painting. *‘Great Dragon Volos. The shadow, the Grey Sun ... The First High King of Drakon, I must be a disappointment to you as your descendant,’* Gareth thought to himself.

“You never told me the full Meiji prophecy. What did they say to you?” Alister was curious but didn’t want to open up any wounds.

“Our marriage was not meant to be. That she will never bear me an heir. Yet I married her anyway. And for what, for her to take her own life,” Gareth did not waver with his response.

Alister was aware of Queen Khali’s suicide. Being present for her funeral the year prior. But he never asked about the circumstance or if Gareth ever finished the investigation. “You cannot blame yourself for what happened. Father was the one to arrange this marriage and you obeyed his wishes even after father had died. Your time with her was not a loss,” Alister lowered his head not knowing how to help his brother through his grief.

‘If I tell Alister the whole prophecy, what will he think and how will he react?’ Gareth arched a brow in silent contemplation.

“I will be going out in a bit to her grave, to pay my respects. What is your final thought on my request for two weeks of exploration before I return to the gathering? No one needs to know that I am in Orlean,” Gareth looked over his shoulder at Alister. “It has been a long time since I have been to the mainland of Drakon. One of the last gatherings I have been seen at was Marius’s wedding eight years ago. Many of the nobles and even some royals may not recognize me since they have not seen me since my wedding six years ago here in Volos.”

“I still do not understand why you wish to travel around Orlean. It is not like you have not seen it in the past?” Alister narrowed his eyes, trying to gauge Gareth’s reaction.

“I want to enjoy some everyday activity and see my people, without them really knowing it is me. You know I am not like our father. I do not want the etiquette, the social decorum, the lechers and their daughters throwing themselves at me to gain my favor,” Gareth smirked.

“Gareth, you know the Meiji will be at the gathering along with the Brotherhood of Okumi. This gathering is scheduled in

time to celebrate Tiamat's and Asterot's union. The Meiji will choose a daughter of one of the families to represent the goddess in the ritual and the brotherhood will choose her knights of Asterot. If you wish for some time for yourself, I may be able to give you a week at most before Exian arrives. And before the first of the Meiji priestesses appears for the blessing of the gathering on the night of the first ball..." Alister repeated.

"Spare me the speech. I know the ritual. We will see what happens," Gareth grumbled. "Perhaps you and Onri will be the ones taking the mantle as one of the many knights. Especially since Exian is about to marry. Marius is long married, and now I received a letter from King Aarif that his daughter Arden has married prince Xander without as much as an announcement of an engagement," Gareth arched a brow at Alister. His iridescent silver steel eyes set to a blaze. "It seems you had forgotten to tell me something, brother?"

Alister took a step back as he lowered his gaze. "It is not my place to tell you. I advised Xander two months ago to write to you or to come here directly to gain your approval, but you know his father, King Furrier. He will not let you have the final say as it pertains to his children and the lands of Fernier."

"Ah, Furrier, his old age deceives him, and he forgets his place as I am the High King of all the lands of Drakon," Gareth turned his head back to look at the dragon painting.

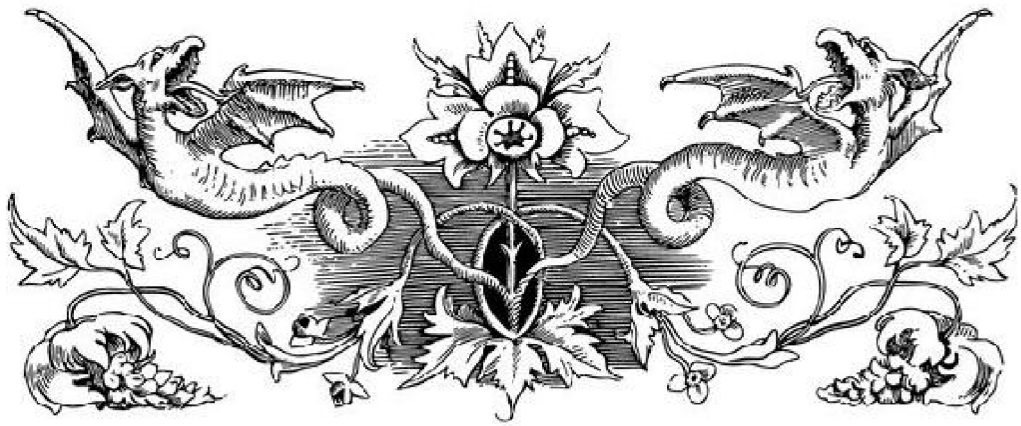
“Look at Nicor. She was cold, yet coy. Her icy blue stare could freeze you in seconds. Her abilities are what everyone was after. But even she knew that Volos was her king, and obeyed his rule with honor, respect, and trust.”

“Brother, King Furrier maybe all the negative things you think he is. But he would not betray Drakon or you. As it is as important for us all to be at each other’s sides and stand our ground against the goblins of Dunne, united.” Alister did his best to speak with caution so as not to further infuriate Gareth’s already tense appearance.

“Do you need a history lesson brother? There are only six dragons in this painting. Which represent the current six dragon lands of Drakon. The other two kingdoms, one had fallen to the Dunne and the other, the dessert of Okumi swallowed. However, instead of two dragons, we are missing four dragons from this painting. And whom are they brother? Better yet what happened to them and how do they relate to the rest of us?” Alister widened his eyes not knowing whether Gareth wanted a real answer or if this was a rhetorical question.

“If we are not careful Alister, and if we forget the old ways, perhaps Nicor’s descendants will betray us as Samael and his offspring did. Perhaps they too will become power-hungry and wish to take all the power of the ancient gods Tiamat and Asterot for themselves. I am not saying that King Furrier or

his sons Marius and Xander would betray us to the goblins of Dunne,” Gareth turned his head to look out of the window as a bell rang in the courtyard. “I have to leave for the grave. You can tell me after dinner why a prince of Fernier and a princess of Aketh eloped. And in meantime, ponder about the question I posed.” Gareth finished his drink and left the throne room hastily.



CHAPTER 2

Alister remained in the throne room for a few more minutes. Staring at the painting and wondering about Gareth's imposed question.

'Is Gareth right? Would the bloodline of Nicor one day betray us, just like Samael did? It has been more than half a millennium since Samael was last seen. His bloodline mixed with that of the goblins of Dunne, and the people of Ormar, before the desert of Okumi, rose and swallowed the Ormar lands. It has been centuries since the first dragon gods, Asterot and Tiamat, were betrayed and trapped by Samael in a distant world we have not been able to find. The access to us mortals is lost for all eternity. And the young translucent dragon Kaida has gone missing while fighting off the goblins of Dunne that followed Samael blindly. It took Volos to unite the rest of the dragons, and humans and lead them against Samael and his followers. We, the royal and noble few, are all that is left of the bloodlines of the ancient and first dragon gods. I am myself a descendant of Nagendra, the emerald dragon, with powers to manipulate the elements of the earth. Create, and maintain the

nature of these vast lands.' Alister emptied his glass and placed it onto the bar cart.

“You are pondering too long over the King’s question, Duke of Orlean. It is simpler than what you may think,” said the feminine voice behind him. Alister turned around, startled to see a small figure covered by a black hooded cape. All he can see were her hands, with a slight lilac color skin tone, clasped together in front of her, and the bottom of her chin peering out from under the large drooping hood.

“Priestess, what a surprise to see you here,” he breathed out. He has seen this priestess from time to time make her appearance here and elsewhere, but she had never addressed him directly.

“I heard you warn the King regarding the celebratory ritual. He has some time before the celebration, a few weeks at best to gather his thoughts and will. Perhaps he will be chosen this time,” she stated.

Alister’s brows raised in surprise. “So, you are planning to summon him to participate in the ritual?” he asked.

“He is of old dragon blood, without an offspring. The ritual celebrates the fertility of Tiamat. It would only be logical. Yet you already know that it is the brotherhood that will select the

knights of Asterot,” she sighed. “However, today I am not here for him. I am here for you, your Grace. To speak to you of the girl you met at the Villa of Maskar. The one whom you have been unofficially courting these last few months,” she said. “You have been coy enough to keep this from the King. Perhaps it is time to tell him the entire truth before the gathering commences. He has a disdain for secrets, especially from his own brothers,” she said.

“What? How can you possibly know of Mari...?” he swallowed.

“You know better than to ask that. We know everything. She will be in attendance at the gathering. She is of age, and her dragon spirit has already stirred for you,” she pointed a long thin finger at him. “As evident by that claiming mark she left on your chest. I am sure you felt it that night you two met,” she said as she walked to the painting of the dragons. “I am here to say that your efforts have not gone unnoticed with her. She is still unsure of her capabilities, but I am sure you will guide her through the changes. She is the right match for you, and your dragon bloodline together will be prosperous,” she skimmed her hand across the protective glass, hovering over Nagendra’s picture. “However, heed my words. Her father is not to be trusted. He has his plans for his children.”

“Ambitious men make haste decisions and in turn can ruin what good is around them. I’m assuming I will have to make

the appropriate decisions and steal her away?” Alister smirked while thinking about the girl, and the night they met. Her touch on his bare chest burned him, leaving her mark behind.

“Do not delay too long before her father gives her away to someone undeserving of her,” the priestess warned. “I must leave now before I miss the sun setting,” and with that, the priestess vanished into thin air.



Gareth stood in front of the marble memorial in the graveyard. Observing the picture etched of his late wife. *‘A human with no dragon blood, from the lands beyond the Tertane Sea.’* He knew his father was wrong to arrange this marriage. But the former King insisted they try to expand their kingdom into one where dragons never roamed.

‘To unify more lands through an advantageous marriage. How wrong you were father. If he only knew the enlightenment that was bestowed upon me by the Meiji. I will be the last High King of Drakon. The bloodline of Volos, the old Grey Sun dragon ends with me,’ Gareth closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry Khali. I wish now more than ever to have told you before we were married that I wouldn’t make you a mother. I wish I had the courage to set you free to your family when you saw my nature. I couldn’t give you the love you

needed. I never knew what that kind of love looked like or felt like. I hope you found peace in your afterlife. In the spirit world of your people. One day, I hope you will forgive me, and set me free of this grief,” Gareth kneeled in front of Khali’s grave and placed a flower in the vase on top of it.

He felt a slight breeze on the back of his neck and a hand on his shoulder. “What are you doing here, priestess?” Gareth whispered, with no emotion of surprise nor did he turn around to look.

“You still have excellent senses. Like a pair of eyes on the back of your head. Cannot surprise you at all,” she replied. “I understand that you will be appearing at the gathering this year. Please be careful to who you give your attention and do not heed anyone else’s words. Use your judgment and senses.”

“Are you saying I should not listen to the advice of the Meiji as well?” Gareth stood up and turned. He glared at the woman in the black hooded cape. “Why did you allow my father to choose a bride for me, knowing that I will not provide her with an heir? Why waste her time? Why Lily?” Gareth questioned.

“My King, the words we whisper are not always what they seem straightforward, and though sometimes they are there to help you move forward. Yes, what was seen is that you will be the last High King of Drakon. Perhaps if you are destined to

have an offspring, it will not bear that title,” she reached out her slender hand to touch his hand, but he pulled away. “But since I was not the one to foresee your destiny, I cannot tell you anything more than what was shared with you. Nonetheless, your inner dragon spirit has been stirring these last few months. Basking in its own power. Perhaps this gathering has come in a good time,” she pulled her hand back, clasping it again with the other. “It is time for you to move forward.”

She took off her hood so she can look directly at him. He took in her appearance, her raven black hair, the petite but straight nose, high sharp cheekbones, and her eyes glowed with silver and lilac hues. Gareth observed some age lines surrounding her eyes, but she is ageless like the rest of the Meiji priestesses, bound by their old bloodlines and the powers bestowed upon them by Asterot and Tiamat.

“It is rare when a priestess shows her true face to anyone. You and your goddess must have faith still in Volos. Thank you, priestess Lily,” Gareth lowered his eyes.

“Yes, my King, we are but your servants,” she bowed her head. “We will see each other again soon. Safe travels across the Tertane Sea. May Ladon keep you safe,” she gave him a faint smile. Gareth nodded and turned back to the marble memorial as the priestess vanished into thin air. Only a black mist remained for a second before dissipating.



In the evening, as Alister finished up the King's orders, he couldn't stop thinking about the girl he met. Her long wavy sun-kissed hair dropped to her waist. Her soft green eyes stared at him nervously, and her alabaster skin, soft under his touch. Her delicate long fingers traced along his chest down to his navel. Her touch made him shudder and a sense of fire had risen in his stomach traveling up through his chest. He remembered how her hands emitted a burning sensation and her fingerprints were imprinted onto his chest. *'Mari....'*

A sudden knock on the door jolted him out of his dream. "Come in," Alister cleared his throat.

"Since when do I have to knock on a door in my own castle?" asked Gareth. "Let the magistrate finish with the tasks. You do not have to plan everything all the time." Gareth rang the bell for the butler to enter. "I will be having my supper in my private rooms, prepare it within the hour. Make sure his Grace here is taken care of, as well," Gareth smirked mischievously.

Alister rolled his eyes and slumped over the document in his hand. "You are insatiable brother," he said while gesturing for Gareth to sit on the couch.

“Have the artifacts been sealed in double crates and loaded with the rest of the supplies?” Gareth continued as he sat.

“Yes, I’ve sealed them myself and personally watched the cases loaded,” Alister chewed on his inner lip, wondering if he should speak to Gareth now.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Gareth.

“Many things at the given moment,” Alister peered up. “I just wonder why you want to transfer the artifacts to the palace at Uther?”

“It’s not that I want to transfer them, but that I have been having this odd feeling that the Island is too open. Even though the Isle of Volos is the first line of protection to the continent, what is the protection for Volos, and the artifacts of our ancestors are vulnerable here. They will be safer in Uther,” he responded.

“Does this have anything to do with Prince Akimsun?” Alister suspected that Gareth wanted to see the young prince and test out his growing knowledge of the ancient artifacts.

“Yes,” Gareth’s lip curled. “I had hoped he would be present at the gathering so that we can speak more of his findings regarding the history of the artifacts. However, his father,

Aarif had also mentioned in his letters that Akimsun will be continuing his studies of the mount Abyss artifacts instead. General Khalib's spies uncovered a great deal when they marched onto the Dunne lands after the war with the goblins ended nearly three years ago. But since he will not be in attendance, I want us to make the trip to the libraries of the Brotherhood of Okumi, to meet with him."

"When do you intend to travel?" asked Alister.

"Right after the gathering ends. You can see to the planning when we settle in Orlean," Gareth cocked his head to the side and said, "what else is on your mind?"

"Do you intend on taking all the artifacts and bringing them to the libraries as well?" Alister furrowed his brow.

"Not all the artifacts, only the sword of Asterot, and perhaps the dragon scales from each of the old dragons. At the same time, I wonder what enchantments and other writing Akimsun will be able to translate from the ancient texts. What else can we do but try and bring back the ancient dragon gods?" Gareth cocked his head and looked sharply at Alister. He sensed that Alister had something else on his mind that he was not bringing up.

Alistar looked cautiously back at Gareth “Akimsun will be a great learned King of Aketh one day. It will be good for him to take on this role amongst us.”

Gareth narrowed his eyes. “I think you know what I am waiting for? Is she with child, is that why they eloped?” Gareth crossed one of his legs over the other, resting his ankle on his knee while his face kept his relaxed but coy appearance.

Alistar sighed. “No, not exactly. The truth is Arden and Xander have been playing the flirting game for several years now. I think it has something to do with Helena.” Alistar knew the truth and had hoped Gareth wouldn’t find out everything. Especially about the relationships being hidden amongst the younger royals. Alistar did not want his own chances to be ruined, as he did not know how his brother will react.

“Hmm, whom did Helena kiss now?” Gareth smirked.

“Ha, yes the kiss of sight. I frankly do not remember if it was Arden or her brother Xander she gave the kiss to. She did mention something about them belonging to each other. The dragon spirits, their heat, and not having to wait any longer for anyone’s approval,” Alistar said trying to remember the conversation that happened several months earlier.

“You know, one of the reasons King Furrier is displeased with me is because of Helena. The first time I met her was eight years ago at her brother Marius’s wedding. She gave me the kiss of sight as well ... more like attacked me with it,” Gareth chuckled.

Alister widened his eyes. He knew from Helena of the story, but never discussed it with Gareth. Nor did Gareth ever reveal this to him. “She was 13, Gareth.”

“Yes, I am well aware. It was Marius’s wedding and she wanted to dance with me. I will not say no to dancing with her, it’s only respectful. The next thing I know I am on the terrace getting fresh air and she flew up on her dragon Rheem, jumped on me, and kissed me. I jerked away as quickly as I came to. Yet she still had her arms wrapped around me as Furrier, and Xander walked onto the terrace,” Gareth shook his head and continued to chuckle, recalling the innocent detail of that night, and the speech he received from Furrier.

“How come you never told me this story? So, what prophecy did her site give you?” Alister was curious to know.

“It saw a glimpse of my wedding. Which did happen two years later. I saw myself leading the dragon riders in a battle near the Okumi desert, which is yet to happen. But did you know she too sees something that will be very important for her? After Furrier sent her and Xander away, we had some

choice words I should say. He demanded that once Helena turns of age for me to marry her,” Gareth raised his hands as he spread open his arms. “Clearly that did not happen, which is also why Furrier refused to attend my wedding to Khali.”

“Did Helena ever tell you what she saw?” Alister continued to ask. He figured if Gareth continued to speak on this subject, he will not have to bring up Marissa and him.

Gareth nodded and pressed his lips into a thin line. “She said one day when she is ready to be married, she will ask for my blessing above her own father. And though I may at first resist to give my blessing, I will find solace knowing that my siblings have found their truth and that her loyalty will always be to me and my family.”

“That is something. I can only imagine how Furrier will react to this news when it happens. Perhaps when I see her next, I will have to ask for the kiss to know what awaits me,” Alister chuckled, knowing well he would never allow Helena to kiss him like that.

Gareth narrowed his eyes at Alister, there was something else he felt Alister was not telling him. “So, what am I missing? What else is on your mind that I have yet to pull from you?” he said nonchalantly.

Alistair tensed as he stared at Gareth. “Fine brother, fine. Do you recall the story I told you about the private party at the Villa a few months ago, and that there was a girl that intrigued me?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“A priestess of Meiji was here earlier, and she said she is certain that this girl would be the right match for me...” Gareth put up his hand to interrupt Alister.

“Let me hear this correctly. You met a random girl at one of those parties Mistress Maskar holds where normally you just meet a girl to fuck, but suddenly she is the right match ... the one mate ... Tell me how many times you have fucked her since you have met. Or how many times has she been bedded by one of Mistress Maskar’s favorite visitors? The Maskar women are all the same!” Gareth snarled.

Alistair stood up, anger splashed across his face. “How dare you brother speak of her in such a degrading way? She is not a Maskar Mistress,” he slammed a fist against the desk. “You do not know her, you have never seen her, nor spoken to her. You do not know what it feels like to have your dragon spirit burn and tear at you because you simply are not near your soul mate. You are the one though, with the insatiable appetite for women. Fucking how many different women, daily!!” Alister roared, making the room feel like it was shaking.

“Is that what you think of me Alister?” he scowled, knowing Alister was not wrong about his judgment.

“She will be at the gathering as well. I want you to meet her, her family, and I hope dear brother. MY KING. You will not be resistant to our union once I ask you to bless her and me,” Alister glanced at Gareth with an almost pleading but fuming look.

Gareth got up from the sofa. “Does she have any idea what she is getting into by involving herself with you? I will have to meet her and see about her character, and if she is strong enough to handle the burden of your position. You’re not some soldier or even a young noble. You are a prince of dragon blood. Any woman you take as a bride must be as strong and willful. As well as trustworthy and cunning as you are ... For time being we will not discuss any more engagements. I’ve had enough surprises for one night.” Gareth nearly spat the last words, as he stormed out of Alister’s sitting room.

Alister’s words agitated Gareth as they were on his mind all evening. *‘So fucking what that I sleep around. What else am I to do when women are so eager to splay their legs for me.’* He stopped abruptly as he entered his sitting room. His eyes landed on a servant as she was setting his table. *‘Not bad,’* he thought. His personal butler sent a fresh-faced pretty one. He walked up behind her slowly and cleared his throat to get her attention. She jumped back almost dropping a glass but caught

it in time. “Good reflexes,” Gareth said with a mischievous grin.

“Ye-your Majesty. If there is anything else I can do for you before your dinner is to be served, please let me know,” she fluttered her lashes while pursing her lips.

He put his hand out gesturing for her to take it and she put her hand on his. He pulled her close to him, taking in her scent. *‘Mhm soothing lavender, like that, would ever work on easing my perpetual desire,’* he grinned. “I’ve always admired a woman that can use her hands, and her pretty mouth well. Show me what you can do,” he said.

The servant kneeled and proceeded to unbuckle Gareth’s belt. It didn’t take long for her to take in the sight of his enormous length. She knew her work in the castle would eventually lead her to this moment. The King had a reputation for his illicit behavior of fucking multiple women days in and out, and she would just be another check on his record.

She licked her lips and took the tip of his cock into her mouth. Her hands slid up and down firmly against his thick girth.

“Good girl,” he breathed out. She continued to pleasure him. Finding moments to breathe in between his fervent

thrusts down her throat. “Mhmm...” A groan escaped his mouth. “Just like that.” He was not overzealous but needed the release. It was an internal burn, an ache to seek out what gives him pleasure. Rarely did he feel satisfied. Gareth continued to guide her pace with his hands as he gripped the sides of her face and hair tightly.

“You’re going to take it all in,” he said. “Swallow my gift when it arrives.” She made an incoherent sound as his eyes were riveted on her face. Tears welled in her eyes. The pressure of his thickness and length hit the back of her throat repeatedly. He could see her squirm as she gagged on the saliva which has begun to drip from her mouth down her chin and onto her neck. Gareth didn’t care though. She was just another girl willing to do whatever he wanted. He could have easily bent her over the table and gotten his release the same way. But there was something more intimate about watching them take to their knees in front of him. To beg him for his release. “Take my cum,” he groaned out as he reached his climax. “Taste it, and revel in it,” he bucked his hips. Cumming down the girl’s throat in thick long spurts.

After taking a moment to ease his breathing he pulled his cock out of her mouth. She gulped, licking her lips and swallowing all of his cum. He pulled up his trousers and grabbed a napkin from the small table near them. “Here, clean yourself up,” he said, leaving her as he went to the basin to wash his hands. “Have my dinner served in a few minutes ...

and you can serve me breakfast tomorrow,” Gareth looked at the girl through the mirror.

She bowed with a smile and left the room quickly, knowing his invitation to serve him breakfast meant he enjoyed her.

‘Have you fucked all the maids in the castle or specific ones,’ Alister’s voice appeared in his head.

Gareth rolled his eyes. *‘Just because you know how to mind link doesn’t mean you need to talk to me all the time. I’m sure the butler sent you one that I haven’t spoiled. Good night, Alister!’*

‘No, thank you, I am good,’ Alister mind-linked Gareth again. *‘Just wanted to clarify that I will not be fucking anyone here. So, clarify that to your staff.’*

‘You have been abstaining from enjoying little life’s pleasures. Is that girl that good?’ Gareth teased but received a growl in return. *‘Goodnight, Alister.’*



Gareth opened his eyes, adjusting to the bright light of the room.

'I hate it when the servants enter my rooms while I'm asleep and pull back the window curtains. It's so bright in here,' he breathed out. He turned onto his side and was startled by the presence of a woman in his bed. He sat up swiftly. Seeing that he was naked, and the woman partially covered up under the duvet, had him wince. *'Fuck me. It happened again.'*

He glanced at the woman cautiously. Observing the details of her face and the calm rise of her chest. She was breathing and curled up in sound sleep. Gareth's eyes lingered on her a bit more, before he took in his surroundings. He realized he was not in his room, nor a room he has ever seen before. *'Where am I? How?'* but deep inside he already knew. He slowly climbed out of the bed, hearing the girl stir, as a slight moan escaped her lips.

He backed away but kept his eyes focused on her. She moved again, her hand sliding across the spot where he just lay. He watched her in silence, as she opened her eyes and sat up slowly. The radiant softness of her innocent smile astonished him. "Good morning my love. You're awake so early. Come back to bed so we can lay in each other's arms," she murmured, her voice one of a morning songbird. She reached a hand towards him. Her hand, her entire silhouette was petite but curvy and delicate, especially compared to his giant form. The bright reddish tinge of her thick auburn hair shined with the dewiness of the morning light. Her deep blue eyes glanced innocently at him. He took in the appearance of

her face, her dainty nose, and deep pink full lips. Her velvety eyelashes fluttered at him. “My king, are you alright?”

‘She is breathtakingly beautiful,’ Gareth sighed to himself. This is not the first time he has seen her, but this was the first time she had spoken to him. A smile crept up on his face. *‘Mm, this could be interesting,’* he thought.

“MY KING!” A deep growl of a voice shook him. He looked around the room, blinking away the thought. “BROTHER! WAKE UP!! WAKE UP!”

Gareth suddenly sat up on his bed, sweating and breathing hard. *‘The same dream but in a different location. This time she was awake and spoke to me,’* Gareth rubbed his temples.

“Are you alright Gareth? The servant came to bring you breakfast but you wouldn’t wake up. We have been trying to wake you for the last half an hour!” Alister panicked.

“I’m fine. I’m fine, just a long heavy dream,” Gareth yawned.

Alister furrowed his brows, this is not the first time this happened. Alister wondered if Gareth would ever tell him about these dreams he’s had recently. “I’m deeply concerned for you brother. You have not been yourself. And these

dreams, it's not the first time we had trouble waking you up. It's as if you were comatose."

"I'll tell you when I'm ready." Gareth sighed thinking about the dream and the previous several dreams. *'Who is this girl? How does she keep on finding her way into my mind.'*

Alister noticed Gareth was in thought, as he dressed in silence. He tried to link Gareth but there was no response. *'He must be blocking me out. Or whatever his dreams are, have managed to put up a wall around his mind,'* thought Alister. "I will let the servants tend to you, and in two hours we are departing. Everything is ready, just waiting on you."

Gareth narrowed his eyes at Alister. "I said, I'll tell you when I'm ready." A low snarl escaped his throat.

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Gareth did not give any more thought to the dream. Since everything has already been loaded onto the ship and readied for departure days before, Gareth just needed to gather himself.

Alister and Gareth rode in the carriage from the castle, perched high up on a hilltop overlooking the inlet from the sea. The port city of Volos was just an hour's ride from the castle. The smaller villages and farms could be easily seen from the castle hill.

“It will be a few months if not longer before you return to Volos. Will you miss it?” asked Alister, seeing Gareth looking out the window of the carriage. It has been more than six years since Gareth left the island. Ruling the continent through his telepathic connections to the other Kings of Drakon and through Alister.

“Volos is precious to me, and yes I will miss it. But I also have a vast continent that needs me.” Gareth pulled up the fur collar of his coat for warmth. Though the island does not see winter conditions, the early spring weather can be cold at times.

As the carriage entered the main wide cobble road of the city, Gareth watched the people out in the streets busy with their everyday lives. The markets were bustling, and kids played in the street. Alister noticed Gareth was in thought. “Another daydream, brother?”

Gareth glanced back at Alister and pulled up a single-sided smile. “No, but I sometimes wish I lived a simpler life like the people here. Going on about their daily routine with concern only for their family and themselves. No need to worry about the well-being, unity, and prosperity of a continent,” he said.

Alister looked out the window to see how close they were to the port. “Captain Broone will be waiting by the port entrance

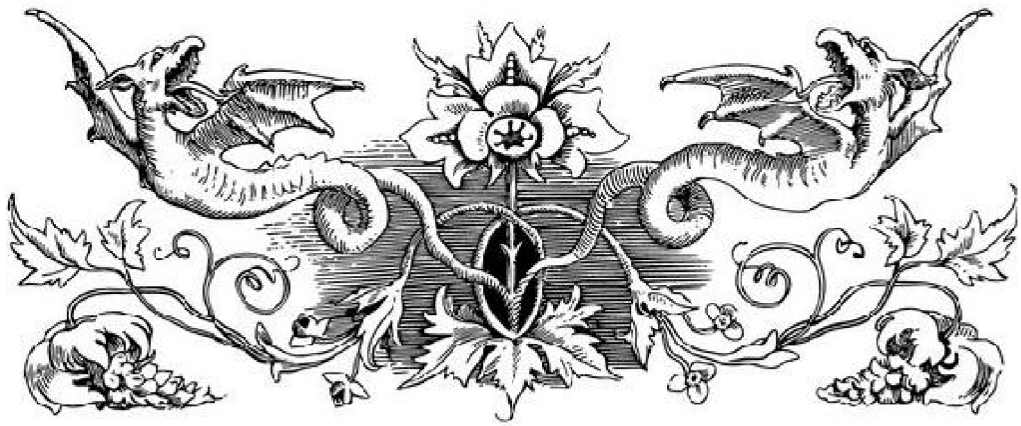
with a handful of the guards. We will need to be quick if you do not want people to see you depart.” Alister looked back at the seat near Gareth, seeing a box that has been comfortably perched there since they departed. “What’s in the box?”

Gareth peered at Alister and then back at the box. “The only piece of Volos that must remain by my side when I leave the Island”.

Alister furrowed his brow in confusion. “But all the artifacts have been accounted for and loaded yesterday,” he said.

“Seriously brother, you can’t read between the lines ... It’s my crown,” Gareth laughed out loud shaking his head. “Anyway, we are here”.

As the carriage came to a halt, the groom quickly jumped down from the front of the carriage and opened the door for Gareth to step out. Alister followed Gareth to meet Captain Broone on the dock with haste, avoiding the gathering crowd.



CHAPTER 3

“She is a great ship, your majesty. Good bones, and structure. She can fly with the wind, if need be, but we should take her slowly. It is my understanding that we carry precious cargo. With current handling and speed, we can expect to be on the mainland in two nights’ time,” Captain Broone spoke. He was a man of middle age, an experienced sailor, and commander of several ships. His Ladon dragon blood and ability to raise the waters and steady the ships in storms are well known. When his vessels are not used in strategic warfare, they are docked in the south of Ladon ports. However, for the King of Drakon, the captain will always make himself available, even if it is something minor.

“I know she is no Kings ship, but I was instructed to use this ship by his Grace” Captain Broone nodded towards Alister.

“I’m more than comfortable here captain. Do not worry yourself. We do not want our allies or enemies to know that the King has left his island. At least not this early in the

gathering. Only you, his grace, and a handful of others are aware that we have departed sooner than planned. I want to keep it that way,” Gareth addressed Captain Broone. He looked over at Alister and nodded. “His Grace will give you more detail on where and when we will depart the ship before you dock at the port of Uther.” Gareth left the main deck to let Alister take care of the details.

“Your Grace, I do not understand why you would depart the ship earlier?” asked Captain Broone.

“The king wishes to take two small boats with his men before the sunrise after the second night. He does not want to be seen when we dock, and he feels that if I’m present at the port many will gather to welcome me home and may recognize him as well,” stated Alister. “I have already sent a message with the wyverns to have Captain Anders and the palace guard meet us with horses at the beach near Mead County. Captain Anders and his men will take the boats back to the ship. We will leave you, Captain Anders, and Magistrate Orson to see to the unloading and safe handling of the property on the ship when you dock,” stated Alister.

“Understood your Grace. It will be done as instructed,” bowed Broone.

In the captain’s quarters, Gareth looked over the manifesto. There were many things he was bringing along but will not be

taken onto the beach with him.

'This gathering is not like the others of the past. Not only will we be celebrating the sacred ritual of the goddess Tiamat, and the knights of Asterot but also the six kingdoms will make their vows of loyalty to one another, to me and Drakon. Exian's wedding will be a great part of the festivities. I owe him and Lidiya,' Gareth thought as he continued to look through the lists. *'Many of the nobles will be present with their children in their coming of age as well. It will be a new beginning, a new blessing for each of the dragon-blood offspring of Drakon. This gathering will be a great way for me to meet them all. Though some I know, already. But to see how the ancient powers of our great dragon gods have thrived in the new generation. This will be a new tradition,'* Gareth sighed.

Gareth thought more of Alister's request from a few days ago. *'This girl he met at Maskar. How did she manage to seduce him in just one night? He is too cunning for any girl to sway him. At least, I think. Though he said he has not mated her, he is undoubtedly enamored with her. Perhaps their Dragon spirits are truly soulmates and have been longing for one another.'*

"Gareth," Alister said as he knocked on the open door.

Gareth looked up at him from behind the desk. “Come in and shut the door,” he said, gesturing for Alister to sit.

“Everything is settled with your early departure from the ship...” Alister was about to finish his sentence when he saw Gareth get up and pick up a knife from the table. Before he could say anything, Gareth had thrown the knife at him and Alister swung his hand. Gareth felt a sudden gust of wind and the knife flew back at him. Gareth snapped his fingers. A small ripple pushed the knife up into the wooden ceiling.

Gareth smirked. “So, your reflexes work, but you’re still too slow,” as Gareth made that snarky comment, a metal plate dropped on Alister’s head.

“Ay, I don’t need bruises on my head,” he rubbed the top of his forehead and both men started laughing.

“Tell me more about this girl you met,” Gareth breathed out.

Alister narrowed his eyes. Uncertain if this was a ploy of some sort. But Gareth cocked his head and asked him again. “Well let’s start with her name. Marissa Katheris. Her father is Lord Nathaniel Katheris, from Valance, and her stepmother is Sandra Irvine originally from Orlean. They currently reside in Summerset in Valance, and she has two elder half-siblings one is married and the other should be getting engaged but that’s

up to her father. I know her father travels often for business and trade, mainly precious metals and stonework. And before you say anything, yes, her father is a human of no dragon blood. But...”

Gareth interrupted him. “But her birth mother is, I’m assuming. Or how could she be of any dragon blood, especially enough to maintain a dragon spirit and to attract your dragon spirit.”

“Yes, I’m still looking into her birth mother’s details,” Alister retorted.

Gareth crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “And it took you mere minutes to fall for this girl? She clearly has used some sort of ritual or power of her bloodline to sway you.”

“I’ve seen her many times after our first meeting. We have been getting to know each other, innocently enough. Obviously, all other meetings were appropriately accompanied by a chaperone or in a group setting. We have been writing to each other for the last two months. She has been living in my mind, my dreams since our first meeting.” Alister sighed as Marissa’s face appeared in his mind again.

“You have been dreaming of her? What kind of dreams?”
Gareth smirked.

“You tell me about your dreams, and I’ll consider telling you about mine,” Alister breathed out.

“Fine, but I need you to take some time. Do not rush into marriage as soon as you get off the ship. Take this time to really get to know her. See if she will be the right fit at the castle on Volos. If you still intend to keep your vow to stay by my side, that will mean she would have to as well,” Gareth leaned back over the desk and picked up a small rolled-up paper. He then began to tell Alister about the dreams he has been having.

“I swear I have never met or seen this girl but since Khali’s death, I have been seeing her in my dreams. At first, all I would see was her back turned to me. She wore what looked like my royal robe and her hair was wild and flowing. I would go to touch her, and she would vanish. The first time I saw her face in a dream she was laying on the bed fast asleep. I just sat beside her staring at her. She was so peaceful, and innocent, and I couldn’t touch her. I was afraid she would disappear like the other times.”

“How long ago was the first time you saw her face?” asked Alister.

“It must have been a day or two after you returned from Orlean. When you found me sleeping on the lounge in the library.” Gareth had his fingers tapping his chin in thought. “I even tried sketching her, but I can’t get her full face. But in this last dream, she was awake and spoke to me.” Gareth passed the rolled-up paper to Alister. When he opened it, he saw a rough sketch of a young woman’s face.

“I’ve never seen her either. Do you remember what she said?” asked Alister.

“Vaguely something about going back to bed. I think I was more concerned with the fact that this time we weren’t in my bedroom in the castle. Come to think of it, I don’t recall I’ve ever seen this bedroom we were in,” Gareth pressed his lips into a thin line.

Alister cocked his head to the side and asked, “what do you remember about the room?”

“It was rather large. The bed had my Royal insignia etched on the headboard, and a crown with drapes hanging over it. There was a large mural of the great dragon Volos facing the bed, and the ceiling and the wall behind the bed were mirrored...”

“Did you just say mirrors in the ceiling and behind the bed?” Alister asked, shock settling across his brow. Gareth narrowed his eyes and nodded.

“Were there also two fireplaces? One with gold carvings under the mural of Volos. Two large blue and green sofas facing each other with a short glass table in between, and ...” Alister stopped talking seeing Gareth’s eyes widen in recognition of what Alister had described. “I was planning on surprising you as I had remodeled some of the rooms in the palace at Uther. The one you described is in your suite that is,” Alister lowered his gaze, almost shrinking into his seat.

“Well, it looked good,” Gareth tried sounding reassuring. “But that doesn’t explain why I’m dreaming of a girl I’ve never met in a room I have not seen in over six years. Which has since been remodeled.” Gareth slammed his hand on the desk, grabbed the rough sketch of the girl out of Alister’s hand, and proceeded to burn it over the candle on the desk.

Alister noticed how the cups and other objects on the shelf behind Gareth started to shake. Utensils flew up in the air passing his face. “Breathe brother, no need to be angry,” Alister’s voice was shaking.

Gareth breathed in and out, calming down his deep burning rage. Once all the things settled back in place, Gareth placed

his head in his hands. “Whoever she is, she has me on a brink of rage,” he whispered.

“I’m sure it is temporary, and if you are meant to meet her, you will figure it out.” Alister was concerned for Gareth’s well-being and the state of his mind. Gareth has not been himself the last year, with his wife’s unexpected death, and now with this girl in his dreams. He is more stressed and tense daily. “Get some rest, Gareth.”



Before the sun rose on the second morning, ten men boarded two small row boats with enough supplies for a day’s journey. They made their way across the sea from the ship to the dark beach near Mead County in Orlean. The men rowed in unison while singing Ladon’s song of safety upon the dreaded sea. Asking the mighty sea dragon Ladon to protect them on their journey through his water realm.

When the men landed on the shore, a wyvern flew onto the shoulder of its master. “Are they near?” Alister murmured, and the wyvern purred in response. It then took flight and breathed a small fire into the air as a signal. It was now sunrise and several men with horses were seen in the distance. “Captain Anders, I had faith you would make it here in time,” Alister said with a giant grin. The man he called Captain Anders bowed his head before Alister embraced him firmly.

“Your Grace, welcome home. The men will lead the horses here and help you pack up for your journey. We will then take the rowboats back to the ship and complete her journey to the port of Uther,” Anders said as Alister nodded in approval. “We have arranged for the guard to meet at the port to escort all the property to the Palace safely,” Anders continued as he looked over the men that were unloading the boats. “How was your trip over the sea, your Grace?”

“Not eventful, just one storm last night caught us, but Captain Broone managed. Make sure to thank the great dragon Ladon while traveling back to the ship,” said Alister.

All the men, including Alister, continued to unload the boats. They gathered and split up the supplies evenly for each of the horses to carry. Captain Anders took his men to push the row boats back out to sea when one of the boats would not budge. As it sank deep into the muddled sand. Alister glanced at the men that had mounted their horses and was about to direct them to help when one of the men already jumped off his horse and made his way to the boat. Captain Anders noticed the man approaching. He was the quieter one that barely interacted with the others when they were unloading the boats, but he did his job quickly. Anders cocked his head, taking in this man’s appearance. He was the tallest amongst both groups, with large broad shoulders, his hair charcoal with streaks of grey falling below his shoulders. He had a sculpted face with a full charcoal grey beard, and his eyes shined like a

freshly sharpened steel blade. There was something familiar about him, but Anders couldn't pinpoint what it was. He was about to offer his assistance, but Alister spoke up from atop his horse.

“Lord Greyson, won't you need help from the rest of the men?” asked Alister.

But in a swift second the man squatted in front of the rowboat and lifted up the front out of the sand with ease. He turned the boat out towards to sea, pulling it before he sat it back down as a wave broke against his boots. Anders's men stood there shocked but immediately ran over and together with the man pushed the boat out further. Alister nodded at the man as he wiped his hands against his leather jacket and got back onto the horse.

Alister watched the boats sail back out to sea before the group began riding south along the beach enjoying the view of the gilded sunrise. Alister noticed a few small one-story homes off the beach and realized they finally reached the last of the fishing village in Mead County and have already crossed into Chester.

They were only a few short hours away from the beach below the cliffs where the Palace of Uther stood. Alister's plan was to enter the palace grounds through the beach hill road.

This would avoid more prying eyes if they were to ride onto the palace grounds from the main gates.

“I want to rest the horses here. There is some good shade, and a small market on the edge of this town if any of you wish to go. One hour of rest, and we can be back on the road to Uther,” Alister instructed. The men dismounted their horses and tied them up in the shade of the trees.

“It’s really warm out. You want to go for a swim?” Alister asked Gareth.

“I remember when you were eight years old, and I was fifteen you challenged me to a swimming contest. I knew you couldn’t swim that far but there you were needing to prove something,” Gareth chuckled.

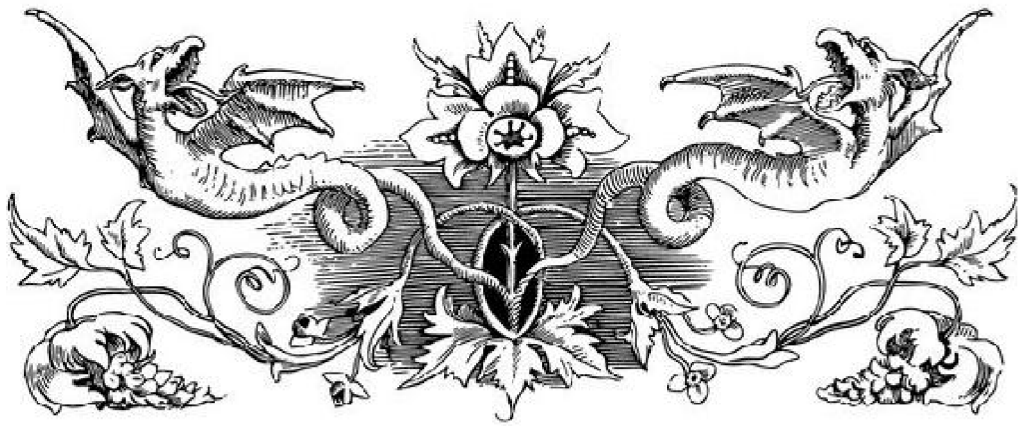
Alister gaped at Gareth with a side-eye. “If I win, you have to give me your blessing to pursue Marissa officially.”

“And if I win?” asked Gareth with a sly smirk on his face.

“Then I will let you choose whomever you want for me to marry, or not marry at all,” he shrugged. “To that rock peering out of the water and back?” Alister pointed smugly.

Gareth nodded and the two began to strip off their boots, and clothes down to only their pants. Both men looked at each other and sprinted into the water. They pushed themselves through the oncoming waves with determination, neither liking to lose.

Gareth thought about Alister's bet and the sacrifice he is willing to make if he loses. What ifs crossed his mind. *'What if I'm holding him from his potential? What if I let him go from his vow and let him live his own life? What if this girl is his true soul mate and I push him away by not accepting her? And what if he is not ready to take the high throne of Drakon as my heir.'* Gareth managed to break free from his inner thoughts and saw Alister ahead of him already reaching the rock. He smiled inwardly, proudly even.



CHAPTER 4

Alister sprinted out from the sea onto the beach. His breathing a bit heaved, as he laughed. He swiftly turned to look behind him to see Gareth swaying with the waves. He did not follow Alister to the beach, instead, he remained behind swimming.

Alister grinned and yelled out. “Today you can declare me the winner!” Gareth gave him a thumbs-up before diving under. Alister wiped the excess water off his naked torso and arms before he sat down on the sand. Stretching out and gazing up into the sky. He thought about Marissa again.

It was nearly noon, the sun bared down, and its warmth dried the remainder of his wet pants. “Sir, are you alright?” a feminine voice said behind him. He instantly sat up and looked over his shoulder. The glare from the sun mildly blurred his vision as he peered up at the woman sitting high up on a horse. *‘That voice,’* he smirked. He slowly stood up; his face fully exposed to the woman.

“Alister? ... I mean your Grace, I didn’t realize it was you,” she said, a sudden shyness appearing in her voice.

Alister hadn’t heard this voice in several months. *‘Mari ... and here right now,’* he thought. He wiped the sand off of his pants and arms. His vision adjusted and he finally saw her face. “Mari...” he swallowed hard. “Marissa. Now, this is an unexpected surprise,” he said, licking his lips as he took in the full rosiness of her blushing cheeks. He quickly grabbed his shirt to put on, as one of his men approached with a canister of water. “What brings you to Orlean?” he asked. He knew the answer well. He had planned it for months. But he was still pleasantly surprised to see her riding freely on the beach near the borders of Chester and Uther. He rinsed his hands and then his face, pushing the rest of the water through his short light blonde hair.

“My family had received an invitation to the gathering. And my dearest friends were arriving early to visit family here in Chester, so I accompanied them on their journey,” Marissa replied. “Are you here to visit the Earl of Chester, your Grace?” she asked. She peeked over at him as he was finishing up putting on his boots with his shirt still unbuttoned. She saw the burn marks on his chest, and suddenly remembered the night they first met. With his overpowering muscular body, and his light golden skin burning against her fingertips, a prickling fire had settled in the pit of her stomach.

“No, just traveling back home to Uther,” he glanced up at her. “With whom are you staying?”

As she was about to answer they heard the galloping of horses approaching them, and both turned to look in that direction. “Marissa! There you are! I didn’t think we would catch up,” yelled one of the riders as they slowed down in their approach.

“Oh, Vincent, my apologies but the horse I think was spooked by something. I barely held on till she finally slowed down here on the beach,” Marissa chuckled and looked back at Alister. “Your Grace, may I introduce the Viscount of Chester, Vincent Polignac...” Vincent jumped off the horse and immediately bowed his head.

“Your Grace. We were not informed that you would be here in Chester, today. My sincerest apologies for not being ready to welcome you,” Vincent said with deep sincerity in his voice. His nape-length auburn hair highlighted the paleness of his skin.

Alister put up his hand and shook his head. “No, no Vincent, no need for apologies. We were not planning on making stops anywhere, just going straight to Uther. How is your father, Klaus? I hope he is fully recovered from his injuries and is ready for the gathering?” Alister said, reaching out and shaking hands with Vincent. He peered up at the other

two riders approaching them on their horses. One was a young teen boy with similar features to that of Vincent and the other, was a young woman with a hooded cloak covering her hair.

'Will anyone recognize me when I emerge?' Gareth's voice appeared in Alister's mind.

'No, not that I can think of,' he replied.

"Yes, my father is doing very well and is rather eager for the gathering to begin. Where are my manners?" Vincent turned toward the others seated on their horses. "May I introduce my cousins, Ryan and Eliza Polignac. Their father is Duke Polignac of Valance and my father's elder brother. They have arrived early for the gathering," Vincent nodded toward his younger cousins. "Your Grace, may I extend an invitation to you to join us at the mansion for lunch? I'm sure your men may want to rest up as well. The journey to Uther is another 2-3 hours from here," Vincent stated.

Alister noticed the sudden pause on Ryan's, Eliza's, and Marissa's faces as they were all looking at something behind him. He turned around to see what or whom it was while answering Vincent. "Thank you for your kind invitation, however, we have to get back to Uther before the sun sets, and as you said it is another 2-3 hours from here." Alister glared at Gareth who walked onto the beach from the sea. Gareth's hair

was dripping wet and hung loosely below his shoulder blades while small droplets of water escaped his long unkempt beard.

Alister gestured to Gareth. “This is my friend, Lord Greyson. He’s accompanying me from the Isle of Volos.” Gareth slightly bowed his head, keeping his eyes narrowed as Alister began to introduce everyone. Another one of the guards approached Gareth with canisters of water for him to rinse his face and hair from the salty water and sand, handing him his dark glasses. When Alister introduced Marissa, Gareth’s lips curled up as he peered at Alister.

‘So, this is her then,’ Gareth chuckled inwardly.

‘Be nice, remember I won,’ Alister nodded. “And this is Lady Eliza, also a cousin of the viscount,” Alister said. Eliza pulled back the hood of her cloak to reveal her thick long fiery auburn hair and as the sun now hit her face her eyes shined with a deep blue hue.

Gareth’s eyes widened, as he swallowed hard. *‘HER, the one in my dreams,’* he exclaimed inwardly. He offered a polite smile and bowed. His body tensed and he clutched his hands into fists. *‘Now that I know who you are, Eliza. How will I torture your mind for allowing yourself to occupy my dreams and thoughts these last few months.’* He glanced back up at the girl, taking in her sweet disposition and utterly innocent face. He felt it then, his insides coil, a spark, and a guttural growl

setting his inner body ablaze. *'Ugh, why me! Fuck! Calm down Volos. She is just another plaything,'* Gareth sighed at his thoughts.

“Your Grace, tomorrow is the season opener at the races at the Winchester arena. My father and I have two beautiful stallions running this year. I am wondering if you will be in attendance this time. And if so, it would be our pleasure to host you in our booth,” Vincent said, his hands resting above his hips.

“That is actually a good idea. Greyson, what do you think? We should be settled. Perhaps we can make the races. It’s only an hour’s ride outside of Uther. It will be a good way to make my return known to my people,” Alister smirked glancing at Marissa and then back at Gareth.

“If his Grace wills it, then it will happen,” Gareth replied dryly. He was eager to observe the people but did not want to be recognized yet. He rather enjoyed the minutia of everyday life and spent days roaming the cobbled streets of the port city of Volos without being disturbed or ogled by his people.

Vincent and Alister finished making the arrangement for their meeting at the arena for the following day. Gareth dressed and with the men settled their horses as they waited for Alister. He observed Marissa’s shy body language as Alister kissed the back of her hand before settling his own

horse. He admitted to himself that perhaps Alister had a point after all.

As Alister, Gareth and their men rode to Uther, Gareth noticed Alister was in deep thought. He knew it had to be the girl. *‘Marissa was remarkably warm, and shy. Not like any of the women Alister seems to be fond of. Perhaps a change in character is what Alister truly needs, and if she possesses the dragon spirit to match Alister’s this may be a good thing after all,’* Gareth pondered.

Alister groaned as he thought of Marissa again. He wanted more time with her. The last several months he spent on Volos he didn’t realize how much he truly needed her, to be beside her till he finally saw her. The mere touch of her skin on his settled his dragon spirit. He hadn’t felt such blissful internal peace as he did the moment their eyes met. He had hoped that her family would accept the invitation to the gathering and was pleasantly surprised to find out that she would be staying with the Earl of Chester before the gathering commenced. Alister deliberated with his own feelings. He knew that with his royal position it would be up to Gareth to decide whom he can court, marry, and when he can make all of this known to the public.

“Will you uphold the terms of the bet?” Alister asked, as his horse veered beside Gareth’s.

“We will see when we get there. But like I said before, don’t run off getting married as soon as we get off the ship. Get to know her,” Gareth retorted and galloped further ahead.

Alister thought of their first meeting at the Villa of Maskar, where he held Marissa in his arms for the first time. His dragon spirit coiled, and the spark of the mating bond burned in him. As much as he tried, he couldn’t stay away. He wanted her then and there. To mark her as his, but she managed to evade him and send him back to reality. She is his mate, and he will honor and respect her.



Marissa and Eliza rode behind Ryan and Vincent slowly on their way back to the Earl of Chester’s property. Eliza glanced at Marissa, seeing she was in thought, but Eliza just had to know. “You never told me you have met his Grace previously. And it seems you were comfortable in holding a conversation with him, though still shying away. Also, the way he was constantly looking at you, I think there is something there,” Eliza said trying to get Marissa’s attention.

“Hmm ... oh yes. I thought I told you I met him several months ago in Valance. And my step-mother received an invitation for us to attend a private art affair he was hosting with Prince Onri. I think you might have been visiting with your aunt in Ladon at that time, or I would have insisted for

you to join us,” Marissa mused but her voice sounded unconvincing to Eliza.

Eliza gave Marissa a questioning look. “That can’t be all of it,” she said unconvinced. “There is no way after a one-time meeting that you would be this comfortable in his presence. We have known each other since we were little babes. I know you and you are not telling me everything.”

“Well, let me finish. Afterward, he invited us to join him in his private booth at the theatre. Obviously, we did little conversing there during the show, and with my step-mother there is really no opportunity to spend any alone time. He was a complete gentleman.”

Marissa pursed her lips, *‘should I tell her everything?’*

“I may not be able to read your mind right now, but I know there is something else. You know I can push myself into your mind and force you to show me everything. But it will hurt us both; I don’t want to do that,” Eliza narrowed her eyes at Marissa.

“Please don’t do that, I was in terrible pain for a week, and you lost consciousness for a few hours the last time you tried that,” Marissa gave her a pleading look. “You won’t judge me when I tell you everything, will you?” she asked amiably.

“Marissa, I would never judge you. You are my dearest friend, a sister like no other. My secrets are yours and your secrets are mine. I will take them to the grave,” Eliza reached a hand toward Marissa, caressing her waist-length sun-kissed hair.

“Ok, here it goes. The real first time I met him was at an event at Villa of Maskar.” Marissa spoke low. Eliza’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped. She knew about the events at Maskar, but never ventured even though she received multiple invitations over the last almost two years since she had turned 16.

‘This place elicits everyone’s desires and gives the attendee a sense of security while being able to freely enact upon their thoughts and needs. Some come to these events innocently to just view what transpires. Perhaps even learn more about their own desires, but do not take any part in the actions. And though it’s even encouraged for young women like me, to attend events like these, it is frowned upon if anyone finds out. Some cannot resist and have fallen into the free-spirited nature of Maskar. Many women have been lost in their desires and give in fully to experience the carnal pleasures of the body without consequences. There are always consequences when one does not see what they are doing can change the course of their lives,’ thought Eliza.

“Ok, go on. So, what happened?” Eliza asked desperately wanting to hear the details.

“Well, Nicola invited me. Her mother as you know is Mistress Maskar, and well she encouraged me to perhaps... well you know... do a little more than just look,” Marissa widened her eyes as she pressed her lips into a thin line.

“What did you do!” exclaimed Eliza in a hushed voice. She did not want her brother or cousin to hear anything.

“Everyone wore masks, no names are ever given and so I thought it would be quick and be done. Nicola wanted me to interact with one of the men that came to see her. The main room was rather crowded. And she practically dragged me to one of the men. I watched her teasing interaction, caressing this man’s chest and neck, while he kissed her. I kind of took that as my cue to perhaps leave and as I backed away, I turned and ran into another man. My hands fell against his chest which was bare under his unbuttoned shirt, and I bumped my head against his collarbone. The man wrapped his arms around me and asked if I was alright. I nodded and he let go of me,” Marissa continued to tell the story.

“So, was that his Grace? And how did you know it was him if everyone was wearing a mask?” Eliza murmured completely entranced by the story.

“Well as I was about to walk away when the same man grabbed both of my hands and pressed them against his chest. And I suddenly felt a burning sensation. My hands literally felt like they were on fire and even some steam came up between my hands and his chest. Then I felt a sensation in the pit of my stomach, of something stirring and burning. Do you know what that is? It’s the dragon spirit mating call. Of course, I snapped back and kicked the man in the shin and ran for it,” Marissa shrugged with a smirk on her lips.

“Are you saying this was his Grace, the very same Alister, prince of Volos, High Duke of Orlean?” Eliza stared surprised by Marissa’s words. Marissa nodded as she pressed her lips into a thin line once more.

“So, he obviously ran after me, and after catching up to me, he pulled me into an empty room where we ended up alone. I kicked him in the shin again and pulled out of his grip. I ended up slapping him against his mask, the band broke and the mask dropped to the floor. I must have been in shock to see his face because then he pulled my mask off and said *‘all is fair. You’ve seen my face, and now I must see yours,’*” Marissa mimicked Alister’s voice and both girls giggled.

“After maybe what felt like hours but really a minute looking directly into each other’s eyes, he took my hand and lightly kissed the back of it. I felt a warm rush flutter all over my body, and by the time I snapped out of my confusion he

already pulled me in against his body, wrapped his arms around me and well ... he kissed me, and like an idiot, I didn't stop him and let him continue to kiss me," jitters came fluttering to Marissa's body as she thought of his strong lips on hers. How he pulled on her bottom lip with his and then what felt like an invasion of the senses. His hard muscular body tightly pressed against her. She felt his heartbeat thumping in a steady rhythm. One of his arms wrapped fully around her arms and waist, holding her limbs from flailing around, while the other hand entangled in her hair and pressed the back of her head softly so their lips couldn't easily be parted.

She continued to recollect the evening with Eliza. "When he pulled his lips away from mine, I couldn't stop staring at how beautiful his emerald eyes were, captivating and filled with intense desire. I asked him to let me go. Trying to explain that I'm not a Maskar woman but just a guest, and I shouldn't even be here. And he had responded with *'are we ever in the place we are supposed to be? Yet here you are, and so am I. I think you would agree that our dragon spirits are in heat for one another, and we must give them something to soothe the burn. Even if it's just a kiss,'*" Marissa continued to describe as she blushed imagining his smirk. "I guess I was entranced by him. How often do we ever get to meet royalty? I agreed to let him kiss me again, though I needed him to let go of me first. You've seen how tall and rather large, muscular he is ... Ugh, he's so frustratingly handsome!"

A rosy flush grazed Eliza's cheeks as she listened to her friend. "He then said '*Do you promise not to run away if I let go? I'm not one for tricks though I thoroughly enjoy the chase.*' I mean who says things like that to women? What else could I do so I agreed, and he released me from his grip. He then led me to a small sofa in the room. And I confessed that I did not fully know what to do. I mean it's not like I go out and flirt and kiss men. I am not one of these girls that easily fall into a trap with these young men," Marissa grunted and shook her head. "He then said, '*Since you clearly know who I am, I need to know your name.*' I hesitated at first but there was something in his eyes, just pure honesty. So, I told him my name and he said I can call him by his first name when we are alone. I think he was trying to defuse the situation and to make me feel less awkward. And how could I not feel awkward? No one knew where I was, and with a man, alone. If anyone would have walked in on us, I would be the one ruined." Marissa grasped the reins tighter, steering her horse closer to Eliza's.

"I am living vicariously through you right now!" Eliza grasped Marissa's hand while trying to keep her excited voice down.

Marissa grinned as she imagined that intimate moment with Alister.

'Part your lips for me,' he whispered. One of his hands was on the small of her back, while the other pushed away the few scattered strands of her hair from her face. She closed her eyes and did what he asked. She felt his thumb caress the bottom of her lip, and then his moist tongue flicked her upper. His lips pressed firmly against hers and his tongue invaded her mouth in search of hers. His insistent mouth tasted hers, teased, and pushed her senses. Marissa recalled his taste, smokey whisky. Her body trembled with the heat that now spread from her mouth down through her lungs and settled in her abdomen. Her body instantly responded to his, wrapping one hand around his neck while the other lingered on his bare chest. His fingers played with her hair until they made their way to her throat. His touch was firm and needy. His lips left hers and gently made their way under her jaw, making her heave a breath.

That's when she felt the prickling sensation on her fingertips and Alister suddenly pulled away from her. They both peered at his chest, seeing her fingerprints burned into his skin. She gasped, surprised by what just happened. His scent like that of fresh wet earth and trees enveloped her. *'Mate'* the word rang in her head.

She recalled his smirk before he said, *'it appears our dragon spirits will not be satisfied with just a kiss.'* The awkward sensation returned.

She swiftly got up from the sofa, backing towards the door as she whispered. *'I'm sorry; I do not know what happened.'* He stood up to follow her, his smirk changed to an excited grin, and his emerald eyes steadied themselves on her.

'Do not run. I will catch you. And then I won't be as nice as I am now. It's expected for something like this to happen. I'm sure you know the ways the dragon spirit's heat or mating call impacts our bodies. The fervent need to mate.' He raised his hand, and she felt a gust of wind push her into his embrace. They breathed in each other's scents, eyes meeting and holding each other's gaze. *'I want to see you again,'* he whispered.

She broke her eye contact, looked away from him, and said *'if only that was possible.'* A deep rumble emerged from him at her response.

He pressed his lips to her forehead. *'I'll make sure it happens,'* he let go of her and handed back the mask he took from her.

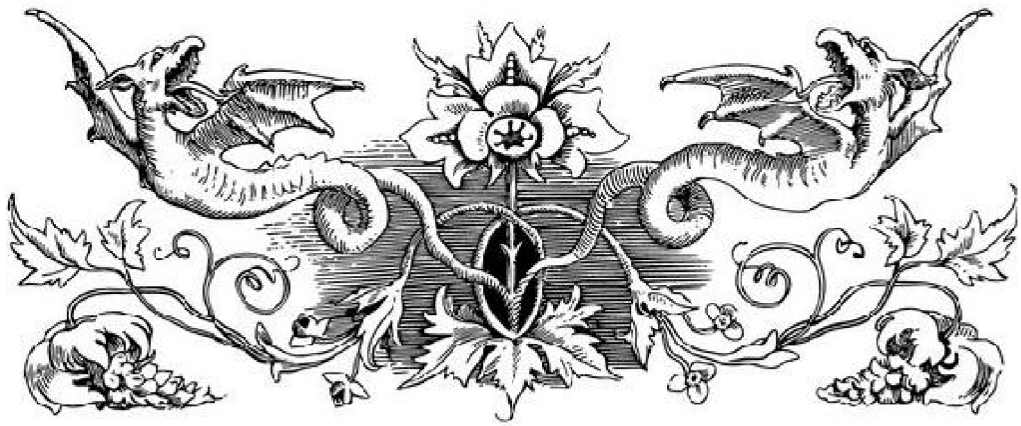
“After that, he left the room first. I had to take a few minutes to gather myself and then I left to find Nicola.”

“Umm, does Nicola know what happened?” Eliza asked.

“No, no, no, I told her it felt overwhelming in the hall with all those men, and I had stepped out to get air. She then escorted me back over the garden to the Maskar mansion,” answered Marissa. “A few days later we received the invitation to the art gallery opening for Prince Onri’s work. Alister did pull me away during the evening. It all felt rather fast, and yet uncertainty lingers still. I am not sure where I truly stand with him. Is he just waiting for me to give in? Or is he serious about me? We had seen each other many times afterward while he was in Valance. And as a matter of fact, today was the only time he did not try anything at all. While we have been apart for the last few months, we have been writing to one another as well. He sent one of his wyverns directly to me so that our letters would be private for just each other to see. My stepmother does not know about the letters, and well my father has been away on his business trip for months so he knows nothing at all of Alister,” Marissa pouted.

“Well perhaps his Grace was surprised to see you here, and with so many of us around he did not want to make an inappropriate scene. Has he made his intentions clear to you? Is he pursuing you in a serious courtship? You are aware of his reputation with women? Right? And I thought he had or has a mistress?” Eliza furrowed her brows.

“Let’s catch up to the boys and we can finish talking about this later,” Marissa sighed.



CHAPTER 5

“That must be some kind of record we just made,” Alister huffed as he dismounted his horse. They arrived in Uther in less than two hours from the beach in Chester. He handed the reins to a stable boy while the servants gathered outside the palace entrance to greet him. Only the head of the palace staff, Charles, and a trusted handful of personnel were made aware that Gareth would be arriving in secret this day. They were instructed to keep Gareth’s presence from all other staff until he was ready to let everyone know he was there.

“Your Grace, welcome home,” Charles bowed, and the rest of the staff followed suit. The last time Charles had seen the High King was right after he was crowned, six years prior, as he had accompanied Alister to the Isle of Volos.

“The staff will take the men to their appropriate quarters. Captain Anders arrived earlier with the ship. The maids are currently setting up the rooms and unpacking all of your belongings. I will escort the guest to his chamber. I am sure he

will wish to rest from the journey your Grace?” bowed Charles while still gazing up at Alister.

“Yes, that would be fine. Lord Greyson,” called Alister to the group. “Charles will show you to your room. We will meet for dinner in a few hours in the smaller dining room. And I’ll give you the tour of all the renovations afterward,” Alister spoke as Gareth emerged from the group.

As they entered the palace, Gareth was taken aback by its lavish grandeur. The last time he had seen the palace look this way was more than twenty years prior before he had gone as a teen to train in Aketh. Twenty years ago, the unprovoked attack on Uther by the goblins of Dunne had resulted in devastation for the city, the palace of Uther, and the untimely death of Alister’s birth parents. “I can see the grandeur of old returning to your home. It will be a great palace once more. And the gathering will be a great way to reintroduce it to all the nobles and royal families of Drakon.” Gareth’s words peeked a smile on Alister’s face. He has looked up to Gareth since childhood and it has been important for him to gain Gareth’s approval in everything that he does.

When Gareth reached his room, he wondered if it would look the same as in his dream. It surely had the same decoration and set up. The same mural of Volos above one of the fireplaces, and the mirrors surrounding the large canopy

bed. However, the room was larger and led into a private sitting room, bathing room, and walk-in dressing room.

“Your majesty it is an honor to have you visit us in Uther,” Charles bowed. “Your valet and the maids have prepared your room and drawn a bath for you to refresh from the travel. If there is anything you may need, please let us take care of it.”

“Thank you, Charles, I will be okay for now. You can dismiss the valet and the maids. I can take care of myself.” Charles nodded and waved the valet and maids out. Gareth’s eyes traveled across the room, comparing it to the dream. *‘Eliza Polignac, you’ve entered my mind and my dreams without my permission. It’s time for me to return the favor,’* he glared at the bed. He stripped off his travel clothes and proceeded to the bathing room. The enormous marble tub already steaming from the hot bath water.

He took a deep breath, laid himself under, and closed his eyes. With his fingertips over his closed eyes, he thought of her. *‘Eliza, Eliza, I see you in my mind’s eye. Now see me, open your mind to me. You placed yourself in my mind, and now I will be in your mind night and day. You will do as I say, think as I tell you to think, and you will not resist my words when I say so. You will be mine to do with as I please.’*

Gareth sat on one of the sofas, glaring at the canopy bed. All he could envision was Eliza sitting up on it with her hand

stretched out toward him. Her innocent blue eyes filled with something he has never seen before. He grunted, forcing himself to turn down for a nap on the sofa instead.

The knock on the door startled him awake from a dreamless sleep. The sun was setting.

“Your majesty. Dinner will be served soon,” Charles approached him. “Your valet had prepared your clothes for dinner in the dressing room,” he gestured to one of the tall mirrors.

“A secret door behind the mirror?” Gareth stood up. Charles replied with a yes, before leaving Gareth to his own devices. Gareth wondered if Alister took his advice and built out the secret passageways between all the rooms. He noticed the different mirrors throughout the dressing room and decided to see if there was anything behind them. One mirror led back to the bedroom, another to the bathing room, another to the large sitting room, and the final one had a locked door behind it. When he unlatched and opened the door, a dark hallway appeared. “Mm, I will explore this after dinner.”



After dinner, Alister led the way through the palace on the renovation tour. Gareth was proud of the changes Alister had

made to the space. The palace needed proper tending to, especially after part of it was decimated by the goblins. They were in search of the royal blood vault. But even if they had found it, there would be no way for them to enter it.

'If Alister planned on making this palace his official residence, it really needed an update worthy of his status,' he thought while walking through the grand ballroom with Charles and Alister leading the tour.

“We will hold the first ball of the gathering in this ballroom. The musicians will be set up here. We will have all the refreshments on the other side, surrounded by smaller tables for guests to mingle and rest. Also, all the patio doors will be wide open out into the gardens. This way we can observe the other planned festivities and have easy access out. Including your grand entrance,” Alister pointed out.

“Have you made arrangements for the rest of the royals that will be staying at the palace? Which wing will belong to which family? Or do we need to use the guest mansion across the gardens as well?” Gareth asked.

“The guest mansion will be for King Furrier, his sons, and his rather large extended family. I am surprised they are all pretty much coming. King Exian and Lidiya will take the west wing, with auntie Alessandra. Exian wishes to hold the wedding ceremony as early as possible. This is all being

worked out still, but maybe a few days after the first ball. Onri and some of his court will be in the East wing, while we are in the North wing. Since King Aarif is not coming this time, we won't have to host his enormous harem. So that gives us rooms on the south side for any other guests that we may want to invite. Plenty of lords, and nobles that we may want to host amongst the royal bloodlines," he smirked at the end of his statement.

"Hmm, any specific lords or ladies?" Gareth rolled his eyes. He was not surprised at Alister. He was going to get his way whether Gareth approved or not. "Prince Onri has a keen eye for art. I had seen some of the choices he sent here from Valance and all the family paintings in the art gallery. Hopefully, no one recognizes me right away," Gareth cocked his head, giving Alister a pointed look.

"Very doubtful, a few of the paintings are of a younger you. You were not older than 16 in some. Pretty much half your current age if not more. Your face has changed, you're physically larger. You have many worry lines. And you have this unkempt beard, and your hair is bizarrely graying for your age. You're getting up there, old man," Alister snorted.

"Ha, and you think you're something special?" Gareth chuckled. "So, tell me about the passageways. Which rooms connect, and where the beginning and the end is," he said.

“I see you’ve already discovered one entryway. Well, your room is at the top of the north end. So, it’s safe to say your room is either the beginning or the end, depending on how you see it. From your passageway, you can travel down the stairs to the north-side guest rooms. The duchess’s quarters, my rooms, and down to the old dungeon, the royal blood vault, and the new armory. I haven’t had the chance to fully explore but the passageways connect in specific rooms to make a full circle around the palace and down and out through the caves on the beach,” Alister continued.

“I see you’re trying to take precautions to fortify the palace as well,” Gareth voiced out.

“Yes, I have men patrolling on the beach day and night, through the cave entrance, and guards all over the grounds. The king’s guard quarters, and palace soldiers now reside on the palace grounds. We can watch them train tomorrow and you can inspect the guard change times. With so many royal families, we need to be prepared for anything or anyone trying to sabotage our gathering,” Alister arched a brow. He was but a child when his home was attacked, and his parents were killed as the result

“For tomorrow’s visit to the races, have you decided on what you want to do about your Marissa? Did you need me to make an arrangement for you to be alone with her?” Gareth winked.

“I have it covered already, but I’ll let you know beforehand if something is needed,” Alister grinned knowingly.

After they retired to their individual rooms, Gareth decided to explore the passageway to see where the new armory and the blood vault were. The artifacts they brought from the Isle of Volos, amongst other things, were now being stored there. In the underground passage, through a stone narrow hallway, Gareth came across the large, fortified doors of the blood vault. The doors and the locks were enchanted by the old gods. The only ones that may enter are those that hold the keys forged from a dragon scale of each of the six ancient dragons and a drop of blood of each of their direct descendants. Gareth had his key and all he needed was his own blood to open the doors. He decided to return on another day to give himself more time to explore the caves.

On his way through the passage, he overheard a loud banging or more like something breaking. He followed the noise toward an open passage door. He realized he was a floor below his own, and several rooms to the west. *‘Must be one of Alister’s rooms.’* Gareth focused his mind to heighten his sense of hearing.

“You have to leave Laura. I did not invite you back to the palace. The audacity that you think I would allow this behavior in my own home.” Alister’s voice was grim. *‘But*

whom is he talking to? Who is Laura?' Gareth thought to himself.

"Alister, what happened between us? I know I may have wronged you in some way. But I was under the impression I was your favorite. That you cared for me, and yet you left for Valance without as much as a letter or a Wyvern with an explanation of where you have gone and why you would not take me with you. And before that, you went to visit the King and were gone for a few months. Every time I tried to see you, you pushed me away. Was I just some fleeting love? Just a mistress these last three years? I thought that you loved me," a woman sobbed.

"Do not use my name so casually. Laura, I told you that all we were was just lovers. Yes, you were my mistress but times change, and I have changed. What you did, your deceit is unforgivable." Alister's voice seethed with anger. "It's been more than a year since I last allowed you in my presence, and yet you are not giving up that it is over. We are over."

"So, you found another. That's what it is! You found another young whore from Maskar to fuck. She will not replace me!" she yelled. "None of the other women you filled your bed with had replaced me these years. Mark my words you are mine and no other woman will ever give you what I can. No other woman knows what you desire and how to satisfy you. You cannot just end it with me. I will not allow it!" The sound of

glass breaking and the woman screaming raised a questioning brow for Gareth.

“I thought you would understand that we have to move forward with our lives. After what you did, you thought I would still want you? Leave right now of your free will. The guard will escort you out from the palace grounds, and back to your home. Do not return here, Laura. I’m giving you this last chance to redeem your mistakes, to humanize the situation you put me in by letting you go free and not punishing you for your lies,” Alister grouched.

Gareth heard the footsteps fade away and a door slamming. There was nothing he can do for his brother but hoped he would make the right choices. *‘Marissa better be worth all of the headaches you’re about to have with these women of yours,’* Gareth sighed.

Gareth proceeded back through the passage and up to his room through a gated staircase. After he entered and walked through the bathing room into his bedroom, he found a woman standing by the bedpost of his bed. She was dressed in a long billowing robe. She bowed immediately upon seeing him. “I am here to satisfy his majesty. I hope you will enjoy me immensely,” the woman said while removing her robe and revealing her naked suppleness. Gareth grinned and ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

“Come, have a seat on this sofa here,” he directed the woman. “I enjoy watching as much as playing. I want to watch you satisfy yourself, and if you please my eyes or ears, perhaps I will let you satisfy me.” He lay back on the opposite sofa facing the woman, watching her intently as she splayed her legs and began to play with her clit. Her fingers ran along her sex, curling in and pulling at her slickness. The expression of self-gratification roused her face and made Gareth smirk. He knew she was nowhere close to reaching her climax, but her moans satisfied him.

He urged her with his voice to pleasure herself faster, her fingers pumping into her intimacy. The slick moistness grazed her inner thighs, and Gareth adjusted himself. He unbuckled his pants, reaching in and began to stroke his erection as he watched the woman continue to pleasure herself. He neared his own climax as he closed his eyes and suddenly Eliza’s face emerged in his mind. Her deep blue eyes beckoned him, her full pink lips slightly parted and gasping. *‘Fuck, not now!’*

He was startled as he felt warm wet lips on his erection. His eyes flung open to the woman now bent on her knees in front of him and his cock in her mouth. “This is all I will allow you,” he groaned.

She continued to pleasure him, but he couldn’t look at her, all he could think about was Eliza. He closed his eyes and there she was again. He wanted to taste her lips, the swell of

her breasts, and plunge himself deep into her intimacy. He groaned as he released into the woman's mouth. *'I will punish you for this Eliza,'* he thought. He glanced at the woman still on her knees beside the sofa, wiping her mouth clean.

“What do you do in the palace?” Gareth asked her.

The woman glanced up at him, surprised by his question. “I am a maid of the North wing your majesty.” She bowed her head down.

“And how did you know who I am, and what I would need?” he looked down at her as she has not gotten up from her knees.

She glanced up to meet his ravenous gaze. “These rooms were always reserved for his majesty. I was sent to please the guest staying here. I just assumed you were the King.”

“I see ... you can go,” he nodded.

At sunrise, Gareth dragged Alister out onto the beach for hand-to-hand sparring. “I told you the other day, you have good reflexes but you're still too slow! Pay attention to your surroundings, your opponent's line of sight, and their hand movements.” Gareth instructed as he pivoted his body away from Alister's uppercut. Gareth spun on his heel around

Alister and swept Alister's leg. As Alister stumbled trying to catch himself, Gareth delivered a blow with the ridge of his palm to Alister's lower back, causing him to fly forward hitting the sand face down.

"If I knew any better, I'd think you liked the ground more," Gareth chuckled. Alister slowly got up growling in return. Gareth suddenly felt a heaviness in his limbs. The sand started to engulf his feet, pulling him down quickly.

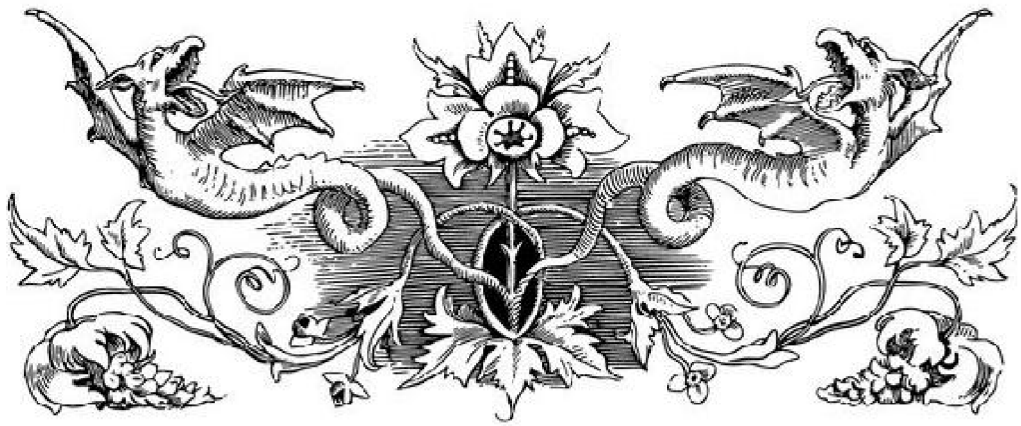
Gareth snapped his neck up at Alister, seeing his emerald eyes completely engulfed, his face enraged, and both his palms spread open over the sand. "I said no powers!" Gareth exclaimed as he was now knee-deep in the sinking sand.

"What is the point of having them if I cannot use them!" Alister seethed.

Gareth's eye turned completely silver, and with a snap of his fingers, he was back out of the sand while creating a ripple in the air that threw Alister back.

"Enough!" Alister yelled as he caught his breath. "We have a long day ahead at the races. And if we don't eat now, I might eat a horse later!" His comment made Gareth laugh hysterically.

“Then tomorrow we spar again!” was all that Gareth said.



CHAPTER 6

After breakfast and evaluating the palace guards, Alister and Gareth made their way to the Winchester arena for the opening of the first horse races of the season. As previously arranged, Vincent met Alister and Lord Greyson at the racetracks to show them his thoroughbreds that will be racing. Vincent toured the two men on the updated course and venue where some of the events of the gathering will be taking place as well.

“This is my pride and joy. His name is Punch,” Vincent showed off his racing horse. “He will be in the flat racing event today.”

“Have wagers been taken, in this event already? I am interested in placing one or two,” Alister rubbed at his chin.

“Yes, bets are being taken as we speak. I did not know that his Grace would enjoy placing a wager. We could have begun the tour at the booths,” Vincent chuckled.

“Well let’s head there now, place a few wagers. Have a toast to your horse, and we will be back in time to watch the rest of the races,” Gareth suggested. Gareth took note of Vincent’s similarity to Eliza in appearance. The same fiery auburn hair, and pale skin, but with Nagendra’s green eyes. Just like his father at that age. Gareth swallowed thinking of Klaus.

“Good idea Lord Greyson. The way to the betting booth is through the park. We will meet a large number of your subjects, your Grace. My cousins and a few friends of mine are frolicking about,” Vincent smirked and gestured in the direction for them to start walking.

‘If only Vincent knew whom he was addressing. He might have a minor spasm,’ Gareth laughed internally, noting Vincent’s amusing but nervous energy.

As they strolled through the park, they took notice of the people, some picnicking, and young children playing. The weather was warmer here at the beginning of spring than on Volos. The lush greens and bright colors of spring were evident across the large park. They made their way through the people, many stopped what they were doing as they were pleasantly surprised to see Alister, their prince, out in public amongst them. Hushed voices and whispers began to circulate amongst the crowd of people as they were drawn to him.

Alister knew it won't take long before he would have to stop and greet some of them. He decided to take a moment and broke away from his guards, Gareth and Vincent.

"May Nagendra bless you, your Grace!" one onlooker exclaimed.

"Welcome home, your Grace!" several people shouted and waved.

"Thank you for coming to see us, your Grace!" several people bowed and curtsied as he approached and shook hands with many.

"I thank you all in return. For your loyalty, support, and hard work to bring our Kingdom of Orlean back to its glory. The High King of Drakon will be arriving soon and I am sure he will be pleased with what you have done here. As I am sure you will be pleased to see him as much you are to see me," Alister bowed small to the people that gathered to greet him.

Gareth took note of the many young women congregating, giggling innocently as they tried to get Alister's attention. *'Many beautiful young women here, vying for your attention brother. You sure you wish to settle on just one?'* Gareth linked Alister.

'If they knew who you were, they would be gasping for air right now, and falling at your feet. Besides, there is only one woman whose attention I require. Do you see her yet?' Alister responded.

'In the shade of the large willow tree. Ahead on your left, and Vincent's cousins,' Gareth responded. Gareth noticed Eliza sitting along with Marissa, both girls leaning on each other, while Eliza was reading. He felt a surge in his gut, something wrestling and seething inside of him. *'No, calm down Volos.'* Gareth growled under his breath. He left Alister to his own devices and chose to go directly to the betting booth. *'This girl will not sway my dragon spirit.'*

Vincent approached his cousins and friends, followed closely by Alister and his guards. Marissa peered up from Eliza's book. Her insides coiled, and she heaved a breath as she saw Alister approach. She began to stand up from her seat, but Alister reached his hand out to her to take. He kissed the back of her hand as he tugged her closer to him.

"Your Grace, you honor us all with your presence here today," Marissa smiled warmly meeting his emerald eyes. He let go of her hand, trying to control his immediate urge to kiss her. The last thing he wanted was to lose control of his behavior and embarrass her. The rest of the group all stood up, greeting Alister as they bowed or curtsied.

“I am delighted to see you all as well. I am hoping for a strong win for Vincent’s prized horse, today,” he said as he patted Vincent on his back. While the group began to praise Vincent’s previous wins, Eliza noticed the man they met with Alister the day before walking in the opposite direction from them.

‘You’re the only one I wish to honor, Marissa.’ Marissa’s eyes widened as she realized Alister had linked her. She gulped and a light pink hue appeared on her cheeks. *‘Here I thought it would take more for me to make you blush.’*

She suddenly glared at him and mouthed the word, stop, while placing her hand on her temple. She felt a bit lightheaded. And recalled when Eliza tried to enter her mind the pain she was in for a week. “Are you parched from the heat, your Grace, we are heading to the stands for refreshments. Please won’t you join us?” Marissa batted her lashes, bringing a smirk to Alister’s lips.

“Lead the way, Lady Marissa,” he said as he offered Marissa his arm and then turned to Eliza and offered his other arm to her.

“Your Grace is that not your friend Lord Greyson over there, whom we met yesterday?” Eliza pointed in Gareth’s direction.

“Oh yes, he is heading to the betting booth to place some wagers on Vincent’s horse. He will join us later in the Earl’s private section. I presume. Do either of you often enjoy horse racing?” he asked looking between both women.

“Well as you know in Valance there are no horse racing activities. Though, we had the pleasure to watch the dragon flights when we were younger. That is until the war with Dunne had taken many dragons away from Valance,” Marissa responded with a small frown forming on her lips.

“The dragons are not gone. Just hibernating and hopefully breeding,” he smirked at the end.

“Any insights on some of the planned events for the gathering, your Grace? Anything we should expect?” Eliza posed the questions.

“So many questions cousin. I am sure his Grace has a lot on his mind and won’t just tell us the plans,” Vincent interrupted.

“This is the first gathering for you, am I right?” Alister peered back at Eliza.

“Yes, for us all, as we were much too young for the last gathering in Aketh,” Vincent replied.

They continued their chat as they reached the stands to get refreshments. Eliza and Vincent slipped away to proceed to order for everyone while leaving Marissa in Alister's hold. His firm grip on her hand around his elbow tightened, as he pulled her closer to him. "It's been too long since we last were this close. I do not intend on letting you go this fast."

Marissa peered up at him and whispered in return, "people are staring at us".

"So, let them look. We are not doing anything inappropriate ... not yet anyway," the huskiness of his voice caressed her ear.

"Umm, Mari do you know who those women over there are? Under that blue parasol. They have been staring at us since we arrived at the stands," Eliza interrupted. She was not planning on interrupting Marissa's and Alister's intimate moment, but the sudden unsettling feeling in her gut made her look around, catching the glare of several women not too far away.

Alister glanced in the direction Eliza had nodded and saw his former mistress Laura, with her lady's maid. Her dull brown eyes filled with anger, almost fuming, as she began to walk in their direction. This is not what he needed right now Alister grunted. He turned back to look at his guards and nodded for them to block Laura from approaching them.

“Let’s make our way to the Earl’s private observation booth,” Alister suggested. He narrowed his eyes in thought at Eliza and wondered what made her feel Laura’s gaze, especially as there were many other people already watching them. His guards surrounded them as they walked through the arena.



“Your Grace, my son informed me that you had returned and were joining us today. I was under the impression that you were arriving back to Orlean with the King in a week, or so,” Klaus exclaimed as he and Alister embraced.

“You know how the King can be. Nothing is ever perfect for him. I had to return earlier to finalize a few things,” Alister smiled warmly. “The weight of your experience is still lingering in your eyes, Klaus,” Alister said concerned. His eyes took in Klaus’s face, seeing how much the Earl had aged in the few years since they last had seen each other at the battle in Mercer. His hair greying though the bright red was still evident. His size in some way diminished with his age. “It was a surprise to see Vincent yesterday. He’s changed in these last few years,” he nodded towards Vincent, who was helping Eliza and Marissa and their friends with the seating arrangements. “I was planning on calling on you and your family to join the King and me for a private dinner when he arrives. But Vincent got ahead of me and invited me to join

you at the races. I'm genuinely glad to have returned earlier to enjoy some peace in my home before the rest of the royal families descend on us," Alister chuckled, and Klaus nodded in agreement.

"It is my understanding that King Exian will be holding a traditional Ladon wedding ceremony with his betrothed. After nearly two years of engagement. I thought he would have married her sooner," Klaus stated.

Alister nodded, knowing the circumstance of everything that has happened over the last year. "Yes, Lidiya will be a great Queen of Ladon. She is already doing great work. But I'm sure you understand that with Gareth's loss right around the time of the original wedding date it was difficult for Exian to proceed," Alister exhaled.

"Yes, you are right your Grace. It is very sad indeed to hear of Queen Khali's sudden passing. I do hope his Majesty is up for this gathering," Klaus's eyes once again filled with a deep sadness. His thoughts went back to Gareth. "Let us sit up here. And the women can be free of our political banter." Alister nodded in agreement and smirked as he caught Marissa looking up at him from the seats a few steps below. "Vincent and Ryan, join us up here," Klaus called to his son and nephew. "I was under the impression though your Grace, since you are hosting the gathering here in Orlean ... that we were getting ready to hear an announcement of your engagement. Is

there a lucky young lady we should be looking out to meet during the gathering?” Klaus asked curiously.

Alister hummed inwardly. “I’ll tell you this Klaus. I am ready, but it takes two. She needs to be ready as well.” Klaus shook his head and chuckled at Alister’s words. Alister glanced sideways sneakily at Marissa. His dragon spirit coiling and purring.

Marissa overheard the exchange between Klaus and Alister, while she and Eliza observed the horses being readied for the races. She was surprised by Alister’s confession that he was ready to be married and looked at Eliza for acknowledgment, that she too heard what Alister had said. Eliza shrugged her shoulders and looked out to the path from the garden “Look Marissa, it’s Nicola. Uncle Klaus, may we invite another friend to join us?” Eliza batted her eyes innocently.

“Yes of course. You do not need my permission, just make sure his Grace is comfortable with additional guests,” Klaus replied.

Alister nodded with approval, as he peered out to see whom Eliza was waving to. He was pleasantly surprised by the sight of Lala. He missed her energy but knew well enough she was in Orlean for the gathering, and for Vincent. Their gazes met as she embraced and giggled with Marissa and Eliza. She

smirked at Alister and peered past him at Vincent. The directness of his stare burned within her.

“Your Grace,” she curtsied as Alister approached her. “I had no idea you would be here.”

“It is a surprise to see you too, Nicola,” Alister took her dainty hand and kissed the back of it. “How are your mother and sister? It has been a few months. I hope you are staying out of trouble?” he grinned and she in turn rolled her eyes.

“Your Grace, I am always on my best behavior. My mother and sister are well, thank you for asking. Mother is still setting up our accommodations in Chester. Narcissa has found an acquaintance here in the park that she has not seen in a few years. They are catching up,” she bit down on her lip.

He tsked disapprovingly at her flirtation, low enough only for her to hear. “I am sure the Chester property will suit your family. And the expectant events?” He whispered and she nodded in return. “Enjoy the races ... and try to behave around each other.” He pecked her cheek before returning to his seat beside Klaus and Vincent.

The bells chimed ten times. The first of the races was to begin in 10 minutes.

Nicola took her place beside Marissa and whispered in her ear. “His grace is quite delicious to look at. His perfect chiseled face, those defined cheekbones, his luscious firm lips, mhm yum am I right?” she teased.

“Shh, he will hear you. You’re speaking of him like he is some piece of confection to be devoured. Can you be a little less risqué,” Marissa whispered cautiously.

“Why do you sound so protective suddenly? He would have his way with any one of us if he chose to. Might as well enjoy his presence while we can, before he devours one of us,” Nicola breathed out causing Marissa’s eyes to widen and her face flush.

‘Oh my, protective over me already. Nicola is not wrong you know, but I only want to devour you,’ his voice caressed her mind again. She peeked over her shoulder, taking in the intensity of his emerald eyes as he licked his lips.

She felt a flutter in her abdomen and heat rising up through her body. *‘Why does he keep on being so obnoxiously flirtatious,’* she rolled her eyes at him and turned away.

‘Alister, I’ve placed the wagers. But I will not be joining you. One of your guards will deliver the papers. I see the Earl is there and do not want to risk being exposed. Plus, I’ve met a

dear old friend in the park and will be preoccupied for a little bit with her,’ Gareth linked Alister.

‘Her who?’ Alister questioned him.

‘Narcissa and her young daughter,’ Gareth responded.

‘Oh no, brother, you better behave, or you will draw attention to yourself,’ Alister sighed.

‘She’s with her child. What do you take me for? I had promised to behave today already,’ Gareth chuckled.

Alister grunted inwardly. *‘I will be inviting the Earl and his family for lunch two days from now. To discuss the lands needed for the horse breeding they are in charge of, and possible contracts for the war horses we will need in the south. Will you be present, or should I arrange for another day?’*

Gareth responded. *‘I will be present. Do not let Klaus know I am here. Let it be a surprise. But I will be out of Uther tomorrow. Let me go back to my entertainment brother.’*



The bell chimed one more time.

Everyone throughout the arena stood up and began to cheer as the horses sped off. Vincent and Eliza couldn't contain their individual excitement for Punch to go faster. Alister immediately noticed the way the horse sped up and took the lead as if possessed. He looked between Vincent and Eliza, knowing that he had the power to manipulate wind and earth, but this was something different. An uncontrolled push from an untrained mind. Alister only knew of select royals and Priestesses of Meiji that had the powers of the mind. To naturally be able to mind link one another, see, feel, push and possess a mind and body completely.

The bell chimed again as the winner, Punch, was announced. The crowd cheered, and in the Earls section, everyone celebrated.

"Your Grace," a palace guard approached Alister. "These are from Lord Greyson," the guard handed several betting notes to Alister.

"Let us see how much we all won!" Alister handed the betting notes to each of the people whose names were written on each note.

As he handed a note to Marissa, she looked at him surprised and whispered to him, "I did not place a bet, your Grace."

“You must have, or how else would you have won,” he grinned at her.

“Let us go out to the field to see Punch and congratulate our rider for a well-managed race!” Klaus gestured for Alister to proceed first.

“Go ahead Earl, it is your and Vincent’s win. I am just a spectator. I do have to depart though before the crowds begin to swarm. I hope you will consider my invitation,” Alister said.

“We understand your Grace completely. Though, I may not be able to attend the invitation as I will be meeting my brother at the same time. However, Vincent, Ryan, and surely our lovely ladies will happily take up your invitation. Vincent is an expert now on our work. He can make the final decisions on my behalf. Thank you for today, your Grace” Klaus and Vincent bowed their heads and proceeded out of their section, followed gingerly by Eliza and Ryan.

Alister placed himself between the exit and Marissa and put his hand out nodding for her to take it. “Lala, this note has your sister’s name on it.” He handed the betting note to Nicola with his other hand. “I suggest you bring it to her immediately.”

“Right away your Grace,” Nicola said and quickly left through the exit.

Alister’s gaze remained on Marissa. “How long am I to stand here with my hand out for you to take it, Marissa?”

“Alister, you cannot buy me. You are being inappropriate. People may think I had done something that will question my honor and you are paying me for it,” she huffed at him.

“You are being silly. No one will think something like that. But please look carefully at the note. Because it was not me who placed the bet in your name,” Alister said, annoyance settling across his brow.

Marissa opened the note and there it was. *‘Note granted as a gift to Lady Marissa Katheris on behalf of the purchaser of the betting note...’* her eyes widened as she read and then re-read the name to herself.

“I will tell you this. My brother enjoys bestowing gifts on his subjects. It is not polite to return a gift he makes,” Alister said.

“I do not know what to say. But how did his majesty know who I am, or ... mhm” Marissa squealed in surprise as Alister grabbed her by her waist and pulled her into a kiss. His lips

devoured hers. She pushed him away quickly. “What are you doing? Someone will see.”

“Was I not clear? I do not care who sees. I know you desire me as much as I desire you.” He let go of her waist, sensing her discomfort.

“It’s not that simple Alister,” she sighed.

“It is as simple as you calling me by my first name when we are alone, and not addressing me by my title. I did not expect our situation to be easy. But I expect for you not to reject me, and try my way,” he picked up her hand and gently kissed her palm. His heart pounded loudly in his chest. “I’m expecting to see you in two days in Uther. Do not make me come and take you from the Earl’s estate myself.”

Marissa sucked in her breath, swallowing nervously. “Yes, I will be there,” she said as she got on her toes and stretched her slender long neck to kiss his cheek.

“I have to go before a crowd forms and we get delayed in our travel,” Alister said. “I hope you found time to follow my instructions from my letters, my sweet blossom,” his emerald eyes glowed as Marissa blushed again. “Think of me while we are apart.” He let go of her hand and slowly left with his guards.

Marissa sighed watching him walk through the field.

“So, you and his Grace, I had no idea you even knew each other,” Nicola reappeared by Marissa’s side. “I see why you became suddenly protective. Have you slept with him yet? He’s quite the lover.”

“What! No! You know I never even really kissed a man, well before him that is. Is he always so daunting, and forward?” Marissa asked Nicola.

“More than you can imagine. I have seen him with a few girls in Maskar. His predatory side rears its head if he doesn’t get his way. Please be cautious, he had one mistress, Laura. She is a piece of work, and she doesn’t share. If you ever see her, stay away, and do not let her see or know you are with him,” Nicola warned.

“I understand,” nodded Marissa. They watched the crowd swarm around Vincent and his horse. “So ... you and Vincent?”

“Shh, no one knows. You shouldn’t know either,” Nicola whispered.

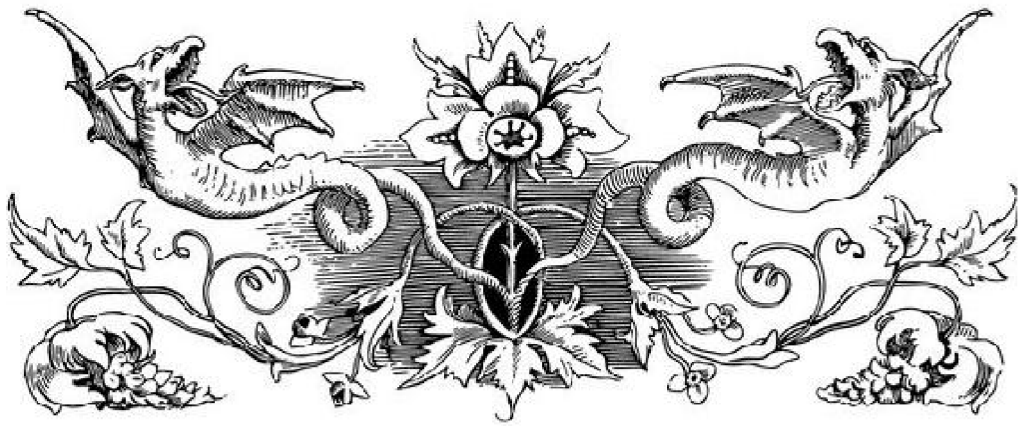
“And whose fault is it, that I walked in on you two?” Marissa nudged Nicola’s shoulder.

Nicola chuckled. “Yours sweet blossom,” she said teasingly. “You know well what I am ... and I am his occasional tryst.”

Marissa shook her head. “Not the way he looks at you. There is more to his feelings. I know it.” Marissa thought of the sweet nickname Alister has called her, which made her heart flutter. “So, I have all of these winnings from the horse race. I am thinking I will need a few more dresses tailored to wear during the events at the gathering. How about tomorrow we meet in Chester and do a little bit of shopping?” Nicola nodded in agreement. “And the rest I am not sure what to do with. Perhaps donate to a charitable cause?” Marissa was still evidently shocked by the gift from the King.

“You heard his Grace. It is not polite to reject a gift,” Nicola stuck her tongue out.

“This is not rejecting, but simply applying it to a cause that would mean something to me and giving others the ability to experience a gift from the King,” Marissa chuckled. “Come on let’s have some champagne.”



CHAPTER 7

The following day, Eliza and Marissa made their way to the bustling market of Chester. Busy street vendors and shops lined the cobbled streets.

“There is Nicola and Mistress Maskar, and is that her niece Leena?” Marissa waved at the women getting out of a carriage near a special dress shop they agreed to meet by.

“I am excited to see what fabrics and prints they have here. Perhaps I will also have them tailor me a dress for my birthday in just a week. I cannot believe I will be 18 soon!” Eliza grinned with excitement.

“I am very excited for you. But how come you do not want a large party?” Marissa asked as they strolled into the shop.

“Well, my uncle and aunt had suggested it. But my parents are only arriving tomorrow and many of our friends and family are still in Valance and Ladon. It would be too much

and unnecessary. All I want is my immediate family and dearest friends. Perhaps a luncheon or dinner, but I still want something beautiful to wear,” Eliza added.

As the women looked through fabrics and samples of dresses, one of the tailors approached Marissa and said, “with your green eyes, and complexion you should wear this dress”. She showed Marissa a sample of a yellow off-the-shoulder dress, with a subtle ruffle at the waist, and bell sleeves. “This dress also has ties in the front. Which can be tightened over the corset and make the dress fit snugly against the torso. Perhaps the lady would like to try it on, and we can make alterations today for you to take home?”

“Very beautiful indeed, can you make this in other colors?” Marissa asked, running her fingers through the delicate fabric of the dress.

“If you want another color in this style, we will need to create a new dress to fit. It can take up to a week to complete unless we have previous demanding orders, which can take a longer time,” the tailor continued.

“Nicola, come and feel the material. It’s so soft and look at the intricate details of the stitching. How beautiful is this dress!” Marissa said, excitement written on her face.

“Perhaps you can wear it tomorrow for your luncheon with his Grace. I’m sure he will swoon seeing you in this,” Nicola said excitedly, and loud enough to have the tailor widen her eyes in surprise.

The shop owner appeared from behind the counter. “My apologies for interrupting, but did you say you were having luncheon with his Grace tomorrow? With Duke of Orlean?” she asked.

“Yes, she is! And so, she will need a gorgeous dress,” Nicola boasted. She was excited for Marissa to experience all that Alister can offer.

“What a coincidence, his Grace had recently ordered some pieces to be made by us. Immensely beautiful and intricate work,” stated the shop owner. “Any friend of his Grace is a friend of mine. Please call me Belinda.”

“Are there any samples of what you are making for his Grace?” asked Eliza. “It would be nice to see what his grace has in mind for the most recent fashions. Especially for all the dress-up and parties that will be happening in the next month.”

“Well though I personally can tailor a good men’s jacket or occasional dress robe, we here specialize in women’s wear only,” Belinda replied. “We already have a few pieces

completed for his Grace's order. Do you wish to see them, so you can have a better idea of what his Grace likes?" asked Belinda while showing the women to another room.

"Oh, wow how beautiful are these dresses? Look at this one Marissa, it is similar to the yellow one we just saw"? Eliza exclaimed. Marissa was evidently in shock, staring at the dresses that supposedly Alister had ordered, but who were they for she wondered.

"This dress is similar but there were a few changes in the designs. As you can see the sleeve is slightly shorter only falling at the elbow. The corset is actually built into the dress. The front ties at the top are easily taken off to reveal the corset right under it. And the corset has front clasps, so the wearer can easily undo the corset herself which will loosen the dress and it can easily slide off. And the material is much lighter and airy, for easy and quick movements. Several of the dresses we designed, have these options. No need to struggle with loosening a back-tied corset or needing another's assistance," Belinda said as she showed off the design features to the girls.

"I really do love the style of this dress. Would you be able to take my measurements and create a similar dress to this one?" Marissa asked.

The tailor proceeded to take Marissa's measurements while the rest continued to look at the sample dresses. After seeing

the measurements, the tailor walked over to Belinda and whispered something no one could hear. “My lady, my apologies but what is your full name?” Belinda asked Marissa.

Marissa peered over her shoulder cautiously at Belinda. “It is Marissa Katheris. But why do you ask, is something wrong with my measurements?” Marissa narrowed her eyes.

“The complete opposite. Your measurements are perfect. So perfect, that all of these dresses designed for his Grace will fit you like a perfect silk glove. The one thing we take pride in is making sure that our dresses are unique and well-made. We also stitch the name of their owner inside the corset. Here, have a look,” Belinda opened up the corset of the dress to reveal Marissa’s name and a flower stitched inside. Marissa’s face was one of disbelief, but no sound came from her. “I do believe his Grace had planned on presenting these dresses to you as gifts. How exciting! And I apologize for revealing any information, though his Grace never said to keep this a secret. Would you like to try on one of the dresses?”

Nicola bumped her shoulder against Marissa’s to snap her out of her thoughts. Marissa blinked a few times. “If his Grace had these created for me. I ... I guess, yes” she paused for a moment, blushing a bit. “Just this sea foam green one for now. But I would like to have another designed in emerald,” Marissa added.

“Absolutely! If you follow me right this way, we can get you properly fitted,” Belinda led Marissa to another room in the back.

“Mother. I know his Grace to be generous with gifts, but this is a bit aggressive and quick,” Nicola whispered to her mother.

“You have spent enough time with Alister, to know his methods. But you are right he has never been this openly generous with gifts for a woman he has a personal interest in. These dresses are extremely expensive. Belinda designs for the royals,” she said. “And from the looks of it, it’s not just the dresses but all the other accessories to go with them. Eliza, I know you and Marissa are close. Has she said anything to you regarding her relationship with his Grace?” Mistress Maskar asked.

“I do not know if it is my place to say anything. I mean there is nothing I can say that you do not already see yourself,” Eliza replied, uncertain if she should reveal how Alister and Marissa met.

“Grandma, can I try on a dress too?” the little voice of Leena came from behind Mistress Maskar’s skirt.

“Oh sweetie, the dresses here are for much taller ladies. I promise after this shop we will go and get you a pretty dress and one for your doll too,” Nicola leaned down and kissed her niece on the forehead.

“I meant to ask earlier. How is your sister Narcissa? We did not get a chance to see her yesterday, and she is not here today either,” asked Eliza.

“She is her brazen self as always. As a matter of fact, she is entertaining her acquaintance whom she met yesterday at the races. I do not recall ever meeting him before, and she wouldn’t introduce him to me when he arrived today. I only peeked through the door in the drawing room as she was serving him tea and mother here pulled me away so that we can leave them alone,” Nicola winked.

“I met him yesterday in the park. He let me sit on his shoulders. I felt like I was flying because he is so tall,” Leena said playfully while twirling around. “He even gave me a gift today before we left,” Leena pulled out a small necklace from around her neck. Holding a small sapphire pendant.

“Leena that is so pretty. Can I see the pendant?” Nicola leaned in to take a closer look.

“Sapphire dragons are intended for protection. It was thoughtful of him to give Leena this charm,” Mistress Maskar said as she inspected the intricate details of one of the dresses designed for Marissa. “He is immensely generous with his close family and friends. I am not surprised though, as his relationship with Narcissa extends since they were teens.”

“Wait mother, you know the man well then? Can you at least tell me his name?” Nicola raised her brows, begging her mother.

“You can call him Lord Greyson for now. Perhaps you will meet him more closely one day, but his patronage to Maskar will remain with your sister,” her mother warned. “He is not easy to handle. Your sister has known him for an extensive period of time and can handle his charisma to a certain extent. Anyone else thus far has had a hard time trying to tame his feral nature, so, do not try anything with him.”

“Lord Greyson? Marissa and I met him a few days ago on the beach near the Chester estate. And he was at the races yesterday with his Grace, but never joined us. Makes sense, he was with your sister,” Eliza furrowed her brow thinking about the man they met at the beach. His long charcoal greying hair and thick, unkempt beard hid his face. Leena was right, he was extremely tall. A giant amongst the men that surrounded him, including his Grace. Eliza felt a sudden ache inside her chest

and burning settling in the pit of her stomach. She heaved a couple of deep breaths before the ache subsided.

“Oh wow, Marissa that dress is spectacular on you!” Nicola exclaimed. “You know what, I think you should wear it tomorrow for the luncheon. Give his Grace a look at what he obviously envisioned you in firsthand.”

“Am I able to take the dress today? If it is not paid for yet, I can pay for it,” Marissa diverted her question to Belinda.

“Yes, you can absolutely take the dress today.” Belinda gave Marissa a reassuring smile. “We will pack this one up shortly with all of the accessories.”

“My friend, I am impressed and frankly a little bit jealous of you,” Nicola giggled. Mistress Maskar glared at Nicola unamused.

“Belinda, I will return tomorrow with my other daughter to have her measurements taken for a few dresses I saw in the shop. Nicola I’m going to take Leena to the toy shop across the way. Let’s meet there.”

“Eliza, have you found anything you like?” asked Marissa.

“Yes, this beautiful silver silk fabric, and this deep burgundy velvet. And I have an idea in mind for a design for them both,” Eliza answered as she followed one of the tailors to get measured and fitted.

Marissa looked at herself in the mirror her thoughts went to Alister. *‘How long ago did you send the request for all of this to be made for me? Did you know I would be in Orlean for the gathering beforehand?’* she questioned. *‘In his letters, he did not hide that he thinks of me often. And I too, feel ... feel strongly for him. I yearned to be in his arms all of these months. But he has not made his intentions public. And he has not spoken with my parents. Unless ... he really thinks that I would just be his mistress. That he would just be satisfied with letting our dragon spirits mate and nothing else. Tomorrow I will, once and for all, clarify that I am not going to be his mistress. If he wants me to be in his life then he needs to do something more appropriate and respectful ... to be with just me.’*



After spending the afternoon shopping, Eliza and Marissa returned to the Chester estate. Marissa was surprised by the arrival of her stepmother, Sandra, earlier than expected.

“Sandra, how... I was not expecting you here in Chester. I was under the impression that I was to meet you and father in

Uther at the end of the week?” Marissa furrowed her brow.

“Yes, that was what we had discussed last month before you left for Chester. However, your father had returned unexpectedly a week ago from his business trip abroad and had to leave once again for Ladon,” Sandra began to say.

“Undoubtfully to see my half-siblings, again. He surely has been spending more time and effort with them these last few years,” Marissa shook her head thinking about her father, Nathaniel, and his continuous absence.

“Do not be so derisive! They are your half-siblings, from his first marriage. You are still young, and they are already grown. Your half-brother’s wife had just given birth, and your half-sister Ermina ... well how do I tell you this? We have received incredible news! Ermina is engaged to be married to a great lord from abroad. Your father does not wish to give any other details. However, her husband-to-be has requested the family to arrive so we can all celebrate together as soon as possible. Your half-brother will remain in Ladon as his wife had just given birth,” Sandra said cheerfully.

“What about the gathering? I thought we made arrangements for us to stay in Uther and be present for all the events for the month of the royal gathering. Are you saying we are not going to be here?” Marissa’s face crumbled and her eyes welled up.

“Please do not be sad. We will be sailing from the port in Uther five days from now. That is why I have come as early as I could. I made arrangements for us to stay with Magistrate Orson and his family in the center of the capitol. We do not want to burden the Earl and his family with our presence. We will leave tomorrow morning and spend some time seeing the city,” Sandra said as she held out her arms to embrace Marissa, herself pouting.

Marissa was shaken by the news. Tears streamed down her face, but she nodded reluctantly. After some time packing up a few of her belongings, Marissa opened up to her stepmother regarding her meeting with Alister. From the beach, the time spent at the race, and his invitation to have lunch at the palace the following day. Marissa trusted Sandra, much more than her own father as she raised her since infancy.

“Has he given you any reason or thought that there is more to his feelings for you? I understand that you may feel confused as he has not made any official claims about his intentions for you. Is this why you are sad?” Sandra cocked her head as she braided Marissa’s hair.

“Well, I’m sad because this would have been my first gathering as I am of age to participate now. But mostly I feel regret because I will not be able to see Alister during this time. I do not understand why, why we cannot wait to leave after the

gathering. Please can you write to father asking for us to wait till after the gathering?” Marissa sniffled, confusion and sadness mixed on her face. Sandra wiped at Marissa’s tears, cradling her face in between her hands.

“There is no time to write to your father. The ship we need to be on leaves in five days. What we can do is, tomorrow morning we will travel to the capital. I will remain with Magistrate Orson, and you can meet with your friends at the palace. I’m sure you wish to give your news on your own, and say your goodbyes,” Sandra sighed, feeling awful for Marissa.

“Why does the way you said ‘*say your goodbyes*’ sound like we are not just going for celebrations? What are you not telling me? Are we leaving Drakon?” Marissa stared intently at her stepmother. Sandra pressed her lips into a thin line, worry appeared across her face. Marissa shook her head getting up slowly from the chair. “No ... no ...” she choked on her tears as she ran out of her room to see Eliza.

When she burst into Eliza’s room, she paused noticing the room was dark. The fireplace was out and only one candle burned on the corner desk. She glanced around the room till she finally saw Eliza’s silhouette near the patio doors. Marissa approached Eliza calling out her name, but Eliza did not move or acknowledge her. Marissa slightly shook Eliza and suddenly her body slumped forward. Marissa caught her in her arms and pulled her up to stand.

“What just happened? How long was I standing here?” Eliza felt a cold shiver run through her body. Marissa helped her walk to her bed.

“Are you alright? What happened?” Marissa asked worriedly.

“I’m alright now, but not entirely sure what happened,” Eliza said still gasping for air. She calmed down and then cocked her head to the side staring at Marissa. “What happened? Were you crying?” Eliza furrowed her brow. Marissa sat down on the floor by the bed and told Eliza the news of her departure from Drakon.

“How can that be? I do not understand it. Is there anything that can be done? Perhaps I will speak to my father tomorrow night to have him write to your father requesting for you to stay with us. To ... I don’t know ... I cannot lose you, Marissa!” Eliza exclaimed.

“I feel like I’m a doll. Everyone is playing with me and for what purpose? My father thinks he can just move me around like a chess piece. My stepmother wants to dress me up and keep me like a precious stone statue, and Alister is probably toying with my thoughts and feelings. I’m just like this doll on the floor.” Marissa picked up a small stuffed doll on the floor by the bed. As she handed it to Eliza, she realized the doll had

no face, just two small jewels sawn on it, one over the heart and the other on the forehead.

“You have not told me the rest of the story between you and Alister. I hope he did not continue to try and take advantage of your vulnerability when we met him at the races?” Eliza tried making light of the situation.

“Vulnerability? All we did was kiss but it was completely innocent,” Marissa sighed. “I get butterflies in my stomach when I see him in person and when I re-read his letters, they are so beautiful ... even the naughty parts,” she blushed while Eliza laughed. “Ugh. I do not know what has come over me, but I cannot stop thinking about him. I ... I do not want to lose him,” Marissa looked at the doll now laying on the nightstand. “Is this a prayer doll, the type you can use to pray for someone in need through telepathy?” Marissa wondered.

“Not necessarily the same but has a similar idea. I haven’t been completely honest with you. Well, more or less I wasn’t able to share this with you, or anyone frankly. But I must tell you,” Eliza slumped on the bed.

Marissa got up from the floor and lay down beside Eliza. “Another secret!” she said smirking.

Eliza nodded a bit nervously. “While I was with my aunt in Ladon about a year ago, a priestess of Meiji visited me,” Eliza whispered. Marissa’s eyes widened as she sat back up. “I know! I’m still surprised as you are now. You know how much I wish to join the Meiji,” Eliza sighed and leaned her head on Marissa’s shoulder. “The priestess told me that the Meiji have been watching my growth and are proud of what I am capable of. However, I still have ways to go in developing and protecting my mind. She gave me this doll and challenged me to find my dragon spirit soulmate using my mind to enter my mate’s dreams or memories. She said she knows that my dragon spirit is dormant, but she had personally blessed me when I was just a babe. She suggested that whoever he is, he must be closed off, or not wanting of a mate. She then said that the only way to get whoever he is, to react or to even consider me is to put myself in his mind and open it to me. She gave me this doll and a few incantations. I have been doing this a day or two a week since,” Eliza tensed.

Marissa was silent for a moment trying to understand everything Eliza was explaining. “And do you think this is working? Can you tell at the very least who the man is?” Marissa said, happily thinking about her friend’s potential future.

“Well at first the dreams were completely dark. I could only see waves of mist or shadow. I would put myself in his dreams, but I never saw him or where we were. The other

suggestion from the priestess was to use an incantation that would show a possible future between us, something intimate. We are mates after all. And recently I have seen myself in a bedroom, a very regal one too. I've only seen his shadow the first few times then another few times he was lying beside me, or he was standing up facing away, but at no point did I see his face. Though I know or at least I think he senses me. And well right before you found me, I was starting an incantation when suddenly I felt like I was pulled or summoned into a daydream. I heard a voice calling me and suddenly I was on a beach. I saw two boys playing, one very young with light blonde hair and the other looked like he must have been close to my brother's age, mid-teens. He had shoulder-length, raven-black hair and was extremely tall for a teen boy. The one with the raven hair then stopped playing with the other boy and walked in my direction. He looked directly at me and said *'what are you doing in my memories? Leave this instant!'* His eyes were the most magnificent iridescent silver steel and then suddenly they were set ablaze, like charcoal burning. He snapped his fingers and then I felt like I was thrown. I ended up in the same bedroom as my previous dreams and heard the same voice calling me. And then you woke me up."

"Wow, this is intense. How do you feel when you do the incantations and push your mind into his?" asked Marissa.

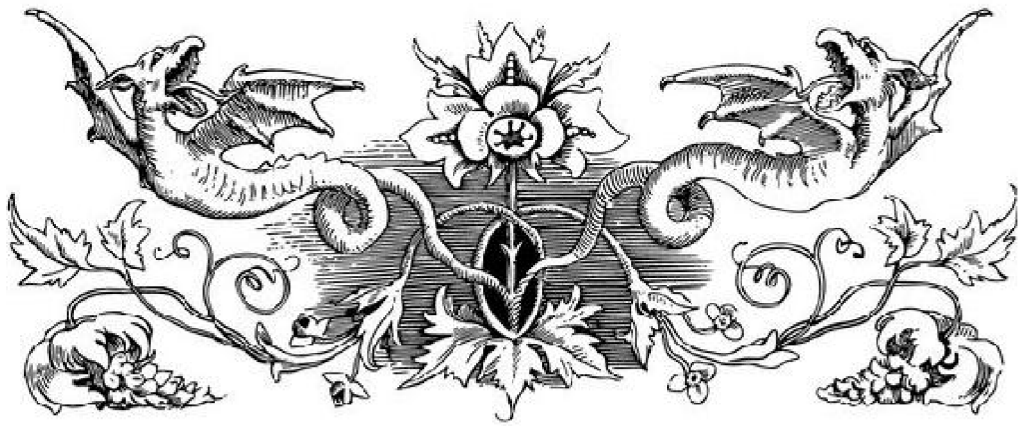
"I don't feel anything really. I can feel his mind perhaps resisting me, pushing me away. He has immense power but

connecting to him has been fairly easy. It is as if our minds work well together.” Eliza looked up at Marissa. “His face, at that young age is well-defined. I feel as though I have seen it somewhere, but I do not know where. I guess I’ll be dreaming of him tonight,” Eliza sighed as she fell back on the pillow.

“Will Nicola join us tomorrow for the luncheon or is it just going to be the two of us with Vincent and Ryan?” Eliza asked.

“No, Nicola will not join us. Especially now that we have to depart to Uther tomorrow with my stepmother and our things. I will have to arrange something before I leave so we three can spend a final day together.” Marissa sighed as she wrapped herself up in Eliza’s blanket and began to cry once more.

Eliza patted Marissa’s head, “it will be alright. We will figure something out. I think you will need to tell Alister tomorrow about this.” Eliza consoled her friend before they both fell asleep.



CHAPTER 8

The day barely broke as Eliza, Marissa, and her stepmother readied for their travel to the city of Uther. They rode in a carriage accompanied by Vincent, Ryan, and the Earl's guards till they reached the capital. Marissa eagerly moved about the carriage, taking in the sight of the neatly lined up homes in varying shades of earthy colors. Some had overgrown vines and fauna sprouting all around them. Rows of shops and galleries showcasing their goods, periodically popped up as they continued through the city toward the capitol's center.

Magistrate Orson's home was situated near the heart of the bustling port of Uther, and the financial and government buildings. The man himself, a bit stocky and bolding, appeared outside of the gates to his home. He welcomed Sandra as if they had known each other for many years while ordering his servants to unload the carriage swiftly. Sandra had encouraged Marissa to go freely to the luncheon with her friends and Alister at the palace of Uther, and not wait for her. She did not want to interfere nor hold Marissa back from spending her last

days in the company of her friends. She had hoped that by the time Nathaniel arrived, Alister will have made his intentions known and Marissa would make the right decision for her future.

The palace itself lay on an enormous territory. Abundant in lavish gardens of diverse flora, lush greenery, a wisteria tree-lined forest, and a large open park on the southern territory near the main route. When the carriage neared the large open gates, Eliza and Marissa were in awe of the carved statue of Nagendra wrapped in her favorite flowers and vines. As they continued down the tree-lined road, a large guest mansion took them by surprise.

“That mansion, many centuries ago, was the original palace until the territory was expanded and the previous princes of Orlean build the enormous palace. It’s a masterpiece,” Vincent explained. “It is still in use if there are events and multiple guests being hosted.”

Marissa’s skin prickled with excitement. She had been eager to see the Kingdom where her birth mother had come from. To learn about Nagendra, the earthly dragon goddess, and how this place will all impact her abilities. Her insides practically purred, calling out to the surroundings in recognition. She wanted to get out of the carriage and just run barefoot through the green grass. Marissa thought of Alister and his abilities. How he had bloomed a seed into a bouquet of tulips for her.

The way air brushed against her with the swift movement of his hand, pushing her into his arms. And the vines, those wicked vines tugging at her dress during her stroll with him in the tulip gardens of the golden palace of Valance. She had hoped that Alister would allow her to spend some time on the grounds of Uther palace in the few days she has remaining. This was Nagendra's home, her essence, her spirit, and her blood run deep here.

Once they reached the front south entrance of the sprawling palace, they saw Alister and several servants waiting outside to greet them. Marissa took in his appearance, a fitted green jacket with gold embroidery, a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, and fitted black trousers leaving little space to the imagination were accompanied by knee-length black boots with gold buckles. She swallowed as she realized he was watching each of her movements as she stepped out of the carriage.

“Welcome, to my home,” Alister greeted, as Ryan and Vincent got off their horses, bowing to Alister. He laughed inwardly as he noticed Marissa's seafoam green dress, the one Belinda had informed him of, that she had given to Marissa. It was perfection on her as it fell snugly against her torso. Showing off her bare shoulders, her figure, and revealing her long slender neck that he wanted to caress and nibble on. Her golden blonde hair was half up in a crown braid, and the rest fell freely down her back. *My sweet blossom. You are*

stunning,’ his words caressed her mind, bringing a natural flush to her cheeks.

“I wanted to start your day here with a tour, but I am sure after your long journey you might be hungry. We will have a light lunch now in one of the gardens. Afterward, we can tour the grounds and parts of the palace. And Vincent we will make time to go over the plans and some ideas I have as well.” Alister looked at his staff. “This is Chares, the head of the palace. He will lead us through today’s plan.”

Eliza walked up between her brother and cousin, wrapping her hands around each of their elbows. “You can both be my escorts,” she looked back at Marissa and winked.

Before Marissa could acknowledge what Eliza had done, Alister was already at her side. He took her hand in his, kissing the back of it before he pulled her closer to him. “I’ve missed your touch. I will need all of it for me today,” he whispered before planting a quick kiss on her cheek.

Marissa craned her slender neck up at him, her green eyes giving him the answer he was looking for. “I’ve missed you too, Alister, but please promise you will behave yourself.”

“I don’t make promises when I know I have no interest in keeping them,” he grinned as he tightened his hold on her

hand. Her brows arched in surprise as he tugged her to walk close beside him. They made small talk regarding Nagendra's earthly gifts and the very soil they stood on. She observed around them as some of the flowers, tree branches, and vines would reach for Alister's hand or shoulder, all trying to touch him. He would caress some with the tips of his fingers while hushing the rest of the plants to sleep.

They continued their talk regarding the education of those born of dragon blood, whose abilities may be dormant and will need proper tutelage to develop their skills. She had opened up to him in their letters about her struggle with her own abilities. And though he had given her advice, she felt she still needed a real in-depth understanding of her strengths and weaknesses.

“Perhaps, you can accompany me to the libraries on the Isle of Volos, the next time I travel back. But first, during the gathering, there will be many members of the Brotherhood and the Meiji present. I'll suggest to the King to have them hold several sessions for those who wish to understand their needs and better their skill sets,” Alister said.

“You believe the King would do that?” she tried sounding enthusiastic, knowing that she would be gone before this happens. *‘How do I tell him that in a few days I will be leaving Drakon for another continent,’* she sighed to herself. “I was thinking about using the generous gift his majesty bestowed on me at the races to donate to a charitable cause. Perhaps

opening a school for those in need of understanding their abilities, to learn how to use them, for Drakon's growth and protection. What do you think?" she asked biting her lip nervously.

Alister paused their walk and stared at Marissa. A soft smile appeared on his face, "it would be a proud day for me when you succeed in your endeavor. I would support your idea. Though, you will need a lot more capital and investment to run a school or more. Perhaps even boast skilled men and women of the Brotherhood and Meiji to educate the younger generation. You will need to come up with complete details, and I can help you with that, before presenting this idea in full capacity to the King."

Marissa suddenly blushed. "I didn't realize how much work it would take to do this. Your help will be greatly appreciated." His gaze upon her burned her from within, leaving her slightly breathless.

"Greyson, I see you have chosen to accept my invitation to the luncheon." Alister turned his attention to Gareth who had his hands folded behind his back as he patiently waited by the oval table set in the small garden. He nodded, keeping up pretenses. He dressed as casually as possible as well, a grey velvet waistcoat over a black long-sleeve shirt, and pants, with a pair of dark round spectacles to cover his eyes. His charcoal grey hair had some small braids pulled behind his ears, and his

heavy beard shielded his face from recognition. “Lord Greyson is an advisor on matters of political nature. He could even give us some sound advice on the idea Marissa has been thinking about.”

Alister pulled a chair out for Marissa, while Vincent did the same for Eliza. Gareth on the other hand kept his distance as far as possible from where Eliza sat. Taking a seat beside Marissa, Alister explained her idea to them. “What do you all think?” he asked, as the servants plated their food and poured them wine.

“I believe that all should have the ability to pursue learning and practicing their skills if they are born with them. My sister and I have private tutors who educate us at our home in Valance. But it would be phenomenal if there was a school where more of us can learn together,” said Ryan with enthusiasm. “It is sort of the same ... I guess ... when we are sent to Aketh to train.”

“But that is only the male nobles and royals,” Eliza chimed in.

Gareth rolled his eyes behind his tinted glasses. Taking slow breaths to calm his whirling dragon spirit which has been unsettled the moment he saw Eliza. “I think this idea needs more development. But it is a worthy discussion. Marques ... being the fact that you are a son of Duke Polignac of Valance,

what ability has the dragon goddess Tanit blessed you with?" asked Gareth

"Well, our bloodlines are mixed. Myself, I am learning to harness the power of water, and my control of navigating through the sea terrane. Our maternal side of the family is of Ladon and Volos blood, and our paternal side is of Tanit," Ryan explained. "And my sister has great skills with her mind, or enlightenment, as the Meiji call it." He turned and looked at Eliza with an encouraging smile. "One day the Meiji will invite her to join them, and she will become a Meiji priestess."

"To become a priestess, you must have a high aptitude for the use of your mind. A telepath or a seer of a sort. Which one are you?" Gareth's curiosity got the best of his need to stay away. He wanted to know how she managed to put herself continuously in his dreams.

"My brother is over exaggerating, I am still learning and harnessing the skills," answered Eliza, ducking her head innocently. Her eyes traveled across the table, looking at the man that has been rather aggressive in his questioning. There was something apprehensive about him. His guarded demeanor and tensed body surprised her when Alister was the complete opposite, relaxed. *'I wonder what Narcissa knows about this Lord Greyson, as he spent the last two afternoons with her.'* Eliza glanced back at Gareth. They continued to eat

and chat freely. Gareth let down a bit of his guard around Vincent as they conversed about his father, Klaus.

Eliza laughed at a joke her brother had mentioned. The soothing qualities of her tone alerted Gareth. His dragon spirit was at complete attention and purring. *'A Siren? ... For fucking sake, Goddess Tiamat why? Am I not to have peace?'*

Feeling a burning sensation settle in the pit of her stomach, Eliza reached for water but suddenly felt lightheaded and began to cough.

With everyone's eyes suddenly on Eliza, Alister took the moment to caress Marissa's leg from her knee to her thigh over the soft fabric of her dress. He left his hand resting on her upper thigh, squeezing a bit. Marissa glanced over her shoulder at him. Seeing his mischievous grin, she shook her head at him in disapproval and slightly pushed his hand away only for him to grab hold of her hand.

"Eliza?" Vincent observed her breathing constrict. "Are you alright cousin? Perhaps you need water or even to lay down," he suggested.

After regaining her breathing, Eliza shook her head. "I think I ate too quickly, and some food went down the wrong part of my throat. Perhaps a fresh walk in the gardens would do," she

suggested, hoping Marissa would agree to go with her. Something bothered her, an anxiousness settled in the pit of her stomach. She felt pressure being exuded on her body and mind.

“If you wish to take a walk on the grounds, I have an idea,” Gareth suggested. “For one of the events at the gathering, his Grace had a maze built in the west garden near the lake. It can make for a refreshing walk through it.”

Alister glanced back at Gareth with eyes wide. “I didn’t think you knew of it?”

Gareth smirked. “It is my job to know these things, I believe.”

“The only issue I see is you will all then no doubtfully know the workings of the maze and may use that to win the event. I want to be fair to the rest of the guests that will be participating,” Alister said to the group.

Vincent rubbed his chin in thought. “What if everyone currently here agrees not to participate in the actual event so we can see the maze now? I think the only thing that may hold us back is the prize for winning the event,” he chuckled.

Gareth smirked. The prizes for winning the events were curated appropriately and were valuable. “Well, perhaps his Grace can ask the High King when he arrives, to reward you all for participating today. No need for a single winner, everyone will be a winner that completes the maze today,” Gareth suggested, watching Eliza fan herself.

Alister chuckled crossing his arms against his chest. “I do hope his Majesty will humor me in such a large request and be generous with his gifts. I will make sure you will all be rewarded, even if he doesn’t agree in the end. So, to the maze then?” Alister said excitedly as he got up. Everyone agreed eagerly, as they followed Charles toward the west garden. Marissa took Eliza’s hand and walked beside Charles, listening to him talk about the creation of the west garden. Alister and Gareth fell back a bit, watching the group from the back.

‘I can tell it was you who made Eliza choke. Was that necessary for you to play with her life?’ Alister linked Gareth.

‘She didn’t die, did she? And it gave a good reason to take a walk to the maze. Is that not what you planned to do? To have alone time with Marissa?’ Gareth responded.

Alister stopped in his tracks, staring worriedly at Gareth and then at Eliza ahead of them. *‘I am confused, brother. I know you wouldn’t intentionally hurt an innocent girl. What did she do to earn your anger?’* he asked.

Gareth looked at Alister sideways with a smirk. *'She invaded my dreams and memories. And is pre-occupying my mind day and night, when I need to focus on more important things.'*

Alister's eyes went wide in surprise. *'You're saying it's her. The one in your dreams? ... Well, this is interesting.'*

Gareth nodded as they caught up to the others. Once they reached the maze entrance, Charles left them to Gareth's instructions.

“Here we are! These few open spaces in the twenty-foot hedges are the entrance into the maze. The rules here are simple. We each will enter the maze through any of these entrances. Do not be surprised if a hedge closes immediately behind you. Take the next entrance or wait for the original to reopen. The maze has some tricks and surprises. A path may close behind you but do not worry, as a new one will open in the pathway ahead. The hedges have a mind of their own and can grow swiftly so move quickly through the open path. At some point we may all end up together on the same path, or perhaps not. And just a suggestion, do not try to break through the hedges,” Gareth explained.

“Where is the exit?” Eliza voiced.

“That is a secret,” Alister chuckled.

They each began to enter the open paths. Gareth was first, followed by Vincent. Ryan walked in with Eliza hesitantly, their entrance immediately closed up behind them. Marissa was about to step into the next open entrance when Alister grabbed her by her wrist and pulled her back against him. He stretched out his hand and all the openings immediately closed up.

“Why did you do that?” Marissa asked startled. Alister did not bother to answer but pulled her in tight against his body and crashed his lips against hers. She tried to push him away, but his grip only tightened around her. “Mhm,” a startled moan escaped her lips against his mouth.

“Stop pushing me away. I already told you I want all of your touch, for me and me alone,” he whispered into her ear right before he tugged on her ear lobe with his teeth. He trailed soft kisses under her ear, along her jawline, up her cheek, and back toward her lips.

“Someone will see! Alister, please, you’re setting my insides ablaze... mhm” Marissa pleaded with him.

“Then I should take you where you can cool off and no eyes will touch us but I can promise that I will not stop touching

you,” he said as one of his hands trailed down from her back to her butt.

Marissa’s eyes widened in surprise. “I know what you want, and I told you before that I’m not the type of girl that will easily splay her legs for a man’s affection. I would rather let my dragon spirit be one with me and me alone than for me to be looked at as anyone’s mistress,” her green eyes showing her unwavering stance.

Alister shook his head. “You are more, much more to me than that. Do you not understand? I only want you, no one else but you.” He pulled away from her trying to read her as she was seemingly unmoving.

“That still doesn’t mean that I am ready and willing to give you my virginity right now,” she said gauging his reaction.

But all he did was smile and say, “I know that, and I wouldn’t want you to do so right now either. I am willing to wait for you, till the time is right.” He caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers, leaning in close to her lips, he whispered. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy other intimacies and pleasures of our bodies. I wouldn’t want you to faint on me from ecstasy if we do everything on your first time.”

Marissa's eyes rose up to meet his, and her mouth opened from the shock of hearing his words. Alister took the opportunity to kiss her, slipping his tongue inside her mouth. Surprising him, Marissa wrapped her arms around his neck and let her tongue caress his in return. They stayed like that for some time until they both needed to catch their breaths from the headiness of their fervent mouths.

“Let me have a taste of you. Let me touch you, the way no one ever has ... and no one outside of me ever will,” he whispered. She bit her lip, before nodding a bit hesitantly. “Come with me, while we can still be alone.” He waited for her nod of agreement before he took her hand and lead her away from the maze.



The maze seemed to come to life the moment they stepped into it. The flowers and leaves on the twenty-foot-tall hedges shriveled up the moment Vincent went to touch any of them. Thick vines, instead, pulled out from the ground wrapping thickly and growing high up. Metal spikes peered out in random spots at the tops of the hedges, arching into the pathway.

“I wonder what these are for?” asked Vincent peering up at the metal spikes.

“They are here to prevent you from climbing up to see the path out,” Gareth obliged with an answer.

“That’s ridiculous, and should be grounds for disqualification,” Vincent said.

“The only thing in the rules is to find your way out the fastest, and no using abilities. So, people will try to climb up. But his Grace wanted to make it difficult,” Gareth chuckled.

A path opened from Gareth’s left and Eliza and Ryan walked through it. “I guess we have rejoined each other. All that is left is for his Grace and Marissa to find their paths to us ... or us to them,” Vincent furrowed his brow.

They continued to walk through the paths of the maze admiring its ethereal beauty. There were statues, small fountains, and bushels of flowers along the winding paths. As Vincent and Ryan crossed an open pathway it suddenly closed up behind them, leaving Eliza alone with Gareth slowly trailing behind her.

“Another path must be open further up than,” she said hoping Lord Greyson would know the way to go. “I wonder why we haven’t met Marissa and his Grace yet.”

“I think you know the answer to that. They are not in the maze,” he said loud enough for her to stop in her tracks.

“What do you mean? Where would they be?” she looked back at him puzzled.

“You don’t need to pretend you do not already know of your friend and his Grace’s relationship. It was her he wanted to spend his time with today. Besides, it wouldn’t make sense for him to enter his own creation. Each leaf, each branch, each flower, and even the grass you’re walking on would automatically open the path to him to anywhere he wished to go without him even batting an eyelash,” he said straight forward.

Eliza rolled her eyes. The gull of this man to be so forward. “How well do you know his Grace, Lord Greyson?” Eliza finally got the courage to ask.

“Extremely well, since he was a young boy. Why do you ask?” Gareth couldn’t help to want to know her reasoning.

“It is just apparent that you both are great friends, but he is still the prince of this land. And you, Lord Greyson, keep taking charge of all conversations and decision-making. I wonder how his Grace feels about this,” Eliza pointed out.

“As any good leader would, I should think proud of his friend.” Eliza looked confused by Gareth’s answer. Gareth smirked and decided to give her a more detailed explanation. “Think of it like this. How would you feel if your dear friend Marissa marries our Duke, or prince of this land that is? You would be proud of her elevation in status, I am sure of that. But would that change your relationship with her? Better yet, do you think this would change her relationship with let’s say Nicola Maskar?” he cocked his head, arms crossed in front of him.

Eliza couldn’t read his facial expression as he still wore the dark glasses covering his eyes. He continued, “Imagine the future Duchess, or princess, is hosting a luncheon for all her friends. Her new friends will now be Queens and princesses of Drakon, and here is Nicola with her free spirit. Should Marissa end her friendship with Nicola for Marissa’s newfound status, or should Marissa encourage her new friends to be open-minded and accepting of differences?” Gareth posed the question.

Eliza furrowed her brow at first, thinking that was a ridiculous question. “Well, it is obvious that Nicola has mannerisms that may not be accepted by many nobles, publicly. But Marissa should not disapprove of her friends who were with her from her childhood to gain approval of those whom she only befriended due to marriage,” Eliza crossed her arms, taking a firm stance. “So, to understand your

point, his Grace would never disapprove of your behavior because he values your friendship above status.”

“We are who we were born to be. And we must accept that in every person our paths cross as well,” he said.

“I see. I thought you did not know Nicola, but only her elder sister, Narcissa?” Eliza allowed her curiosity to take over.

“I met Nicola many years ago when she was just a young girl. But her behavior was the same then as it is now, at least that is how her sister sees it,” he responded.

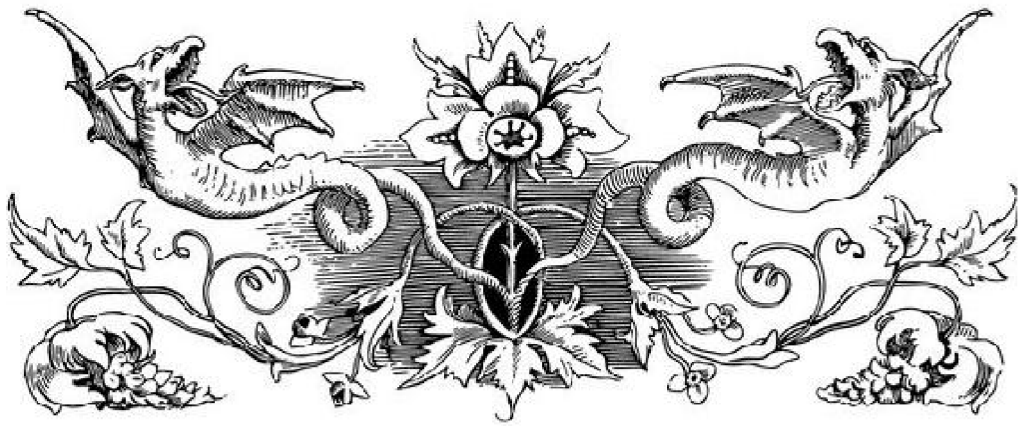
“Oh, interesting as Nicola is under the impression that she has never met you,” Eliza pointed out.

‘That’s because she met me as the crown prince and future King of Drakon, not as Lord Greyson’, he laughed inwardly. “You cannot expect a young girl to remember one of her sister’s lovers, which she met in passing a few times.”

Eliza’s eyes widened and her mouth hung open slightly. *‘This man is shameless and completely full of himself,’* she thought. Eliza’s breathing shortened as heat settled in her abdomen like something coiling and tugging on her very insides. She pulled a handkerchief out of her dress pocket and dabbed at her face and neck.

“Are you feeling any better or do you wish to leave the maze?” Gareth asked.

“I should really find my brother and cousin before leaving them behind in the maze,” she said while using her handkerchief to wave air on her face. She knew she felt stifled, but she did not understand what was provoking her to feel this way. They continued to walk, Gareth keeping a distance of several feet behind.



CHAPTER 9

“Was this your plan all along?” Marissa said as Alister led her toward a large gazebo, with closed shutters. He squeezed her hand gently before bringing it up to his lips.

“It was,” he breathed out against the back of her hand. “Greyson knows me well enough to have suggested the maze tour. So, we can have some alone time.”

When they entered the gazebo, she noticed several small lanterns burning and giving the space a soft light. There were tulip petals sprawled across the wooden floor, a small table with a wine decanter, two crystal chalices, and a single chaise lounge in red suede.

“Were you planning on seducing me here, as well?” she smirked while arching an eyebrow at him.

He licked his lips as his eyes traveled across her entire silhouette. “You’re not being fair,” he murmured as he tugged

her closer to him.

“How so?” she said. He spun her around, pressing her back to his front.

“You can seduce me, by wearing that dress. But all I want is a simple taste of you,” he whispered the last part. Alister wrapped his arms around her waist and placed his chin on her bare shoulder, taking in her scent. He breathed it in slowly as his lips found their way to her neck, softly gliding down and along the side of her shoulder. She shuddered and a soft sigh escaped her lips. “Mhm,” he responded with his own as he spun her to face him, pulling the loose part of her hair tightly back for her to crane her neck up. “This throat of yours. What I wouldn’t do to immerse myself in it.” He wet his lips again and slid them along her throat down her collarbone. “Relax,” he whispered as he sat her on the chaise. “A glass of wine?” he asked, and she nodded in response, their eyes lingered on one another before he turned toward the small table.

He took off his jacket, dropping it on a chair before he poured them both wine. When he turned back to look at her, she was moving her hand and fingers in a circular motion over the petals on the floor. He watched her intently use her ability as she pulled the petals together to reform the flowers they were once, creating a large full bouquet of pink tulips. He sat down next to her, offering her a glass of wine.

“Beautiful, just beautiful,” his emerald eyes were almost glowing. “The dress you are wearing I must say is stunning on you. I guess I have an extravagant taste. Did you know Belinda has been a royal designer for a long time and she hand stitches the name of the owner of each dress somewhere inside?” He swirled the wine glass, before taking a sip.

“Yes, Belinda is quite knowledgeable. She even showed me where the name is stitched. To my surprise, it was my name that was stitched into this dress. This is a kind gift Alister,” Marissa decided to play along with him.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it. And I’m going to have to see your name in that dress for myself,” he winked at her. “Have you ... done anything I had suggested in my letters?” A blush crept up her cheeks as she took a sip of the wine. “I’ll take your blushing as a yes.” He swallowed, his eyes giving way to his menacing thoughts. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Alister!” she turned to him with eyes wide like a doe. His gaze set on the vein in her neck, watching it pulse. She bit her lip. “You won’t do something I’m not ready for?”

He smiled at her question. “I promise I will try to only bring you pleasure but don’t faint on me,” he gave her a wink, settling both of their glasses on the ground by the bouquet of tulips, right before he dipped a finger into the remaining wine.

He pulled her onto his lap and slowly traced his moist finger along her neck down to her collarbone. She breathed in the scent of the wine now on her skin. As he suddenly slid his tongue along that spot to the valley between the exposed part of her breasts. With a swift movement, he pinned her down to the chaise. She let out a surprised squeak. Unsure of what to do next, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to her. “Kiss me,” she whispered. Their lips met and Alister indulged her with his persistent tongue and mouth, keeping her preoccupied as he untied the front of her dress and loosened the clasps of the corset.

Marissa’s breathing hitched. “Alister, wait ...” but he had already shifted lower, his mouth nipping on one of her exposed breasts while slowly tracing his hand over the other.

‘Don’t be shy my sweet blossom, let me play with what is mine.’ His voice came through with an authoritative demand. She nodded, giving him permission as he peered at her. He took her nipple in between his lips while taunting and pinching the other. His tongue, clever and brazen, caressed and flicked it over and over till heat radiated through her body. Marissa let out a moan, grasping his hair and the back of his shoulder. He continued to play with her other nipple, enjoying how erect they both had become for him.

“Alister!” she cried out, feeling a hand trace along her side, yanking up her dress skirt.

“I want to know ... show me how you pleased yourself. What my instructions led you to,” he nearly panted the words. It’s been months since he has last seen her under the guise of intimacy, which there was little of, to begin with. Let alone, his oath of abstinence from the moment she claimed him. To wait for her until she is ready to be marked by him. She nodded, biting her lip, as she pulled up the skirt further, exposing her legs up to her thighs. His eyes moved along with her fingers as they gently traced along her hips to her inner thighs. A nervousness settled in the pit of her stomach. His eyes, those emerald globes, were focused solely on her hand as she pulled at her panties. Never did she think he would ask her to be this open and show him what a mess he created in her.

Her aroused scent hit him like a giant dragon paw. Alister let out a short grunt, licking his lips. His eyes still focused on her fingers, now rubbing and circling her clit. “Perfection.” A small moan escaped her lips. He could swear he heard her call out his name again. His hands grasped at either side of her thighs and pulled her closer to him. “If you moan out my name one more time,” he warned. “I promise I will not be able to hold myself back from claiming you as mine.” His hand cupped her sex over her wet panties before he pulled her hand away. Feeling the moisture, he took her fingers into his mouth. Her taste, her scent, and her arousal made his insides purr with satisfaction. She was his, and he wasn’t letting her go. His

mouth went back to playing with her taut nipples while his fingers explored her swollen clit.

“Alister please ...” she squeaked out again, as something twitched and pulled at her core. Her body trembled from the pressure, convulsing and dripping out of her.

“Cum on my fingers. Bloom for me my sweet blossom,” his words nudging her to grasp at him. To release her aching build-up. She caught her breath, trying to steady her racing heart while her body subsided from her orgasm. “You didn’t faint. This wasn’t so bad, was it?” he said. She bit her lip, her eyes glowing a soft green. “I don’t want to stop. Your arousal is delicious. I want more of this,” he sighed as he buried his face between her breasts. “But we have to,” his voice now muffled, which made her giggle.

He lifted up his head suddenly, narrowing his eyes as he turned to look at the closed entrance to the gazebo. “Seems like some of the other guests have found the exit and are making their way out of the maze soon. We may have to end the fun ... for now. Let me help you with your corset.” He stood up and her gaze landed directly on his bulge straining against his fitted pants. He was not hiding how aroused he had become.

“Does that hurt you?” she asked. He looked down and adjusted himself.

“A bit, but I can handle it. Just need a few minutes to decompose,” he grinned.



After helping Marissa fix her dress, Alister asked her to wait a few minutes for him to return before he stepped out of the gazebo. He made his way back towards the maze and watched as Eliza and Gareth emerged first. “And the winner is Eliza. I think you have to come up with a magnanimous idea for a prize that we will solicit from the King. Perhaps a beautiful diamond necklace or maybe a tiara,” he smirked at Gareth who already rolled his eyes and flared his nostrils in return.

“Thank you, your Grace, but that won’t be necessary. It was with Lord Greyson’s help that we found the exit, he deserves the prize. It was just mere luck for me to be by his side,” Eliza was humbled by the thoughtfulness to be considered as a winner.

“Thank you for your honesty, I know his majesty will reward you nonetheless...” Alister was interrupted by his guard and Charles approaching. His guard had whispered something to him which made his face change to one of furious urgency.

“Is everything alright your Grace?” Gareth asked concerned.

“Nothing of worry. I have to attend to an urgent matter. Lady Eliza your friend is in the gazebo just beyond those trees. Please see to her. And Greyson can you take everyone inside for some refreshments in the piano room, I will return shortly.” Alister turned and walked swiftly with the guard.

“I will wait for the viscount and your brother. Once they emerge, I will come to collect you at the gazebo,” Gareth called out as he watched Eliza walk towards the area. With only Charles nearby, Gareth cautiously looked at the maze wall in front of him and snapped his fingers. A ripple from his snap pushed at the tall hedge, opening back the exit.

“Wow, that was so unexpected. I thought we would be searching a lot longer,” Ryan laughed as he and Vincent walked through the opening.

“Viscount, his Grace will meet us inside the palace to discuss your proposal. Please allow Charles to show you the way, and I will gather the ladies in the meantime,” Gareth turned and walked in the opposite direction.

As Gareth approached the gazebo, he focused his mind to hear inside.

“What do I do? How do I tell him about my father’s plan?”
Gareth heard Marissa say.

“You need to tell him. You need to tell him before we leave today. Do not drag it out. Imagine he finds out you are leaving the continent from someone else. He may not forgive you for keeping this from him. And do you really want to go? I can sense how much you care for him,” Eliza consoled her friend.

“I ... I ... I love him. B-but I do not know w-what to say and I’m afraid he may n-not feel exactly the same for me,” Gareth heard the nervous stutter in Marissa’s voice. “You haven’t told me about the maze. Are you feeling better?” Marissa tried changing the subject.

“It was a bit confusing in the beginning. But the walk was nice, beautiful and serene. At first, I was with my brother and then we all met on the same path. And afterward, we were separated so I was with Lord Greyson. It appears he has a close friendship with his Grace. He knew you two were not in the maze. He even suggested that his Grace may have planned for us to go into the maze so he can have some alone time with you. I hope he was a gentleman,” Eliza giggled.

“A perfect gentleman as always,” Marissa sighed.

“Oh, wait you have something on your neck. Let me get my handkerchief to wipe it off,” Eliza said searching her pocket for it. “Hmm, strange it’s not in my pocket, I must have misplaced it in the maze,” Eliza said frowning as she searched her other pockets and then inside her sleeves.

“I have mine, here, help me clean off whatever it is,” said Marissa as she handed Eliza her handkerchief.

“So, you actually weren’t nervous speaking with Lord Greyson. He has a distinct persona, dominant almost, doesn’t he? I wonder if his relationship with Narcissa is a serious one,” Marissa asked.

“I can’t say he is serious about her, especially when he shamelessly called himself one of her lovers. A nobleman of status should know better than to speak of women in a shameless way, even if she is a Mistress of Maskar,” Eliza shook her head as she spoke.

Gareth chuckled while listening in on their conversation. He knocked on the open door before calling to them. “If you are ready, we can head back to the palace.”



Marissa and Eliza followed Gareth back to the palace through the gardens. Marissa stayed quiet while taking in the different

sights and the abundance of plants she has never seen. She had an aching feeling as if she was being watched. The flowers, the leaves of the trees, and the tall grass swayed back and forth, leaning in toward her. Some of the closed hydrangeas opened up as she placed her hand over them, and some vines began to follow her, twisting all around. She paused for a mere second and looked back at all the greenery sensing them. She put up her index finger to her lips and whispered “shhh, go back to sleep.” She was in disbelief that the plants were reacting to her presence. This has not happened to her before, but she has read that once she is ready to harness her ability, she would be able to control and understand the plants more.

In the palace, Charles began the tour starting in the piano room. “This is the grand piano room. As you can see there are several types of organs, monochords, clavichords, and more modern pianos decorating the room. All surrounding this beautiful grand piano, made of jade and crystal. This piano has been in the royal family of Orlean for centuries. It is said that the keys are made of a bone from Nagendra’s skeleton herself. It is one of the old artifacts created after the passing of the great dragon Nagendra. It was kept preserved in the royal vaults but for the gathering, the High King has made the decision to show it to everyone.” Charles continued to tour the group through the enormous room, stopping at an onyx piano. He enjoyed telling the history of the palace, the old artifacts, and the story of the dragons.

“It is my understanding that all the royal family members enjoy music. Have you heard any of them play?” Marissa enquired.

“Many of them are extremely talented,” he replied, his eyes traveling to Gareth. “The King does play the piano eloquently. I believe this onyx piano is one of his favorites. As you should know in the past, many centuries now, to calm a raging dragon you must sing to it. Though it is rare to find any wild dragons these days, the royal bloodline is naturally filled with talented kings and queens who can soothe a wild dragon with just a song,” answered Charles.

The servants proceeded to serve refreshments to the group as Charles continued to tell the history of the palace.

‘Where are you, brother?’ Gareth mind linked Alister.

‘The small library. I need a favor. Can you have Charles bring Vincent to the office on the north end? I need to finish up the contracts for the ranches and the war horses needed for the army in Aketh,’ Alister replied.

‘What am I a footman now? I can finish the contracts myself. I think you need to talk to Marissa. There is something you may need to know, and it will be hard for her to tell you so be patient and listen,’ Gareth replied.

'Fine, I'm sending an actual footman to bring her to me,'
Alister grunted in return.

'What happened earlier?' Gareth asked.

'If it's not by the sword then women will be the death of me, brother,' Alister snorted.

Gareth laughed internally, turning his attention to the footman that arrived in the room. Gareth approached Marissa and directed her to follow the footman.

“Viscount if you will follow me to the north end offices, the contracts have been readied for us to review. And Charles, you may continue the tour. We will reconvene in the art gallery shortly,” Gareth said and walked with Vincent out of the Piano room.

Marissa followed a footman to a small library just down the hallway from where they were. She wondered what happened, why she was summoned to this room, and where was Alister. When she entered the room, she saw Alister sitting on a sofa with a small mirror in front of him while holding a wet cloth to his lip. A maid was tending to a small cut on his eyebrow.

“Alister, what happened? When ... who did this to you?”
Marissa ran over to him worriedly. “I’ll take over, please leave

the bowl on the table,” she said to the maid as she sat down beside him.

Alister grabbed her hand before she could tend to the cut. “You don’t need to do this. I’ll be fine. It will heal on its own shortly.”

She pulled her hand out of his grip. “Alister please let me help you,” her eyes glistened with worry. The side of his lip pulled up into a sincere smile and he nodded for her to continue. Alister then waved for the maid and the footman to leave them alone. *‘Women, one wants to kill me, and one wants to care for me,’* Alister sighed at his thoughts.

“What has happened Alister, honestly? Are you going to tell me?” she frowned, putting pressure on the cut. The swelling on his lip was gone almost instantly.

“The truth is not something you will like. But for us to have trust we must be honest with one another,” he looked at her wondering what her reaction would be, as she nodded in agreement with him. “I know you are not naïve, and you know I have been with ... plenty of women. Some claimed to be my mistresses, but truthfully, I only had one mistress. All others were just minor entertainment on the road to you,” he gauged her reaction while holding onto her free hand. Her eyes widened though she was not surprised. “The truth is that my former mistress is a very possessive woman. And even though

we ended things more than a year ago, she is still pursuing me. She has been made aware that she will no longer have room in my life, nor any contact further, and she came here today to show me that she can still impact me and hold me in some way hostage ... She threatened to take the life of the woman that she thinks replaced her, and in turn, she threatened to take her own life so that I wouldn't have her either," he continued to tell Marissa the events of earlier.

"Alister, what did you do?" she asked, her heart pounding almost in her throat.

"I told her if she ever steps foot near the palace, or comes near me and ... and my mate ... I will kill her," he tightened his hold on Marissa's hand as he felt her shift nervously. "She tried to harm herself with a knife she was wielding. And when I pulled the knife out of her hand, she attacked me and what you see on my face is the result of that."

Marissa's eyes widened and an unsettling feeling crept over her face. She didn't understand at that moment if she was terrified because he was injured or because of how easily he disregarded a woman that has been in his life for years. A woman he clearly had feelings for beforehand.

"I can see you are questioning everything by the look in your eyes. Tell me what has crossed your mind," Alister did

not want her to be involved in this past drama but swore to protect Marissa from it.

“I’m not sure what I’m feeling right now. I knew you’ve had relations, and this is not why I’m hurt. I’m not sure if it’s because it pains me to see you harmed or the thought of how easily your feelings for another were dismissed, and how easily you moved on. I ... I,” she didn’t know how to best express her turmoil.

“When my brother’s wife passed away, I saw a man grieve over a woman he never trusted, never cherished, and never loved. Yes, he cared for her, but he often said he did not see a future with her. They did not have children, and he maintained all of his relationships with his various mistresses throughout his entire marriage. I realized that I do not want my life to be like his, forced to marry without an ounce of love. What I want is a woman that will be all my own, and I will give her all of me. Honesty, loyalty, and love,” Alister said, caressing Marissa’s cheek.

“Since we are being honest, I have to tell you something before it’s too late,” she glanced at him uneasily. “In a few days, my stepmother and I are departing Uther to meet my father. My half-sister is engaged to be married and her husband to be, has requested for us all to gather to celebrate.”

Alistar narrowed his eyes in confusion. “When will you return? The gathering begins in a few days, and I need you here by my side.”

“Alistar, I’m not sure of anything. I do not think we will be returning,” Marissa mumbled averting her gaze. Her eyes rimmed with tears, and she got up from the sofa. She walked towards the fireplace, twisting her hands in front of her. *‘I can’t have him see me like this,’* she breathed out.

“How long have you known about this?” he asked, as he got up and closed the distance between them.

“My stepmother arrived yesterday at the Earl’s estate and told me then,” she was quietly sobbing unable to look at him.

“I see. And what is it that you want?” he looked at her intently, needing to hear her say it. His insides fuming in anger, *‘She is not leaving me, ever!’* was the only thought screaming across his mind.

“It’s not that simple. If I do not go, my father will see it as if I’m disobeying him. He has already been a distant father and will most definitely disown me. Then I am left with nothing and no family. But if I go then my heart will never be the same,” she turned and looked at him through her wet eyelashes, not knowing how to tell him how she feels.

“Then it is settled you are staying here with me. A heart cannot easily be mended but materialistic things can always be replaced. As far as family, there is the one you are born into and there is the one you create for yourself out of love,” he pulled her into his arms. “I think I’ve said this several times to you already. You’re mine. And if you think I’m just easily going to let you leave, you are mistaken. You might as well get comfortable right now, as I’m not letting you leave tonight either.”

“Alister, sometimes you are easy going and sometimes you spark up and become overbearing. You know well enough that even being in your arms right now I am allowing my reputation to be tainted. What would people say and think if I just stay here with you ... alone, with no family, and nothing official,” she sighed.

“You should only ever worry about what you think, and not what others think. And I think you are afraid to tell me how you feel, though I already know,” he eased the tension in his eyes from earlier. There was a longing in hers and he wanted to ease it with his own truth. “Marissa, I love you. That is how I truly feel.”

A pink hue appeared across her cheeks as she felt her heart skip. “I love you too, Alister,” her heart just poured out the words without hesitation.

“It is settled then, I will have Charles and a maid, and my guards go pick up anything you need from your belongings while we pick out your rooms. And as far as the King is concerned, I’m sure it will be in his interest to make sure I do not as you say taint you before we can make everything official.”

Marissa narrowed her eyes at his words. “Let me have a few days with my stepmother, to explain things, and I will return to you. We have honesty and love between us, trust is what we are working on. Please trust that I am not running away from you,” she said.

He glanced at her with thought. “I will give you the rest of today and tomorrow. Then I will personally come and get you,” he breathed out and leaned in to capture her lips with his. “You’ve tamed this Dragon with just a touch,” he whispered against her lips, continuing to kiss her gently.



In the north wing offices of the palace, Gareth and Vincent discussed the contracts for the staggering amount of war horses, and the lands needed to raise and train new horses from foal hood.

“Great, 100 destriers, and the other 500 coursers we will split between the borders of Dunne Valley with Valance and

Aketh armies,” Gareth wrote the clause into the contract.

“This is magnificent. To be able to provide the Drakon armies with horses to protect our borders will be long work. Has his Grace mentioned anything regarding expansion for the lands needed to raise more horses?” Vincent asked.

“Yes, right here. The Anders lands near the border of Orlean and Fernier would be an ideal place for the heavier breeds. King Furrier might be a bit troublesome in sharing some pieces of land, but he knows if the high king wills it he must oblige,” Gareth snickered.

The door to the office opened and Alister walked in. Gareth stared questionably at Alister’s face, seeing the bruising under his lip and the small cut on his eyebrow that was healing quickly. “I see you have started without me.”

“I hope, your Grace, that whoever did that was properly punished,” Gareth raised a brow. “And is everything settled with ... ?”

“She rejoined her friends on Charle’s tour of one of the galleries,” Alister interrupted. “Where are we with the contracts? Let’s not get distracted from the point of today’s meeting.” Alister could have stayed with Marissa and let Gareth finish the contracts. However, he needed to clear his

mind from the earlier incident with his former mistress Laura and having Marissa nearby only made him yearn for her touch even more.

In the art galleries, Charles was touring Ryan, Eliza, and Marissa through the different art pieces and sculptures.

“These different pieces here were created by Prince Onri of Valance. They are called ‘All the Kings Horses.’ As you can see this sculpture here is of King Gareth’s current war stallion a charcoal war horse named Lutz. Gorgeous horse, he is a free spirit but always finds himself where he is needed.” Charles then walked them to several large paintings. “Here is a depiction of his Grace Alister and King Exian at the different battles against Dunne goblin forces three years ago, riding on their stallions.”

“Look at the beautiful blue-like coloring of King Exian’s stallion. What kind is this?” asked Marissa.

“It’s called blue roan. It’s not really blue but the shades from the hairs and how they grow, make the horse coat coloring look blue,” Ryan chimed. “Vincent has been showing me the different breeds and the different characteristics they can have.”

“Very well said, Marques. As you may know, Ladon is the home of the sapphire sea serpent, encompassing the power of water. So, a blue shade to honor the dragon Ladon is in everything in the daily lives of the people of Ladon. And so, the King’s horse is a shade of blue as well. A horse breeder must be well versed in Ladon to make sure the king and his cavalry have distinct horses,” Charles continued while walking towards a painting Eliza’s gaze was fixated on.

“Charles, do you know who this is in the painting?” she asked curiously. The face of the young boy depicted seemed familiar, but she couldn’t pinpoint where she had seen it before. He had raven black hair, a strong jawline, and high cheekbones but she couldn’t see the color of his eyes from the distance where she stood.

“Oh, what is this painting doing out and uncovered? It’s part of a new collection by Prince Onri that he will debut at the gathering, this collection is called ‘Dragon Blood’. But since it’s out yes, I can tell you a little bit about it. It is one of the first paintings completed by prince Onri when he was just a young boy of age eight. This one is of young King Gareth when he was just a teenage prince who returned from his training in Aketh. Here he is leaning on the great protector of Drakon, Finnigan.” Charles kept speaking about the painting and the dragon while Eliza took in every detail. She had never seen the King or even a painting of the King before, but she felt like she had met someone that looks like the young

depiction of King Gareth. *'Who was it though and where?'* she stared in confusion.

“Are there other paintings of the King here? More recent paintings? I do not recall ever meeting the king or seeing a current painting,” Ryan crossed his arms against his chest.

“Well of course there are other paintings of him, but actually the last painting he sat for was with his late wife Queen Khali for their wedding. So, six years or so ago. Though we are under strict rules not to show any recent paintings as they are for the gathering and the art shows Prince Onri, and his Grace will be holding.” Charles smiled politely but internally he was laughing. *'What a surprise they will have once they know that Lord Greyson is really the King himself.'*

“It must be with heavy heart his Majesty is making this trip and the gathering appearance. It is extremely sad to hear that his wife had passed away. And they had no children. He must be still in pain. My heart feels for him,” Marissa spoke, not realizing that Gareth, Alister, and Vincent had entered the gallery behind them and heard what she had said.

Gareth looked over at Alister and nodded for him to interject. “On behalf of my brother, thank you for your words, Marissa. He would be glad to know he is thought of during this difficult time.” She gave him a shy smile as she and Eliza curtsied. “But it has been more than a year now, and this

gathering would do well for him. To be around family, friends, and the people that love and respect him,” Alister gave Gareth a side-eye. “And Eliza, your cousin Vincent here has told me that your birthday is coming up in a few short days. 18th birthday as well, I would be happy to host a celebration here at the palace if you wish,” Alister grinned, knowingly wanting to annoy Gareth.

‘I’m not agreeing to this,’ Gareth linked Alister.

‘I’m not asking for permission, brother,’ he replied teasingly.

“Your Grace it’s an honor to just be thought of, but I would never impose on you. Thank you for your kind offer but it’s not a decision that can be made so quickly and without my family. Perhaps we can do another luncheon on another day and ... or you can visit us at the Earl’s estate,” Eliza peered down shyly. It was not in her nature to accept generous gifts but to be offered multiple gifts in one day startled her. She has always been the one to give and care for others. Her way was the Meiji way. She wanted so much to become a priestess in service of the dragon goddess Tiamat.

“Think of my offer, for now, you have a few days to decide. I am also sure your friend,” Alister pointed his chin at Marissa. “Would very much like to see you for your birthday. So, something will need to be arranged.” Eliza furrowed her

eyebrows at Marissa. They haven't had a chance to speak privately yet since Marissa returned from seeing Alister.

After they finished up the tour of the gallery, it was time for them to depart.

“Your grace, we want to thank you for your hospitality, the wonderful tour of the grounds, and the prospect of a continued relationship with our family and our work. I know we will see each other soon, if not before the gathering, then definitely during,” bowed Vincent. “We will be leaving shortly as we have a long trip back and do not wish to return late past nightfall,” Vincent looked to his cousins and Marissa as they nodded in return.

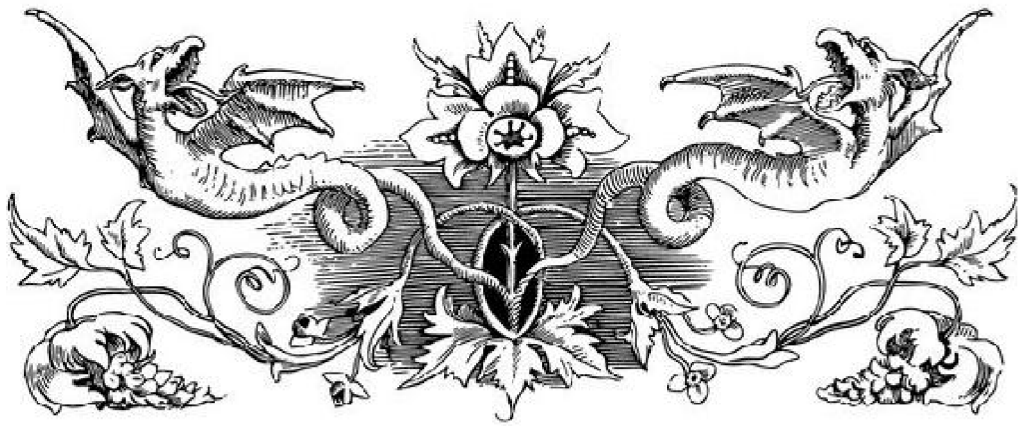
The group walked to the entrance of the palace where the horses and the carriage were waiting for them. Gareth shook Vincent's hand. “The contracts will be signed by the King very soon. But I can confidently say he will agree to the terms we settled on.”

“That will be wonderful. Thank you, Lord Greyson, for your assistance and knowledge today, it is an honor to learn from you,” Vincent bowed small.

Alister helped Marissa and Eliza into the carriage one by one. As Marissa was the last to get in, he held her hand firmly

kissing it. “If you want me to come to pick you up sooner, please let me know, I will be there.” She mouthed the words ‘I love you.’ He took a deep breath and put two fingers over his heart as he let go of her hand.

The flutter of butterflies returned to her stomach. *‘This man I love, loves me the same, and we will be together soon.’*



CHAPTER 10

Once the carriage cleared the palace grounds Eliza grabbed Marissa's hand excitedly. "Okay, tell me what happened. I mean I kind of understand that you two had an intimate time in the gazebo. But what happened afterward, and did you talk to him about you leaving?"

Marissa took a deep breath and the smile on her face widened. "I am so happy. My heart is going to burst, I think! We spoke about everything and ... And he loves me. He really loves me."

"That is amazing! But what's going on with the other issue?" Eliza asked with a concerned tone.

"He is sending a messenger to my father with my stepmother and the ship, letting him know that I will not be leaving and will remain here in Drakon. And in two days he is coming to get me. He wanted me to stay tonight but I had to convince him that I cannot just run away from my stepmother

and out of everyone I owe her the most, a proper explanation,” Marissa said gingerly.

“Wow. How do you think your father will react?” Eliza questioned.

“I do not know. But something Alister said that has struck me. There is a family you are born into and a family you create for yourself out of love. And I want to create a family with Alister, a family that will have love, and most of all we will be in each other’s lives. My father has been in and out of my life for many years. He is never home, always away on business. My half siblings were raised by their mother mostly and all the way in Ladon. And my stepmother raised me. I never knew my birth mother as she died when I was pretty much a few months old. I was lucky you can say that when my father remarried, Sandra was unable to have children, and having me in her life gave her a child of her own to raise. I owe her more than anyone. I hope when I tell her, she will decide to stay with me,” Marissa bit her lower lip nervously.

“You will always be my sister, my family. I cannot wait to celebrate you and Alister during the gathering. I can hear the wedding bells already,” the girls hugged tightly and laughed.

After leaving Marissa at the Magistrate’s home, Eliza, Vincent, Ryan, and the Earl’s guards made their way back to Chester. Once they returned to the estate Eliza had excused

herself to her room, feigning being tired and wanting to rest. During her ride back to Chester she kept on trying to pinpoint where she had seen the face of the teenage boy that looked like the depiction of the young King Gareth in the painting. She thought back to her daydream of the boy that told her to leave his memory. He had the same hair color and length. The same jawline and the same build. It dawned on her, that he had silver steel eyes, and in the painting, she couldn't see the King's eyes because the shine from the silver made them look iridescent and colorless. *'It couldn't possibly be the King himself,'* she thought. *'The King is much older, and is married, or ... well a widower now.'* She frowned at the thought. She recalled that she has never seen the face of the man whose dreams she pushed herself into. He was always a shadow or a blur, or she would see his naked torso lying beside her in bed but when she went to look at his face the dream would dissipate.

'There is only one way to find out. I have to try to push myself into his memory again. If it is truly him then I must end this. No good can come from lingering in the King's mind. He is able to control and torture anything and anyone at a whim. He will not be forgiving if he realizes who I am and what I have done,' goosebumps crawled across her skin. She picked up the doll and began to recite the incantation, envisioning the painting she had seen earlier in the day.

She opened her eyes and found herself sitting on a swing in a garden filled with white tulips. She looked around and saw not too far away the champagne-colored walls of the Golden Palace of the Sun. *'I'm in Valance ... the palace at Aureate city, where Prince Onri resides. Why am I here?'* she thought.

“Who are you and what are you doing on my swing?” a cheerful voice of a young boy startled her enough to fall backward on her butt off the swing. She stood up, quickly fixing herself, and tying the ties of her robe. Eliza peered at the boy, noticing his wavy dirty blonde hair with streaks of white, and his golden eyes staring at her.

“My apologies. I’m not sure what I am doing here. Can you help me find my way out?” she smiled at the boy innocently.

“My name is Onri, what is yours?” the boy cocked his head playfully, his smile was wide.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Prince Onri. I am Eliza. And a loyal subject of Valance,” she said.

“Oh, then you are welcome to be here. All my subjects are welcome here. I’m on my way to sketch my brother and his favorite dragon. Do you want to watch?” he asked her playfully. Eliza felt bright energy surrounding him.

“Of course, I will come to watch you sketch. I just know what a wonderful artist you will become one day soon. But I didn’t know you had a brother?” she questioned.

“Well, Gareth is not my blood brother. But we are all descendants of the great Asterot’s and Tiamat’s bloodlines. The same ancient dragon blood runs through our veins. We are raised together as a family. A family we created to keep the people of Drakon safe from Samael and the goblins of Dunne. Come this way,” he waved her on to follow him.

When they reached a large clearing, she gasped when she saw several dragons of varying sizes grazing amongst the fields of tulips and peonies. “How are there so many dragons here? I’ve lived in Valance all of my life and I have only seen the gold dragon Bash, and a handful of others from Fernier?” she asked Onri in amazement, as he furrowed his brow.

“We can’t let the dragons just roam anywhere they are still wild at heart. They will become restless and may cause trouble without guidance. And it is peaceful here for them,” Onri laughed.

Eliza nodded in understanding and looked back at the grazing dragons. A large charcoal grey dragon with elongated horns and sharp spikes across his chest and back had stood up. He cocked his head and narrowed his stainless-steel grey eyes at her, letting out a low grunt. He turned his head and looked

behind him, made a tiresome sound, and lay back down. A young teen boy appeared from the side of where the dragon was looking.

“Gareth!! I’m ready to sketch!” Onri yelled out excitedly, waving a hand while holding a sketchbook and pencils in the other.

“Come Onri. You can start with Finnigan, and I’ll join in a few minutes,” Gareth called to Onri while his gaze was directed at Eliza.

The shock was the least of Eliza’s worries at that moment. She watched Gareth raise his right hand up and close it into a fist. His voice, still young, growled in her mind. *‘Do not move. Do not speak till I tell you to, Eliza.’* She felt her body stiffen, and her lips pressed tightly together, immobile.

As Onri ran past Gareth to set up his sketching station, he then finally walked forward to her. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from him. *‘He has to be the same age as my brother here,’* she thought. His raven black hair hung loosely at his nape. His face was smooth, chiseled with high cheekbones, and handsome. She was surprised by how tall he was, broad-shouldered and lean.

“How dare you come into another one of my memories!” he roared at her. “What did you not understand the last time? Do you want me to hurt you? Do you know what you had done this time? You have me and Onri, and even the Dragons dreaming this memory right now, but now you’re in it. Changing our memory of this day, affecting and infecting both my brother’s and my mind with your presence. They will remember you now. They will remember this day this way, and not how it was. How can I forgive you this time? I thought I would let it go after the beach memory you invaded with Alister. I thought you would know that a mind should not go through this. I was okay with your presence in my dreams, the adventure you created for our minds to coexist in the future. A future that is but a dream, not a reality. But this goes beyond the point of those fucking dreams,” he continued to berate her.

Eliza stood still, unable to speak or make a single sound, as he held her mind and body captive with his. Her eyes began to glaze over, and tears undulated across her cheeks. Gareth paused his beratement and watched her tears slide. His insides rumbled with annoyance. “Please, I can’t look at you right now. I thought that when we finally meet out in the world, we at the very least can be friends. You have a strong mind, and your abilities are admirable. I could have helped you, taught you to become an even stronger telepath. But right now, I am very disappointed. Please, do not pursue me,” his tone shifted from one of anger to one of sheer disappointment. He leaned in closer to her face. Taking in her scent. “What do you want

of me?” he said as he wiped away a few tears from her cheek. His insides murmured, purring. He closed his eyes and sighed. “All the good things in my life are now memories. All I have left, and you have invaded them ... Just ... What are you doing to me, Eliza?” he leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Please go. Do not return again. I release you.”

Eliza opened her eyes and took a deep breath. She must have slept-walked while in the trance, as she was now lying on the balcony floor of her room.

‘He already knows who I am, who I really am,’ a soft sob came from her. *‘I did not know it was you I was pursuing, my King. I swear I will no longer come into your dreams. I am ending this now and forever. Please forgive me,’* Eliza sobbed into her hands.



In the palace at Uther, Gareth lay in the bath under the water. As soon as Eliza disappeared from his memory, he opened his eyes and sat up heaving his breath. He got out and walked to one of the mirrors. Drenched and leaving slick footprints behind him, he glared into the mirror. Her voice, a sweet melodic caress across his mind, murmured, asking for his forgiveness.

“What are you doing to me, Eliza?” His insides scolded, burning, and a growl escaped his mouth. “Hush. We’ve been through this. You do not need to have a mate my dragon spirit. I do not want to waste another woman’s life. I do not wish to fall in love or be loved in return. I do not need it ... I ...” he shook his head, clutching at his chest as his heart pounded fast. “I do not want this Volos. Do not pursue her and her spirit.”

Gareth stumbled fully naked back into his bedroom. Restless and confused. He stopped, staring at the same maid from the night before standing by his bed. She curtsied before she loosened her robe to reveal her supple naked body.

“Get the fuck out!” he growled, his eyes glowing with feral intent. “And you can tell all the rest of the women working in the palace, if they enter my personal space without my permission, it will be their heads. I do what I want, on my time. Now leave!” Gareth glared at the woman. She trembled as she bowed, apologized, and left his bedroom quickly.

After downing, a glass of fragrant cognac he walked to his bed and picked up a handkerchief off of his pillow. The embroidery was delicate, tulips stitched in gold, and initials that read E.P. He brought the handkerchief up to his nose to take in the scent. *‘Peony, blushing, aromatic, and beguiling soft little flowers ... Just like you ... Eliza,’* his insides hummed with blissful desire. “Are our dragon spirits truly mates? I ... I must know the truth of it. But first, sweet siren, I

need to punish you.” He lay down on the bed with the handkerchief over his eyes. ‘*Eliza ... Eliza*’ he searched for her mind, calling out to her mind and spirit. ‘*I will see you in my dreams...*’ a wicked smile spread across his lips.

Eliza’s mind couldn’t stop dwelling on the facts. The Meiji priestess that had appeared to her had encouraged her to do this. To push her mind into this man’s dreams. To waken his spirit and to plant herself in his mind for months. ‘*And for what?*’ she thought. ‘*I don’t believe it. Do the Meiji think that our High King of Drakon is my dragon spirit’s mate, my soulmate? That’s not possible. He ... he will kill me for doing this,*’ she continued to rub her temples as she still sat on the balcony floor.

After getting ready for bed, Eliza’s eyes were on the doll again. “I will never come into your dreams, my king. Please forgive me,” she whispered before she heard a humming in her head, and her name being called.

Eliza jerked and her eyes opened. ‘*I don’t recall getting into bed. What, where am I? Who said my name?*’ Her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the room. And she realized she was in a room that she has never seen before. Her ears perked up as she heard light breathing beside her. She looked over her shoulder and she saw a young man curled up near her, his hair covering part of his face and his eyes were closed. She shifted, slowly getting out of bed, her eyes squinting at the

surroundings. But then she heard him shift and say, “how does it feel to wake up in an unknown room beside a person you do not know?”

She stumbled as she got up quickly and backed away from the bed, pulling the blanket with her. Her heart pounded, her throat tightened, and she felt a spark ignite within her. The young man stalked toward her, getting out of bed quickly. Eliza observed that he was almost naked, only wearing silk shorts synched below his waist with a drawstring. Her eyes widened and she backed up even more. He was towering over her, his hair falling below his broad shoulders, his chest, his body, sculpted and muscular, tapering off into a perfect point toward his ... ‘*Oh, no*’ she looked away. The silk fabric did nothing to hide the sheer size of his cock as it draped snugly against him.

He chuckled, watching her look away. “And I am not even hard, vixen. But I do feel your dragon spirit’s heat rising. She wants this, and she will burn you to pieces if you do not give her something to calm her. Come here and let me soothe the burn,” his tone was mischievous.

“Who are you?” she asked as she continued to back up while holding the blanket against her body trying to cover her thin nightdress. The young man snapped his fingers and some of the candles in the room lit up. She finally was able to see

his face in detail. Her brows rose up and her eyes widened with surprise.

“Y-your majesty?” she tensed. He was slightly older than she had just seen him.

“How is this possible you’re thinking? I am a telepath. I am projecting a memory of mine and pulling you into it. Though you are replacing a former plaything, I do not care to remember. I am sure you are wondering how old I am in this memory ... I’m just a year or two older than you are now. Now come here,” he said with authority.

“What d-do you w-want?” she stuttered nervously. Her heart pounded in her ears. *‘If he wanted to frighten me, he definitely managed that,’* she thought to herself.

“I can hear your thoughts, Eliza. Have I really frightened you? Come here,” he put his hand out for her to take.

“Is this your punishment for being in your mind?” she took another step back, her back now flushed with the wall.

“Do you want me to punish you? It will give me great pleasure to hear you scream and squirm under me,” his grin even wider now. “I can’t deny my dragon what he wants, and

what he wants is you. Now take my hand before I use my mind to make you do things you will surely regret.”

Eliza took two steps forward and reached out to put her hand in his. He pulled her quickly into his arms and stared down into her deep blue eyes. “This is only a dream Eliza, none of this is actually happening.” He leaned in towards her face, but she pulled back away from him. He stared at her, questioning why she pulled away. He felt the urge to scold her for it. But then he felt her heat against his body and his dragon roared inside. He quickly lifted her over his shoulder, and as she struggled and kicked, he dropped her back on the bed. She squirmed and tried to knee him, but he pushed her down with ease and got on top of her. He pinned her hands above her head while using his weight to hold her legs down from moving.

“This is just a dream, Eliza. You wouldn’t be here if you had really stopped thinking of me and desiring me. My dragon spirit yearns for yours,” he looked at her, seeing her nervous reaction. “I yearn for your radiant warmth.”

Her eyes widened, and he grinned further. “If I fuck you right now in this dream, nothing will change out there. You will still be an unsullied little virgin. But you will feel my urges and desires when we finally see one another, and you will want for nothing but to give yourself to me, over and over just how I will want it,” his voice dripping with a husky drawl.

He leaned his face into her neck and took in her scent, a groan escaped his mouth.

A shudder ran through her body. “P-please don’t do this,” she pleaded, on a verge of tears.

He pulled away from her neck, looking at her still squirming under him. His eyes raked over her body, seeing her thin, partially see-through nightdress and her nipples rising to his will. He leaned down and grazed his bottom lip against one keeping his gaze locked on her face. She gasped and her lips parted. He took that second to capture her mouth hard, nipping and pulling on her bottom lip. He released her hands, whilst indulging in her lips. Cupping her face with one hand while kneading her breast with the other. He expected her to push him or hit him with her now free hands, but she lay there completely entranced under his will. He paused feeling her shiver and how frightened she was of him.

“This could have been easier and gentler if you didn’t back away earlier, Eliza. All I wanted was to kiss you. To help soothe that dragon heat,” he said. He sat up, giving her room to breathe as panic settled across her innocent face. He picked up both of her hands and kissed the tips of her fingers. “I will see you soon, siren.” He snapped his fingers and they both woke up in their respective rooms.

Eliza placed her hand on her lips trying to remember the feel of his lips against hers. His scent was like that of lightning and leather. “I can’t do this. Please Goddess Tiamat, I need your help. Find my dragon spirit another mate. This has to end now before it gets out of hand,” her insides hummed, and her dragon spirit coiled.

Gareth turned over on his bed to look at the handkerchief on the pillow beside him and licked his lips. *‘You in this very bed might not be so bad. Your lips are delicious Eliza. And your thick, perfect curves ... I think I will have to have some more of you soon. Sweet dreams, siren,’* he chuckled mischievously.



‘I promised myself not to think about her ... not to fucking think about her? ... laughable as all I see is that pouty mouth of hers,’ Gareth mewled to himself. *‘The gods are punishing me.’* His night was sleepless after he had pulled Eliza’s mind into his memory. He could only think of her. *‘The things I want to do to her succulent mouth. And that perfect ...’* he breathed out trying to refocus on his work.

He reviewed the financial dossier for all of the upcoming events held in the next several weeks. “Alister, how many guests in total are staying in the palace?” he narrowed his eyes at the sheer number, and names of nobles and royals throughout the continent that will be making an appearance.

“It is what’s in front of you, about one hundred and fifty in total,” Alister chuckled. “The number does include the young ones. They all will be pledging their allegiance to the crown of Drakon.” Gareth rolled his eyes. He hated the old rules. The rules of his father, his grandfather, and all the preceding High Kings of the continent, or rather their control. They continued to go through the lists, title changes, land grants, new unions, and the events themselves. Their powers, their abilities, and their strengths will be on display for everyone watching, purposefully securing their place at the top of the dragon bloodlines.

He narrowed his eyes at the room assignments, “Marissa? You planned this without my knowledge or approval beforehand.”

“Yes, and yes again,” Alister huffed. “I am not willing to wait anymore. And now after finding out that she was being taken away, what was I supposed to do? Leave her alone or leave her at the Magistrates? It will be best if she is here, with me,” Alister pointed out the rooms he planned on giving to Marissa in the palace. “I want her close to me. I do not want her in the south wing with the other guests as well.”

“Do not overwhelm her. I know you are serious about her, but she has a lot to learn. Perhaps you should ensure she first

befriends the rest of the inner circle. They are pretty good judges of character,” Gareth suggested.

Alister rubbed his temple, treading carefully with his words. “Helena and Onri have seen her in Valance. But yes, it will be an easier transition for her if she builds trust with the immediate royals which she can depend on during the gathering.”

Gareth ran his hand through his thick long beard. “Speaking of the inner circle. Is Anthony ready? Have you convinced him to finally take up the mantle of his family and take over for his father? I’ve written him but he declined twice,” Gareth cocked his head in question. “If we are going to give Vincent the Anders lands in the north for the horses, we might as well give him the appropriate titles and deeds with it.” Gareth continued to sign documents and handed them to Alister for review.

“Yes, I have spoken with him already and he said he is considering it. He has been a bit distracted since he returned from Valance a month ago. Possibly his mother’s passing has taken a toll on him. I had him go into the capitol today to gather information on Laura. I just can’t allow that woman to come out of this unscathed.” The last thing he was expecting was for Laura to return with such burning rage and jealousy after what she had put him through.

“What you need to do is find out how she knew you had returned and managed to get into the palace that first night. There is a traitor amongst the staff. The oath taken by anyone working for a royal is serious,” Gareth arched a brow before returning his attention to the lists of nobles. He let out a mischievous chuckle. “Hmm, so many young women will be here. I think I am going to have some fun.”

Alister rolled his eyes. “As always, the insatiable spirit ... I will have Yulia find out. She hears and sees everything that is happening in the palace.”

Gareth nodded approvingly. “Ah yes, she has been loyal for a long time and according to Anthony, she has proven herself. I think you need to promote her. She can be a great guide for Marissa as she maneuvers daily life in the palace. So, the Duchess’s quarters it is then? Have Charles start making arrangements.”

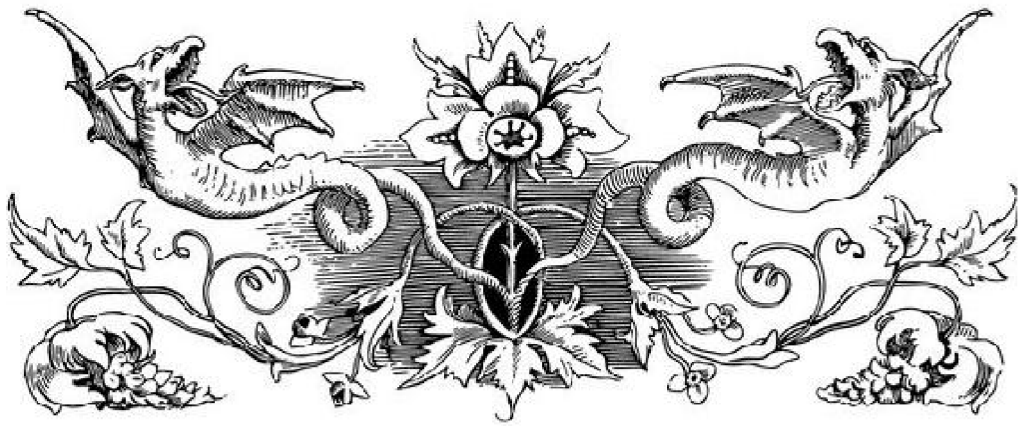
The day went by quickly and as the night had fallen Gareth yet again summoned Eliza into the same memory. This time he sat silently on the edge of the bed watching her skin crawl with goosebumps as she pressed herself to the headboard. The nervous tick in her jaw as she swallowed amused him. “Should we continue where we left off last night?” his wolfish grin caused her to pull up the covers as she shook her head. “I see ... not burning for me today.”

Eliza peered around the room, her hands twisting in front of her. “P-please,” she stuttered as she turned her eyes down to her hands. “I did not mean to invade your privacy. Or cause you any discomfort, my King. Please let me go. I swear it, I will never do this again and I will never speak of this to anyone.”

“Look at you. Begging,” he narrowed his eyes. “Most women around me ... beg me to fuck them, to ride my cock and be filled with my in all the ways that matter. But here you are ... seeing a tiny real glimpse of me and you’re running for the hills.” He moved closer to her, his body tensing like that of a predator. “I wonder ... if I get you to cum for me in this dream, in your mind ... will your body respond the same way once you’re awake?” He licked his upper lip. “I wonder what you taste like, vixen.” Eliza’s eyes widened, and a spark of fear caressed her pupils as she gazed at him. He took her small shaking hands into his large ones. “You’re so small ... soft ... and your scent ... that scent,” he whispered almost breathlessly. He pulled in closer to her, his nose grazing the crook of her neck and then her thick auburn red hair. She shivered, her breathing ragged as her entire body was enveloped in his large frame and warmth. She continued to stare at him in disbelief as he pulled away, her hands still held tightly by his. “I want to punish you ... I do ... I should,” he whispered under his breath.

He brought her hands to his mouth, smirking at her. His tongue took a deliberately slow lick from her wrist through her palm on each hand before planting soft kisses on her fingertips. Surprised and yet calm was her reaction. She stared at him, unable to comprehend what he was doing. “Let me know next time if you wake up with your pussy aroused and dripping wet by this.” He winked and snapped his fingers.

Eliza woke up, breathing heavily. Her body trembled as she reached under her nightdress. There it was the evidence of his teasing, her inner thighs and slit moist with her arousal. She cursed at him under her breath.



CHAPTER II

“Your Grace ... Alister ... Alister! Wake up!” Captain Anders shook Alister.

“W-what ... what time is it?” Alister yawned as he rubbed his eyes to see Captain Anders standing over him. “What are you doing here Anthony? What happened?” Alister sat up in his bed seeing Anthony’s disheveled tired face.

“Late last night I was in the capitol finishing up the investigation on Laura and happened to see Lady Katheris, Marissa, walking into Magistrate Orson’s home with her father following in,” he said quickly.

“Wait ... I thought she said he wasn’t coming and that she and her stepmother were to meet him?” Alister interrupted as he got out of his bed.

“Yes ... Sandra ... both she and Marissa seemed worried or saddened. So, I decided to keep watch, knowing that you

would be arriving in the morning to get Marissa. Around midnight I saw three hooded figures approach the Magistrate's home. Only one entered while the other two remained outside. After a while the first figure came out with Lord Katheris, he said something I couldn't hear, and the three left heading towards the docks. I then approached the windows to see if I can hear anything or see anything. I was only able to see Marissa in the study sobbing," Anthony swallowed. "I saw Katheris leave the house a few hours later and I followed him to the docks. There is a large ship anchored off the port and three smaller boats attached to each other with hooded men in them at one of the docks. I went to take a closer look and I saw one of these men ... not a man ... none are ... goblins from Dunne Valley. Their faces have been etched in my mind forever. Katheris was there, speaking to one ... he appears to be with them."

"This doesn't sound right. Why would her father ...? Fuck ... that's what she meant he had plans for his children ... Wake up Gareth, he's upstairs. We need to go there now!" Alister sprinted to the walk-in closet to grab his clothes.

"Upstairs your Grace?" Anthony furrowed his brow.

"What, did you think he wasn't already here? Wake him up and have him meet me in the Vault," ordered Alister. He then turned and through the bathing room opened the passage behind the mirror to head downstairs to the vaults. When

Alister reached the fortified doors that lead into the Vault he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, placed his hand over his heart, and murmured an incantation.

“Nagendra hear me, your child, and your blood. My power is yours and your power is mine. I am here to protect that which is yours.” He pulled his hand back from his heart and in his palm was an emerald key carved from a dragon scale. He pricked his thumb and with the blood on the key, he placed it into an opening carved in the door. The large doors made a creaking sound and locks began to shift.

“Alister, is it true? There are goblins in the port?” he heard Gareth running up behind him.

“Yes, but I’m afraid there is more to it. I think Marissa’s father is up to something. He arrived here unexpectedly,” Alister seethed.

“Get the dragon bracers. I’ll call on Exian for assistance. Anthony has your horse, and the guard will meet you by the entrance. We won’t let them leave,” Gareth said reassuringly as he sprinted toward another chamber inside the vault. “Check with the Magistrate first, and I’ll meet you on the docks.”

Alistar opened one of the caskets marked with an emerald dragon. Inside were two large bracers made of dragon bone and covered in green dragon scales. *'It's been nearly three years since the battle at Mercer. And a year since I last wore my dragon battle suit,'* he took in a deep breath as he put them on and ran back up to meet Anders. *'Hold on Marissa I'm coming for you.'*

Dawn has just broken as Alistar, Captain Anders, the royal guard rode into the center of the capitol. Smoke had billowed in the distance, coming from the direction of the port, and the magistrate's home. A bell rang loud, signifying a fire spreading. They rode toward the commotion, the horse hoofs pounding into the cobble stone road. Once they reached the scene of the fire, Alistar was in a state of disbelief. Magistrate Orson was being tended to by several people in the middle of the street. His family was assisted out of the burning building, while many others carried pails of water. Some used their abilities to whip the fire away, and others created continuous rain from the water brought to them

Alistar directed his guard, half were sent to investigate the docks and the surrounding area, and the rest were sent to assist with putting out the fire and handling the commotion. "Orson, what happened? Who did this? And where are Marissa and Lady Sandra?" Alistar shouted whilst running to the man.

“Your Grace! The goblins ... the Dunne are here. They took Lady Marissa, and ... Lady Sandra is still in the house!” Orson coughed from the smoke and pointed at his burning home.

“We got Lady Sandra out your Grace,” one of the soldiers pointed to Captain Anders carrying her in his arms out of the burning building, as vines sprouted from the ground wrapping themselves around them both.

Sandra coughed, bracing her burnt hand tightly. The vines sprouted several leaves and Alister plucked them quickly. “Let’s wrap your burnt hand with these. Anthony, I can rely upon you to take care of Lady Sandra from here?” he asked, and Anders nodded. “Lady Sandra, where is Marissa?”

Sandra coughed in between heaving her breath from the inhaled smoke. “He ... he gave them away. Nathaniel gave both of his daughters away.” Her voice was hoarse with anxiety. “He is taking them to the Prince of the Goblins as ... as concubines. When he said last night where we were traveling to, I ... I tried to stop him from taking Marissa, as well. They are probably on the ship by now!”

Alister swallowed. “No ... no, Anthony you know what to do.” He stood back up, flicking his wrists. From the emerald bracers on his forearms, emerald scales unsheathed themselves across his entire body. With his dragon-scale battle suit fully

intact, Alister jumped back on his horse and rode toward the docks.



A large ship barreled its way through the oncoming waves as it began its turn out into the open sea. Marissa shouted and kicked at her captors. The more she struggled with her binds, the rougher the creature pinning her to the mast was.

'These things, these creatures,' she sucked in her breath as she analyzed their appearances. The elongated and protruding bottom tusks, the charcoal leathery skin, and eyes that were hollow, and devoid of any comprehension. *'How will I get away?'* she thought to herself. One of the goblins tied her hands together and dragged her across the ship till her father, Nathaniel, appeared on the deck and made him put her down.

“Not a way to treat your King’s property,” he said laughing.

“Father please, why are you doing this?” tears ran down her cheeks.

“It was all good business. And for the future of this continent. A prince of the goblins of Dunne paid me handsomely for you and your sister to be concubines, and to bear children for his King,” he replied with a devious grin.

“You are not my father! How could you do this? You are a traitor to Drakon, our gods, and its people. You are a traitor to me!” she yelled as a small-dissatisfied growl left her throat while she still sobbed.

“Oh daughter, you will learn. There is always good and bad in the world. But business is business. Plus, you will be reunited with your half-sister Ermina, and I will be there with you by your side, always. Imagine my daughters creating a new continent or more,” his tone was cocky, as he laughed. He grabbed the rope that was twisted around her hands and dragged her over to the railing of the ship. “You can say your goodbyes to this land. It would have been much easier if you did not leave Valance. I never accepted the invitation to this gathering, so it makes me wonder who accepted it and allowed you to come all the way here to Orlean. I had to make this arrangement last minute to get a ship, these men, and all the proper documents to sail around the continent to get here.”

Marissa looked over the railing and then at the docks far away. Her heart was beating so loud that she thought she heard someone screaming her name. She slipped down into a crouch, her back pressing against the railing. *‘The only way out is to jump.’* She braced her tied hands together and whispered a small prayer.

‘Marissa I am coming for you.’ She suddenly stood up and looked back at the docks. Her eyes widened as she saw not too

far away a figure in all emerald-green and several others on one of the docks.

“Marissa!” Alister yelled to get her attention. She heard his voice clear as if he was beside her.

“Alister!” she cried out.

“Who is that man!?” Nathaniel spat at her.

“Nathaniel, that’s the Duke of Orlean. We did not know your daughter was acquainted with him. Let alone he came here to seek her out. We cannot fight him!” growled a goblin that was beside Nathaniel.

“His earthly abilities will not work out in the sea. This is not his domain. Continue the course,” Nathaniel ordered.

‘Mari, I need you to go to the center of the ship by the main mast and take cover,’ Alister mind linked her.

Marissa closed her eyes and focused on Alister’s voice. *‘I don’t know if you can hear me, Alister. I want you to know that whatever happens today, I will always love you.’*

‘I love you too, now get to the middle of the ship,’ Alister responded anxiously.

Marissa backed away from the railing and ran to the main mast. Squatting and bracing her tied wrists and hands over her head.

A sudden thud rocked the ship. Something crashed and pushed the ship again.

“Did we hit something Commander Tronk?” Nathaniel yelled out to the goblin giving out orders to the others.

“No, something hit us! Arm yourselves, we are under attack!” Tronk roared through his tusks.

An enormous wave surged above the ship and a sapphire dragon flew through it with a man in blue dragon-scale armor on its back.

“That’s a child of Ladon and King Exian himself riding it. Your daughter must be precious to them. For any royalty to be directly involved trying to stop you from taking her,” Tronk groused.

“Use your powers and get me and my daughter out of here,” Nathaniel ordered.

“I will have to leave my ship and men behind if we are to use the water passage!” Tronk roared. The ship groaned, wood splintered, and objects began to fly through the air. Shields, barrels, ropes, and metal objects surrounded the space where Marissa huddled for safety, creating a protective shield around her. Water splashed the surface of the ship as the sapphire dragon roared and let loose its fire.

Tronk was stunned and turned to the dock narrowing his eyes at a large man in what appeared to be platinum armor. This man was holding his hand to his temple and the other stretched out toward the ship.

“Nathaniel there is nothing more we can do here. You will have to leave her behind. If we take her, the High King will declare war on the Dunne. We are not ready to fight them after the last war, especially if King Gareth will get involved,” Tronk said while pointing at the man. “Fight them off for as long as you can. Those that are able, you know the way home,” he ordered.

Tronk grabbed Nathaniel, pressing a small vile to his chest. “Drink this quickly. Cross your arms against your chest, close your eyes and take a deep breath. Once you’re submerged envision your other daughter and repeat the following phrase in your head. The water takes, the water gives, the water guides to a place known only to me. Water, take me to the one I see.” Tronk placed his hand on Nathaniel’s chest, “Now!”

and pushed him off the ship into the sea. Tronk then took a sip from another small vile in his hand, crossed his arms against his chest, and jumped off the ship, following Nathaniel.

A large wave came crashing over the ship as Exian landed his dragon onto it. Exian raised his hands and another wave came crashing onto the ship pushing many of the goblins off the ship into the water. “Feast on their flesh, Star!” Exian roared to his dragon.



On the dock Alister seethed angrily, seeing the sapphire dragon land on the ship. But a loud roar from above surprised him. Gareth looked up from the dock.

“Alister,” he pointed to a green dragon flying toward them. “Coy is here. He woke from his hibernation. He must have felt your anguish.”

Coy hovered near the dock, spreading his wings wide enough for Alister to climb up onto his back. “Let’s go Coy,” Alister patted the back of his dragon’s main. “Fly to the ship, we need to destroy these mindless beasts,” he commanded.

As they reached the ship, Coy swooped in, grabbing two goblins with his claws and tore their heads off with his sharp fangs. Alister swung his right wrist and a sword formed from

the emerald bracer he was wearing. With the sword in hand, he jumped off Coy to land hard on the wooden splintered deck of the ship. He began his attack, slicing through and beheading each goblin that stood in his way while making his way to the shield surrounding Marissa.

Coy and Star continued to pick off the goblins one by one, ripping the creatures apart.

“Where is your Commander?” shouted Exian when he captured one of the goblins. The beast shrieked and shook from fear as Exian drove his sword through its throat. “Alister! I think they have used the water passage to return to their place. Is the girl still on the ship?” Exian shouted over the screams coming from the tortured goblins and the growling dragons.

“She better be, or I will bring war onto them!” Alister roared as he sliced through another goblin’s head. “Remember the only way to kill these things is to behead them, or they will wake back up!” Seeing a number of the goblin getting back up he knew he would have to get to Marissa quickly. Though they sliced through the goblins, they noticed many had begun to fall onto the deck, shaking violently as their heads crushed inwardly. Their greyish-green blood oozed as their heads imploded, leaving nothing but writhing headless bodies. Exian and Alister nodded at each other knowingly that this was

Gareth's work, but he wouldn't be able to handle them all. The more he uses his abilities the weaker he becomes.

Alister swung his hand, pushing the wind against the protective shield around Marissa. Pieces flew off, making room to allow him inside. As he entered behind the barricade, he was surprised to see vines had grown out of nowhere through the bottom of the ship and surrounded the mast in a tight sphere. Several goblins lay dead, their body parts and heads crushed and torn apart by the vines. Suddenly some of the vines lifted off the floor and began to whip at Alister. "It's me, Mari. I'm here to take you home."

The vines stiffened, and an opening appeared in the green sphere. Marissa was at its center, sitting on the wooden planks. Her head pressed to her knees while her hands were still tied together and wrapped around her bent legs. Alister walked over to the sphere, trying his best not to step on the vines. The noise of the fighting, the dragons' roars, and the screams of the dying goblins were drowned out by the humming of the small flowers sprouting around Marissa.

He slowly climbed into the sphere, whispering, "my sweet blossom ... it's me. Please look at me. Take my hand so we can leave this place." He reached out to her to touch her hands, but she lifted her head and gazed at him. He noticed her eyes were puffy from crying as he cut the ropes around her hands.

“Alister, you’ve come for me,” she whispered faintly.

“Nothing will keep me from you. Come, let’s go home,” he pulled her up into his arms, one hand under her knees and the other supporting her back. She pressed her face into his shoulder, still lightly sobbing as he carried her away from the vines.

“Coy, I need your wings,” Alister called over to his dragon.

Coy swooped back down onto the ship and landed right in front of Alister. “Exian we are leaving. Sink this ship!”

“It will be done, brother. I will see you soon,” Exian nodded at him while slicing one of the goblins open, spilling its gooey greyish-green blood onto the deck.

“Marissa do not be frightened, just hold on to me,” Alister warned her as she was still in his arms. He brought her up onto Coy’s back. “You will need to straddle him like you would a horse and hold on just not too tightly to the horns under the main. I’ll hold you steady.” Alister sat behind her, wrapping one arm around her waist and pressing her back tightly against his chest. She felt the pressure his thighs exerted against her hips, holding her steady.

“Let’s go Coy!” Alister patted Coy’s side and they lifted off the ship.

Marissa felt her body tighten under the pressure of the lift-off and the speed the dragon was going. She peered down to see them fly further up into the sky and everything below becoming smaller, almost insignificant. Taking a deep breath, Marissa relaxed and leaned in firmly into Alister’s arms.

“Did they hurt you? Are you in pain? How are you feeling?” Alister whispered question after question into her ear.

“No, they didn’t harm me,” she peered over at him. His dragon-scaled armored suit gleamed the same as his eyes. “I am safe. Where I belong in your arms.” He pressed a kiss to her temple, holding her close to him. He observed her minor spat with her dress, as she pushed it down.

“We will need to have riding gear made for you. I’m sure you’re not comfortable sitting on Coy in a dress,” Alister sighed.

Marissa looked back at him. “You want me to ride your dragon?” she narrowed her eyes in confusion.

“Being a descendant of Nagendra, it’s your birthright to be able to ride a dragon. And being my future bride, it’s

expected,” a wide smile appeared on Alister’s face as he watched Marissa’s eyelashes flutter. “It was not something we discussed. Though, I know what I want, and hope you want the same things. It may not be the most romantic way of proposing. Flying on a back of a dragon right after you were taken forcefully from me. But seeing as we will be landing shortly, I feel the need to know ... ” he stared at her, worried she would say she wasn’t ready.

“Yes, Alister. My answer would have been yes, even if you had asked me on a battlefield covered in goblin gore,” her eyes glowed with a gentle green shine. He let out a sigh of relief, chuckling a bit at her humor even though she was just in danger.

Coy let out a small grunt followed by a low roar. “It’s alright Coy, you can land on the beach.”

In just a few short minutes the beach below the cliff of the Palace was in sight. “It’s so peaceful up here,” Marissa said with her eyes closed, taking in the breeze.

“Even more so now that you are back in my arms,” Alister tightened his grip around Marissa’s waist and buried his face in her long blonde hair that has come undone in the wind. Coy landed slowly on to the beach and walked with them still on his back, toward the guards at the cave entrance.

Alister slid off Coy's back and helped Marissa afterward. He took both of her hands into his. "Let's officially introduce you two to one another," he held Marissa's hands out, palms up while waiting for Coy to put the tip of his jaw onto her hands.

Coy understood the gesture and gently placed the tip of his jaw onto Marissa's palms. "Coy, this is Marissa. My ... wife-to-be. And just like you and I, Nagendra's blood runs through her." Coy breathed out through his snout, blowing hot air against Marissa's face. It caused her hair to sway, while he made a cooing-like noise.

"Coy was my father's dragon, hatched on the same night as my father was born. He has been a loyal dragon of Orlean for nearly fifty years. He needs his rest though and hopefully lay an egg." He nodded at Coy, letting him go free.

"Do you know what happened to my mother ... I mean?" Marissa paused, thinking of Sandra.

"She should be in the palace by now. I had Captain Anders tend to her and bring her here. Tell me everything. Do you know how the fire started?" he asked as they walked through the cave entrance with the guards by their side.

“After we parted two days ago, I told my stepmother everything that you and I agreed upon. She was hesitant at first to even listen but when I told her that I will be leaving with you today and she can either stay and be by my side or wait to leave to meet my father. She chose to stay with me. She said that she was proud to have been in my life since I was a baby and wanted to stay with me,” Marissa said with tears forming in her eyes.

“She did not have any children of her own with your father, and with his absence, you were her family. A family she created for herself. Do you see now what I mean ... a family we can create,” Alister peered gently at her.

Marissa sighed in agreement and continued. “When father arrived late last night, I was beside myself. I thought I would convince him to meet you first before anything would be finalized. However, he did not even want to speak to me. He said he wanted to be back out to sea by sunrise. Sandra was trying to convince him to wait a day, so we can gather our things and say our goodbyes. But he would not hear of it. We were up all night packing and trying to find a way to delay him.”

“Why did he leave his wife behind? If the plan was to travel to reunite with the new family?” Alister asked.

“I could not hear much but they were arguing at some point before the fire broke out. I heard her tell him ‘How could you make this decision without talking to her? You do not know your own daughter. Her life should be here, not with the Dunne.’ I was assuming they were talking about my half-sister, but then I heard Sandra scream and things crashing in the room. My father walked out of the room, and I saw her laying on the floor. Magistrate Orson woke up from the noise and came to check on us. My father at this point grabbed my arm and said, ‘we are leaving right now no more time to waste.’ I struggled to get out of his grip and Magistrate Orson intervened, trying to stop him. At that point four of those things appeared in the house. My father ordered them to set the house on fire, and at the same time he stabbed Orson.” Marissa sniffled a tear trailed down her cheek. Alister pulled her closer to him and wiped her tear away.

“You have had a long night and morning. When we get in, Charles will have already assigned a lady’s maid for you. We will have her draw you a bath and you can rest afterward as long as you want. I have already chosen your rooms. Lady Sandra will occupy one of them so she can be close to you,” Alister caressed her tangled hair.

“Rooms?” she choked on the word, surprised.

“Well, it is only appropriate that you have your own space. You can do anything you want with your rooms. Plus, our

engagement is not yet announced, and my brother has to finalize all the official rituals. Therefore, you would need your own appropriate space,” he winked at her as he lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. She felt a warmth rise in her belly, and her cheeks flushed. She thought about his words and the unmatched facial expressions he made. He is after all a prince, and in public, he must be as honorable as expected of his position, but she had already experienced his mischievous side.

“May I see Sandra before I retire?” she asked lowering her gaze, not wanting to sound demanding or needy.

“You do not have to ask me for permission to see the woman that raised you,” he answered slightly confused why she suddenly seemed shy. He turned to one of the guards that were escorting them through the passageway into the palace. “Where has Captain Anders taken Lady Sandra?”

“The lady is being seen to by the royal physician in the sitting room on the first level of the South Wing. Shall we escort you there, your Grace?” answered the guard.

“Take Marissa up to see her mother. I have to return to the armory,” he ordered as he turned to Marissa, “I will see you soon.” He let go of her hand as she nodded, and he headed to the armory in the opposite direction.



Marissa followed the guards up to the entrance to the palace. While walking through the passageway she noticed how it veered off in several areas to other tunnels. She wondered how many hidden places there were in the palace and if Alister will show her any. She felt anxious inside as she made her way to see Sandra. What will she say to Sandra, and how will she thank her for trying to help her?

When she entered the sitting room, she saw Charles and Captain Anders by a desk with a maid taking notes. Sandra lay on the sofa while a man, with a white beard and round spectacles, was wrapping her hand with a bandage. She noticed burns and soot on Sandra's dress, and her heart sank. *'Sandra could have died in the fire. How could my father be so cruel to the woman that he has been married to and has taken care of his child for 18 years?'* she thought to herself. "Mother, how are you feeling?" she asked Sandra as she approached the sofa.

Sandra looked over to where Marissa was standing and a large smile spread across her face, large enough to illuminate the whole room. "Well, that is something new. You called me mother, not Sandra, or stepmother, but mother," she said.

"You have always been my mother. Doing everything in your power to nurture me, protect me, and push me to be the

best that I can be. I could not ask for anyone else to be beside me,” she said as she leaned over and kissed Sandra’s forehead. “I will ask Charles here to assign you a room within my quarters. You need rest as much as I do after our last night’s, and this morning’s catastrophe,” she said with heaviness in her voice.

“Spoken like a doting daughter,” said the man with the white beard.

“This is the royal physician, Augustus,” Charles made the introduction.

“It is wonderful to meet you. Thank you for seeing to my mother,” Marissa reached her hand to shake his.

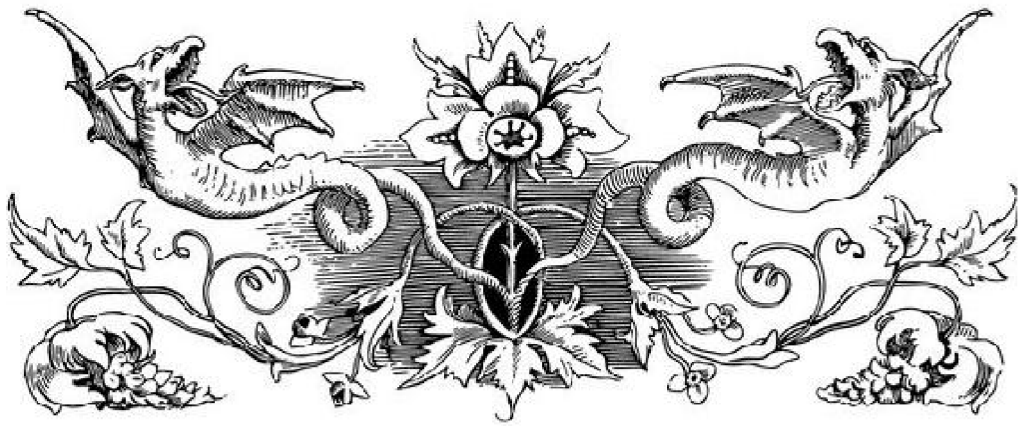
“I am prescribing medicine to help heal the burn on your hand, Lady Sandra. Charles here is taking note of what I will need from the medicinal herb garden to make more of this medicine so that we can reapply later tonight. Also, to help you take a rest, these valerian drops are of good use. And I’ll have Anth ... Captain Anders, bring you something for that ... um stomach pain you’re having. Lady Marissa, I believe an herbal bath will take away any stress you may feel. Charles, have the maid take the lavender and mint herb pouch for Lady Marissa. That is all for now. Yulia knows the rest,” Augustus said as he got up from Lady Sandra’s side.

“Did you say there is a medicinal herb garden nearby?”
Marissa cocked her head.

“Yes, the best medicinal herb garden on the continent. The brotherhood of Okumi and the Meiji try to replicate it but soon all know that some herbs can only survive here in Orlean, where the resting place of Nagendra is. Our earth mother. Lady Marissa, if you are ever interested in touring the herbal garden or getting to know more information on any plants you may call on me. I am always at his Grace’s disposal, and now ... yours as well,” Augustus bowed.

Marissa thanked him for his help and watched him leave.

“My lady, may I escort you to your rooms?” Charles enquired as he assisted Sandra to stand. “I am sure you are both extremely tired. His grace has work to tend to, but I am sure he will want to see you for dinner tonight. And please do not worry about anything. Just take your time and let me know if there is anything else you may need.”



CHAPTER 12

Charles escorted Marissa and Sandra to the second-level quarters in the north wing of the palace.

“Charles, I am confused, but isn’t the north wing of the palace reserved only for the high King and his Grace? The other palace wings are for guests or am I mistaken?” Sandra furrowed her brow as they strolled through the hallway, admiring the details and decor.

“You are not mistaken. The north end of the palace is limited only to the King and the prince’s direct family. The quarters specifically here have always belonged to the Duchess of Orlean,” Charles explained as they stopped in front of large double doors with gold trimming and a depiction of a forest carved into them. “The duke’s quarters are just next door. The quarters consist of three bedrooms with their own dressing and bathing rooms, a sitting or tea room for entertainment, and a game parlor. If the duchess wishes to entertain a guest or a relative in one or all of the rooms, it will

be her decision. Lady Marissa, I will need to know which of these rooms you will choose for yourself, and which one for Lady Sandra?” Charles asked.

Sandra gave Charles a quizzical look and stared back at Marissa. “Did I miss something then? Is there a Duchess of Orlean? I thought his grace was unmarried.”

“Umm, Charles, when were you told? It has not been more than an hour since his grace asked, and I have not had the chance to tell anyone yet either,” Marissa had a slightly amused facial expression.

“My apologies my lady, but his Grace planned these rooms for you yesterday. I am only assuming if he had planned for these rooms to be yours, then he had already asked you and you said yes,” Charles replied, seemingly flushed from embarrassment.

“Asked? What was asked?” Sandra looked at Marissa with wide eyes. Marissa took in a deep breath. “Mom ... He asked me to marry him.” Sandra’s eyes went wide, and a tear rolled down her cheek that she quickly wiped away.

“This is so sudden. But I am sure you understand that this is not an easy job being a duchess, or technically a princess. You

will have a great deal of responsibilities,” Sandra said, still surprised by this new development.

“I know, and I will be taking lessons from everyone so that I can be the best I can be for Orlean, our people, and my family. With that said, Charles what will you recommend as for the rooms?” Marissa asked determinedly.

“Umm, well normally the emerald room is the grandest, so I would recommend it for you lady Marissa. I would recommend the baroque for Lady Sandra, though it is just a guest room, and it will be expected after the gathering for Lady Sandra to move into her own quarters in the palace,” stated Charles.

Charles bowed and walked them into the quarters to show the women their respective rooms. “This is Yulia, the head lady’s maid. She will help you with anything needed for today and going forward. Your belongings that were not lost in the fire from the magistrate’s home will be sent up shortly, and the maids will organize everything into your closets. Please take some rest,” Charles bowed and escorted Marissa to the emerald room at the end of the hall, while Yulia took Sandra in the opposite direction to the baroque room.

“Guards will be stationed at the entrance of the private quarters, all day and night. If you wish the guards can instead be stationed right by your private chamber?” inquired Charles.

“No, Charles that would not be necessary, they can remain at the main entrance,” Marissa said as she walked into the emerald room and her jaw dropped. This was by far the grandest room she has ever seen. The walls were covered in deep green drapery, and some areas had velvet green wallpaper with floral designs. There was a lounge and small armchairs near gold-trimmed patio doors. A large white marble fireplace with gold and emerald vines painted all over. A grand mural dedicated to Nagendra herself was hanging over the fireplace. The bedposts were wrapped in green lush climbing vines that sprouted beautiful white flowers around the bed.

“My lady, this way is the dressing room,” Yulia had arrived and directed Marissa to the mirrored door. The dressing room consisted of two gold-trim mirrors, a large round sofa, and a small bureau. What Marissa did not expect was to see a whole wardrobe of dresses and matching shoes already lined up. She immediately recognized them from the shop in Chester. “The mirrors here open to other parts of the room or into the reading room right next door,” Yulia explained. “This way is the bathing room.” Yulia pulled open one of the mirrored doors, and Marissa was astonished by the delicate details.

The scent of the freshly drawn bath soothed Marissa’s nerves. *‘Must be the herbs Augustus had prescribed,’* she wondered. “Thank you, Yulia, I can manage my bathing and

dressing for right now. Just bring me a nightgown and leave it here on the chair. I will be taking some rest right afterward. Can you make sure to wake me before dinner and help me with selecting a dress to wear? That will be all, and thank you,” Marissa gave a firm but polite smile.

“As you wish my lady,” Yulia curtsied and quickly stepped back into the dressing room.

Marissa walked over to one of the mirrors to look at herself. She knew she has been through a lot and may look far worse than she physically felt. Staring at herself in the mirror she was slightly taken aback by her appearance. Her hair though not messy was still tangled from the wind when she was on Coy’s back, her dress was tattered in some areas, and she had scratches and bruises on her arms, neck, and along her jawline. She removed her clothing and got into the warm bubbly water.

Looking around the room she noticed all the plants in their planters swaying around as she now could hear them internally humming. Something here on the grounds of the palace made her feel different, more in tune with her inner self. She felt the plants as if they were breathing, talking to one another, and even their humming was soothing to her. She thought if she stays in the water any longer, she might fall asleep to the sounds of the flowers. She continued to wash her hair and body, as Yulia returned with a nightgown and towels.

“Let me add more warm water,” Yulia approached the tub with a large basin, adding more water. “I have already added the herbs to the water that Sir Augustus had prescribed. However, this right here is an ointment for your skin,” she pulled out a small jar from her pocket. “It will help heal the cuts and scrapes quickly. We wouldn’t want for you to have any scars left behind.”

Marissa smiled at the woman. Thanking her and reassuring her that she will apply the ointment before going to sleep. Yulia assisted Marissa wrapping her in the towel and drying her hair with another. “You do not need to dote on me Yulia. I am sure there are other things in the palace that will need your attention,” Marissa said meekly.

“My lady, as your lady’s maid, my attention is only to you and to assist you in any of your needs. Simply helping you bathe is just one small part of my duties,” Yulia said, still surprised by the beautiful girl’s unwillingness to receive her help.

Marissa wondered if this is how it will be going forward for her. No space for herself and if there is someone who will always be at her side. Perhaps she can set boundaries, as she never had a lady’s maid before. “Yulia, may I ask you something?” Marissa contemplated.

“Anything my lady,” she answered.

“How long have you worked in the palace?” Marissa was curious about the woman who was assigned to her, she did not appear to be in any way special, but she was humble and sweet.

“I have been employed here for nearly seven years, since the return of his Grace to the palace from his training and residing on Volos all his younger years,” Yulia answered.

“Have you been a lady’s maid long? I just want to get to know the people who will be by my side better. It is all about trust for me,” she stated frankly.

Yulia smiled softly at Marissa. “My lady, I am at your disposal. If there is anything you wish to know just ask me and know whatever you tell me in secret will stay between you and me. I have not held a lady’s maid title beforehand, though I have taken care of needs of ladies that have visited the palace previously,” seeing Marissa’s eyes go wide, she added. “I have taken care of princess Lidiya, princess Helena and other noble families ladies that had visited for small celebrations only. I do hope this will ease your mind. I well understand the daunting thought. His Grace doesn’t hide his affairs and many ladies have come through the palace halls for a short period of time, but none were given a preference of actually residing in the palace. And definitely, no one has stayed in the north wing ever. Not even Queen Khali, may her soul rest in peace.”

“Did you ever see his Grace’s mistress before, or at least did she reside in the palace?” Marissa was curious to know about the woman that laid claim to Alister and wanted to end his life if she could not have him. Marissa slipped into a clean silk knee-length night shift and put on a robe.

Yulia seemed a bit nervous at first. “I will tell you the truth, my lady, but please do not judge his Grace once you know this. Laura was her name, and she did reside in the palace for several months in the south wing, but his Grace ended things with her more than a year ago. She had her own lady’s maid, but his Grace assigned me to her as additional help to be his eyes. They had a tumultuous relationship for a few years beforehand, and well she appeared in the palace about a year and a half ago. The rumor swirled that she had claimed she was pregnant with his Grace’s child. I think she thought that he would be happy and accept her. But I guess he knew the truth the entire time.”

“What do you mean, he knew the truth? Was it not his child?” Marissa furrowed her brow, this was a lot of information to handle, but she felt her inside spark and an urge to protect Alister appeared in the back of her mind.

“The truth is that she was never pregnant, to begin with. She had lied and had tried several times at the beginning of her stay to bed his Grace, possibly trying to get pregnant. I had to

be the watchful eyes for his Grace you see, so I saw and heard everything. She was bold enough to come to his private chambers many times, and he would not accept her. He has one rule regarding his private space, and that it's his and his future duchess's place of rest," Yulia gave Marissa a knowing look.

"I see, but how did he know she was not pregnant?" Marissa continued to ask.

"Well for starters, she had claimed to be at the very least several weeks pregnant so perhaps maybe the timing was not adding up," Yulia shrugged. "I know he wrote to Sir Augustus asking for advice on how to tell if she is truly pregnant. Some herbs can help identify if one is. And then her lady's maid would have the bed made every morning herself..."

"And how is that a sign of her faking the pregnancy?" interrupted Marissa.

"Well, you see my lady, it's the regular palace maid's job to make the beds and clean the rooms, and to laundry the lady's belongings. A lady's maid's role is to tend to the lady directly. One morning I entered her chambers a lot earlier than normal. She was bathing and her lady's maid was changing the sheets and I saw there were light patches of blood on the sheets. I pretended I did not notice. The next day I returned and again the sheets were being changed and they too had patches of

blood. This went on for two more days. It was evident she was having her normal monthly bleeding, and if you are pregnant then you cannot possibly have your regular bleeding. I had to report it to his Grace. Afterward, he had me serve her tea made with herbs that Sir Augustus had sent, and the results showed she was not with child,” Yulia continued.

“I cannot believe any woman would try to trap a man this way. This is appalling. Do you know if besides two days ago, if she had tried to see him or do something else to him?” asked Marissa.

“I only know that after he had rejected her a year ago and ended things due to her deceit and manipulation, he traveled extensively for the year. With Queen Khali’s death, the renovations in the palace, and touring Valance and Ladon on behalf of King Gareth, his Grace was not here most of the year. I will say that she did manage to sneak into the palace the night he had returned. I can only assume that someone in the palace had informed her of his arrival and she came to see him. He had her escorted out of the palace. And after she had attacked him the other day, Captain Anders had her arrested and the guard took her to the jails in the capitol of Uther. Captain Anders is doing the investigation now, as it is punishable by death to accost a member of royalty,” Yulia spoke in a low tone as she saw Marissa’s face change to one of worry and sadness.

“She is a woman scorned by love. I do not know what to even think,” Marissa shook her head while wrapping herself up in her robe.

“Please my lady, do not let this bother you or think of this woman any longer. His Grace ... the way he looked at you at the luncheon table, and in the sitting room when you tended his wound with such care ... I have known his Grace for seven years and seen him with many ladies, and not one of them received an ounce of affection riddled in his eyes as you have. He has a heart of gold, and it is difficult to see him hurt, but you have sparked something in him. It will be an honor to serve you, my lady,” Yulia had the sweetest smile as she curtsied. Marissa took Yulia’s hand and thanked her.

“I promise this will stay between us, and Alister will not have to know that you shared anything with me. I’m going to rest, for now, please return in time to wake me to prepare for dinner,” Marissa squeezed Yulia’s hand in appreciation and proceeded back to the bedroom.



Gareth grunted peeling off his heavy protective breastplate off his dragon-scaled suit. “Exian returned to Ladon with Star,” he stated, getting Alister’s attention as he removed his emerald bracers. “They demolished the ship. Though, some of the goblins managed to escape through the water passage. The rest

we beheaded, or they drowned.” Gareth stared at Alister in question. “How do they know the old magic of the water passage? We need to find this out. And they managed to organize and travel the Straits of Batieg and the Tertane sea without our knowledge. What happened to our watchers in the southern regions?” Gareth crossed his arms against his bare chest.

“We will investigate when the others arrive. However, I do think it has something to do with Nathaniel, Marissa’s father, and his trade business. The ship was registered in his name,” Alister responded, avoiding Gareth’s glare.

Gareth arched a brow, “I do not understand how nor why her father orchestrated this?”

“I spoke briefly to Lady Sandra. Apparently, he had dealings with Ziel. He arranged to sell or give both his daughters to him as concubines,” Alister ran a hand through his short hair. “I am baffled. I didn’t think ... I didn’t know ... that there are people on our lands that would be this disloyal. Ziel, the goblin prince ... is Katheris out of his mind?”

Gareth’s eyes widened. “People are desperate to get ahead in life. But this is questioning a man’s sanity. I would understand if he wanted to leave Drakon for the human lands but ... but to give his children to the mindless beasts. I am at a

loss.” Gareth threw on a shirt, pulling his unkempt hair into a half-tail.

“There has to be more to this. We have been cautious and watchful on all the borders. But this was planned out and deliberate. Katheris had to have either gone directly to Dunne or they trapped him,” Alister continued.

“We must find out their plans. I will send word to General Khalib to gather his intelligence team to enter the Dunne lands. I am assuming Katheris had already given his elder daughter to Ziel?” Gareth closed his eyes and murmured a small prayer. “Tiamat save her soul, her spirit, and bring her peace ... How is Marissa?”

Alister hung his shield and weapons back in their place on the wall, contemplating if he should share with Gareth what he observed Marissa do on the ship. “She is strong. This experience for her will alter her perception of what is the reality we live in every day. It’s not all glamorous as our people think.”

“What are you not saying, brother?” Gareth cocked his head observing Alister’s hesitance.

Alister took a minute to compose his words. “How do you do that? How do you know when I have not told you

something or have something on my mind?”

“We are forever linked, brother. I may not push myself into your thoughts but that does not mean I do not see the signs that something weighs heavy on your mind. Tell me everything,” he said.

Alister pressed his lips into a thin line before he began to speak. “On the ship, though you created the barrier between Marissa and the goblins, she on the other hand created a barrier from everything and everyone. She has Nagendra’s natural abilities. She managed to grow thick vines from one small leaf, which surrounded and protected her in a sphere while the rest whipped away and pierced through the goblins that tried to break through. If I was not of the same blood and she did not know me, they would have tried to rip through me as well.” Alister stared at the emerald bracers before he placed them back in the case.

Gareth nodded approvingly as he listened to everything Alister had explained. “How did she and Coy react to one another?”

“Coy accepted her immediately. As if she was always one of us. We did the trust introduction on the beach, and he was enamored with her,” Alister said pridefully

Gareth smiled softly. “That is good. She will need to practice with Coy and spend a lot of time with Augustus. Perhaps he can pull more of the Nagendra abilities out of her. She will be in good hands with him, brother. She can join the rest of the dragon riders when she is ready.”

“Gareth ... I need something from you,” Alister said lowly, avoiding Gareth’s questioning gaze.

“What do you need brother?” he asked.

Alister took a deep breath and peered back up at Gareth. “I need your blessing ... to marry Marissa,” he said firmly.

Gareth narrowed his eyes. “I think we discussed this already. I will allow you to pursue her but do not jump into marriage. She is not ready for this life...”

“I will help her,” Alister interrupted. “We all will help her. She will learn quickly. I am not asking to marry her tomorrow. I am asking for an engagement announcement at the beginning of the gathering, and maybe an engagement period of a month or 2. I ... I cannot be without her in my life.” Alister’s eyes glared with determination, his hands clenched into fists at his side.

Gareth smirked and sighed as he closed the distance between him and Alister. Gareth always being the one to tower over everyone, his presence always stern and daunting, suddenly seemed like he was at ease and relaxed. He embraced Alister. "I would give anything to stand in front of you and your bride, reading the ritual of the bond of husband and wife, at your wedding altar. I give you and Marissa my blessing," he said easing the tension Alister had felt earlier. "I do expect you two to behave appropriately in public. Whatever private matters that may happen between you two, need to remain private so as not to tarnish her and your reputation before marriage. We do not need rumors spreading about her not being of pure dragon blood. Giving way to other men to try and claim her. Like the incident that just occurred today, we will need to keep her involvement under wraps until we have more to go on for the council meeting, understood?"

"Yes, brother that I understand. Though with our siblings here, everything might move a lot faster," Alister chuckled. "Thank you, brother, for your blessing."

"Have you really been abstinent?" Gareth smirked, watching Alister's eyes go wide.

Alister swallowed, and removed his shirt, pointing to the small mate mark on his chest. "Since she marked me. I haven't thought of anyone but her. I haven't had any desires, except for her, only wanting her."

“I see. Just ... don’t suffocate her with your needs,” Gareth chuckled, as they exited the armory vault and headed up through the passageway.

“I did not ask you about your visit with Narcissa. Do you intend to see her again?” Alister asked with curiosity.

“As often as I will need satisfaction, I think. She knows my sins and my desires. I was planning on seeing her later tonight but with everything that has happened I will need to reschedule for another day,” Gareth said nonchalantly.

“Do you plan on making her your official mistress through the gathering?” Alister asked, hoping for some sort of affirmation that his brother is ready to move forward from the grief of his wife’s death.

“Why would I do that? I do not have feelings for her. We are both just friends, in need of satisfaction ... You already know she was my first. There is a slight attachment to the memories we had shared over the last almost 17 years. But I do not see her residing at the castle in Volos with me. I do not need that kind of stress. I am enjoying my unattached life,” Gareth affirmed.

“And here I thought you were still grieving for Khali’s death,” Alister stated.

Gareth stopped in the middle of the staircase and looked back at Alister. “I am still saddened by her death. She did not deserve to die, nor take her life. But I never changed who I was for her, and I do not intend on changing who I am now either. I do not think that I will be attaching myself to any one woman in the near future. There are plenty of fiery fishes in the sea and I just want to swim around and pick them off one by one,” he laughed sadistically. “I promise you this brother. If I ever find a woman whose bed I would never want to stray from, perhaps then I will be a one-woman man. And if there is a woman out there that can bear me an heir. Then I swear on the blood of Tiamat and Asterot, that I will marry again, and will only be loyal to her,” he continued laughing and shaking his head. *‘Now even I know that will never happen,’* he sighed inwardly.

“I am assuming you have decided against Eliza?” Alister mumbled under his breath.

“Do not ... speak her name,” Gareth snapped back. “She was wrong to do what she did, and she is lucky I have decided against killing her. She is amusing, but she will not break me, nor my dragon spirit.” Gareth ground his teeth.

“I see. Just do not hurt the girl. I am sure she did not mean any harm not to invade your mind and memories,” Alister growled back at Gareth.

“Hmm, you only care because she is Marissa’s dearest friend, and you do not want Marissa to hate you on account of me,” Gareth had a mischievous look on his face.

Alister laughed. “Speaking of Marissa not hating me, when do I introduce you as you and stop the pretense of your alter ego Greyson?” Alister asked as he crossed his arms behind him to crack his shoulders and then his neck.

“I think you need some more morning practice routines, or you will go soft and won’t be able to carry your own sword in the future. Shall we try tomorrow morning again?” Gareth was trying to change the subject.

Alister glared at him, “give me an answer, brother!”

“Fine, give me a few days. I promise before Exian and Onri arrive you can introduce me,” Gareth retorted. “I will meet Captain Anders for a briefing on the cleanup efforts in the city. Why don’t you go rest and check on Marissa. I probably will not return before dinner, therefore do not wait for me.”

They parted on the second level of the passage in the palace, Alister headed to his suite while Gareth headed up to the third floor. As Alister passed through the stone hallway behind the Duchess's quarters, he saw Yulia step out from the last room before the passage veered toward his suite.

"Yulia, how is she?" Alister startled the lady's maid.

"Your Grace, I did not see you there. The lady has just gone to sleep. I think she is alright. She may need some time to let everything that happened today sink in. Though, she is awfully worried about you," she bowed her head.

A soft smile appeared on Alister's face, *'after what she went through today, she is still thinking about me.'* "Have you gotten any information regarding whom it was that allowed Laura into the palace and disobeyed our rules?" asked Alister quietly.

"Yes, your Grace. After Lady Laura left the palace the night you had arrived, she was seen speaking to a maid. This maid was the same one that was also assigned to her when Lady Laura stayed here for a few months. The same maid had finished her work early the day of the luncheon and had left the palace right after Lady Marissa had arrived. I had asked Anders to watch the maid and he had followed her to Lady Laura's townhome in Uther. This maid now works in the north wing as well."

“Has Charles gotten the guards to take her into questioning?” asked Alister.

“Yes, your Grace, they are holding her in a cell, in the dungeons. They would have taken her to the jails in Uther but with the morning activity and the fire in the Magistrate’s home, they locked her up in the dungeons instead. They are waiting for your command only,” Yulia reported.

“Great! She can spend the rest of today, tonight, and tomorrow there. I will be taking some time off for the remainder of the day,” he said.

“Yes, understood ... Umm, I do have a question. Do you wish for dinner to be served in the dining room tonight or as you had originally planned?” Yulia asked.

“As planned, I’m not deviating from my original intentions,” Alister nodded as Yulia curtsied and they proceeded in opposite directions. Alister looked at the entrance from the secret passage to Marissa’s new bedroom. *‘I cannot believe she is in the emerald suite. My duchess, my sweet blossom. We will be together soon.’* He headed back to his bedroom, to bathe away the grime and the sea salt from the earlier fight with the goblins.

His thoughts veered to Marissa as he sponged away the dirt. Yes, he has been abstinent from sex with other women. But thoughts of her led him to need a self-release consistently. He put on a clean linen shirt, shorts, and his fur-trimmed long robe and proceeded through the passageway to Marissa's room. The room was dark as the patio drapes were pulled together to block out the sun. The light emitting from the candle on her nightstand gave him enough to be able to see the abundance of flowers in their pots swaying around, and the magnolias expanding on the vines that weaved themselves around the bedposts.

He heard her light breathing and smelled the strong aroma of the flowers. His insides hummed with pleasure. Was it the fact that she was within reach of him or was it the flora in the room that has come more alive and practically glowing because the two of them were together in the same space, he wondered but walked over to the bed and squatted down to level his face with hers. He kissed her forehead gently.

“Mhm ...” a humming came from her. He couldn't resist himself to touch her, as he caressed her cheek slightly with the back of his hand. “Mhm ... hmm...” her voice, a bit drowsy, as she fluttered her eyelashes and peered sleepily through them. “Alister?”

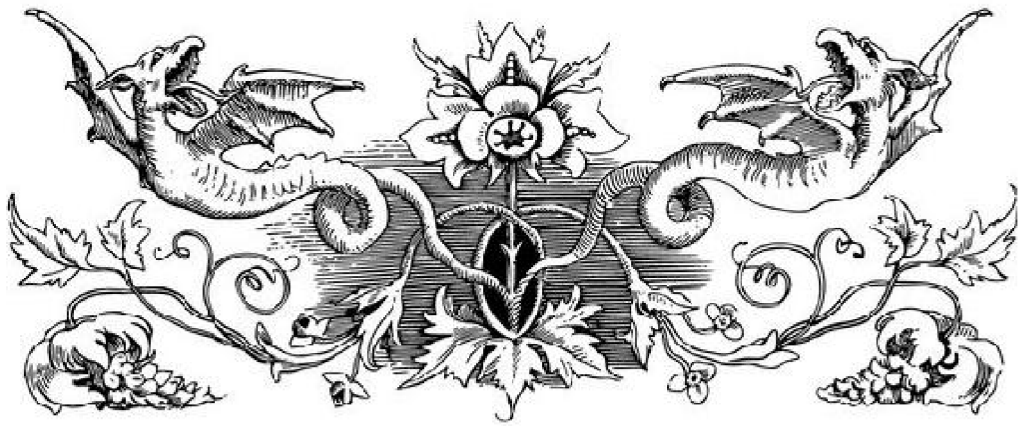
“Shh, yes it's me my sweet blossom. I'm sorry I couldn't resist seeing you. I'll let you sleep,” he said as he slowly stood

up. He was about to turn around to leave but she pulled her hand out from under the duvet and took his hand into hers. “Stay,” she whispered.

He looked back at her. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Just hold me,” she murmured again.

“Okay,” he nodded, as he turned back and got onto the bed. He lay on top of the duvet beside her, pulling her body closer to him. As he wrapped his arm around her waist, she held on to his hand pressing it tightly to her chest. The lavender scent emitting from her hair made him hum with satisfaction, his insides stopped rattling and they both fell asleep in each other’s arms.



CHAPTER 13

Several hours had gone by in the quiet slumber of the Emerald suite. Marissa yawned as she opened her eyes. The heaviness of Alister's arm wrapped around her waist while the other hand was entangled in her hair caught her off guard. She recalled waking up from a restless dream, seeing Alister's concerned face, and then asking him to stay with her.

'I just casually invited him into my bed. Does it even matter though? I am marrying him,' she thought. She ran her fingers against the fur trimming on the sleeve of Alister's robe. His warm breath steadily tickled the nape of her neck, as his chest expanded and pushed against her back. She slowly lifted his arm off her waist, trying to pull away.

"No," she heard him whisper as he pulled her closer to him.

"Darling, I need to get up. Please ... I have to ..."

she said with a hushed tone.

“Don’t go far. I haven’t had my fill of sleep beside you,” his voice was gravelly with sleep. He lifted his arm up for her to scoot out from under the duvet. As she moved away from him, his hand slid against her breasts cupping one with a slight squeeze before he let her go. Startled by his action, she looked back at him with her eyes wide. She could only see a part of his face, but his mischievous grin gave way to his thoughts.

“Behave yourself. You’re in the Duchess’s suite now,” she said teasingly as she got up from the bed just to hear him snort and start laughing.

“My sweet blossom, I did not mean any offense. I wonder though, how will you punish me for my crude behavior towards your lovely supple breasts,” he licked the corner of his lip.

“Perhaps his Grace will have to imagine how the rest of my body feels or tastes till our wedding night. Especially if he continues to take liberties with my body whenever he feels like it. And who knows, that could be months, if not a year from now,” she smirked teasingly as she turned and swayed her hips whilst walking into the bathing room. Alister watched her, heat pooling in his abdomen as he focused on the movement of her curves.

He got up from the bed and proceeded to open the patio curtains, letting in the last of the daylight before the sun was to

set. He heard some shuffling by the door and then a quick knock. “My lady are you awake?” he heard Yulia’s voice.

“You may enter Yulia,” Alister called out.

Yulia entered and curtsied. “Your Grace dinner will be served in your chambers in a few minutes.” Alister nodded and turned his head towards the bathing room. “We are not to be disturbed the rest of the night.”

Yulia understood his meaning as she picked up Marissa’s robe from the accent chair and proceeded to the bathing room. “My lady, did you need help?” she asked seeing Marissa wash her face.

“Oh, Yulia, you’re here just in time. I need you to pick out a dress for me to wear for dinner tonight.” Marissa picked up a hairbrush from the counter and began to brush out her long hair.

“My lady, it will be just a very casual dinner, just you and his Grace. I think you have dressed appropriately already. You just need your robe and maybe slippers so that you aren’t walking on the cold floor.” Yulia held out the robe open for Marissa to slip on.

Marissa peered at herself in the mirror, puzzled by the maid's words. "Yulia, I'm just wearing lingerie." The maid nodded and looked back over her shoulder as she heard Alister's footsteps approaching.

"Please, my lady," she said with a pleading look while still holding the robe open. Marissa put down the brush and walked over to Yulia. She slipped on the robe, and allowed Yulia to quickly fix up the ties, while she slipped on her slippers. Marissa stepped out of the bathing room to be greeted by Alister with his hand stretched out for her to take.

"Come, I'm famished. And I am sure you are too," Alister said. She took his hand without hesitance. "You're not going to even ask why I want you this way. Just in your robe and that sweet little silk number," he cocked his head, grinning as his eyes raked the shape of her body.

"I would hope that you know that I trust you. And I trust you wouldn't do anything to shame me," she offered him her sweet shy smile which he had become accustomed to seeing. He pulled her closer to him, leaning in to capture her lips with his. They left her bedroom and proceeded out of the Duchess's quarters, passing the guards and strolling hand in hand towards his set of rooms.

"I thought you did not invite ladies into your private rooms?" Marissa asked.

“Who shared that with you? And are you some woman or are you my wife-to-be?” he paused and peered at the curiosity in the softness of her green eyes. “To answer your question. No, I have never entertained, or taken pleasure from any woman in my own bedroom. You are the first, and will be the only,” the sincerity in his voice never faltered as he spoke.

She bit her lip, before getting on her toes to kiss his cheek. The uneasiness in her had settled, now that it was clear that she was and will be the only one to share his bed. Marissa leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked past a set of guards through the large double doors. The hallway of his quarters had two rooms on opposite ends, and the light was dimmer than in hers. Charles waited at the entrance to one of the rooms with his head bowed.

The stark resemblance of this bedroom was uncanny to the one Marissa now occupied. Though there were minor differences in the number of plants and the intricate designs of the accent chairs by the fireplace. The mural of Nagendra was larger in contrast and the walls surrounding the mural were covered in cascading sweet autumn clematis instead of the suede drapery and magnolias in her room. The sweet aroma from the flowers had her dragon spirit coil with pleasure.

“I want to spend our first evening together, alone, and undisturbed. I do not want to share our time with anyone else,” he whispered in between leaving small kisses against the back

of her hand. “With the incident that occurred in the morning, I wonder if something of the same may happen again, or worse.” She raised her eyebrows at Alister’s words. “I finally find the love of my life. The woman I am meant to be with. My mate ... and now it looks like I will have to fight off demons to keep her safe,” he sighed, pushing her hair behind her ear and cupping her cheeks with both of his hands. Marissa practically melted into his hold. “I will keep you safe, Marissa. Please, trust me. Even though I know there is strength in you. I will help you bring it forward. Please ... trust me.” She nodded in understanding.

Alister recalled his conversation with Gareth after he had given him his blessing to marry Marissa. *‘Then you must perform a blood binding with her as soon as possible. It would be the best way for you to keep her safe,’* Gareth had suggested.

“Dinner is served,” Charles interrupted Alister’s thoughts, before leading them both to a table set up near the fireplace, with multiple covered platters and decanters.

“Thank you, Charles. Everyone is dismissed. I’ll call on you if we need anything else, but I am sure we will not,” Alister directed. Charles bowed and waved all the servants out of the room, leaving Alister to tend to everything.

“Come, sit here,” Alister pulled back a cushioned dining chair and gestured for her to sit. He leaned over her shoulder as she sat. “I suggest the red wine if you want to try the lamb, or white for the scallops.”

“White will be good. Everything looks so delicious,” she said, her stomach making small sounds from hunger as he uncovered the dishes. It dawned on Marissa that she hadn’t eaten anything since the night before. ” What will you have?” she asked as Alister poured her a glass of white sparkling wine, its fizzing bubbles settling down.

Alister smirked. “Mhm, you,” he chuckled as he rested his hand on her thigh. She choked on her sip of wine startled by his words. He laughed, “Better?” he rubbed her back, enjoying her reaction to his playfulness.

“How do you do that, always acting so shameless? We can’t even enjoy dinner without you teasing me,” she cocked a serious gaze at him.

He laughed again and picked up his glass, “I love making you blush. And I can’t resist making you feisty either.”

“Oh, you enjoyed it when I kicked you in the shin? I can do it again,” she stuck her tongue out at him. He chuckled heartily. Alister didn’t presume anything regarding Marissa.

She was demure and shy when she wanted to be, and a feisty minx when it came to defending her honor.



They continued eating and sharing the food with one another. “Try this cheese, it’s heavenly,” she said as she grabbed a piece with her fingers and brought it to his lips. He held her hand by her wrist, taking the cheese and her fingertips into his mouth. She widened her eyes and blushed as he licked her fingers and then kissed the palm of her hand. “You can feed me anytime you want,” he said with a smirk leaning in to steal a kiss from her lips.

Relaxed, she pulled up her legs under her and leaned back into the chair as she enjoyed the rest of the wine. “Tell me about your parents. What can you remember about them?” she asked Alister.

There was a distance in his eyes, but he smiled and looked back at her. “Everyone says I have my father’s eyes and jaw, and my mother’s lips and hair. But I remember the kindness in my mother’s eyes when she would sing to me. Especially when I would fall out of a tree or Coy would throw me off his tail,” his eyes were glistening and a tear fought its way to get out from his eyelid.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to have you relive any sad memories,” she said worrisome as she wrapped her arm around his bicep and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“I am alright,” he looked down at her. “We have each other, now and always.” Kissing her forehead, he gestured for her to eat. They continued to enjoy each other’s company over the rest of the wine and food. Observing her completely relax around him, Alister said, “there is something we need to do tonight, to strengthen our bond with one another.”

“And what is that?” she asked nervously.

“It is something only done within the royal and high noble bloodlines. We call it a blood bond,” he said. “Don’t look so nervous. Give me a minute, I’ll explain further.” He pecked the tip of her nose before leaving the room into the dressing room and returning within a minute with a small wooden box. The box was made of deep rich mahogany, adorned with carvings of dragons intertwined with one another. Small opal stones were set into their eyes. When he opened the box, Marissa saw a small dagger that appeared to be carved out of bone. The hilt was carved into two dragons intertwined from their tails through their heads, with the bone blade spewing out like fire from their open jaws. A small glass vial lay on the left of the dagger in the cushion of the box. On the right of the dagger lay a small flat stone with scripture, an epitaph, which Marissa recognized as the glyphs used to describe the

language the dragons of old used to communicate with the first settlers of this land.

“How does the blood bond work?” she asked Alister.

“There are two types of blood bonds. The first one we have used for a long time amongst us, the blood brother bond,” he pointed to the scripture. “It reads ‘those uniting in the brethren bond, we will forever protect, align and think as one.’ That is the basic gist of the translation. See here the symbol for the great dragon god Asterot, and those bound by this brethren bond are his knights.” He then flipped the stone over to its back end. Another scripture adorned it, slightly longer than the previous one, with a small image of two dragons intertwined at the bottom. “This is the soul mate bond or a lovers bond. It reads ‘the two joined are now one. What has been joined cannot be undone. One cannot survive without the existence of the other. Both will protect one another’” and so on. And the two dragons intertwined are Asterot and his mate goddess Tiamat.”

Alister opened his large hand and pointed to five small scars that trailed below his pinky along the side of the palm. As he pointed to each scar he said “Gareth, Exian, Onri, Marius, and Xander my blood brothers. A small cut either on the palm or along the pinky or the thumb line. We would let both of our blood mix in the vial while reciting the scripture. Then we would share and consume the blood. To seal the bond there is

one other thing. For blood brothers, we embrace our hands that spewed the blood. But for you and I ... it's more intimate than that."

Marissa looked at her palm and then back up at him. "How much more intimate?" she asked curiously.

He smirked, "I made you a promise, I will not break it. But I did say there are other intimacies and pleasures we can explore."

She gulped nervously, and then held out her right palm, "will it hurt?" He took her hand and slowly traced the inside of her palm with his thumb.

"Depending on what you are asking. The cut may sting at first, but it will heal immediately. But the other ... has a very thin line, between pleasure and pain." He let go of her hand, just to trace his fingers along her inner thigh under her robe. Leaning in close to her ear he whispered. "Some pain can be, oh so pleasurable. But my concern is that you are torturing yourself if you hold back from me, hold back from experiencing everything I can give you. But if you let me in, let the pain and pleasure consume you, you will be in ecstasy like nothing you have ever felt before."

He pushed apart her inner thighs, brushing his fingers over her panties. She grasped his wrist, but he continued to stroke her, firmly and repeatedly, to hear her breath hitch and a soft moan escape her lips. The heat of her arousal was evident against his fingers. “You should have told me that you needed me. Why are you holding back from me?” he bit his lower lip.

“S-stop ... Alister ... p-please,” she stuttered, her voice restricted due to the moans he forced out of her.

“Say yes,” he breathed out, his focus was on her parted lips and her little moans. She nodded in response. He stopped his ministrations, pulling away from her and taking out the vial and dagger from the wooden box. “Take this and hold it firmly.” She took the vial, her hands slightly shaking. “Breathe Marissa, no need for us to spill more of our precious dragon blood than necessary,” he said. He cut into his thumb, letting his blood drip into the vial while murmuring the words written on the stone. “Are you ready?” he asked. She nodded, placing the vial on the table.

Alister breathed out as he held her thumb over the vial, piercing it with the dagger. He continued to murmur the words as droplets of her blood slowly seeped into the vial. Once he finished, she pulled back her hand and licked the remaining droplets on her thumb as she watched him swirl their blood. A sudden tension in her belly, made her wince. Heat spread

across her body down to her core, causing her breathing to hitch. She removed her robe and left it on the chair behind her.

“I need some water,” she said as she poured herself a glass to ease the throbbing heat in her face, throat, and stomach. She did not realize that the entire time Alister was watching her. His gaze was that of a starving man, shining with intense desire.

“Even your gaze is ravenous, fiancée,” she said smirking while putting down her glass.

“I’m gluttonous for your body, mate,” he sighed as he bit down on his lower lip. He swished the vial one more time and drank half of it. Alister took her free hand into his as she drank the rest of the blood. His eyes were ever watchful as she licked her lips.

“What?” she asked. “Is there something on my face?” He nodded, pulling her closer to him and swiping his tongue across the corner of her lip to capture the remaining droplet of blood.

They gazed at each other for a split second before their lips crashed against one another. She let out a heady moan against his lips as he devoured them. There was nothing gentle about his kiss, his tongue intrusive, tackling her tongue, and teeth that nipped at her lips in between. He held her firmly as he

traced his tongue from her mouth down to her shoulder, licking and nipping at her neck in the process. He meant for her to feel his burning desire, for their dragon spirits to coil and bask in each other's heat.

“If you can admire and touch my body, I should be able to do the same to you,” she bit his ear lobe, hearing a groan escape his lips against her neck. She pulled her hands free of his embrace, pushing his robe off of his shoulders and tugging at his shirt to come loose from his shorts. “Take it off,” she urged.

He looked back at her wide-eyed, dropping his robe to the ground and slowly removing his shirt. “My little minx, you can touch me all your heart desires.” She gazed at his broad chest. Her eyes took in the strong biceps, as she traced her fingers along his carved muscles down on his chiseled abdomen. She let out a sigh as her fingertips caressed his skin right below his belly button while her lips gently grazed the burn mark, she had left on his chest more than four months ago. *‘Only the gods can create a body like this,’* she thought.

He let out a heady moan from her touch and trail of kisses. A burning sensation enveloped his body, his dragon spirit yearning for hers. Alister wrapped his hands around her waist, bringing her closer to him as he caressed the small of her back. “A sweet blossom in public, but a minx in private,” he whispered before he grabbed her butt and lifted her off the floor. A startled squeak escaped her throat, but she

instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to the bed across the room. Their lips met again, the kiss curling her toes.

He climbed onto the bed, squeezing her butt before he laid her down. “Mhm ... o-ouch,” her voice squeaked from his sudden bite on her lip. He sat up on his knees in between her legs, as his thumb traced her trembling lower lip.

“I will not hurt you,” he reassured, moving his hands to her legs. She nodded, watching him trace small circles around her right ankle with one hand, while his other hand slowly slid up from her calf and down the back of her leg. She clenched, feeling his fingertips caress the edge of her panties before they slid under. His breath hitched as he was met with the warm moistness of her arousal.

“Why are you blushing, my minx,” he teased her. The pink hue across her cheeks and neck was evident. His fingers continued their teasing as his thumb circled her clit, pulling several heady sighs from her. Alister’s lips fell to the top of her breasts, using his free hand, he ripped the top of her lingerie open to expose them fully. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that,” he whispered against the tender skin of her breast.

“It’s alright, you just sta ...” she moaned loudly as his fingers invaded her slit, spreading her open and thrusting into her slick depths. His tongue slowly twirled around her

sensitive nipple, taunting it. “Alister!” she moaned out his name. He sucked in her taut nipple, teasing it more before letting go of it with a pop, and moving on to attend to her other breast. He continued to intensify the rhythm of his fingers, making her raise the pitch of her moans and sighs. Marissa grasped at the sheets with one hand, while running her fingers through his hair with the other. Her toes curled, and her body arched under him. The heat now pooling in her core as she felt her walls clench around his thick fingers.

“Do not torture yourself, let go for me,” his words brushed her ears. He continued to thrust his fingers into her relentlessly, pulling at her swollen clit. She came apart in his hands, releasing the build-up of her climax. She panted, her body arched, staggered, and fell back onto the bed. He breathed in her scent, as he slowly pulled his fingers out and traced the pool of wetness along her slit. She twitched from the sensitivity, as he smirked and put his fingers in his mouth to taste her release. “My delicious, sweet blossom. A flower you truly are,” he teased. Her cheeks flushed and she covered her face with her hands. “Don’t do that. Don’t cover your face.” She shook her head under her hands. “I see, have it your way,” he warned.

She gasped and jerked as she felt the stubble from his face scrape along her inner thighs. He wrapped his arms around her hips and forced her legs over his shoulders. His lips tasted her release. “I’m glutenous,” he murmured before his tongue took a slow lick of her arousal and flicked her clit. “Alister. What

... what are you doing, stop!” Marissa cried out. His eyes locked on hers as he shook his head. His tongue continued its work, thrusting, flicking, and demanding another release. He sucked in her clit and peered back up to meet her eyes. But she already leaned her head back and more of her moans filled the room. Each lick and stroke of his tongue drove her senseless.

‘Feed me your release,’ his voice enveloped her mind. The slick noises of his feast surrounded them. He pressed her harder, his own dragon spirit intoxicated by her arousal. He needed her release. Feeling the tension build up in her abdomen again, she squeezed her thighs around his face. *‘That’s right my minx suffocate me with your delicious pussy,’* he linked her. Alister’s voice tingled her very spine in ecstasy. She had come completely undone, convulsing her release all over his mouth. He licked it all up, savoring each drop of her cum.

She heard him murmur into her inner thigh a few minutes later, “mhm, mine.” Catching her breath and trying to calm her pounding heart, all she could think about was him and what he had just done. She squeezed her eyes shut. *‘Is this how it is meant to be with lovers, and mates,’* she thought. She felt him shift positions above her. “More?” his lips slightly grazed her earlobe as he put the question out to her. His weight pinned her to the bed. She felt him, his erection beneath his shorts pressing against her abdomen. *‘Yes,’* the word she couldn’t say out loud. She yearned for more of his touch, her body suddenly needy, and her mind forcing her to act.

She kissed his neck, the sensitive crook by his shoulder, as her hand traveled along his abdomen to undo the ties of his shorts. Sliding her hand in, she was surprised by the rigid thickness of his sizeable erection. Her fingers made an educated exploration of his cock. The bulbous head was slick with his precum, and the skin of the thick veiny shaft was warm to her touch. Alister sucked in a breath as she circled the tip, pulling the moisture down his girth. "You're not as inexperienced as you claim to be," he whispered in her ear.

"Did you forget who is one of my closest friends? She many times over shares her experiences," she sighed against his jawline, while teasingly stroking his cock. Alister suddenly sat up, pulling her hand off him. "Did you not like that?" she asked suddenly feeling disappointed with herself.

"Sweet blossom, there is nothing I want more than to claim you ... to make you feel all of my thickness spreading you open ... and to bathe you in all of my cum," he smirked revealing the turgidness of his cock.

She pulled up onto her elbows staring at him and then back at his hand fisting his cock. "I am not ready Alister."

"I know. But I told you there are other ways for us to enjoy each other's bodies," he beckoned her closer to him. "Show me what else ... your friend shared with you," he said

watching her innocently lick her lips. She averted her gaze for a second, biting her lip in contemplation. Marissa was well aware of what he was asking for. She hasn't forgotten his remarks regarding the length of her throat and what he wanted to do to it. Her mind immediately went to the night she walked in on Nicola and Vincent.

Her tongue peeked out. "Then let me play," she winked at him. Alister stilled, his brows raised, as he swallowed hard. She licked the leaking tip, savoring the taste of him, before stroking his erection with both of her hands. She peered up at him, his eyes wide with sheer surprise. She licked him again, this time running her tongue down his shaft and back up to the tip. She wanted to hear his pleasure-filled hisses ... his husky satisfied groans.

"Fuck me," he breathed out. "My minx ... take me into your pretty mouth." His eyes glowed a deep green hue of desire. She did without hesitation, descending onto his cock with all of her throaty depth. "Look up at me," he hissed, shifting and bucking his hips. "Ha ... you look so good, flushed with my dick straining in between your lips." He growled, angled her head, and pushed his length deeper down her throat. His hands gripped and twisted in her long golden blonde hair, as she continued to work him into a growly moaning mess. Her hands braced against the thickness of his muscular thighs. The heat of his pleasure arose within him. He was close to spilling into her throat. He peered down into her tear-filled eyes, hearing

her gag a little. “I don’t want to cum just yet,” he strained out, stopping his thrusts and pulling out of her mouth.

She took in a heavy breath, wiping at her lips. “Lay back down,” he reached for her chin, and their eyes met for a split second. As soon as her head hit the pillow, he spread her legs apart and swiped the tip of his cock along her wet slit through her pelvic area. She twitched, surprised by his action and the feel of his cock against her sex. “Not enough,” he murmured, leaning down and letting saliva drip from his mouth onto her pelvic area.

Marissa’s face was riddled with surprise and questions. “Now you’re wetter,” he grinned, slapping the top of her sex with his cock. Squeezing her legs together, and pulling her feet up onto his shoulders, he rocked his hips. Her wet inner thighs and their squeeze around his girth gave him the friction he sought. His cock rubbed at her clit with each of his thrusts. Marissa gasped, not prepared for her body to be usurped this way. The familiar dull ache formed at her clit, throbbing and begging to be released again. “Play with your nipples for me.” His words coaxed her to tweak and roll her nipples for his watchful eyes, making him elicit a mischievous chuckle.

“Ali ...” she moaned, biting her lip. “Keep going.” He grinned knowingly as he picked up the pace while himself eliciting pleasure-filled hisses. “I’m ... going to ... cum,” she

breathed out. Her body writhing, her hips undulating to meet more of his friction as she pulsated her pleasure once again.

“That’s it ... that’s my good girl,” his heady groan filled the space between them. The room was soon filled with humming sounds coming from the surrounding plants, the aroma settling in their senses. “Only you ... Marissa ... only you,” he sucked in his breath, as he spurted his cum all over her belly. “So much ... shit ... so fucking much,” he mumbled his curses. His cock still pulsating and releasing his build-up over the months of abstinence.

Catching his breath, he lowered her legs off his shoulder and kissed her bent-up knees. “Give me a minute.” He put up a finger and she nodded in return, herself still dazed. He got off the bed, dropped his shorts to the floor, and walked towards the bathing room stark naked. She watched him ... admiring his broad shoulders, sculpted back muscles, thick muscular legs, and the firmness of his ass. “My mate ... mine,” she sighed.

Alister returned within the minute with a towel and helped clean off his cum from her belly. He tugged up her shredded lingerie, helping her remove it. Her skin was flushed, as he traced his fingers from her belly button to her breast. “Are you enjoying yourself?” Alister asked her teasingly, laying on his side, and absorbing the heat of her skin.

Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. “Why do you ask when you know the answer,” she giggled.

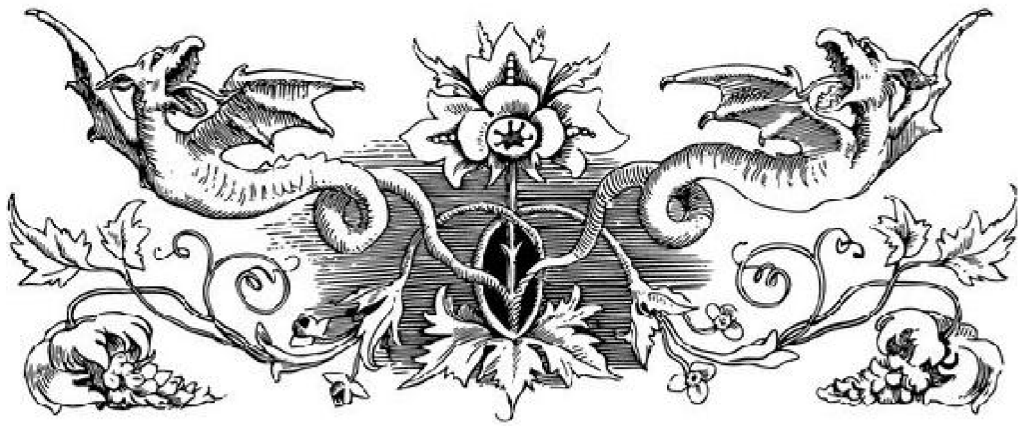
“I asked you a question. I expect an answer,” he whispered as he nibbled on her earlobe, while his hand cupped her breast.

She let out a small moan. “Keep me warm, and I’ll answer,” she retorted back. Grinning, Alister pulled the duvet from the edge of the bed over them. Wrapping his arm around her firmly while she laid her head on his chest. “It was amazing. All of it. I’ve ... I’ve never felt such sensations before,” she said. “I love you, Alister. I really do,” she looked up at him with her soft green eyes filled with devotion.

He caressed her cheek. “I love you too. Only ever you.” He kissed her lips, savoring her taste, and her scent as they remained in each other’s embrace.

“Can you hear them, the flowers and plants?” she asked him.

“Always ... since I can remember, and even more now that we are together. You were always meant to be mine, as I am meant to be yours,” he said. He ran his fingers from her cheek through her shoulder and down her arm, before interlacing them with her fingers.



CHAPTER 14

Marissa woke up to a sound of melodic humming and a weight enveloping her body. She rubbed her eyes, and the sweetest smell absorbed her senses. Her eyes widened as she realized the cascading vines that wrapped the bedpost had crept down and covered her up. She felt their embrace as protective, while the trumpet lilies in one of the pots swayed and emitted a melody. She turned her head towards Alister's side but saw his space empty. She slowly sat up and watched the vines retract to the bedpost, releasing her from their embrace. She looked around the room. "Alister? Are you here?" she called out to him, but there was no answer.

She looked to the table where they left their last night's plates from their dinner, and saw it was cleared. Though she did notice it was replaced with a ceramic teapot and a platter of fruit and cheese. The knock on the door, drove her attention to Yulia's voice, asking if she can enter.

“Yes, Yulia, come in,” Marissa called out as she pulled up the duvet to her shoulders to cover her nakedness.

“Good morning. I hope you slept well” Yulia said cheerfully.

“Good morning. What time is it? And have you seen his Grace?” Marissa asked.

“It is pretty early. His Grace has been up since dawn. Lord Greyson has him preoccupied with combat training.” Yulia’s eyes trailed to the table seeing the teapot and food. “Lady Sandra, your ... stepmother is awake and wishes to have breakfast with you. Do you wish to head back to your quarters to freshen up, or?” she asked as she walked to Marissa’s side bringing up a new chemise for her.

“Has his Grace had breakfast yet?” Marissa took the chemise and pulled it over her head.

“I believe something light here. He is not one for routine, but he also does not eat heavy breakfast before combat training,” Yulia said as she walked over to the dining chair that still had Marissa’s robe draped over it. Marissa got out of bed seeing her slippers were beside the bed, and her lingerie neatly folded on the edge.

“Has someone come in the room earlier, or after his Grace had left for training?” she asked, wondering who had cleared the table, brought the food and set her things in place.

“No, mistress. I was the first to enter the chambers since his Grace left,” Yulia answered. “Besides no one can just enter his Grace’s rooms, only three of us have a key. And well with you in his Grace’s chambers, he won’t allow the two men to enter without his presence.” Marissa peered at Yulia’s face looking past her at the bed with wonderment. Marissa looked back to see the thicker vines moving across the bed and pulling the duvet to cover the bed again. “They are a wonder, aren’t they?”

Marissa gazed at the vines still moving around the bed and held her hand out for one of them to wrap itself around her palm. She caressed the vine and its leaves, “thank you my friend” she whispered, and the vine retracted back to the post. Marissa slipped on the robe and slippers and gestured for Yulia to take her back to the duchess’s suite.

“I’ve already chosen a dress for you,” Yulia nodded. “And started to prepare the bath. Come this way though, as the majority of the staff are already out there doing their chores. I am sure you do not wish to leave his Grace’s chambers and walk down the hallway in your robe and chemise in front of them,” Yulia winked at Marissa.

Marissa scrunched her nose, “yes you are right about that. So, which way should we go?”

Yulia led Marissa into Alister’s bathing room. Marissa was surprised to see how large it was. Several tall mirrors adorned the walls, hydrangeas in multiple colors hung from the ceiling, and water lilies floated in a large built-in pool. The pool was adorned with jade marble and gold leaf vines. 2 large dragon statues stood on opposite edges, water floating out of their maws into the pool. Yulia led Marissa to a large mirror on the opposite end of the room and pulled on a small-gilded branch in the wall beside it. Marissa heard a clicking sound and the mirror slowly loosened from the wall, revealing a door.

“A secret doorway, how interesting,” Marissa was suddenly intrigued.

“The entire palace is built around secret passages leading in out of many halls, and chambers,” Yulia started to explain. “In almost all main chambers there is a door leading out into the inner wall passageways. Most of the doorways are behind a mirror like this one, they are marked with gilded branches or leaves, and they can be found either in the bathing room or the dressing room of the chamber. The inner wall passageways connect throughout the palace to make it easy for the handful of us to be able to lead anyone out,” Yulia said.

As they exited out into a narrow passage made of dark grey stone Yulia turned and pulled the door behind her. “The doors must be locked behind at all times. This hallway leads to another passage which then splits between the west and the east wing, and a set of stairs leading either up or down to the cave entrance. If you recall when you arrived yesterday morning through the caves? The stairs from the beach cave led to several halls. One hall leads to the armory, the other to the ground level of the palace’s north gardens, and the third to the stairs leading to the hallways behind the north offices and art gallery. If you had continued ascending the stairs, you would have ended up here above the art gallery and behind the duchess’s chambers.”

“Yes, I recall there were several gates and passages that had to be opened for us to continue up the stairs. Does everyone have keys then to the passageways?” Marissa asked as they walked around the corner towards another long narrow hallway.

“No, not at all. The head of the guard assigned to patrol the beach has a key that opens the gates in the hallways and the stairs, the armory, but he has no keys that access the level of chambers or the offices. Hence why you came through the passage leading out nearest the south hallway. There are master keys of course that lead to all the chambers and all the passages.” Yulia stopped across from a staircase behind a gate

and handed Marissa a bronze thick key, with an emerald stone on its hilt.

“This is a master key. Only I, Charles, and Captain Anders have a master key. His Grace has the rest and will give out a key only to those guests whom he trusts. The stone on each key hilt is different and is part of identifying which keys are being used to enter. A chamber can be left by anyone who knows where the doorway is but getting back in or getting into another passageway or chamber is impossible without a key.” Yulia took out her key, it was bronze and thick as well, but with a citrine stone at the hilt.

“This staircase,” she pointed to behind an iron tall gate. “Is the only one in this passage leading to the floor above. It is also locked by this gate. If you see here by the lock, there is an embedded onyx. This indicates that only the master key with the onyx stone can open this gate to lead upstairs. The gate is easily opened from the other side, there is a hidden lever. Though, since I have never had to use this staircase before I couldn’t even tell you where it is. His Grace asks that no one goes up this staircase if you see it open, as it leads straight into the High King’s private rooms,” Yulia continued.

“D-did you j-just say the High King,” Marissa suddenly stuttered nervously.

“Yes, his majesty will reside in the King’s chambers designed specifically for him. This is the King’s residence when he is supposed to be in Orlean. Though he has not been here in many years. His main chamber is actually right above yours,” Yulia said as they crossed the path and stopped in front of another door. Near the keyhole, Marissa observed small citrine, emerald, and onyx stones. “Press the emerald on your key hilt against the emerald by the keyhole, it will open up the door,” Yulia pointed out. Marissa did as instructed, watching the emerald push into the wall and hearing the door unlock.

“How interesting,” Marissa said entering her bathing room. Yulia continued to draw her a vanilla and citrus bath while Marissa undressed and inspected the bruising around her inner thighs. Her breast prickled with small reddish and blue bruising as her thoughts went to his perpetual need to play with them. Her skin was covered in goosebumps and her nipples were taut and rigid from the chilly air. *‘Thank you Alister for your hickeys. At least they will not be visible under the dress,’* she crinkled her nose with laughter. She took a quick bath, enjoying the sweet-smelling soaps and flowers.

“Is everything to your liking mistress?” Yulia walked back in with fresh towels and a silk robe.

“Yes ... can I ask you something ... something intimate,” Marissa looked down into the water.

“Of course,” Yulia replied, narrowing her eyes.

“Do you have more of that ointment you gave me yesterday, and does it work on ... um this type of bruising?” she asked timidly pointing to the hickeys on her breasts.

“Yes, I do, it will soothe the pain, but the discoloration may not go away for a few days,” Yulia helped Marissa out of the tub, observing her body for any other marks. “Was he a bit rough with you, I’m sorry for asking,” she noticed more bruising along Marissa’s inner thighs and hips. “Young men, they never know when to stop. You can tell him to slow down or be gentler, I am sure he will not be rough next time.”

Marissa sighed at the thought that if this bruising is just from his lips and his hands squeezing her, what kind of pain and bruising will she be in when they have sex? “I’ll make sure to tell him that, when we actually make love,” Marissa let out her breath as she slipped into her undergarments and had Yulia help her with her corset.

“Oh, I thought you have already,” Yulia was surprised, as Marissa shook her head whilst blushing.

“No, no we have not. He has been for the most part a complete gentleman,” Marissa snorted at her own words,

though realistically he has been pushing her to accept his advances, and experience more.

“I see. Well then, we will have to make sure he continues to be a gentleman, at the very least until you are ready,” she winked. “I picked out this light yellow off-the-shoulder dress for you. Do you wish to wear it, or we can look at another dress?”

“It’s beautiful. It’s perfect” Marissa said cheerfully as she slipped on the dress



Yulia led Marissa to a small dining room on the second floor near the east wing. When she entered the room she saw Augustus, her stepmother, and Captain Anders. The table was oval and set for a more intimate gathering.

“Lady Marissa, you look well rested,” Augustus was the first to greet her when she entered.

“Good morning, I hope you weren’t all waiting for me,” she arched her brows.

“Marissa, you are glowing,” Sandra crossed the distance between them and the two women embraced one another. “I thought we were going to see each other last night for dinner,

but Yulia told me his Grace had invited you for a private dinner. I'm assuming it went well?" Sandra caressed Marissa's cheek and interlaced her fingers with Marissa's. Marissa nodded giving way to her rosy blush. "Come, I don't know if you remember Anthony, I mean Captain Anders, from when he was in Valance with his Grace. He was the one that discovered our situation and managed to bring his Grace and the royal guard to the capitol in time," Sandra walked with Marissa to greet Captain Anders.

"Yes, of course, I remember meeting you in Valance several times. If it wasn't for your quick thinking and bravery, I cannot even think of what could have happened to me and my mother. I do not even know where to begin to thank you for what you have done,' Marissa was humbled by this man's actions.

"There is nothing to thank me for. I simply acted upon my instincts to protect you," Anthony responded bowing his head.

"I understand what you are trying to say but nonetheless I have to find a way to thank you for what you had done," Marissa said. There was something familiar about this man in front of her. His appearance and his demeanor were peaceful and kind she thought.

"I cannot stress enough, as I had already stressed to Lady Sandra, my role here is to protect his Grace and his family. I

cannot even imagine what he would have done if we did not make it in time to retrieve you from the Dunne. Though knowing him well, he would have gone after you no matter where they would have taken you,” Anthony responded. Before Anthony could say anything else, Charles rushed into the dining room with two servants behind him carrying additional plate settings and silverware.

“It appears his Grace and Lord Greyson will be joining you for breakfast after all,” Charles directed the servants to finish setting up the table.

There was a considerable rush as footsteps and deep laughter approached the dining room.

“You purposefully flung the sword to distract me just to use your tricks to disarm me. And then you went for my neck. I enjoy my head on my shoulders, perhaps next time, do not try to behead me,” Alister said to Gareth as they walked into the dining room.

“The enemy will not be concerned if they are to behead you or drive their sword through your heart. To them your death needs to be imminent,” Gareth continued, chuckling at Alister’s words. Alister stopped in his tracks, eyes wide. Gareth, picking up on Alister’s behavior, turned to find Marissa standing next to Sandra.

'Do you need assistance lifting your jaw off the floor, brother? She is definitely stunning,' but seeing Alister not responding nor moving from his spot, Gareth made his way to Marissa instead.

“Good morning, Lady Marissa. You look quite stunning today, like the warm sun, and yellow daffodils,” taking her hand in his, he kissed her knuckles. She blushed and gave him a small bow.

“Good morning, Lord Greyson. Thank you for your compliment. I hope you did not go too hard on his Grace this morning with your combat training,” she said, her eyes lowered under her thick eyelashes.

“I only ever try to teach, to make him stronger,” he peered down at her. He quickly and lowly whispered to her. “I suggest you go to him,” before letting go of her hand and heading toward Sandra and Anthony. “Lady Sandra, just the woman I wanted to see,” Gareth said cheerfully.

“Lord Greyson, good morning. Thank you for last night’s tour of the palace,” Sandra curtsied. Gareth gestured for her, Augustus, and Anthony to take their seats.

“Lady Sandra, come sit next to me. We have a lot to discuss regarding the newly engaged couple,” Gareth said to her. “The

first ball of the gathering will be held in a few days from now, and his Grace wishes to make a formal engagement announcement.”

“I am under the impression that his majesty would have to be involved in the announcement,” she furrowed her brows at Gareth, the man she knew only as Lord Greyson.

“Well of course his majesty will be involved. We just have to decide on when the announcement is to be made, how it will be made, and inform his majesty when he should be involved. Other than that, as her sole parent, you will have to bestow your ritual blessing during the engagement announcement, after, of course, his majesty does his,” Gareth said as he pointed out some of the rituals for a royal engagement announcement.

“Lord Greyson, you are extremely informative. I was wondering what were some of the rituals?” Sandra asked.

“Queen Mother Alessandra of Ladon will be arriving in a few days. She will be great in giving advice for events post-formal engagement announcement. In the meantime, Anthony here can help you with anything you may need,” Gareth said. Anthony nodded his head in agreement, his eyes not leaving Sandra’s face.

Marissa slowly approached Alister, trying to decipher why he was not budging, but suddenly he crossed the distance between them. Placing his hands on either side of her waist and pulling her close to him. “I did not want to wake you. You were so peaceful in your sleep my sweet blossom. But now I wish I did, just so that I could watch you get ready,” he whispered to her. “You are the most beautiful woman I had ever laid my eyes on,” he let out a small satisfied grunt as his eyes traveled over her curves and back to her face.

“Alister...” she blushed. The burning heat rising between them.

“Kiss me,” he whispered, and she obliged. Their lips connected in an innocent embrace, the complete opposite of their zealousness from last night.

Gareth cleared his throat to get Alister’s attention. *‘Ease up on the girl,’* Gareth linked Alister, causing Alister to sigh against Marissa’s lips and break away.

“It’s going to be a long day ahead. Will you be alright staying in the palace? Greyson and I have some work to do in the capitol,” Alister said to Marissa as he pulled a chair out for her at the table.

“Yes, of course. I was going to tour the rest of the grounds,” she said.

Augustus inclined his head from across the table and chimed in, “Lady Marissa, if you wish, I will be staying in the palace and have some work in the greenhouses and the medicinal garden. I can tour you around the grounds.”

Marissa perked up with eagerness. “That would be wonderful. I actually wanted to visit the medicinal gardens. I am extremely interested in the plants and their uses.”

Augustus gave her a curt nod. “His Grace already informed me of your interest in the subject. I will be holding lessons throughout the gathering for those seeking to better their abilities.”

“Great, Augustus I entrust my fiancé to you. But don’t let her mind run away with yours,” Alister chuckled and the rest of them laughed as well.

They ate their breakfast and continued to keep up the lite conversation. Marissa observed an odd closeness between Sandra and Anthony, as they easily spoke to one another as if they were friends for many years before. She found this development interesting and wondered what she had missed

while she and Alister stayed in bed for most of the previous day and the entire night.

Feeling Alister's hand caressing her thigh under the table, Marissa had to snap out of her thoughts and stop mid-bite to give him a glare. He smirked back at her. "Can I eat without you being so handy," she whispered to him.

"Doubtful, very doubtful. I cannot keep away from you," he whispered back and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

Marissa bit her lower lip, blushing yet again. "In a few days, it will be Eliza's birthday, and I wanted to see her in Chester for the day..." she said but was interrupted by Alister's sudden glare and answer.

"No," he shook his head.

"I understand if you are busy and cannot come with me. I wouldn't want you to amend your plans. But I really would like to see her," she gave him a pleading look.

"I already said no. I cannot just let you travel to Chester, especially after what just happened yesterday. You are safe here in the palace and with me. But I must finish preparing for everyone's arrival and cannot just accompany you to Chester," he said sternly.

“If you need my assistance in preparations, please tell me and I will be here to support you. But please reconsider. She is my dearest friend, and it would mean the world to me,” she lowered her eyes so as not to meet his stern gaze.

Alister stood up from the table. “Greyson and Anders I will be ready in a few. We must head out.” Leaning in, he whispered to Marissa, “I do not want to argue. But I cannot agree to let you go to Chester alone. I will see you tonight.” She nodded, still unwilling to meet his gaze. He read her reaction and after kissing her cheek, he left the dining room with Anthony and Gareth trailing behind in their own conversation.

“Are you alright?” asked Sandra to Marissa. “Whatever this was about, do not take it to heart. He is just being protective right now.”

“Yes, I understand. I just do not want to lose who I am and my friends,” she said sulking.

“I know. That is why I said this position will be strenuous. Being a royal comes with significant responsibilities. Take your time with Sir Augustus,” Sandra kissed Marissa’s forehead. “Take this time to learn everything you can about the people of Orlean. Starting with the senior nobles. They will be here during the gathering, and you need to show them why he

chose you to be by his side. Royal marriages are not always about love, but how you will strengthen each other and provide together for the people of your Kingdom.”



“Have you toured the whole of the palace grounds?” Augustus asked Marissa as they were leaving the small library with a handful of books.

“No, we only had luncheon on one of the patios, and walked through the west garden, I think, to the maze. Though, there was an abundance of fauna and flora, oh and the arched trees which were beautiful and unique,” she sighed as she thought about that day. *‘Life changing.’*

“Ah, yes the west garden. I’m assuming you didn’t pass the maze then?” he asked.

Marissa smirked, thinking of the way Alister maneuvered everything during the luncheon. “Well, we walked to the maze and spent some time in the garden near it, but I didn’t venture into the maze. I think I will leave it for the day of one of the events of the gathering, perhaps then,” she shrugged her shoulders. They continued their walk through the far east of the trail. “Are those the greenhouses, where some of the year-round medicinal herbs and plants are grown?” she asked seeing several large glass sheds.

“Yes, and further up, spruce and birch tree garden. You can see their arched shapes on the long path ahead,” he pointed with his chin, his long white beard swaying in the breeze. Marissa watched Augustus use a key similar to the master key Yulia had given her earlier to open a door to one of the greenhouses, but his key had a citrine stone on the hilt.

When they entered Marissa immediately observed several tables at the entrance with books, parchments, vials filled with liquids, and dried plants. A small section of one of the walls was shelved and on it, more vials, labeled and signed. Along the path, long tables filled with planters, and pots, sprouting different plants and herbs.

“I want you to have this book to take back with you. Though all the other books and parchments are always accessible here, they cannot leave the greenhouse. I believe you will get a key of your own. Possibly different than the one I have, but it will open practically any door in the palace and on the grounds,” he explained showing her the key. Marissa nodded in understanding.

“This is wonderful,” her eyes lighting up with excitement as she opened the book to peek through the pages. As they walked to the long tables, she heard a humming sound and noticed some of the plants swaying around. “Oh, is this not the

valerian plant,” she immediately observed the familiar plant with its small pink bulbs and miniature flowers.

“Yes, good eye. The book is alphabetized, so open it to V and locate the information regarding the plant and all of its uses,” he said. While Marissa did as instructed Augustus walked over to another table and brought over another plant. “Do you know what this is?” he asked as he brought over a large pot with tall thin stalks with small white flowers.

“I’ve never seen this before,” she responded.

“And you would never see it anywhere unless you live in the south of Ladon or have access to this garden. This plant is special as it is used in many of the Meiji rituals. And if it is properly harvested, all parts are used for many different remedies and ailments. Since one of the most important rituals will be held later this month, the High Priestess of Meiji has asked for this plant to be harvested and readied. Now the important part of today’s lesson will be opening up some of that energy within you and see if you are able to connect to the plant’s emotions, needs, and controls,” he said.

“Lesson? What do you mean by controls?” she asked puzzled.

“If you have at least half of Nagendra’s blood running through you, you can control some of the plants, trees, and greenery around us. Though again it all depends on your disposition and character. The plants are living beings and can sense your resolve. If you intend harm, they will not respond, but if you are trustworthy and mean well, they will open up to you. So, what we will do is a simple bonding ritual. If it works you will be able to actually hear and speak to the plants. And you can then control more of what they can do,” he further explained. Marissa nodded, not surprised as she has been hearing the flowers recently hum and murmur, though she couldn’t understand what they were saying.

Augustus continued to explain the bonding ritual and Marissa agreed to do it. “Once I stop saying the words, you are to take a bit of soil and press it to your lips followed by your forehead. Then use your mind to just say hello to the plant in front of you. If it works you should be able to speak to the plant,” he continued to say as he flipped through pages of a smaller book. He started the ritual and Marissa did as he instructed.

‘Hello, princess Mari. We have longed for your voice,’ the plant’s humming turned into words.

Marissa’s eyes widened in surprise, but without lingering too much on the feeling she responded. *‘Hello ... what is your name?’*

'We have many names as we have been called Lace, Carrot, and even sometimes Queen Anne,' the plant responded.

'I have to say this is my first time doing this, being able to hear your thoughts. Can you help me and tell me why are you so important to the Meiji?' she asked.

'We do not know what they use us for. They use all of our parts, the flowers, the seeds, the leaves, and roots but we do not know,' they responded.

'That sounds sad, I must say. I wouldn't want you to be used for something terrible or without your knowledge. I will find out. But in the meantime, will I always be able to speak to you and the other plants or is it something that can come and go?' she asked.

'You will always be able to speak to any of us. Mostly we will all sway and sing. Only if you decide to speak to us directly will we be able to speak to you like we are doing now. The same way we are with our beloved princes. Mother Nagendra is full of love seeing them return home,' the plant giggled swaying around. Its voice sounded like that of babbling babies and toddlers still learning to speak.

'Princes?' Marissa asked confused by its reference.

'Why Coy and Alister of course,' the plant replied.

'Oh, right, I understand now. They are both her descendants and are connected to each other,' Marissa nodded in understanding.

Augustus cocked his head, observing Marissa's changing facial expressions and hand gestures. "I am assuming you are having a conversation with them?"

"Yes, rather remarkable. It is like they have been waiting for me to open up my mind so they can talk to me. Incredible," she said with excitement.

"Well, what did you learn about the plant then?" he asked curiously.

"Well for starters their name varies and looking in the book, one of the names is here Queen Anne's Lace. Though they do not know what they are being used for. So that's a question I have for you?" she asked.

"The plant has many common uses. But for Meiji the seed and the flower are the most important," he ran his fingers through his beard again, questioning if he should share with Marissa the use of the plant. "Do you know why the sacred

ritual to celebrate our Goddess Tiamat is so important for the Meiji?” he asked Marissa, and she nodded.

“The sacred ritual celebrates when Tiamat had given birth to Asterot’s offspring. Volos, the firstborn of both dragon gods, was conceived when the gods took human form, and he was born in a human body,” Marissa recalled her lessons.

“Yes, that is why we celebrate the ritual. The significance for the Meiji is that they were the ones to call on the dragon gods to come to our world. And they are the ones that assisted our ancient gods and their future offspring in their transformations, from dragons to humans and back to dragons. But most importantly they assisted them all in producing heirs, the dragons and ... well us ... men and women with the disposition to contain the dragon spirits and control their powers. The Meiji were tasked over the millennium to continue the work of containing the gods’ powers, in the heirs of their blood,” he rambled on, picking up another plant and setting it in front of Marissa.

“Augustus, I am aware of this. But now the blood of the first dragons has been spread out so much, that almost all of the Drakon population can name the dragon god they could be descended from,” she said trying to sway Augustus to the point.

“Well even though that is the case now. The blood and the abilities of the gods are still strongest in the royal family and

the highest of nobles. The point of the celebration was always to produce the next High King of Drakon. Volos's blood is extremely potent, being of two deities and most arduous to contain. Because of that, the Meiji have been choosing always the purest and richest dragon blood women to participate. Sometimes even sacrificing themselves to maintain the potency of the powers of the ancient dragon blood. After all, it is a mating ritual," he continued. "However, in recent centuries the dragon spirits within us have begun to call to their mates. Therefore, when possible, produce offspring with significant abilities, which we can cultivate. The High Kings of the past and many nobles have found the ritual no longer viable, and no longer want to see their daughters be sacrificed to carry a child of a completely anonymous winner of the hunt. So, to answer your question. The plant is used to suppress a pregnancy, a sort of abortifacient."

Marissa's jaw twitched, she was visibly shocked by the revelation and a bit annoyed by the significance of the ritual. *'Sacrificing a woman's purity to a stranger that wins a hunt, just to get her pregnant? In hopes of producing the next heir? This is absurd!'* she grumbled inwardly.

"The books you have read on the internal dragon spark, the call of the dragon spirit does not mention all of this, does it? I know I sound like I am an old man just rambling on, but if you are to be a dragon leader, then you need to know everything. The Meiji practice the ritual in celebration of the gods, but

now they adhere to the King's rules. Making sure the woman that is to represent Tiamat does not become pregnant.”

“Then why continue the ritual at all, if the point is lost to the past,” she asked.

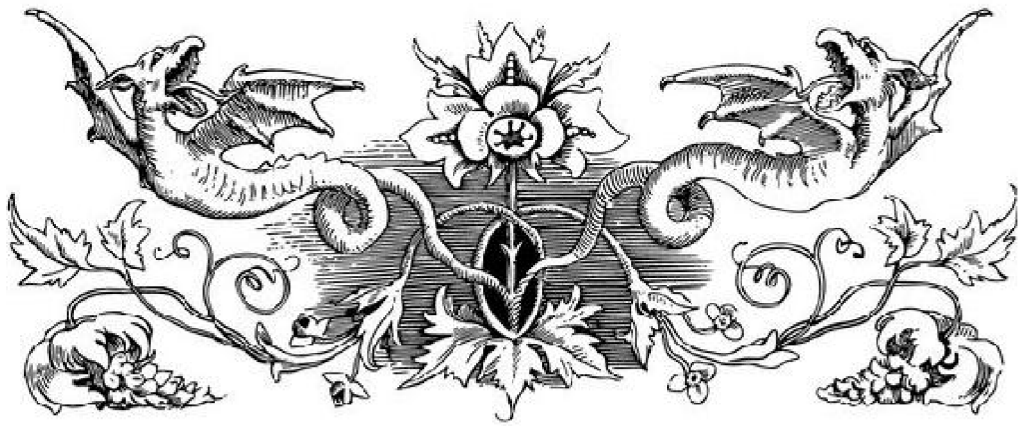
“Now that is a good question, and perhaps as a leader, you can bring that up during a council meeting. Maybe you will bring that change, either back to the old ways or end it completely,” he observed her confusion and hesitation. “I will tell you this though. Being someone who is good with plants and herbs, you may be asked to procure things or make things for the Meiji and other nobles. Just be cautious. There are other plants in here that can have different effects as well,” he said looking around the space.

“You really are a lecturer. I just wish there was a room of people for you to lecture to,” she said and they both chuckled.

“Let's move on shall we? There is much more to see and learn about. I'll make an herbalist out of you yet,” he handed pruning shears to Marissa and nodded toward the plant.

Marissa trimmed a few flowers and leaves from Queen Ann's plant to start drying them, while August mixed a few already prepared ingredients for a concoction. “An afternoon

well spent,” Marissa grinned as she dug her hands into the soil, making space to move a small plant into a larger planter.



CHAPTER 15

Alister, Gareth, and Captain Anders spent their morning in the capitol. Using their abilities, they assisted in the rebuilding of damaged homes from the fire which spread from Magistrate Orson's home to the center of the city. They also made their way to the docks, though there was minor damage there, they did want to search the area for anything that may have been missed.

“When Exian returns in a few days, I will have him, and his water serpent riders lift up the wreckage from the bottom of the sea inlet so we can investigate further the appearance of the goblins. And perhaps find out how they managed to get around the Straits of Batieg without being halted at checkpoints,” Gareth said to Alister.

Captain Anders went through the lists of all that lived in the area with significant abilities to continue the work of rebuilding, while Alister and Gareth made their visit to the main hospital.

“Your Grace we are very pleased to receive you. With the tragic occurrence, we have had a great outpour of volunteers and donations to help those injured, and those who lost their homes and loved ones,” the main physician said as he led them on the tour of the hospital. “We have made strides to make sure we housed everyone that needed our support.”

Alister nodded, taking in all the information as he looked over the hospital request for further financial support. “That is good to hear. We have assessed the damaged homes and businesses, as it is not minor work, but with our abilities, we made good progress. Anyone that was displaced will be able to return to their homes soon,” Alister said.

“That is wonderful news, your Grace. In addition to your arrival, Earl of Chester and Duke Norester arrived not too long ago as well to lend support and bring more medical equipment. If you wish to meet them, I can lead you to their current location,” the physician suggested.

“Yes, let’s do that. We can discuss the next necessary steps with their support,” Alister said, as he peered over at Gareth and Captain Anders. “Captain, I believe you have an ongoing investigation to complete. You are free to head back to the palace.”

Gareth, who was beside Alister slowed in his steps. *‘And this is where I will leave you. The last thing we need is for Klaus to recognize me and make everything and everyone uncomfortable with my presence,’* he mind-linked Alister.

‘I will let you know if we return in this direction, or get ready to head out,’ he responded to Gareth.

Gareth waited for Alister and the physician to leave before he walked in the opposite direction, turning into one of the hallways. He walked through a hallway noticing several women ogling him and whispering. He put on his dark spectacles so that none of those staring at him would notice his silver steel eyes. He noticed a group of elderly women standing in front of double doors talking about their grandkids and the orphans. ‘Children’s Ward’ the sign read above the double doors.

“Oh, poor things they must be frightened. Though their injuries aren’t fatal, they really needed someone to come and soothe their thoughts and pain,” one woman said.

“May the goddess bless the young lady for her help. She is skilled in calming the frightened children and taking their pain away,” said another.

Another woman exited the room and hushed the chatting women. “Most of them are resting now. She will stay longer to help the rest of the young ones. Either keeping them entertained, easing their pain, or soothing them to sleep as well. Now let’s go and see if we are needed in another ward. I think the lady will be fine on her own, here,” she rushed the other women away from the room.

Gareth’s curiosity got the best of him. He wanted to know whom the elderly women were speaking about. As he saw no one else in the hallway he decided to enter the ward. Once in the room, he noticed how large and long it was. There were many small beds, though they were not all occupied as he did see small children everywhere. Some were reading, some playing with toys, and those with injuries were sound asleep. He heard a few children sobbing in the distance of the room and a woman’s voice soothingly cooing to them.

“Oh sweetheart, do not be frightened, do not cry. It is only a few injured bones. But you will get better soon, and the pain will go away. You should rest now so that you can wake up all healed and better soon,” she said before she started humming a soft tune, turning it into a calming lullaby for the child.

Gareth’s eyes widened with surprise *‘that voice, it’s her again.’* His ears perked up and he felt a coiling warmth form in the pit of his stomach which then spread throughout his body. *‘Eliza’* he hummed her name. He slowly approached the

area she was in, observing her quietly. Her flowing bright auburn hair was pulled up off her face, revealing her freckles along her cheeks and forehead. Her luscious lips, which he wanted to bite, were parted as she released her melodic voice.

He noticed her clasping a little boy's hand. As her song smoothed and her voice lightened to a whisper, he could see the boy's veins in his arm become thick and grey in color. The boy kept staring directly at her, as his veins looked like they connected to hers and something was passing from the boy to her.

Gareth understood, she was taking away the boy's pain by taking it into herself, but with her mind abilities, she could easily trick her sense of pain to think nothing of it. She didn't flinch at all. The boy's sobs had dissipated, and she wiped the last of his tears away. "All better now?" she asked. The boy nodded but suddenly turned his face and looked past Eliza, causing her to turn and look as well.

She recognized him immediately and with a soft smile she nodded. "Lord Greyson, what are you doing here?"

"Same as you I would say, Lady Eliza," he said, returning a polite smile. "I see your brother was not exaggerating about your prospective powers. You're doing amazing." He watched her tuck in the boy and caress the boy's hair till he closed his eyes. Gareth felt a sudden tug on his heart, his dragon spirit

humming ‘*Mate*’. He took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. ‘*Fuck, not right now, breathe.*’ His heart was in his throat, pounding rapidly, hands clamming up. Suddenly he felt a tug on his pant leg and he looked down to see a little girl standing at his knee. One of her arms was in a sling, and she looked like she has been crying as well. Gareth squatted down beside her. “Hi little one,” he said.

“Y-you are very t-tall. My d-daddy was t-tall but not like you. I like the braids in your h-hair,” she stuttered as she touched the small braids hanging behind his ear.

“I like your pretty caramel eyes. What happened to your arm little one?” he asked.

“I w-was walking with m-mama from the fish m-man, and a b-big m-monster pushed m-mama and I. M-mama didn’t get up, and my arm b-broke,” she said as she continued to play with his braids and then touched his unkempt, thick beard that covered half his face with her tiny hands.

“Let’s get you tucked in bed. I’m sure your father will be here soon to take you home,” he picked up the girl and carried her to a bed.

“Let me tuck her in,” Eliza said as she approached him.

“I’ll do it,” he said as he touched the little girl’s temple and she fell into slumber immediately. Eliza arched her brows in surprise. She has never seen anyone with abilities to put someone to sleep and so quickly.

“Is his Grace here?” she asked Gareth.

“Yes, he is meeting with the Earl now,” he answered turning around to face her. Her scent hit him hard. *‘Mhm ... sweet peony ... just breathtaking...’* he couldn’t help but stare at her, though she had already turned from him.

“We were informed of the attack and the fire at Magistrate’s home just last night, so we decided to come here to help. I was hoping to see Marissa as she was supposed to be staying with her stepmother at the Magistrate’s home for the next few days, but we have yet to locate her. I’m just so worried...” she twisted her hands nervously.

“She is at the palace with her mother,” Gareth interrupted, the least he could do was ease Eliza’s nervousness regarding her friend’s whereabouts. “She is fine,” he said nonchalantly, watching a rosy hue settle on her cheeks. His insides purred.

Eliza’s eyes widened and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, great Tiamat, I was so worried. I wanted to come here last

night as soon as we found out. Uncle Klaus was wondering why his Grace didn't send for his help right away."

"His Grace is more than capable of taking care of the pest without involving others," he knew he was being short with her. However, he felt the need to get away or he wouldn't be able to control his dragon's urge to pounce on her in such close proximity. "It was good to see you, Lady Eliza," he bowed his head and made his way to the exit.

"If you see Marissa, please let her know I am thinking of her," she said.

"His Grace will come to speak to you shortly regarding his future wife," Gareth smirked as he watched her surprised reaction, turn into a wide smile across her face.

He left the room and walked towards another hall that was empty. Leaning back against a wall he took in several deep breaths. *'What was that? Why does she keep affecting me so?'* he thought to himself. *'Alister, um Eliza is volunteering in the children's ward. If you intend on speaking to her about Marissa, this would be the time,'* he mind-linked Alister.

'Klaus just told me and we are on our way there. I am assuming you have left?' he responded.

'Yes, I'll meet you at the palace,' Gareth sighed and made his way to leave the hospital. Walking out into the main street, Gareth decided to leave for the palace without having the guard follow him. He needed his own space and time to reflect. To think about what he just felt after hearing Eliza sing, and her overall presence near him. He was about to settle his horse when he saw Vincent and several other men across the cobble path. One of them was taking notes, while an older man was speaking to them.

"Lord Greyson!" Vincent called out to Gareth, as he left the group behind.

"Viscount. What brings you here?" Gareth asked. He was being cautious, trying to make sure that no one in the group could potentially recognize him.

"My father and Duke Norester are in the hospital. My uncle Duke Polignac and several of our associates are discussing a proposition we have for his Grace and his Majesty," Vincent spoke.

"His Grace is inside. I am sure he will make time to hear out your proposal," Gareth retorted, trying to leave. He knew if Klaus were to see him, even with his long beard and grey hair, he would recognize him immediately.

“I was hoping I can ask you for your advice. Your knowledge has been invaluable, and I know I can trust your opinion,” Vincent said.

“Alright, I’m listening,” Gareth said as he mounted his horse.

“The empty space near the hospital. We have some ideas on how to support the surging issue of overcrowding, between the orphan ward and the hospital. My cousin Eliza and Lady Marissa actually came up with the idea after the luncheon. A separate orphanage, that will boast a school as well. We have an idea for a location, and we are working out the finances. Do you think this is something the King would approve of financially? Considering this is an expense that will not be financially profitable,” Vincent asked.

Gareth let the idea seep into him. *‘Eliza thought of this? hmm.’* ... “Profit doesn’t necessarily have to be financial. Think of the progress if more children with abilities are able to develop their knowledge of how to control and better use their ancestral bloodlines for benefit of our continent ... This is a good idea ... Just prepare the costs of building, staffing, supplies needed, and will any of the royals be needed to support with the use of their abilities. The King arrives in two days, have the proposal ready before the ball,” Gareth responded. “I must be off, Viscount.”

“Thank you, Lord Greyson. We will see each other at the gathering,” Vincent nodded and watched Gareth gallop away on his horse.



Marissa found herself wandering through the small north garden, perched atop of the cliff above the beach. Freshly planted rows of multi-color tulips made their way towards pink and lilac wisteria trees. With a set of books in hand, she sat on a large grassy knoll under one of the wisteria trees. “I’ll make a quick study of you,” she flipped open a history text of Orlean nobles. A gust of warm wind flipped up the pages. And a soft rumble behind her made her stiffen. She slowly turned her head back and was met with the glowing emerald green of Coy’s eyes. She didn’t know what to do as the only time she met and interacted with him was when she was accompanied by Alister. She watched him near her cautiously, his head low to the ground, almost smelling the grassy knoll she was perched on. He growled lowly, and a sort of soft whistling sound came from him. She did not move and tried to keep calm. At the end of it all, Coy’s sharp fangs and long claws alluded to her fear of being ripped apart by a dragon. The size of his head was nearly the length of her, while his body was large enough to accommodate four riders comfortably.

His eyes blinked and his head turned sideways, observing her stillness. Coy continued to approach her cautiously, sniffing the grass with his large snout. She finally heard him

hum before he lay down with his head between his front paws staring at her. They stared at each other for a few minutes before Coy let out a short grunt and began to wag his tale. Marissa realized he was being playful and wanted her attention. She laughed and put her hands together, palms up. Coy immediately purred as he crawled up a little more and put the bottom of his maw onto her palms.

“You’re just like a puppy needing some attention,” she breathed out as she rubbed his jawline, causing him to wag his tale harder. “Alright, just don’t go thrashing your tale around Coy, you will destroy the tulips behind you.” He snorted and let out a deep exhale. “Oh, I see, you agree that you’re a large puppy. Okay, I need to get some reading done. If you want, I will scratch your head if you just lay down beside me,” Marissa said, hoping he could understand her.

Coy blinked a few times and crawled closer, wrapping himself around her and lying down on his side. She leaned back against his soft underbelly, with the book in her lap and his scaly cheeks beside her for her to scratch. As she continued to read, she thought about the plants around them and what she had learned. She closed her eyes and thought about the tiny vines on the ground. She asked them for help to give Coy some scratches on his back. Watching the vines sprout up from the ground, they made their way to Coy and slowly began their dance across his back. Coy let out a few low purrs before

Marissa undoubtedly heard his low snoring. “Perfect, now I can finish this book,” she murmured.

Alister walked through the hall to the north wing toward his office when he returned in the early evening. When in the office, he noticed the eeriness, the silence and wondered where everyone was.

‘Gareth, have you returned to the palace?’ he mind linked Gareth with hopes he had returned.

‘Yes, I’m in the ballroom with Charles and the staff as they begin to prepare to decorate,’ he responded.

‘There are no servants in the north wing, and I haven’t seen Marissa. Any idea if she had returned from her lessons with Augustus?’ he asked.

‘Oh, you have not seen her yet. Go out to the wisterias in the north garden and take a look,’ Gareth’s chuckle made Alister wince.

Alister made his way out to the garden, wondering what Marissa has been up to. He stopped in his tracks as he saw Coy’s enormous body lay coiled below a pink wisteria. Vines were randomly moving about his scaly torso, and his ears picked up Coy’s mild purring. “What are you doing Coy? You’re scaring the staff. They’re not used to having you out

here on your own. Come on Coy wake up...” he was interrupted by Coy’s sudden light growl as Coy lifted his head and glared at Alister. The vines moved back onto the ground and Coy got up slowly, still growling slightly.

Alister cocked his head, ignoring Coy’s growling to see the lush green grass beside him shift and pull back. “What the fuck... COY WHAT DID YOU DO!!” he shouted as he ran through the tulips. Coy shifted backward, head lowered and whimpering as Marissa slowly got up from the lush bed of grass. “Marissa, are you alright?!” Alister exclaimed as he ran up to her.

“Yes, why are you yelling?” she asked annoyed at Alister’s sudden outburst and interruption.

“What did Coy do to you? I saw you laying on the ground,” Alister panicked as he glared at Coy. The emerald dragon whimpered, backing away and pressing up against the large wisteria.

“No, no Coy, calm down. He doesn’t mean to yell at you. Come here,” Marissa cooed, holding her hands out to him. Coy ducked his head, grazing his jaw against the grass, wings tucked tight at his side as he crawled behind Marissa, coiling his tail around her legs and pressing his snout to her. “Why are you yelling at him? He was sleeping and I was comfortably

reading on the grass beside him,” she said, her shoulders squared and hands on her hips.

“I’m not prepared to see him interact ... alone ... with you. I thought he crushed you, or perhaps worse decided to eat you,” he said. Coy lifted up his head, eyes focused on Alister as he hissed disapprovingly. “Coy you know very well you sometimes randomly pick off an innocent person for a meal. I’ve told you before no eating people unless otherwise instructed,” Alister retorted. Coy continued to lowly hiss and shake his head, letting out a few rumbles from his chest. “Well, you should be sorry for making me worry, and ... ugh, no do not be sad. Clearly, I was wrong to yell at you.”

“Now that you two have calmed down and apologized, I am going to continue reading right here. The two of you can decide whether you want to stay or go,” Marissa rolled her eyes and climbed over Coy’s coiled tail around her legs. Marissa walked back to the wisteria and sat on the opposite side this time. Both Alister and Coy watched her in awe, she was firm and fearless. Coy purred, tail wagging again.

“I loved her first, Coy. I’ll love her for all eternity,” Alister sighed. They both walked over to her, with Coy low to the ground, almost crawling. “What are you reading?” Alister asked as he sat down beside her, and Coy lay behind them allowing them to lean on him for comfort.

“The history of Orlean rulers, and other important families,” she cocked her head. “I can’t believe someone sat there and wrote all of this. But now I know about the other families, Duke Norester, Earl Tavo, Earl Polignac, and did you know Captain Anders gave up his title and lands as Marques of Anders to his younger brother?” she looked over at Alister for confirmation.

Alister sneered. “Yes, that I am well aware of. He gave an oath to my parents to protect and guide me when he was barely nineteen. My parents were killed just days after he had taken the oath. I was barely five.” Marissa intertwined her fingers with his, her thumb caressing the knuckle of his thumb. “I have tried countless of times to return his titles and land, but he refuses till this day,” he said looking at the ground. “Technically he is Duke Norester’s eldest son, which means when the duke passes away that title and land will belong to Anthony, as well. Perhaps he will finally take a step towards what he deserves.”

“Why do you call him Anders then, if that title belongs to his younger brother?” Marissa asked curiously.

“His brother died at Mercer three years ago. He had no children and so naturally the title goes back to Anthony. Duke Norester is overseeing the lands and the deeds at this time but that also is not going to be for long. The King has decided to give the Marques of Anders title and lands to Vincent, for the

contracts for the war horses. If he accepts that is,” he continued to explain.

“Oh, I see. This is quite a bit of political movements. I still have a lot to learn here,” she sighed, feeling a bit defeated. Alister wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her against him.

“I’m sorry for earlier today,” he whispered to her.

Her eyes widened, “sorry... for what?” she asked.

“I should have been more reasonable to listen to you when you asked to go see your friend for her birthday. I was not trying to come off ...” he was interrupted by her lips pushing up against his. Wrapping his hands around her, he pulled her against him, and they stayed in that embrace letting their mouths devour each other for a few minutes.

She pulled away with a smirk across her mouth. “The next time you decide to order me around and not consider my feelings, remember these lips, and how they taste. Because I will not spare another kiss for you if you treat me like I’m your property or that my opinions are insignificant.” She did not realize how truly upset she was by his words and actions until he brought it up.

He grabbed her waist again and pulled her on top of him, causing her to straddle him.

“What are you doing, let go,” she screeched at him, shoving his chest.

“I love you even more when you become this feisty. A sweet blossom in public and a minx in private,” he grabbed a hold of her hair and pulled her head back to expose her entire neck to him. She felt his breath on her skin and his lips trailing kisses along her neck down to the top of her breast.

“Alister stop it, not out here like this. Especially with Coy right behind you,” she groaned, her hands grasping his shoulders firmly.

“We can always take this back to the bedroom if you like,” he wiggled his brows, and continued to kiss the top of her breast.

“Perhaps after dinner you can join me,” she looked down at him, meeting his eyes and winking at him.

“Well, I am famished. Let’s make it an early dinner than,” he continued to hold his mischievous grin. Coy grunted and suddenly got up, walking away from them to the edge of the cliff.

“Hmm this is a position we will need to try soon,” Alister grabbed a hold of her hips and pulled her tightly down against the firmness of his growing erection.

“Alister ...” she squeaked as he flipped her onto her back. Getting a hold of both her hands above her head, he used his free hand to pull up the skirt of her dress, exposing her legs and thighs.

Using his weight to hold her from squirming he stated firmly, “Let’s clarify something. You are an independent woman and can do pretty much whatever you want within the means of your power and title. But you are still mine, and I prefer for you to not disobey me when all I am doing is thinking of your safety.” She stared up at him, eyes large as a doe. His free hand now moved along her inner thigh, feeling the silky softness of her skin. His lips slowly brushed against hers, as his hand cupped her sex. His fingers teasingly caressed her over her panties, feeling the wetness forming. She sighed and bit her lip. “As far as being significant, my love, you are the most important person in my life. And soon the most important woman in all of Orlean,” he purred against her lips. His fingers pulled at the edges of her panties, grazing the slick entrance. “Fuck you’re so wet,” he swallowed, pulling at her wetness and spreading her entrance. Working two fingers in, he grinned as she moaned out and ground up her hips

against the friction. He continued to drive his fingers in and out of her quivering walls, hearing her moan under him.

“As your punishment for cuddling up next to Coy earlier, we are not leaving here until you cum on my hand. You are mine and I am the only one you will sleep next to, cuddle up to, and keep close to your body,” he whispered against her breathy moans. “Do you understand me? My jealousy has no bounds when it comes to you.”

She gasped with each of his deep thrusts into her pussy. “Yes ... yes,” she mewled the words through her panting.

“I want to hear you Mari, louder,” his tone demanded. His fingers thrust faster, deeper. His thumb found her swollen clit, pressing harder, making her moan louder. “I love your heady moans. I don’t know how much longer I can hold back from you,” he groaned while pressing his forehead to hers. The familiar throbbing ache pulsating deep in her core.

He felt her insides clenching around his fingers, tight and pulsating, as she screamed out his name in her pleasure-filled voice releasing her climax all over his hand. “That’s my girl. Next time ... I won’t be so nice ... and let you actually cum,” he laughed at her surprised expression, muffling her protest with his lips and intrusive tongue. He let go of her hands, and she pushed him away. Using the opportunity of having her

hands freed, she managed to slap him across the face. He glared at her “what was that for...”

“I told you not out here where anyone can just see us, and Coy right here. I felt disrespected just now. No amount of pleasure will change being disrespected. I love you, but I will not stand for your shameless behavior. You’re a Prince of Drakon, show some decorum,” she was fuming whilst glaring at him and trying to wiggle herself from under him. He rolled to his side to release her and burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he caught his breath while she continued to slap his arms. “I truly am sorry, it is never my intention to ever disrespect you, or make you feel like I have. I thought you understood that I do not care about other people’s thoughts about my behavior. My behavior is my alone,” he looked up at her as she stood from the grass. “I am struggling to hold back from you. I want you. I want to take you, right now. All it takes for me is to breathe in your scent and I am aroused, burning for you,” he continued to say as her glare softened. He could tell she was taken aback by his words even in her anger.

He sat up, looking at her trying to fix her dress, brushing off the grass attached to her. “But that bit about Prince of Drakon and decorum. That one is hysterical. The debauchery that comes with that title is luckily remaining with Gareth. Do not misunderstand me. I have significant sexual needs.

Considering I haven't bedded anyone since before I met you at Maskar, I am very much pent up and ready to burst," he sighed as he got up.

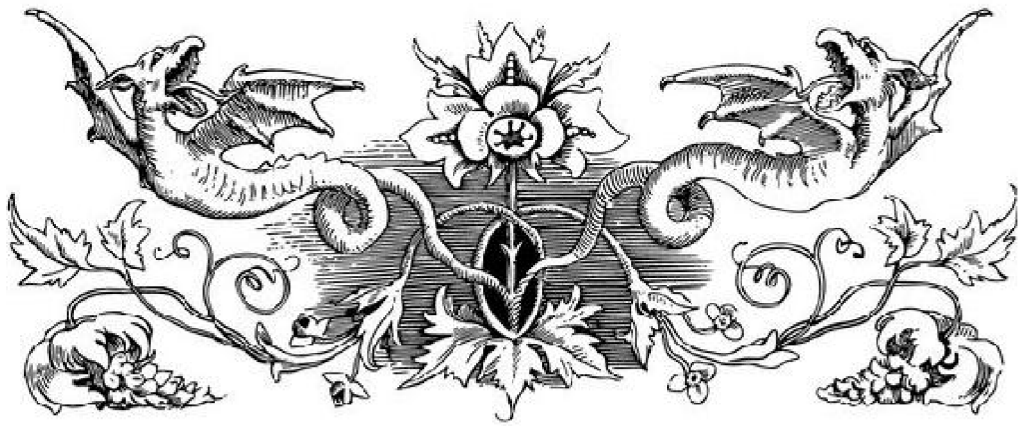
She scowled at him in silence, but this time she noticed his eyes burning with a rich deep green glow. He blinked a few times and the glow diminished, returning his eyes back to their emerald shine.

"I do not know what to say to make you understand. You may not care about what others think of your behavior, because well ... you're a man and a prince! No one would dare judge you. I am on the other hand a girl. And in our times, it is very rare when a woman holds more significance than a man. I am always judged for the smallest thing. The last thing now I need is to be judged on how easily I caved to your demands, to be another girl on your list of easy conquests," she said with her arms crossed in front of her, and her lower lip pouted.

He stood up and wrapped his arms around her. "You're my fiancée, there are no other girls. And it is only healthy for our relationship to be active like this. No one would dare judge you. And if someone is out of line, I will punish them ... and you can punish them too," he kissed her forehead. "Let's go, so we can freshen up and have dinner. I am seriously starving ... unless you want to feed me your deliciously sweet nectar of

your wet pussy,” Marissa peered up at him, wide-eyed. He chuckled as he licked the corner of his upper lip.

“Ugh, you are insatiable. Let’s go in before you make me want to kick you in the shin, again” she groaned as she pulled out of his embrace. Alister continued to chuckle, and they walked back to the palace hand in hand.



CHAPTER 16

Nathaniel gasped for air as he surfaced in a deep mosaic pool. He rubbed at his eyes, blinking to restore his vision. He was back in the goblin fortress, the stronghold of the goblin prince, Ziel.

The goblin commander, Tronk, crawled out of the mossy green waters of the moat right outside the main tower of the goblin fortress. The remaining goblins followed behind him, growling dissatisfied. “This was not what was planned, commander,” one of them spat. Tronk bared his teeth, growling out an order to regroup.

“We must notify prince Ziel, before our great king returns for his claim,” he hissed to Nathaniel when he found him in the pool struggling to get out. After changing into dry clothing, they made their way to see Prince Ziel. They had lost the ship, and half the crew, and most importantly they did not have Marissa. They knew they would have to explain the involvement of the Drakon royals in their failure to obtain her.

“Tronk explain to me, what happened with the ship. This was a foolproof plan, so why did you and Nathaniel return through the water passage without the girl and half of the soldiers I gave you?” Ziel snarled at them. He waved his hand at a servant, “bring the other one here.”

“We were ambushed unexpectedly by Drakon’s King and his menacing brothers. We had no idea they would come for the girl. I had to make the decision to leave her behind or risk open war with them!” Tronk growled, almost hissing at the prince. Ziel glared at Tronk and then back at Nathaniel.

“Nathaniel, you did not tell us your daughter was important to those disgusting half-breeds,” Ziel scoffed. “I might have sent more goblins if that was the case. Now how am I to explain this to Samael? He will not be pleased with only one. They are already half human and half mixed dragon blood.”

“My daughters will both be perfect for the great dragon. It is only a delay in attaining Marissa. For now, he will have to do with one, and we can plan out how to get Marissa and any other of the dragon-blooded females he wants,” responded Nathaniel. The servant returned, pulling a dark-haired girl by her arm to Ziel.

“She is a pretty one, though. Come here, Ermina. I want to make sure you are ready to be gifted to Samael, the real

Dragon God, and our King,” he pulled her onto his lap, caressing her arm with his thick leathery fingers. Panic settled in her eyes, as she frowned at Ziel and then at her father. She didn’t know what was next for her, nor was she prepared for her life to change so drastically.

Ermina scowled at her father. “What is going on?” She was skeptical of her father’s actions from the beginning but the only way to keep herself safe was to stand her ground and oblige the goblin prince. “Where is Marissa? Father, you said she will be arriving soon. But now...” she was interrupted by several figures, goblins, men, and dragon-like creatures walking into the long hall.

“ZIEL! What is the meaning of this? WHY IS MY PRIZE ON YOUR LAP!!” a deep voice roared from someone in the group. A man, or at least he appeared as a man, stepped forward from the group and Ziel immediately stood up, pulling Ermina to stand with him.

“Great one! I was not expecting your return today. I was just going to test the prize for strength and dragon blood potency,” he said, evidently surprised by Samael’s sudden appearance.

Ermina peered directly at the man, seeing his multiple razor-sharp fangs protrude and glare directed at Ziel. The man’s shape was broad and large, with charcoal grey and silver striped long hair, that hung straight below his shoulder blades.

His exposed arms were covered in scars, markings, and what appeared to be charcoal dragon scales protruding from his skin. As he neared Ziel, Ermina observed his face, wide jaw, large enough to shred a goblin's throat open, nostrils wide with what appeared to be smoke billowing out, and his eyes large and bloody red. A loud displeased roar came from him, causing Ziel to shrink to his throne-like chair, while the others stood still unable to speak.

“Tronk! I was informed you were not successful to get the other girl. And Nathaniel, I see Tronk has let you come back with him here without delivering what was promised. What am I to do with just one?” Samael huffed.

Tronk stepped forward and bowed. “Great one, we had an unexpected situation arise. We did not expect her to leave Valance for Orlean. Making our journey longer. It appears the dragon gathering is in Orlean this time around. When we had taken her, the mortal dragons came for her...”

Tronk was interrupted by a loud roar coming from Samael. The dragon scales on Samael's arms stood up, fluttered, and retracted. The markings disappeared and revealed smooth bluish skin underneath. His face, too, had started to shift. Eyes widening and turning red with specks of grey. His jaw squared and smoothed out. The fangs retracted, setting his broad mouth to a human demeanor. Ermina couldn't take her eyes off him as he radiated immense power.

Samael glared between Tronk and Nathaniel and moved quickly. Lifting Tronk by his throat and roaring. “DO NOT EVER MENTION THEIR EXISTENCE IN MY PRESENCE!” The walls, the fixtures, and the ground they stood on shook. Ermina froze, her breathing stifled while Nathaniel fell to his knees in front of Samael.

“Those abominations, the other dragon gods were eager to create, and seed this world with. I will see them all annihilated one day and take what is rightfully mine. Asterot’s and Tiamat’s mortal throne here and the one they sat on above,” he dropped Tronk on the ground. “Nathaniel, now that your other daughter is aware of your betrayal. How do you propose we take her from the clutches of those half-breeds? Tell me human, what else can you offer me?” he sneered, glaring down at Nathaniel.

“Great one. As you have heard, the gathering of the dragons is happening in Orlean. My son does not know of what has transpired, or that I have given my loyalty to you. Perhaps I can send him in my stead to fetch my daughter. We will need to act quickly as the first of the gathering is within a few days,” he spoke low while looking down at the ground.

“Make it happen. He should meet my daughter in Orlean as well ... to help him. Ziel, I have not seen Laura in many

months, has she made any success in her assignment?” Samael had calmed down as he spoke to Ziel.

“She has not returned yet. She was supposed to make contact a few days ago but has not. I have sent another messenger to locate her,” Ziel swallowed nervously.

Samael nodded though his displeased appearance still rattled Ziel. He looked over at Ermina up and held out his hand. “Come, young one.”

Ermina walked down the few steps from Ziel’s throne over to Samael. Gliding effortlessly, her eyes riveted on the godly creature in front of her. He looked her up and down, pulling her closer to him. “I can smell the human in you, trying to overwhelm the Ladon blood. Do you have any of Ladon’s abilities, young one?” he asked her.

She nodded and swirled her fingers in the air. The water in the fountain and the dark liquid in Ziel’s glass sprung up in thin lines across the room. Suddenly pausing in midair, the water burst into a misting drizzle. He chuckled. “This is what I meant that those abominations kept all the powers of Asterot and Tiamat for themselves. A pure Ladon child can summon the sea while in a desert and create a monsoon in the iciest of places. Looks like Exian is not going to give up his blood that easily to anyone. Luckily we have an abundance of pure Ladon blood already.”

“I am half human,” Ermina bowed her head. “This is all that I am able to do or know how to control. My apologies if I do not please you. But I will do whatever you ask of me and more ... my king,” she pouted while peering up at him innocently through her lashes.

He smirked. “Yes, I can see that.” His fingers played with the ends of her long dark brown hair.

“Ruxen!” he called. A mixed goblin female emerged from the group of his followers. “Take Ermina to be prepared for the ceremony tonight.” Ermina bowed and followed the female goblin out.

“Nathaniel, if either of your daughters gives me a strong dragon male offspring, I will enrich their lives and give them something only my children and their willing mothers have. Pray for their success,” he said to Nathaniel. “Come we must discuss the next strategy.” Nathaniel stood up from his knees, bowed, and followed Samael out.

Tronk waited till the hall was cleared and approached a still-shocked Ziel. His red eyes were filled with disappointment. “I know what you must be thinking, brother,” Tronk exhaled. “You are the eldest of his living children. Or at least of the ones that are not in hibernation.”

“Do not lecture me,” Ziel spat. “I have been nothing but patient with him. Biding his orders and ruling this forsaken plot of land. But I deserve more. I earned more!” Ziel plopped back down on his throne, snatching up the glass from the pedestal and swallowing the remaining liquid. “He uses my mother to ... our mother ... ” he looked up at Tronk, acknowledging the truth. “To prepare his little half-breed human concubines for him to breed. Yet, we are here. Have been here for a century,” he pointed at Tronk with his chin. “And nearly two centuries,” he patted his own chest. “I deserve to be his one true heir to his armies, to his sacred city of Ormar, and to the remaining lands under the Okumi desert.”

“What if he wakes the ones hibernating? Those foul creatures are worse than his other experiments,” Tronk said.

“If he wakes them, then I will have died, and the others are still too young to rule. But he will never give me my birthright if this girl and the others bear him male dragon children. All he wants and cares for is to find the perfect balance of his and the other god’s powers,” Ziel hissed. “To control every element in the mortal lands, before he brings down the gods above. I will prove him wrong. I am his perfect offspring. What is more perfect than the balance of his shifter dragon blood and my goblin blood,” he growled low.

“Ziel, be patient. These half-human half-dragon girls may not be able to produce him the offspring he desires. He has

tried with just humans many times over the centuries and has failed. And even if they miraculously do fall pregnant, who is to say they will give birth to a male? Look at Laura, she is half human and half his shifter dragon blood,” Tronk said to Ziel.

“Speaking of Laura. The last I heard from her was she tried to trap that boy prince, Alister, by pretending to be with child, but that failed. And then he banished her from his side. How is she going to complete her mission and get into the vaults under the palace if she is no longer welcome there?” Ziel arched his thick eyebrow.

Tronk scratched at his greying beard in thought, when a small goblin servant ran into the large room. “My prince, my apologies but I have news of Laura,” the servant kneeled looking down as he spoke.

“Speak freely,” Ziel waved his thick hand.

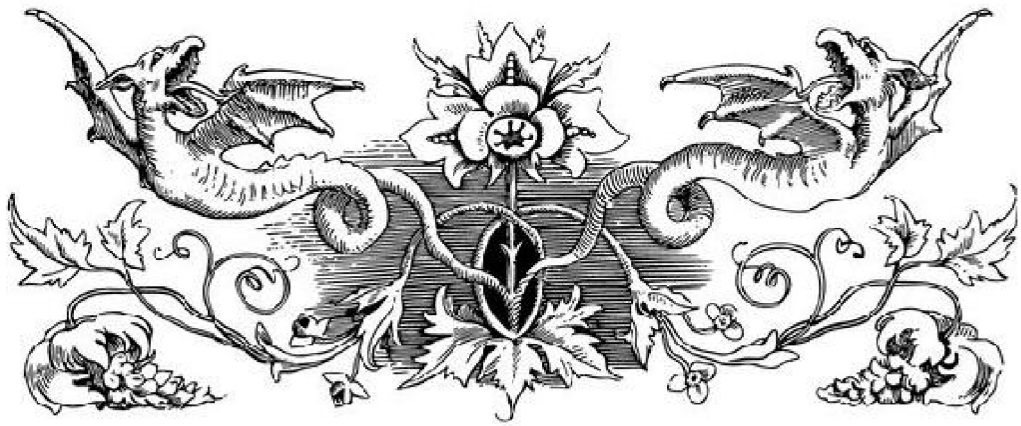
“She was arrested on the charges of attacking Alister with a weapon. And he is building other charges against her to have her exiled or worse executed. She is being held in the jail in Uther capitol,” the servant panicked.

Ziel leaped out of his large chair. “THEN WHY ARE YOU HERE TELLING ME THIS AND NOT GETTING HER OUT!” he roared.

“I ... I ... the m-messenger you sent, he ... he is working on g-getting her out,” the servant stuttered, shifting uncomfortably as both Tronk and Ziel straightened out into their massive bulking forms, their tusks protruding and their red eyes glowing.

“We must tell Samael right away!” Tronk began to pace back and forth.

“I will go to him. Tronk we must make our way back to Uther and get her out before she is killed, or worse they find out what she really is,” Ziel said. “I have rather an interesting proposition for Samael,” he narrowed his eyes, a bit pensive. “Prepare for my departure,” he ordered the servant before he walked out of the hall.



CHAPTER 17

“Did you tell Marissa yet?” Gareth asked Alister as they walked down the secret passage to the dungeons, to interrogate the maid that was caught giving Laura unauthorized information.

“Yes, right after the Coy incident,” Alister replied.

“You meant to say after you were frolicsome with your behavior in the garden. Coy did not do anything wrong, they were just bonding. If I thought there was a chance Coy could have harmed Marissa, I would have stepped in as soon as Coy scented her,” Gareth explained. “So, what was her reaction to the offer?” he asked.

“As expected, elated with the idea that I am sending her to see her friends tomorrow. She promised to be vigilant, and I’m sending a wyvern to look out if something is to go wrong. But since you had promised to accompany her there before seeing

Narcissa, I am sure I will not need to worry,” Alister continued.

Gareth nodded, “And you said Vincent will accompany her here the day she returns.”

“Yes. I still cannot fathom why you are trying to avoid King Furrier and his family’s arrival tomorrow night. I understand it may be overbearing with their presence, but they will be in the mansion, not in the palace. You are seriously leaving me alone to deal with Furrier and Marius,” Alister grunted annoyed.

“I am not avoiding anyone. I am not ready to see Furrier. Also, I do not want him to corner me and try to pressure me to marry his daughter,” Gareth chuckled. “Besides, I am not even supposed to be here till the first night of the ball.”

Alister chuckled knowing the truth. “Oh, I am sure Helena will have something to say to her father if he even tries this nonsense with you and her, again.”

The entrance of the dungeon was marked by large metal gating, with a triple lock mechanism that took two people to open the gate and hold it open while anyone that needed to pass through the gate went under.

“Anthony, has the prisoner spoken yet?” Alister directed his question to Captain Anders who was waiting for Gareth and Alister to arrive.

“She has started to speak about her actions in relaying the message to Laura, but she has not revealed the motive behind her betrayal,” Anthony replied. He led Alister and Gareth through the narrow hallway to the cell where the former maid was being held in.

“Oh ... her. This is the maid that has been giving information to Laura?” Gareth whispered to Alister as he recognized the maid that pleased him a few days earlier, the same maid he kicked out of his room when she randomly appeared there again.

“You know her ... wait ... did you fuck her?” Alister narrowed his eyes.

Gareth snapped back, glaring at Alister, annoyed with his assumption. “No, I definitely did not fuck her. She did give me head though the first night we arrived,” Gareth shrugged as Alister rolled his eyes. “So that you know she had a key to my room. Make sure all the keys are accounted for after this.”

“My lord please let me out. I haven’t done anything wrong! I did not know that Lady Laura had fallen out of your favor,”

the maid ran up to the doorway of the cell she was in. She fell to her knees and started to sob. “Please my lord, I have parents and a sister, and I needed the extra money to help my family,” she continued to sob.

“You know well enough that these excuses will not work here. What other information did you pass to Laura?” Alister calmly asked while looking down at the maid kneeling on the ground behind the bars.

“I told her nothing of importance my lord,” she suddenly winced and put her hand to her forehead. She screeched and let out a pained yelp.

“Every lie, every half-truth, or misinformation will cost you,” Gareth spoke. She peered up, seeing Gareth step into the light. His right hand was stretched out. “My King, please. Was I not obedient to you ...” She screamed again as she braced her head against both of her palms.

“Do not fucking speak till you are required to answer,” Gareth lifted up his right arm, closing his hand into a fist beside his face. “You will answer when asked, you will not lie. You will not move from this spot,” he nodded towards Alister.

“What keys do you have?” Alister asked.

“I have the key to the Kings Suite in the north wing, the key to your study on the ground floor, a key from the north and west wings entrances, and a master key with a citrine stone to the passages and greenhouses,” she answered without hesitation, without blinking, and without any expression on her face.

“Where are the keys now?” he continued to probe.

“My family home,” she replied.

“Did you give Laura any keys,” he asked.

“No. I only let her in to the palace and out from the west wing entrance,” she replied.

Alister looked up at Gareth and nodded. “Why were you in my room the first night?” Gareth asked.

“To pleasure you, my king ...” she yelped again from the pain, as Gareth lifted his pointer finger from the fist and waved it back and forth.

“Tsk ... The whole truth,” he growled out.

“When the staff was informed of the duke’s arrival, and him coming with a guest. I assumed we had to prepare the south

wing, but when I was asked to prepare the King's Suite, I knew that this guest must be very special in order to stay there. I had gained the key to the suite so I can prepare it. I then informed Lady Laura of the Duke's return and where the guest was going to stay. She had paid me to make a copy of the King's Suite key so that I could return the original key. I wasn't able to give her the copy of the key though," she said.

"Why did she need to gain access to the King's Suite?" Gareth asked.

"Lady Laura is searching for something she did not find when she was staying here. As no one has access to the suite, she assumed what she was looking for was in the suite," she replied, looking down on the ground. "Please let me go, I beg you."

"Not a chance ... Now, what is Laura searching for?" asked Alister.

"All I know she had once asked me to show her the Vaults under the palace in the caves. I had no idea what she was asking about. She told me that the palace was built a top of an ancient cave where Nagendra's bones were buried. She said that this cave has a secret vault and she needs access to it," the maid started crying. "She-she pr-promis-sed me ri-riches," she stuttered through her tears.

'Fuck. Alister. How does she know about the vault?' Gareth linked him.

'I've never spoken to her of such things. She never had access to any of the keys when she stayed here either,' Alister responded.

“Why did you inform her we had guests a few days ago, allowing her access to the palace?” Alister asked the maid.

“She said that you had betrayed her trust and have taken another as a mistress. She said when the woman appears she wanted to meet her and confront you for your betrayal. I'm sorry my lord, I thought she was suffering from a broken heart, and I wanted to help her. I know now that it was not a broken heart but utter possessiveness that has been driving her to try and get to you,” she continued to sob.

“Where is the copy of the Kings Suite key?” Alister asked.

“I never had the chance to give it to her. It is with the other keys in my family home,” she answered.

“You understand that divulging information outside of the palace about the royal family, copying keys to steal from his Grace, and most importantly causing immediate danger to his Grace and his fiancé is cause for execution,” Gareth said. The

girl looked up with tears streaming down her face, she nodded reluctantly.

“Anthony, did you get everything?” Alister asked, watching him finish writing down the maid’s confession.

“Yes, it is all here. She just needs to sign it, and I will submit it to the magistrate for finalization,” Anthony responded, handing Alister the parchment with the maid’s words written out. Alister looked at Gareth and handed the parchment and quill to the maid. She signed it, though her hand was shaking, and she was still sobbing, knowing well that her physical body was under the control of the King.

“How do you want to handle Laura?” Gareth asked.

“This is enough to have her exiled from the continent and put a no-access clause to any of the royal family. Should we dig more regarding why she was looking for access to the vault?” Alister said.

Gareth looked at the maid. “Did Laura tell you what she knew was in the vault?”

“She said riches beyond our dreams, and history of the dragon bloodline,” she responded lowly.

“Anthony, tomorrow afternoon, execute the orders as follows in the parchment,” Gareth directed Anthony as he handed him back the parchment.

Alister took back the signed confession from the maid and handed it to Anthony as well. Gareth lowered himself to face the woman behind the bars. “Once we collect the keys from your family and anything you may have stolen, the magistrate will finalize the papers. It is unfortunate that it comes down to this.” He got up and nodded to Alister that it was their time to leave.

In the passageway, Gareth looked at the stones near the locks to some of the doors. “I want the keys to the passages swapped out. Use sapphire instead of citrine. I’ll head back to the Vault. I need to do a check on the artifacts.”

Alister nodded in agreement. “I’ll have Charles and Anthony start the swap-outs, as soon as Anthony returns with the guard from retrieving the keys.”



Gareth returned to his room at near dawn. The artifacts were all accounted for, and nothing was amiss. He settled on his sofa, staring at Eliza’s handkerchief. *‘You were so beautiful yesterday. Your heart is magnanimous. Not an ounce of selfishness. I want to hear your voice again, Eliza,’* he

envisioned her. Her sweet disposition, her kindness, her gentle innocent smile, and her voice made him ache, and his dragon spirit stirred and clawed at his insides.

Eliza stirred in her sleep, gasping for air, she suddenly opened her eyes. *'Why can't I sleep normally?'* she took in a deep breath. There was a heaviness pinning down her waist, which caused her to be still. *'No, no, not again. This can't be. Wake up Eliza, wake up!'* she yelled at herself inwardly. The heaviness shifted, an arm moved along her waist a little and the grip around her tightened.

Peering through her half-closed eyes at the room ahead, she realized she was back in the same dream she had a few days before. *'If I shut my eyes tight and think of my bedroom, perhaps, I will fall back asleep and wake up in my actual room,'* she thought to herself.

Closing her eyes, she lay there quietly, but her other senses were suddenly heightened. She felt the deep caress of breathing against her nape. Her ears picked up a steady heartbeat, and that same scent as before, of lightning and leather, overwhelmed her now. She subconsciously took in a deep breath to smell more of this scent and opened her eyes. Her insides felt like they were scolding hot, and she heard a soft growl-like purring from within her. Eliza moved her head just slightly enough so she can peer over her shoulder at the

person holding her. *'Please be asleep, please be asleep,'* she pleaded inwardly.

There he was, beside her again, The King of Drakon. She stared at him *'that young face of his. He is the same age as in the previous dream. Why is he doing this to me?'* she thought to herself. She peered a bit more at his sleeping face, biting the side of her lower lip.

“If you keep staring at me, I will get the wrong idea, Eliza,” Gareth whispered, his eyes still closed. Eliza’s eyes widened hearing him speak, though she was not surprised that he was not actually asleep, as this was his dream or memory. “Your thoughts are too loud Eliza. Perhaps the reason you cannot sleep normally anymore is that your body wants to be beside me, in my bed,” he said opening his eyes as his lips pressed tightly into a mischievous smirk.

Eliza’s heart hitched, not knowing how to respond, those silver steel eyes beckoning her. “Dragon got your tongue?” he said teasingly against her ear, his lips lightly grazing her ear lobe. Feeling his mouth so close on her skin, her heart started racing. “Eliza ... breathe normally, or your heart will explode at that rate it is beating,” his tone teased every bit. “Turn your body towards me. Let me look at you,” he said, his tone now more curious.

Eliza turned over to face him, both her arms bent up against her breast. He snaked one arm under her waist, using the other to caress her shoulder, bringing goosebumps to her soft skin. She looked down and away from his face. Seeing he once again was only wearing shorts and his well-sculpted muscular torso, large and warm, on this display. “Why ... why am I here ... in your mind?” her voice finally broke from the cage of her throat.

“I wanted to see you,” his response was simple.

“Why are you in this form and not your real current self?” she asked curiously. He was quiet for a moment but instead of answering her, he lowered his head and placed small delicate kisses on the tips of her fingers that were covering the top of her breast. Feeling his knee push in between her legs, her body twitched from the sudden intrusion her inner thighs felt. He grasped her butt and pulled her tight to his body, making her grind against his leg from his knee to his thigh. She gasped as she felt the tightness of his thigh press hard against her sex. He continued to nibble at her fingertips, moving his lips to her neck and then to her jawline. “Please my King, please stop. I am not comfortable or ready for any of this,” she pleaded. The sweet innocence coming from her voice made him softly purr against her chin, surprising her even more.

“Your body is saying something else. I can feel your heat and your desire for me. You’re already wet, an obvious

invitation for me to take you,” his voice lustfully husky and reverberating against her lips. Before she could find the words to deny his claim, his lips crashed against hers, devouring her small mouth, and tasting the sweet peony from her lips. She squealed under his hard kiss and the tight pinching grasp he had on her butt. She pushed his chest hard with her arms pulling away from his mouth.

“What is wrong Eliza, you don’t like my lips?” he asked glaring at her with annoyance.

“You ... you ... are shameless,” she uttered while catching her breath.

“How so, Eliza?” he was still glaring down at her.

“You ... you ... just kissed me without my permission and ... and you just insinuated that I am a lustful girl, that is ready to let you just ... just have your way,” her tone resolute.

“Are you not? Am I the one who pushed myself into your dreams for the last eight months? Am I the one that created all of those illusions? Do you even know what you had me dream?” his husky voice was now seething. “Do you?” he waited for her to answer.

Seeing a confused look on her face, he said “what you dreamt was purely innocent, I am assuming. Perhaps you saw my naked body lay beside you at the most.” Her flushed cheeks were a dead giveaway of her innocence. “I, on the other hand, had many different dreams. In some, I open my eyes and I see your naked supple body. You are on your knees and elbows, your face buried in the pillows, your curvacious ass propped up for me, and I am seated deep inside your tight pussy, fucking you, while you scream my name with such undeniable pleasure that I couldn’t resist going back to sleep to see more of you. In others, I open my eyes and you are on top of me. Though your head is tilted back, and I cannot see your beautiful face again, I still heard you moan and scream in ecstasy as you rode me. I thought they were all just dreams as I was still pent up and going through my own grieving. But when I finally saw your face, knowing I have never seen you before, I knew something was different,” he said, with his eyes still glaring at her. His grip tightened, as he dragged his nose against her neck taking in her scent.

She gasped, her heart still beating quickly. “I was angry at first, seeing as you were not yet knowledgeable of your own abilities but were able to penetrate my mind. I knew that I would meet you someday and will punish you for your mind tricks. I am willing to give you back what you made me dream of. All I want now is to fuck you senseless. Make you scream and beg for more,” his anger now spewing onto his face, gone was the gentleness in his demeanor from moments before.

He pushed her onto her back, pinning her down under him, as he kissed her again. Pushing his tongue into her mouth to taste more of her indulgent scent, he groaned his satisfaction against her lips. His insides purred just from their small connection as he felt her kissing him in return without hesitation. She met his indulgence with her own, as she pressed her little tongue against his and followed his lead, playing and teasing each other's mouths. Short nibbles, pulls on the lips, and tongues intertwining, caused her to moan against his lips.

He pulled away from her lips, letting her catch her breath, while his thumb caressed her lower lip. "Eliza, you are not being fair," he said. She swallowed nervously, realizing that she kissed him back. She couldn't avoid his silver steel eyes. They were glowing with the light in the room, making her feel lightheaded just looking at him. "Why did you kiss me back?" he asked.

"I think for the same reason you brought me into your memory, to let my walls down and to know more ... about you, your majesty," she lowered her eyes. Her arms had relaxed, a hand now gently held on to his shoulder, and the other hand settled against his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin.

"My walls are not up Eliza. I am all here," he said.

“Then why have you not shown me your real self? I want to know the man you are now and not the teen prince of the past,” she said.

“The past molds us into the people we become. I am letting you see how I was in the past so that you can understand who I am now when we meet,” he said, as his eyes traveled down from her eyes to her lips, and lower to her breast and protruding nipples which he wanted to bite. He had already untied the strings that kept the opening to her chemise snug on her while he was talking, keeping her eyes distracted. He moved swiftly to grasp one breast and landed his mouth on the other. Eliza squeaked from the surprise as she tried to push him away. He took a long-circulating lick of her areola before grazing his teeth against her nipple. He sucked her nipple into his mouth, indulging on it with little flicks of his tongue. He groaned, enjoying the taste of her, and making her nipple swell, and pulsate before he hungrily toppled the other. His ears picked up on her stifled moans, and small sighs, while he felt her fingers run through his long raven hair. Pulling on her nipple, he let it go with a small pop from his lips.

“Has no one touched your luscious breast before?” he said with mirth. She caught her breath but still felt dizzy from the overwhelming aching sensation settling in between her thighs.

She opened her eyes, looking down at him, as she slightly shook her head. “N-no,” was her meek answer.

“Tell me, since you live in Valance, have you been invited to Maskar?” he asked.

Her brows furrowed she was confused by the unexpected subject. “Y-yes I have been invited, but I have never gone,” she said lowly. “W-why are you asking?”

“I just wanted to know where you learned to kiss like that?” he arched up his neck. His chin pressed softly onto her exposed breast.

Her eyes widened. “Umm ... like what exactly?”

“Like you want to please me, though there was some hesitation,” he ran his thumb against her lower lip again. “How many men have tasted your lips?” he glanced at her curiously. He wanted to know what he was up against and what, if anything, he would have to teach her. Though, he also wanted to know how many men he would have to bury for touching her. *Mate* that tiny word rang in his head.

Her lip trembled under his caress. “Only you, my king, in our dreams,” her eyes turned away from him, slightly embarrassed.

He stilled, staring at her for a moment before he pulled away from her, rolling onto his back he lay staring up at the ceiling deep in thought.

“Are you disappointed, my King?” her voice was low and trembling.

Snapping out of his thoughts he turned back to look at her. “No, quite the opposite. I ... I think you should decide on what you really want from me, and what you think you deserve to have.”

“It depends on what you want from me, my King?” she asked curiously, their eyes meeting. He caressed her cheek admiring her deep blue eyes, and soft lips.

“For now, I want to hear you sing,” he said with a small glint in his eyes.

She blinked, surprised by his request, but even more surprised that he thought she could sing. Perhaps he already knew she could. She nodded and began to hum a melody. Before her voice came through, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer to him. Her voice was feathery, comforting, and delicate.

She caressed the smoothness of his face as she continued to sing to him, and he couldn't help himself as he pulled her on top of him. She straddled his waist with her knees planted on either side of him, her hands on his shoulders, and his hands on her waist. She stopped singing and leaned into him, braving to steal a kiss from him. To her surprise he reciprocated drawing out the kiss, making each lip stroke and tease reverberate through her body.

Gareth stopped the kiss abruptly. "This will be the last time we see each other like this," he said as he turned his head away. He did not want her face to sway his decision. "I need you to burn that prayer doll you have. I do not want you to be tempted in the future to visit me in dreams again."

She narrowed her eyes, a confused look on her face. "How did you ... I ... After I figured out who you were, I had made a promise to myself to stay out of your dreams, and away from you. You are the one that keeps bringing me in now."

Gareth smirked. "That is fair to say. Your mind still needs training, the doll is the safest way to project and create dreams. I promise this will be the last time I project myself to you. No more, Eliza."

"Your will, my King," she bowed her head. He pulled her back down to meet her lips. She sighed against his mouth, an

electric current surged between them right before he released her.

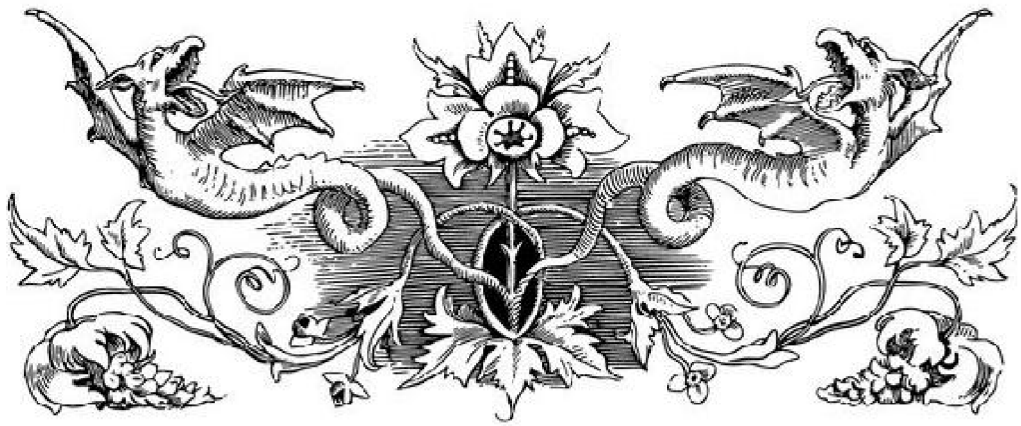
“Soon, Eliza, soon ... but for now, good night,” he licked his lips, savoring the taste.

“Good night,” she whispered, biting her lip as he snapped his fingers.

Eliza opened her eyes, looking around as she was back in her room. She sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. Sighing, she whispered, “He makes me feel so, so alive. My heart would be so content to be just held by him ... I want him ... I need him.” A tear escaped her welled-up eyes. She got up from the bed and picked up the doll from her nightstand. She stared at it for a moment. “Till we meet, my Ki ... my beloved,” she whispered through her tears and threw the doll into the fireplace.

Gareth pressed his head into his hands, elbows pushing onto his knees as he remained seated for a moment on the sofa. “FUUUCK!” he yelled. Groaning he got up and walked to the fireplace. *‘Why ... why do you make me feel like ... like I am lost without you in my arms?’* he thought while shaking his head. Lifting up her handkerchief, he took a final look at it, a final smell of her scent, and threw it in the fire. “Eliza, I ... I must have you. If you ask anything of me, I may not be able to resist you ... If only Goddess Tiamat can help you choose

another, and fast, as I am not worthy of her goodness, and her purity,” he said as he watched the handkerchief envelope in the fire.



CHAPTER 18

“**A**vert your eyes! Seriously Alister, are you going to just stand there and stare at me,” Marissa ducked her head, blushing. She was sitting in her bathtub when Alister burst through the door looking for her. Seeing her in the water he couldn’t help himself but leer while letting out a howling whistle. He left her sleeping alone the night before, not wanting to disturb her when he returned in the middle of the night after the investigation.

“Well, I need a bath as well, since I just had my morning sparing with Anthony. My muscles are sore,” he said slyly while stripping off his shirt and boots. Approaching the tub, he stripped off his pants and stood above her in full glory.

Marissa’s eyes widened, “you are not being serious”.

“Oh, I am very serious,” he licked his lips and squatted beside her. Dipping his hand into the water, he flicked some at

her. “Perfect, now either move down so I can get in behind you or you can wash me,” he gave her a playful wink.

“No, no stop it!!” she yelled as he jumped into the tub. He toppled her under the water, capturing her lips in a breathless kiss. She kneed him in the stomach as she pulled above the water for air. Gasping “w-what is the matter with you?” she shoved him.

“That knee should be bent over my shoulder, not in my stomach,” he breathed out as he surfaced back up.

Marissa knew what he meant, and she blushed again. She had forgiven him for his abruptness and forcefulness the day before, and something inside her swelled, wanting more of him. “I’m going to miss you tonight,” she murmured.

Alister positioned himself behind her, pulling her to him with her back against his chest and her head nuzzled under his chin. “This is really nice,” he whispered. “But next time let’s do this in the pool, more space ... for play.” They spent some time enjoying lathering each other up and playing with the suds. Alister knew he wasn’t going to last long with Marissa so tightly pressed to him. The softness of her fingers glided along his thigh to his knee.

She looked up at him through her lashes, feeling his growing erection pressing against the small of her back, she knew he wanted more than just bathing each other. His hands found their way to her breast, massaging them, and making sure to give attention to her taut nipples. Tweaking and pinching them in the process. The feeling of arousal was within the pit of Marissa's stomach as gentle moans escaped her. She trailed kisses along his chin and neck, while her hand found its way to his thick cock. She slowly stroked him, feeling his erection tighten and twitch in her hand. Feeling more confident she picked up the pace. His breathy groans and satisfied sighs indulged her senses. She wanted to hear him more.

“S-slow down,” he managed to whisper in between his husky groans.

“Why? Don't you need a release?” she murmured back.

“I'd rather release inside you, than in the water,” he bit down on his lip, holding back a groan. “I also want you to cum first. Seeing you quiver with pleasure, and knowing I've satisfied you will be the highlight of this day,” he moaned again, grabbing her hand and forcing her to stop. His erection throbbed, pulsing with the need to release.

“Alister ...” she managed to say as he crashed his lips against hers. Tongues intertwined, mouths busy with

devouring one another, he pulled her up into his arms as he got up, carrying her out of the tub. Both dripping wet, he sat her down on the lounge while he positioned himself on his knees on the floor in front of her.

“Open up your legs. Let me see my sweet dripping petals,” he winked at her, she bit her lip and teasingly splayed her legs. His eyes riveted on the slickness glistening along her entrance. “That’s my girl,” he breathed out. “And that’s my sweet nectar. Now bend those knees over my shoulders. Let me satisfy your needy clit, and feed my dragon spirit your euphoric moans,” his eyes twinkled, and his tongue made a licking gesture. She obeyed, and as soon as her knees fell over his shoulders, his head disappeared between her inner thighs. Taking a long lick of her slit, he drove his tongue into her entrance, already swollen and pulsating with need. He worked his fingers in along with his tongue, pulling at her pleasure.

“Deeper,” she moaned out. He peered up at her, their eyes meeting. He twisted his fingers, grazing and pushing against that sweet spot inside, while his tongue flicked and lapped at her center. “Oh Ali...” she was a moaning mess, causing him to thrust his fingers deeper and faster while sucking on her throbbing clit. Her hips jolted, and her back arched, feeling all of her buildup peak and burst out with a loud and long heady yelp. His cock twitched, *‘fuck me’* he groaned against her pulsating pussy. She heaved her breath, watching his starved eyes upon her, as he savored her release.

There was a sudden knock on the door. “Good morning my lady, did you need my assistance?” Yulia said cheerfully.

Alister stood up from his knees. “LEAVE!! WE ARE NOT TO BE DISTURBED!” he yelled out.

“My apologies your Grace,” Yulia’s footsteps disappeared instantly.

Marissa stared at his massive erection, now bobbing in front of her face as he stood. A bead of precum rolled down the engorged bulbous tip of his cock. The first taste of him was a mere tease of her senses, not enough for her. “I want more,” she whispered right before she licked the tip, tasting the bitterness and earthiness of him.

Alister jerked looking back down at her, eyes wide and smirking. “Well, well ... my little minx,” he let out a strained breath. She grasped his cock, sliding her hand firmly along his thick length down to the base, and up again. Her other hand explored the twitching rounded sack. “Do you see how hard you make me? How much I ache to burst for you,” he groaned out. She nodded, grinning, before sliding her tongue along his velvety shaft to the tip and playing with the precum forming once more at the small slit. “You like that? You like my cock drooling for you?” he breathed out.

“Yes ... and I want it to spill more ... to taste you more,” she said in between her tongue strokes.

“Good girl ... now take me into your mouth, and down your throat where I belong,” he ran his thumb across her bottom lip, pulling it down. Marissa sucked in his thumb playfully. “Tease.” She arched a brow at that word as she pulled away.

“I’m not a tease ... my dragon spirit is yearning to play and explore,” she licked her lips and her mouth descended onto his cock, taking him deep into her throat.

“Fuck,” he groaned out. “I want ... you ... to explore ... all,” he hissed, “all ... that you want ... fuck Mari,” his hands wrapped in her hair, digging at her scalp. He pushed further into her mouth, guiding his pace with his deep thrusts. Her fingers dug into his thighs, gripping tight as he continued to fuck her mouth. “Mhm ... Mari ... look up at me ...” she peered up, her eyes rimmed with tears from the pressure. “That’s right my minx keep your eyes on me while I fuck that goddess-sent throat of yours.” Pleasure coiled in his abdomen, his dragon spirit shifting and growling in ecstasy. “I’m going to spill in your mouth, baby, and you will take all of my cum.”

She mewled an incoherent response, her mouth preoccupied with pulling out groans and varying noises of his elation. She felt it, his cock twitching in her mouth, and his balls contracting in her hand. He let out a guttural growl, grasping

the sides of her face as he spilled his climax in several thick long spurts. She tried to breathe as the cum dripped down her throat.

After a moment of panting, he slowly pulled his saliva-covered cock out of her mouth. His eyes not leaving her as he watched her close her eyes, lick her lips, not missing a single droplet and swallow. With her eyes closed, her face was one of pure jubilation. “Did you swallow all of it?” he breathed out and she nodded. “And?” he cocked his head watching her lick her lips again.

“You taste of earth, slightly bitter and yet the floral takes over at the end,” she opened her eyes seeing his pupils dilated. “What’s wrong? Did I not do it right?”

He immediately cupped her face. “I fucking love you ... you are sublime ... my sweet blossom,” he said. His lips crashed against hers, dragging out the sweet caress of their warmth and each other’s aftertaste. “Everything with you has been nothing less than incredible. We were meant to be together, in all of the sinful and carnal ways there is as well.” He pecked the tip of her nose, before picking up a robe from the armrest. “You are perfection ... my perfection.”

Marissa melted into the backrest, “I love you so much, there are no words to describe how much.” She stood up from the

lounger, and he slid the robe on her, before grabbing a robe for himself.

“I like this ... I’m going to miss you. Even though you will be back in two days’ time,” he pouted, as he sat behind her on a small stool, brushing her long hair in the mirror.

“If you really need me to stay to greet King Furrier and his family when they arrive, I can stay, I do not have to go today,” Marissa looked at his reflection through the mirror.

“No, we already made the arrangement. I want you to enjoy time with your friends. Besides, trust me, the last thing I want is for you to meet King Furrier and the whole Fernier clan. Maybe one at a time but not all of them right away,” he shook his head, wrapping his arms around her waist and running his nose against her silky long hair.

“When is High King Gareth arriving?” she asked while putting on a foamy green tint on her eyelids. Looking at her through the mirror, he didn’t know how to tell her but hoped Gareth would sooner than later.

“Hopefully tomorrow, if not the day after. I can’t deal with Furrier and then Exian’s mother, too,” he said getting up from the stool behind her. “Belinda and her team will be here shortly, for a final fitting for your dress for the first ball, and

other outfits. I suggested they see you first, and then they can continue with Sandra,” he picked up his things from the floor.

“You’re leaving?” she watched him put on his pants and grab the rest of his things.

“I need to finish up a few things before Ga-Greyson is to escort you to the Earl of Chester’s estate. I’ll see you before you leave,” he kissed her forehead before heading out to the secret passage.



Marissa met with Sandra in her sitting room as Belinda had already arrived and set up samples of materials, accessories, and the dress that Alister had requested to be designed specifically for Marissa to wear at the ball.

“I am still confused. How did his Grace manage to get her measurements and for you to have the dresses ready on such short notice?” Sandra said amused as she looked at the samples.

“The truth is we did receive the measurements and orders for the dresses a few weeks ago. He did say it was not a guarantee that all the dresses would be needed but he wanted them all to be ready, nonetheless. The ball gowns were the first ones he had us design. Today we will finalize the first one and

finish up the details for the rest. Also, a few new outfits, we have samples and a few designs to consult on,” Belinda explained.

Marissa stared in awe at the dress designed for her to wear at the ball. “This dress is so beautiful. What kind of stones are these?” she asked Belinda.

“These are small emeralds found in different regions of Valance and Orlean, sewn into the bodice with gold-dipped thread, to create the effect of dragon scales,” she explained. “The deep green will be magnificent against your alabaster skin, and because it is completely strapless, being held up in place by the corset, we will do this shawl to give you modesty and warmth if needed. His Grace will be wearing matching colors, also with the same detail design as on the bodice of the dress,” Belinda chatted eagerly as she fitted the bodice and the remainder of the dress onto Marissa. “Just magnificent!” she exclaimed turning Marissa in the mirror and fluffing out the full skirt.

“Now regarding the rest, I just need you to approve the materials and colors. And take a look at the sketches while we prepare for your mother,” Belinda waved a hand at one of her staff to bring everything to Marissa.

“This is all extremely extravagant, not necessarily what I am used to,” Sandra looked down at her bandaged hand. “I

think I may have to forego the event.” She stood up, bracing her hand against her chest. Her eyes misted as she looked over a silk flowy gown with small petals scattered throughout the skirt and short train.

Marissa furrowed her brows at Sandra’s comment. “What do you mean? You can’t forego, you’re my only parent.”

Sandra swallowed nervously as she turned to walk toward the door. “I think his majesty can handle bestowing the blessing on you and his Grace...”

“It’s Alister ... mom ... he asked you to call him by his given name,” Marissa spoke as she struggled to get out of the bodice the other seamstresses were unpinning.

Sandra nodded taking a few steps toward the door when Belinda stepped in front of her. “These gloves go well with the dress as they pass the elbow. And I am quite sure, no matter what you think ...” Belinda paused and leaned forward to whisper. “No one will notice. And perhaps it’s best that you think about reclaiming your independence and a bit of your birthright. Orlean missed one of their own.” Sandra widened her eyes, staring at Belinda’s cocked eyebrow and sly smirk.

“Mom ... Belinda is right, the gloves will be beautiful. But to be honest ... you’re beautiful just as you are,” Marissa

embraced Sandra's shoulders.

Sandra swallowed again. "Okay, let's do it then. Let's hoist this dress on," she breathed out, making the women laugh.

They spent the rest of the early afternoon finishing up with Sandra's dresses, while Marissa readied to leave to see Eliza at the Earl's estate for the night.



The horse-hoofs clicked along the dirt road approaching the Earl's estate. Marissa peered out of the open window at Gareth. "Is this where you leave me, Lord Greyson?" she said loudly. He looked over at her and nodded. They rode for several hours chatting on and off about Alister, and her learnings the last day. Marissa was aware that he would leave her before they would enter the estate and the royal guards riding alongside them would continue to escort her.

"We're almost at the main gates of the estate. I advise you not to make his Grace worried. The guards will remain at the estate and the Earl is aware of the arrangement," Gareth called to Marissa.

"Rather possessive, isn't he?" Marissa joked.

Gareth practically snorted from holding in his laugh. “As all claimed and mated dragon-blooded men should be.” He nodded before pulling the reins and turning his horse around. Marissa watched him gallop away into the distance as her carriage passed the gates.

Eliza and her mother waited at the front entrance of the courtyard, as the carriage came to a halt.

“Marissa!!” she ran to greet her friend with a crushing embrace. “I’m not letting go of you!” Eliza breathed out.

“I’m alright, I’m alright,” Marissa said, she peered over Eliza’s shoulder seeing Duchess Luisa’s bright smile, while Ryan and Nicola stepped out of the main entrance as well.

“Marissa! Eliza! Come in. I am sure Marissa wants to freshen up after the almost 3-hour journey. And we will have dinner within the hour,” Eliza’s mother waved to them both as they remained standing in an embrace in the middle of the courtyard. Eliza reluctantly let go of Marissa but held her hand firmly as they skipped laughing to the others waiting.

“The same little girls, skipping hand in hand as you did growing up,” Luisa chuckled and offered Marissa an embrace.

“It is so good to be back here with everyone. And Nicola, you’re here too!” Marissa said cheerfully. Nicola nodded with

a sly smirk, making Marissa roll her eyes.

Eliza, Nicola, and Marissa spend the next hour in Eliza's room chatting and catching up on all that had happened to Marissa. She told them about her father and the Dunne trying to forcefully take her, and Alister and Exian rescuing her with their dragons.

“You flew on a dragon!” Eliza's mouth hung low in shock. “Were you not scared?” Marissa shook her head and thought of Coy and wondered if he went back to hibernating or was terrorizing the gardens again.

“Coy is so gentle. Well at least with me. Alister demonstrated how to show a dragon you are seeking trust and friendship as a greeting. If they reciprocate, they will put their maw in the palms of your hands, and if they do not want to, they simply fly away, or they will attack if they do not trust you at all,” Marissa shrugged her shoulders as she explained.

“What I am still stuck on, is the part of Alister just proposing to you in mid-air. I mean how long have you actually known one another?” Nicola asked with a furrowed brow. In all the years she had known Alister, and her time spent with him and Onri in Aketh, she did not foresee him just settling down so quickly.

“I think you should tell her how you two met,” Eliza said to Marissa.

“Okay, but please know that I wanted to tell you everything, but I didn’t want to create a mess of things,” Marissa said and began to tell Nicola the details of her meeting Alister at Maskar, and the last almost five months of unofficial courtship.

Nicola’s facial expression was one of shock and slight fear. “You met that night at Maskar? And your dragon spirits are mates? You are mates?” Nicola swallowed. “Did anyone else see you two that night?”

“No, not that I could think of. Why?” Marissa narrowed her eyes.

“I just would hate it if my mother found out that rules were broken,” Nicola sat down beside Marissa. “You weren’t supposed to be there. But I hope Alister has been a wonderful teacher ... in more ways than just the use of your gifts,” she winked. “So, how is he in bed? I know it’s all true ...” Nicola gestures to a significantly large size with the motion of her hands.

“Nicola!! I did not sleep with him. We ... we have come to an understanding that I simply am not ready for such intimacy

... yet,” Marissa blushed as she spoke.

“Ugh, you liar! I can see you’re flushed. Tell us! I’m sure Eliza can’t wait to hear all the juicy details, please!” Nicola exclaimed.

“Um ... no ... no do not drag me into this,” Eliza giggled. “Let’s go down for dinner and afterward you can regale Nicola here with more intimate details,” Eliza grabbed Marissa’s hand and lead them out.

After dinner had ended, the younger generation retired to the game and piano parlor, wanting to celebrate Marissa’s engagement announcement and Eliza’s upcoming birthday on their own. Eliza dabbled with music sheets at the piano while Vincent poured champagne for them and Ryan dealt the cards.

“So, it is true then, Vincent? The High King had offered you the Marques of Anders title and estate? Are you willing to part with Chester and move north?” Marissa asked, taking a sip from her glass. Vincent had perched himself on a sofa beside Nicola, handing her a glass.

“Yes, it is true. I had received the letters detailing everything just this morning with the official offer, coming directly from his Grace with the King’s seal. But I am sure you knew because you were in the palace. I have not shared this

information yet with anyone outside of our family here. The King is gracious in his offer. As for parting with Chester, it's not like I am moving to another continent, it's just two days ride north."

"Doesn't the estate and lands border the Kingdom of Fernier?" asked Nicola, her eyes never leaving Vincent's face. Marissa observed their body language. Vincent's leg crossed over and pointed toward Nicola's direction, while Nicola's body turned and slightly leaned toward him. It was evident to Marissa that there was more to them than the occasional tryst as Nicola had admitted to her before.

"Are you saying you may be ready to settle down and have a family?" Marissa's comment was deliberate as she was curious to see Vincent's and Nicola's reactions.

"Umm ... well not yet, I am still young. I can wait for a long while, especially since I would want to make sure I am successful in my endeavors and the estate is profitable. Honestly, I haven't thought that far ahead yet. I am enjoying my life as is, with all its fun," he said, his eyes moving sideways to peek at Nicola's sharp glare.

"Who knows maybe you will meet an eligible young woman during the gathering and begin a serious courtship," Marissa snickered, eyeing Nicola's facial reactions and eyes that were glaring at Vincent.

Eliza yawned, “I think I’m going to retire for the night. Besides you know I can’t drink that much,” Marissa and Nicola agreed, and walked with Eliza back to their rooms, leaving the young men to play their card game.

“Tomorrow we’re having a few guests joining us for luncheon. Earl Tavo and his son,” Eliza cringed. “However, the rest of the day we are free to celebrate! And Marissa, you are leaving the following day? Will you stay for breakfast, or you must head out early?”

Marissa walked arm-in-arm with Nicola down the hall. “I know I need to return by late afternoon. King Exian and prince Onri arrive that night, and Alister wants me to be present to greet them. The entire Fernier royal family should have already settled in by now,” Marissa said and Nicola snorted. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. I am sure his Grace is having a great time,” Nicola laughed. “Well, at least princess Helena is there. She will either ease his anxiety or worsen it, depending on her icy mood.”

“That’s right Princess Helena will be here. Aren’t you excited to meet her? She is exquisite,” Eliza said. “Do you remember that gorgeous painting of her at the gallery in Aureate?” Marissa nodded in response.

“She is exquisite. Be your genuine self with her,” Nicola sighed thinking of seeing Helena and Onri again. She paused them all from walking. “Be her friend. And let her be yours. Alister respects her, highly.” Marissa and Eliza looked back and forth and nodded. “I’m pretty exhausted. I hope you do not mind but I’m going to retire for the rest of the night. Good night my sweets. I’ll see you in the morning!” Nicola hugged them both and headed to the room she was staying in.

Eliza and Marissa walked back to Eliza’s room continuing their conversation. “And I believe the arrangement was that Vincent would accompany me back with the guard that arrived with me today. He is supposedly bringing a gift for King Gareth and needs to arrive to make sure all is settled for your uncle and your family’s arrival on the day of the ball. Did you know that Alister had invited your family to stay as his guests in the palace during the entire time of the gathering?” Marissa said.

“I ... I did not know that,” Eliza furrowed her brow. This news was new to her, and somewhere inside she felt a bit more anxious. This would certainly lead her to be in close proximity to the King for a few weeks. She wondered if he knew this as well, or perhaps was the one to arrange it.

When Eliza and Marissa got back to Eliza’s room, Marissa immediately turned the topic of the conversation. “I have been

on edge, waiting to ask you this, but we have been surrounded by everyone all evening.” Marissa grabbed Eliza’s hands, squeezing her eyes shut as she proceeded to say. “Alister and I are going to make the official engagement announcement in a few days and we are asking the King to let us marry before the end of the gathering. I thought we would wait longer, but honestly, there is no point,” she opened her eyes staring at Eliza’s large eyes and even larger smile. “I love him so much. I’m just the happiest I could ever ask to be. So, what I am asking of you is ... is ... will you be my maid of honor, and in the meantime before the wedding to be my official lady in waiting?” she squeezed Eliza’s hands.

“Um yes! Who else would be your maid of honor? This was always my responsibility,” Eliza grinned.

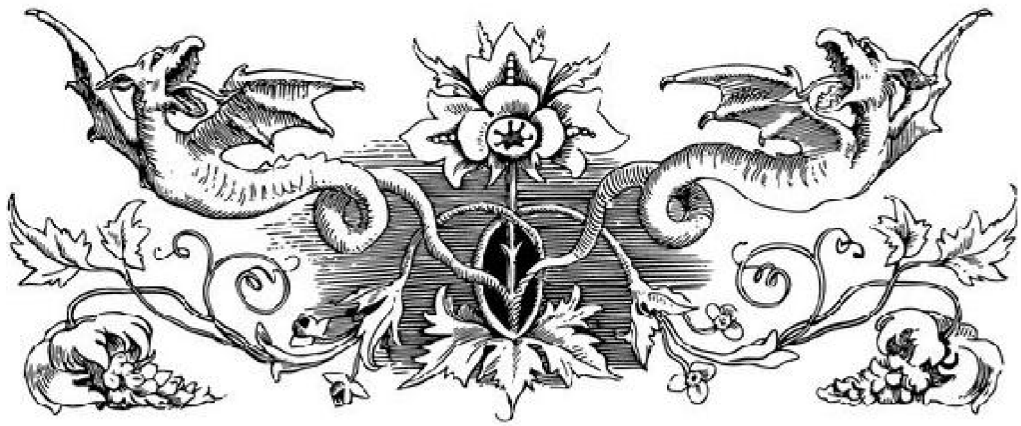
“Okay, so now I’ve been dying to ask you about the dreams and the man whose dragon spirit is your soul...” Eliza pressed her finger to Marissa’s lips and shook her head. “Wh-what’s wrong, Eliza?” Marissa narrowed her eyes. “Did something else happen?” Eliza did not know how to tell Marissa the entire truth. She did not want to complicate and make things more awkward, especially with Marissa now engaged to Gareth’s closest brother. Eliza took a deep breath and decided to tell her a few things, but not reveal his identity yet.

“Wait so what you are saying is that this man knows who you are. And he is a telepath, and he can manipulate your

mind by just easily projecting himself into a dream or a memory,” Marissa scratched her temple as she plopped down on the armrest of a chair.

“That is only in dreams but being that strong only means he can manipulate minds with ease. If he wanted you dead, he could just tell you to walk off a cliff or anything frankly. And if he wanted to know something, there is nothing you can lie to him about, as he will know. Unless you’re a telepath too, then you can delay him or build up mental blocks to keep from him, hypothetically speaking. Being that strong of a telepath may take a small toll on him and make him a bit tired. Depending on his training, he can be volatile at times, or extremely energetic. One moment gentle, happy and the next his power can just strangle you,” Eliza shook her head. *‘What have I gotten myself into,’* she thought of Gareth.

“What a jerk. And he yelled at you for trying to find your soul mate. Perhaps you made the right decision asking the Goddess Tiamat to direct you to another. You do not deserve to be treated like that,” Marissa said. They readied for bed, discussing the upcoming events planned.



CHAPTER 19

It wasn't long after Gareth and Marissa departed the palace at Uther that a wyvern landed beside him. It cooed the news of familiars arriving soon. Alister readied himself and met with Charles and the staff outside the guest mansion in the south of the palace territory.

A familiar growl bellowed in the sky above, the dragon still out of sight. Multiple horse hoofs clanked along the path as carriages of pale blue and snow white came into view. *'Here we go,'* Alister breathed out watching the carriages come to a halt. A stocky man, with his white beard and white short hair, dressed in a regal silver tunic, sleek grey trousers, and adorned in fine cut leather, stepped out of one of the carriages. "Welcome, King Furrier to Orlean, and my home of Uther," Alister bowed deep to the arriving monarch or Fernier. "I am honored you have all accepted the invitation for us to host the gathering of all Dragon leaders here."

“Alister!” Furrier exclaimed, opening his arms wide for an embrace. “It has been almost 3 years since I last laid my eyes on you. Since you last visited us in Fernier. Come let me look at you closer,” King Furrier put his arms around Alister, squeezing him in a burly embrace. Before Alister could greet the rest of the guests disembarking the carriages, a thick gust of wind picked up the road dust around them.

“Alister!!!” a soft-pitched voice flew through the air as a large dragon with silvery scales hovered over them. Alister looked up and waved as the dragon made its way to land.

“Helena ... sister be careful! Rheem might be too large to land here,” Marius waved for Helena’s dragon to land without destroying the well-manicured garden near them. “Helena and Rheem, can’t be parted,” Marius said as he emerged from behind King Furrier nodding at Alister. The distant coldness was evident between them though they managed to maintain a cordial atmosphere over the last few years.

Alister returned the nod, “Prince Marius and Princess Idrani I believe this is your first official visit to Orlean in over six years. I welcome you both. And Mihail, so big now!” Alister kissed the back of Idrani’s hand as she curtsied. He took a knee to embrace the young boy, seeing his stark resemblance to that of Marius. Hair white with a silver shine, narrow pale icy blue eyes, high cheekbones, and skin as white as fresh snow, almost translucent. The boy giggled as Alister lifted him

up and carried him, following King Furrier towards the dragon Rheem.

“Father, we made it! I told you Rheem knows her way here comfortably. We should have all flown on our dragons, would have saved you three days from the use of a carriage,” Helena slid off Rheem’s back to the ground. Her silver-white hair pulled up into a high tail, opening up her snow-white face, long neck, and cherry red lips. “It only took me less than a half days flight with Rheem. And would have been faster if Rheem and Rodan didn’t decide to play around and stalk down a stag at the border,” she said as she pulled down large antlers attached to the back of her riding seat.

“Speaking of Rodan, where are Xander and Arden?” asked King Furrier.

“They landed in the north garden by the cliffs. Rodan knows his way around here and seems most eager to rest in Coy’s dragon burrow,” answered Alister. “Speaking of them, there they are,” he pointed to the couple strolling hand in hand. Alister put Mihail down and the boy ran towards Xander and Arden.

Alister watched as Arden picked up Mihail. He was small against her Akethian warrior princess figure. Alister had seen both Arden and Xander just a few months earlier before they eloped. But in some way, in these few months, she had

blossomed. The deep bronze of her skin shined lustrously, the red undertones making her flushed. Her hair was thick, braided at the scalp, and hung loose and wavy at her waist. The fullness of her hazel lips appeared to have been thoroughly ... kissed. *'Damn it Xander! Did you two fuck as soon as you landed on the beach?'* Alister linked Xander, who was oblivious to anyone around him except his wife.

Xander peered back at Alister, grinning wide. *'We are newlyweds. We will fuck when and where we want ... or more like when and where she wants.'*

“Children, you will be my early grave with your games,” King Furrier shook his head.

“Alister,” Helena whispered to get his attention. “He cooled her raging fire, while she melted his icy heart. That’s what our people are saying about the newlyweds,” she giggled.

“What are you whispering over there Helena? I hope you’re not teasing Alister, as you seem to always do,” Arden gave Helena a stern look, watching her wrap her arms around Alister’s waist as he hugged her.

“Oh, nothing sister, seems like Rodan couldn’t wait to rid himself of his riders to go play with Coy. I guess he misses the warmth of this place,” Helena teased.

“Tsk, sister, behave yourself or Alister will not invite you back,” Xander chuckled, and Alister sighed at the bickering twin siblings.

“Since now everyone has arrived, let’s make our way into the mansion. The entire mansion is completely reserved for your family, King Furrier, with plenty of rooms to spare if there are any other guests you wish to host here. Some of your servants arrived late last night and alongside my staff have set up the bedrooms and other spaces to your specifications,” Alister explained as they all entered the grand foyer.

“I am sure everything will be fine. I remember this mansion, though clearly it has been expanded and freshly updated,” King Furrier nodded. “Is he here yet?” Furrier directed his question to Alister.

“If he, you mean High King Gareth, then no. He will be here tomorrow night, I believe. We will have a family dinner the day after, on palace grounds with all royals present to represent each dragon territory. Though King Aarif will not be present for the gathering, he had sent word that Princess Arden will be his kingdom’s representative,” Alister nodded towards her.

“It seems time has come for the young to rule, while we the old sit on the sidelines quietly watching,” Furrier chuckled.

“Are the rest of the royals arriving tonight or tomorrow?”

“The rest are arriving the day after,” Alister said.

“I’m excited to see Lidiya, it has been a year almost,” Helena said. “But who I am most eager to see, is your Lady Marissa,” she grinned looking up at Alister as she nudged his side.

“All in due time, sister. We don’t want to overwhelm her with so many of us wanting to meet the girl that Alister has fallen for,” Xander said as he slapped Alister’s free arm. “Is she here then, or is she staying in Uther during the gathering?” Xander wiggled his silvery brows.

Alister glared at the twin siblings, but mostly at Helena. Though both siblings were in Valance at the time when he first met Marissa, Alister knew Helena had seen Marissa at the art gallery. An annoyed look crossed his face as he rolled his eyes at Helena. She was the one he trusted to keep his secrets as he did hers.

“Oh, I see sister, he is angry at you because he thinks you told me. You forget Alister, even though we are fraternal twins, we are twins after all,” he nodded at Helena and pointed to his temple, signaling their mind link. “I was in Valance. Do you not remember? And though I was preoccupied with

wooing my own bride,” Xander looked at Arden waiting for him at the bottom of the opulent staircase and blew her a kiss. “I did see you with a stunning woman at the theatre, and how you behaved around her,” Xander chuckled.

“Let’s not have this conversation with all the ears present,” Alister said low, his eyes still glaring at the two. They nodded in understanding as they watched their older brother Marius and his family, and their father, make their way up the staircase, following the servants to their rooms.

“King Furrier, let us meet for dinner later in the evening, we have a few things to go over for the gathering,” Alister turned to look up at the staircase.

“We all will meet you then,” Furrier waved a dismissive hand.

Helena remained in the foyer with Alister watching her father, siblings and their wives disappear from their sight.

“Are you fucking joking Helena!” he growled out. “I keep my mouth shut about your private life, and you just blurt my personal business out in front of your father. I don’t need your father or brother getting into her head. I have enough to deal with Gareth and Marissa’s family right now.”

“I’m sorry. I did not know you were not ready to talk about her in front of everyone. It seemed from your last letter that

you were planning on claiming her during the gathering. And Xander intercepted your wyvern, that's the only real reason he found out her name. I would never betray your trust," Helena pouted with her silvery blue eyes glazing slightly.

"Shit. Stop making that face," Alister rolled his eyes. "That won't work on me. Now go, and we will talk about this later," he said about to turn away.

But she grabbed his arm pulling him into an embrace before she whispered, "did you figure out how I can stay in the palace instead of this close under my father's and Marius's eyes?"

"You would rather have Gareth catch you two?" he whispered back, his eyes traveling around to make sure no one was around to hear. "Give it a few days. I'll talk to Marissa about it when she returns."

"So, she is staying in the palace then?" she asked, her eyes suddenly giddy with excitement. He nodded to answer her question, his smile beaming. "Do you want a kiss to reassure your destiny?" she winked, puckering up.

"No, no, no getaway," he put up his hands between them as he pulled away.

"Ugh, you're annoyingly assured of yourself. Fine, we will talk later," Helena said as she scurried up the staircase.



Alister strolled down the tree-lined path toward the palace, veering toward the north garden to avoid Charles and his senior staff. The palace was busy with preparations for all the royals' and other guests' arrivals. Gardners, guards, and grounds staff stopped their work to gaze at him as his focus was on the path ahead and no one else. *'Helena has arrived,'* he linked Onri. *'When am I to expect you?'*

'I just arrived in Ladon. We will leave in two days' time through the water passage. How is she?' Onri replied immediately.

'She is herself, as always,' Alister let out a sigh. He strolled lazily through the corridor. Seeing Charles in the distance Alister turned into another corridor and walked into the secret passage. Onri and him maintaining their link as they discussed the art that had arrived at the palace earlier in the morning. *'It will all be ready. Charles is taking care of that as well.'* As he came up the winding staircase, he heard shuffling noises, and different footsteps. Some short and sharp, and others heavy and long. He paused, *'Onri, I need to go. I will see you at sunset. Keep safe on the sea,'* he said before severing their link.

Alister listened, staying hidden in the dark staircase. *'No one should be here right now,'* he furrowed his brow and

listened further. He heard a door creek open in the distance. From where the sound came, he knew it was from the baroque room, one of the rooms belonging to the duchess's quarters.

'I don't remember giving Sandra a key to the doors in the passage,' Alister thought but then he heard the voices as clear as if he was standing beside them.

“Sandra, we can't keep waiting to tell her, we should have done this when I was in Valance. Now the King knows, and soon so will Alister. She deserves the truth,” the deep baritone of Anthony's voice echoed. “We can't keep us a secret for much longer either,” he continued.

Alister pressed himself against the wall, eyes wide. *'Us?'* he questioned what he heard.

“Anthony, please, we have been through this. This would be the worst time to tell Marissa everything. She has been through enough. I know that it will be the right thing to do. But she has found her happiness, and I do not want to confuse her now. Perhaps after the gathering, when there will be fewer prying ears, and things settle down,” Sandra said. “With this truth, everything she knows will change. And who knows how she will react.”

“Sandra ... the rest of the royals will be here soon. One look at her and the older generation, especially Queen Alessandra,

will know the truth,” Anthony sighed. Sandra whispered something Alister couldn’t hear. “Is he sure?” Anthony asked. There was more shuffling and whispering Alister couldn’t make out. “Then let me make it all better ... sweetheart,” Anthony rasped out.

Alister widened his eyes as a moan rang in his ears. He peered out from the stairwell into the hall, and in the dimness, he saw them. Sandra’s back pressed against the wall, while her arms were wrapped around Anthony’s neck as they were in a heady kiss. Anthony lifted her up and carried her into the open entrance of her room. Alister blinked, frozen in his spot. *‘What the fuck is going on?’* he swallowed. He thought of interrupting them and confronting what he overheard. *‘Enjoy yourselves for now, but we will talk tonight,’* Alister turned in the opposite direction to his rooms.

At dinner, with Furrier and the rest of the family, they discussed the upcoming events throughout the gathering. Though Alister was present and interacting with his guests, his mind kept on going back to the conversation between Anthony and Sandra. *‘What does Gareth know that I do not?’*

“This time I will not participate in the Fight and Flight event,” Marius said. “I think we have enough younger generations that did not participate in the previous gatherings that should be considered this year,” he continued.

“You just don’t want to lose again,” Helena chuckled.

“I think we, the women of the dragon blood, should have our own Fight and Flight. I wouldn’t mind getting a bit dirty and showing what I am capable of in front of our people. What do you think, King Father?” Arden said, her tone eager.

“I think that would be a great idea to bring forward. We would have to agree upon this as latest as the council meeting. What do you say, Alister?” Furrier asked.

“Hmm ... oh ... yes I think ... I think it is something worth discussing with Gareth. I am sure there are many women that will be willing to participate in ... such a barbaric event. An opportunity worth the cost of beauty,” Alister said cautiously. The event is known for displaying the participants’ powers, and for the blood spilled in the process.

After dinner had completed, Alister had excused himself back to his rooms, allowing the rest to take a small evening tour of the grounds with Charles leading them. The real reason for his need to retire early was to summon Anthony and Sandra.

“Your Grace, you wanted to see me?” Anthony said as he fixed his messy golden hair. His appearance was unusually a bit unkempt, but Alister knew why.

“Did I disturb your slumber?” Alister asked while he poured an amber liquid into three glasses. Alister gestured for Anthony to take a seat and offered him one of the drinks.

“No. I was taking rest but...” Anthony was interrupted as Sandra walked into the room with Yulia leading her in.

“Your grace, you summoned me?” Sandra curtsied, confused seeing Anthony sitting on the sofa.

“My apologies, if you were getting ready for bed. But this is an urgent matter, and I needed your presence. Have a seat please,” he gestured to a spot near Anthony. “All servants are dismissed,” Alister gave a nod for Yulia and his attendant to leave them. Sandra and Anthony glanced at each other with that knowing look crossing their faces.

“Alister, what is this about?” Anthony began, weary.

“How long has this been going on?” Alister asked pointing to the both of them. “Before you ask how I know ... I saw you two earlier in the passage,” he said straight to the point.

“Umm, your grace,” Sandra paused, seeing Alister’s arched brow. “Alister, it is not that simple,” she lowered her gaze.

Alister took in a deep breath and stared back at them. “But it is simple. You give me a number followed by the word days, weeks ... Enlighten me.”

Anthony swallowed his drink, shifting closer to Sandra as he said “Almost 20...” His hand finding hers in the process, as their fingers intertwine.

“20 what ... days ... weeks...” Alister gave them an opening to complete the statement as he took a sip of his drink.

“Years,” Sandra breathed out, watching Alister cough up his drink.

“Your Grace!” Sandra and Anthony stood up, panicked.

Alister put up his hand and heaved his breath, adjusting himself. “20 years!” he exclaimed. His brow furrowed in confusion. “How is that possible?” he rubbed his temple. “What is this ‘truth’ that you were speaking of earlier?” he said as he got up from his chair. “And what does it have to do with Marissa?”

Anthony nodded to Sandra and approached Alister, facing him at eye level. His gaze was intense and yet protective. “Alister ... look at me,” he said, Alister stared at him unmoving. “No, I mean really look at me ... my eyes ... my

hair,” he said as he inched closer to Alister, both men facing each other not more than a foot apart. Alister narrowed his eyes taking in what Anthony said. The sandy golden hair, and his almond-shaped soft green eyes ...

Alister took a step back eyes widened with realization. “H-how? W-what? I ... I don’t understand,” he breathed out confused.

“Marissa ... she ... she is my blood ... my daughter,” Anthony sighed and moved his gaze to Sandra. “And Sandra is her real birth mother.”

Alister’s eyes shifted back and forth between them. He shook his head and sat back down. “Tell me everything.”

“Alright,” Anthony said taking a seat with Sandra. “After the attack on the palace 20 years ago. And your parents and many others perishing, I was instructed by then the High King Carlyle to take you to Valance for protection. You were just five years old at the time and with your parents gone, you were the next in line for the Orlean throne. During the year we spent in Valance, Sandra and I met ... the same way you and Marissa met,” Anthony pressed his lips into a thin line and raised an eyebrow at Alister, giving him the serious protective fatherly look. Alister rolled his eyes and smirked.

“My father was the magistrate Irvine of Uther at the time. Orson was his young assistant. My older sister and I were in Valance finishing our studies when we found out about our parent’s death during the attack as well. I was only seventeen at the time and my sister had just received a marriage proposal from Nathaniel. He was long divorced from his first wife he had in Ladon and was seeking to relocate south of Valance,” Sandra rubbed her hands together nervously. “Anthony and I met at Maskar, and it was a matter of young love. We were young, not thinking straight, and things progressed between us rather quickly.” Her eyes trailed to Anthony, both gazing at one another.

“Alright, so how did you end up marrying Nathaniel, and making him believe that Marissa was his daughter?” Alister asked.

“When King Carlyle summoned me to bring you to Volos a year later, I did not know the extent of his plan. To officially raise you as his adopted son, and my vow to protect you as your personal knight remained. We left Valance, Sandra did not know that I had to leave for Volos instead of our mutual birth home of Orlean. She also did not know that I was your protector and that a vow like this cannot be undone ... until you come of age or release me from it,” Anthony lowered his head, clenching both of his hands together.

“Anthony’s departure was sudden. And he couldn’t tell me where he was leaving to. My sister had already married and was pregnant almost immediately. My only ability for any social standing was to live with my sister and her husband, and I, as well as she, realized soon after Anthony had left ... that I was experiencing the same symptoms as her. So, we hid my pregnancy from everyone. I was hoping ... I thought that Anthony would return, and we would be together. My sister had ... she ...” Sandra swallowed, tears brimming around her eyes. Anthony cradled her almost immediately, kissing her temple and whispering reassuringly.

She wiped at her tears, nodded, and continued. “Nathaniel had left the continent for business. He was going to miss the birth of his child, but business was more important to him than his family. My sister spent the majority of her pregnancy in bed, weak and without her husband. Only me and my pregnancy to keep her company. She ... she went into labor earlier than expected, and the babe ... the babe was ... was stillborn,” Sandra exhaled, reliving that day with her words. “My sister was in agony. She did not want anyone to know.” Sandra was practically shaking as more tears flowed down her cheeks. Anthony pulled her closer against him, whispering words of comfort. Alister approached them, taking a knee and holding Sandra’s hand.

“I see how much reliving these memories is hurting you. If you wish to stop...” Alister said warmly.

Sandra sniffled. “Perhaps sharing them will ease the pain,” she continued. “I went into labor not long after, and when Marissa was born, my sister was beside herself. She then asked me to give her Marissa. She wanted to raise her as her own, quote on quote ... to ease her burden of having to tell her husband the devastating news, and to free me of being an unmarried young mother with nothing to give her child.” Sandra shook her head. “I do not know why I agreed with her. I was desperate, I think. And so, we agreed to keep the secret between us. Nathaniel never knew anything, and to this day believes Marissa is his own blood. I stayed with my sister and her new family, as a doting aunt. Just a few months after Nathaniel returned, she had fallen pregnant again. But this time she ... she miscarried and ... and ...” Sandra swallowed, her sobs increasing as she shook in Anthony’s arms. “The complications,” she managed to say in between wiping her tears.

“I am so, so sorry ...” Alister squeezed her hand gently, his face crumbling in agony. “You don’t need to continue.”

After calming her sobs, she continued despite Alister’s words. “I remained taking care of Marissa, and Nathaniel asked me to stay and be her guardian. He was always traveling and couldn’t have a young babe with him. After a year he asked me to marry him. It became a marriage of convenience for us both. I turned a blind eye to his extramarital affairs, and he took care of the child he thought was his ... There wasn’t a

time I didn't think of just taking Marissa and leaving. Coming back to Orlean and perhaps finding what I had lost. Nathaniel traveled extensively to Ladon, as his other children were coming into their own, leaving me and Marissa often as well," Sandra breathed out.

Anthony rubbed her shoulders, letting her calm down as he took over. "I did not know any of this. I wrote to Sandra to explain what I was authorized to but there were no responses. I thought she had moved on, not knowing that she had moved south to Summerset and was not receiving my letters. When we were in Valance again, I want to say you were eight, I think. I wanted to find Sandra again. To at least get closure if not for her then for me. To my surprise, I saw her in the tulip gardens of the golden palace one day strolling with Nathaniel and pushing a stroller. She looked so peaceful, radiating such happy energy. I could tell, by how much the flowers around her bloomed with their vivid colors. An image of a perfectly happy family. I was too late," Anthony said, a tinge of sadness in his words.

"So, how did you two rekindle this," Alister now curious.

"About 5 months ago, you had me deliver an invitation to the art gallery opening to Marissa and her family. When Sandra and I saw each other, it was as if time had stopped and begun anew. Like nothing had ever changed. All the same feelings and emotions were buried inside and immediately

rushed back to the surface. Nathaniel was away on business, clearly, we know what that was now. When I finally saw Marissa face to face, I was beside myself. Her strong resemblance to my mother when she was of similar age is unmistakable. All these months of knowing the truth, we had tried to figure out what to do. However, with Nathaniel's treason coming to light. Yesterday I asked King Gareth to annul her marriage to Nathaniel, though we have his approval we are waiting on Prince Onri to sign the final documents when he arrives. And we are going to wait till after the gathering ends so that we can marry ... finally." Anthony sighed. Alister let go of Sandra's hand as he stood up.

"I am so sorry ... It's because of me ... you missed so much time together," Alister walked over to the side table and picked up his glass again. Taking a sip before he asked, "what can I do to make it up to the both of you?"

"No Alister, none of what happened in the past is your fault. If anything, it's because of you we met and have a daughter," Anthony stood up, closing the distance between him and Alister.

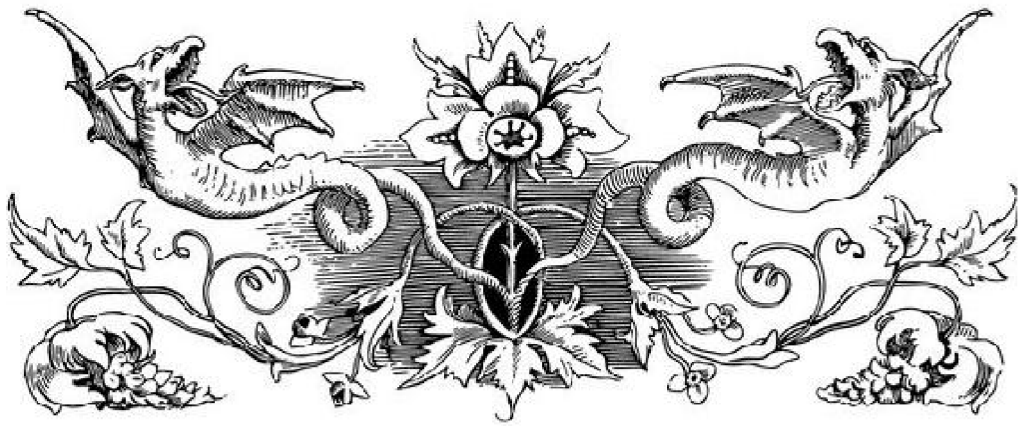
"Destiny works in a mysterious way, doesn't it? If you didn't embrace your destiny of being my personal knight, I might have been dead alongside my parents. You two would have never met and you wouldn't have had Marissa ... who is my destiny. What I want to say is ... Anthony and Sandra, as

Marissa's real parents..." Alister said as he took a knee in front of Anthony. "I ask you both for your blessing and Marissa's hand in marriage."

Anthony placed his hand on top of Alister's head. "We bless your union and pray to our gods, Tiamat and Asterot, to honor you both and the spirit of Nagendra residing in you." Alister stood up and both men embraced.

After a few minutes of further discussion and arranging for Sandra to move into Anthony's designated rooms they readied to leave. "Oh, there is one more thing, that will come to light ... possibly sooner than we would like it," Anthony said, wrapping his arm around Sandra's waist protectively, his fingers gently rubbing small circles along the smooth material of her dress covering the flat of her stomach.

Alister's eyes widened seeing the gesture, and then the elated look on both of their faces. "Goodnight, Alister," Anthony breathed out as he led Sandra out of the room.



CHAPTER 20

Gareth stared at the ceiling. His thoughts of Eliza preoccupied his every free moment, awake or asleep. It's been a day since he escorted Marissa to the earl's estate. His dragon spirit hummed with excitement, just knowing how close he was to seeing her again. If it wasn't for the earl's and her parent's presence, he might have actually entered the grounds to see her again. *'I should have ... I should have ... Eliza,'* he chewed on his lower lip.

“Can I ask you something?” Narcissa turned onto her side, balancing on her elbow while she caressed Gareth's collarbone.

He peered at her from the corner of his eyes. Her shoulder-length white hair fell to one side of her face. Her cat eyes glowed iridescently. “I don't think you need my permission to speak,” he said.

“Who is she?” she asked, and he turned his head, narrowing his eyes at her. “Who is the girl you are thinking about while you’ve been with me these last few times?” she continued. It’s not the Maskar way to pry into their patron’s private affairs, but the way Gareth has been behaving is not like him. Not like the insatiable man ... King ... she has known intimately for half their lives. Just burying his lustful anxiety in her.

“What? I don’t get your meaning. This is just sex,” he said trying to avoid the question.

“My King, I know you well enough to know when you are detached but you have been particularly different these few times we have slept together. It is as if you are thinking about someone else while you’re with me. Which you know I am fine with. But I did notice the subtle changes in your mannerism. You’ve been more attentive, actually kissing me for once in a very long time and being gentler than I could ever recall. You actually cared that I had climaxed, which is also a first,” she sat up fixing her sheer chemise.

“Perhaps I am gentler because you are familiar. I trust you and I can be at ease around you. Did you consider that?” he said trying to push away her question and reasoning again.

“Ha, right! You have never closed your eyes during sex, with me. I know you enjoy watching the women you fucked squirm under you, taking their pleasure, and pain for your

delight. But here you were enjoying the way you made me feel, and the way I made you feel. I probably wouldn't have thought twice about all the sudden changes in your demeanor if I didn't hear you murmur something when you climaxed. I can swear it was something that sounded like, 'mhm Eli'," she smirked, her cat eyes curiously watching his facial expression change from nonchalant to surprise.

His eyes widened and he looked away. Narcissa huffed, annoyed now. "I can't believe after all of these years, almost seventeen years, you still don't want to share your thoughts with me. We are friends. I was there for you during all of your ... needs and I do not expect anything of you. If anything, I would rather help you get what you need. Or in this case, I think, get whom you want," she spat. She knew many of the women he had bedded, many within the walls of Maskar at that. They all said the same thing about his appetite that he was unpredictable, voracious, heated, unfeeling, and insatiable. The vipers were blunt when they returned from Volos the year prior. They spent two years as his mistresses and yet he wasn't satisfied, dismissing them both. But now the man next to her has shown a change in his mannerisms. Something or someone has overtaken his thoughts, and his body reacted differently.

"What I need is rest. What you need is to stop bringing this up, or I'll be the brute you think I am when I fuck you again!" he hissed at her. His demeanor suddenly heated and he turned

away from her. Getting out of bed he walked naked across the room and grabbed his pants.

“What are you doing?” she asked. *‘Isn’t he staying another night,’* she thought. “I’m sorry for bringing up the subject. We can drop it.”

“I’m going to the cellar. I need a stiff drink. Do you want anything?” he said nonchalantly as if he didn’t just hiss at her.

Her eyes narrowed. “I can have a servant bring anything you wish. You do not have to go.”

Their gazes met, his curiosity getting the best of him. *‘If she is a true friend, then she will understand me,’* he thought. “If I said that I was thinking of someone, what would you feel or think?” he said.

She suddenly blushed, “whoever she is, for her to have an effect on you such as this. She must be something special. Don’t let her out of your sight, and maybe don’t play with her as you do with the rest of your mistresses.”

His face softened, and he smirked, thinking of Eliza once more. “She is ... apologies to your mother, but I have to go.”

“You’re going to see her, the woman you’re thinking about? Will you come back and tell me about your time?” Narcissa winked at him.

“Ha, I know you would enjoy that. Do not count on it though,” he chuckled. “I’m borrowing that mask on your wall. I’ll return it to you at the first ball. Be prepared to play your part.”

“Will I get to meet her at the ball? I promise to behave and maybe give her some advice on what you enjoy,” she smirked playfully, though she knew that he will most likely reject the idea.

He narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps, I’ll take you up on your offer to help me get what or whom I want. I do not want all these vipers around me to deter me away from ... her ... and you already know her.”

Her mouth hung open eyes widened in surprise. She thought about whom she knows whose name starts with Eli. Swallowing back her thoughts, Narcissa got out of bed and walked over to Gareth as he was putting on his riding boots. Kneeling on both knees in front of him she assisted him by tucking in his pant leg and buckling his boots.

“She is an intelligent, sweet, generously humble young girl ... and pure. The Meiji will offer a position with them once

she is of age. Do not act hastily and take her before she knows what it will cost her. Give her the option to choose, please, my King,” she looked at him pleading. She knew of Eliza, talks of her abilities, her character, and her beauty was something regular amongst the men visiting Maskar. These nobles never really understood that information of all kinds was regarded highly and kept secret amongst the Maskar women.

“Is that really my reputation, dishonoring virgins?” he asked curiously looking down at her, as she was adjusting his boots.

“Umm ... actually no, but hmm ... well, when was the last time you had a virgin?” Narcissa asked staring up at him.

“I think you know the answer. I don’t fuck virgins. And I do not plan on taking her purity just like that either. I am letting her decide, to choose what she wants and give in when she is ready. But...” he sighed, trying to decide for himself. “I am not sure if I am the right man for her either. Regarding the Meiji priestesses, there are many of them, and they do not deserve her mind. She has a power within her that I want to help her cultivate, not destroy as they would,” he said sternly getting up and grabbing his shirt.

“If she would choose you and not another, would you give yourself over to her, and her alone? Does she know that you cannot have children? Is that something she would be willing to live without? To live knowing she cannot pass her dragon

blood, her powers onto an offspring?” she asked, her eyes on the floor, avoiding meeting his. Narcissa knew this subject was one that he avoided the most because of how much it pained him. But also knowing that he has been a doting uncle figure to her daughter because of how much he desires to have his own children.

He glared at her, his eyes turning dark. “How dare you. Of all the people that I had trusted with my suffering, not even my brothers know, and you have the nerve to bring it up?” He snatched a blue mask off the wall. “You better not stand in my way. Or you will lose my friendship and patronage.”

“Please my King. Do not be angry with me. I know you do not let many in. And I just want to make sure that you are making the right decision, not just for you but for her sake too,” Narcissa matched his tone looking up at him as she was slowly getting up from the floor. She did not fear his anger, she has seen all his different sides since they were teenagers, and as a daughter of Maskar, it was her responsibility to ease his temper. She was hoping he would think of their long years of friendship and take her words into consideration. He did not respond but continued to glare at her.

“Gareth ... I had hoped that you would find the one woman that will finally satisfy your insatiable appetite. That could finally tame your dragon and be your one soulmate, even if that is not the way Volos wanted it. But I also know of Eliza.

And I don't want her to pay for your insatiable ways with her purity and her future. You love to play with women, you cannot settle yourself. Even when you were married, how many mistresses did you have? How many of them are still waiting for you to return to your castle on the Isle of Volos? How many will throw themselves at you once the gathering begins? Please reconsider. If you wish to play around right now, take me instead, or take any other but Eliza ... she is not meant to be just your toy till you grow tired of her and leave her to the vultures that all these men are," Narcissa continued persistently.

"I know she is special. I just need time. But I will do as I please. I need you to either be on my side and help me or stop being in my way. I will see you at the ball Narcissa," his tone calmer this time as he opened the door. He stood for a moment in the doorway. "This turned out good," he pointed to his hair.

She narrowed her eyes, settling her thoughts. "It was high time you got rid of that charcoal and grey tinting you have been using. And even though Leena loved the braids, they too had to go," she smirked approaching him. She pushed a few strands of his raven-black hair behind his ear. "The shoulder length always suited your face, and finally a trimmed, cleaned up short beard, not that hideous unkempt nest. You're not someone on the battlefield brawling in the dirt." She tugged on his short black beard. "Your disguise in Mercer might have worked too well. Even your brothers did not know you were

amongst them observing their leadership while fitting alongside everyone. But it's high time you turn the clock back to your real gorgeous self," she said, proud of her work. "If the girls batted their lashes at Lord Greyson ... I wonder how they will react when they see you now ... their wet depths begging for your hot release to fill them." Narcissa widened her eyes at the words escaping her mouth. She flared her nostrils and slapped Gareth's chest as he chuckled mischievously. "Don't do that! Stay out of my head," she shoved him.

He shook his head, as he caressed Narcissa's cheek. "You said if I wished to play around to take you instead. This is how it would be ... but you already knew that." He kissed her cheek. "I'll see you at the gathering."

Walking down the hallway, he stopped in front of another room. Peering in he watched as Leena slept soundly surrounded by her favorite stuffed toys and dolls. His heart ached as all he could think about was a daughter of his own that he would protect, teach, adore and spoil.

"She will miss her uncle Greyson," he heard Mistress Maskar say as she appeared out of the room next to Leena's.

She curtsied as Gareth looked at her. "I left a gift for Leena on the desk. Her real father will be at the gathering. Did you want to introduce her to him?" he whispered, so as not to wake Leena.

“A daughter of Maskar remains a daughter of Maskar. She doesn’t need to know him. And he can live his own life as he has these almost five years,” she retorted.

“You do not think she should grow up knowing who her father is? Have a relationship with him?” he furrowed his brow.

“He will not be able to be a father to her. It is not the Maskar way. I would rather keep her safe and let her grow up freely as she wants. Not as a daughter of a noble that must adhere to strict rules and be prim,” the woman responded.

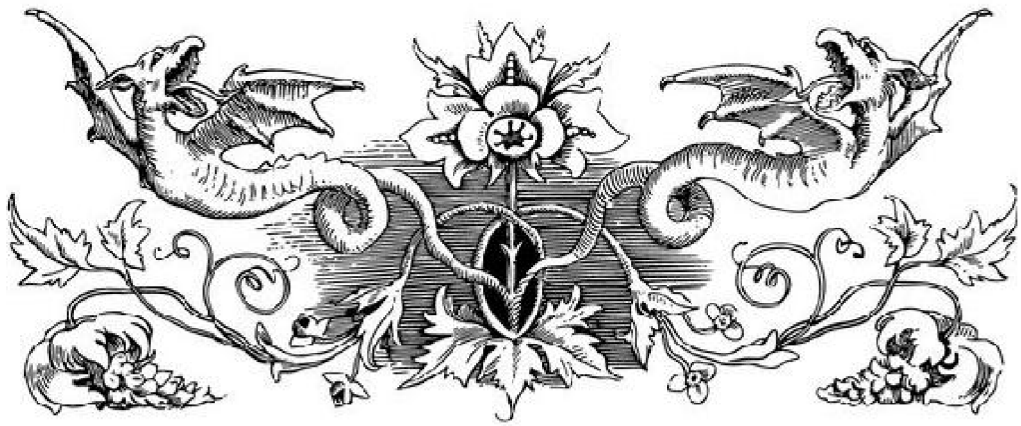
Gareth nodded. “I understand. I hope you will make an appearance at some of the events. I know how much you hate these public outings,” he said, looking at the clock, seeing it was an hour till midnight.

“If My King wills it, I will oblige,” she said bowing.

“Good night, mistress,” he bowed small and left to the cellar of the small mansion. He had entrusted Narcissa with a small chest of his favorite possessions, and she hid it for him in the cellar.

‘Eliza, you better be asleep, or you will hate it when I summon you if you’re awake,’ he smirked. He opened the

chest, looking at the different size velvet boxes. “Ah, yes, this will be perfect for you.”



CHAPTER 21

Eliza opened her eyes and looked around, seeing Marissa beside her sleeping, she sighed. Their day was filled with activity. Riding through the grounds, writing Marissa's speech she must have ready for the end of the ball. And though the visit from Earl Tavo and his son was not one she was excited for. She mustered up enough sense to be courteous and friendly toward the young man. It was evident there were talks of possible unions for her. But all she could think of was Gareth. Just a few nights before Gareth had pulled her mind into his dream, even though he said that this was the last time he would do so, she had an aching feeling it was not the end.

'My King,' she thought of the silver in his eyes, the softness of his lips on hers, and his tongue. *'My shameless King.'* A warmth settled in her core, making her throb with the same need as when she woke up from their last encounter. She bit her lip as she got out of bed to get some water. She drank a glass and poured another but before she was able to pick it up, she felt her limbs stiffen. A deep humming caressed her mind.

'What is this, what is happening?' she thought. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Not a squeak or a murmur. Eliza panicked inwardly her body moved suddenly on its own as if it did not belong to her. She slipped on her slippers and walked to her closet, pulling out a floor-length thick robe adorned with embroidery of her favorite flowers. Putting it on she tied the strap around her waist. She watched as her body performed all of these actions without her. She tried to resist, telling her mind to stop, her dragon spirit huffing and clawing desperately to help her regain control, but she couldn't.

She picked up the dimly lit lantern and walked out of the room quietly. Once she reached the stairs, she tried to hold on to the railing so she wouldn't walk down, but her body didn't respond to her commands. She walked down the staircase, making no sound, quiet like a breeze she walked into the game parlor near the stairwell. The doors to the terrace from the game parlor opened slowly without her having to touch the handles.

'Eliza, come to me. I'm waiting for you,' a deep melodic voice grazed against her mind. Her heart started racing as she stepped out onto the terrace. Her feet had a mind of their own as she glided down the path into the garden. It was dark out, the only light coming from her dimly lit lantern, and some stars she could see glowing in the clear sky.

Her feet kept on moving forward, creating a distance between her and the mansion. She reached her favorite part of the garden which had a fountain with a sculpture of a siren sitting on a boulder at its center holding up a lantern. A few benches faced the sculpture garden, and a pergola surrounded by peonies.

“Eliza,” she heard the voice, but now it was no longer in her head. “Turn around Eliza,” the voice melodic with a familiar undertone. She felt a sudden rush of heat spread through her body, a spark in the pit of her stomach. Her dragon spirit coiled, breathing her fire and setting Eliza’s insides ablaze. Whoever it is, his voice was familiar, smoky, and made her entire body ignite. She turned to face the trees at the beginning of the sculpture garden and there, a silhouette of a rather tall man. The voice called to her again, telling her to remain still. She did while observing his movements. He was holding something in one hand and the other hand formed a fist that was near his face. She lost all of her control all of her telepathic abilities were for nothing. She was someone’s pawn, standing still, her body no longer moving, her voice unable to come out. No choice for her but to wait for this man to direct her.

“I can feel you fighting, resisting my commands. But it is pointless to resist my skill. Something we will have to work on with you,” he said lowly as he approached her. He was finally in her light. She focused on his face, but she realized it was

covered by a mask. All she could see were the eye openings in the mask, but it was too dark to see his eyes. His lips and short beard were the only parts of his face uncovered. This man towered over her, and his entire build was massive in comparison to her petite size.

“It’s a good night for a walk, Eliza. Care to join me?” he asked. Her eyes moved back and forth, as she finally forced a muffled sound. “Ah, that’s right you’re still in my hold. I wonder if I release you, will you scream, or will you run away, or worse, do both?” he approached closer. He leaned forward his masked face just a foot above hers. The light from the lantern brightened the mask and the eye slits. The silver steel that she has dreamed of shined brightly now in front of her. The realization hit her. It was written all over her face.

‘My King, what are you doing here?’ she mind linked him. His lips twisted up into a mischievous grin.

“Such a smart girl to know how to do that all on your own. I will release you from my hold, but if you so much as move more than five steps from me, or your voice becomes louder than mine before I leave, I will put you to sleep right here. Do we have an understanding?” he said.

‘Yes, My King,’ she mind linked him again. She looked at him cocking his head, as he opened the fist that was still leveled by his face and whispered the word release.

Eliza coughed, taking in deep breaths of air as she could finally control her breathing. “Are you alright?” he asked genuinely concerned.

She nodded, “Yes, My King.”

“Good. Now, where were we? Ah, that’s right I was inviting you for a midnight stroll,” he said. “I’ll take the lantern and umm ... these are for you,” he held up the hand that was holding something earlier and as he took the lantern from her with the other, her eyes went wide. He was handing her a small bouquet of pink peonies. She looked up at him trying to meet his eyes behind the mask.

“Your majesty, um, you brought me flowers?” Eliza asked as she was shocked by his gesture. Before he could muster up a word she simply took in their scent, her eyes shining with pleasure. “Thank you, they are my favorite,” she said with shyness emanating from her gentle voice.

“You’re welcome ... Come I won’t keep you out too long,” he said as he held out his hand for her to take. She slowly placed her hand into his, feeling the warm, slightly rough skin on his palm. He clasped her small hand in his and brought it to his lips. Their slow caress against her skin made her tremble. He noticed her uneasiness as he kissed the tips of her fingers next. Her heart hitched as she sighed.

“My King you did not answer my question,” she glanced up at him through her lashes. Mustering up courage, she asked him again. “What are you doing here?”

“The truth?” he asked, and she nodded. “I wanted to be the first to wish you a happy birthday. As it is past midnight now, I had hoped I was to be the first,” he said, still holding her hand in his. Eliza swallowed nervously, her face settled with shock.

“I ... I do not know what to say. T-thank you ... but how did you know?” her eyes traveled down, looking at the ground. She felt her cheeks warm, and her hand in his was still trembling slightly.

“I have my ways of knowing everything I need to,” he said, whilst feeling a stinging warmth emitting between their clasped hands, he pulled away abruptly letting go of her. “Do you have an answer for me then?” he asked.

“I am sorry my King?” she narrowed her eyes in question, trying to recall what he had asked.

“My name, use my name,” Gareth said.

With eyes now wide, she swallowed hard and shook her head. “My King...” she was interrupted as he pressed the tip

of his finger against her lips.

“My name,” he said again, as he slid his finger against her lips down under her chin, pulling her chin up slightly to look at her face filled with turmoil. “The question I asked you the other night in the last dream? What do you really want from me, and what do you think you deserve?” he was curious to know what she had chosen.

“I ... I ... I am sorry. Please forgive me, but I do not have an answer for you,” her words were low as she tried to hide her confusion and frustration.

“When will you have an answer, Eliza?” he said as he let go of her chin. “I am not a patient man. If you do not have an answer, I will have to assume you want what I want. And you may not like what I want, and how I will go about getting it.”

“Please give me more time ... but ... may I ask you something?” she chewed on her lip.

“Anything, Eliza,” he answered. He slowly backed to a bench and gestured for her to take a seat beside him.

Following him to the bench, she said “why are you wearing a mask?”

“I ... I do not think you are ready to see my face. I look different. Remember I was about the same age as you are now, in the dreams. When truly I am fifteen years your senior,” he replied.

She swallowed, realization settling in. He was a man, that has lived a voracious life, while she is but a young girl, inexperienced. She finally sat down beside him, holding the bouquet close to her chest. “I do not think it would have mattered either way, not to me.” They sat quietly for a moment, him looking up at the midnight sky, and her looking down at the bouquet. “I am very sorry for your loss. You must still be grieving your wife’s death, and here I am pushing my way into your dreams and your life. I am truly sorry, my King, I did not mean to cause you any pain,” her voice trembled, and her eyes welled up. He put his arm around her waist and slid her closer to him.

“First, this will be the last time I will tell you to say my name. I think we are close enough for you to be informal with me. You can call me by my name when we have the ability to be alone like this, Eliza. Or if you wish to mind link me again. Secondly, I have already forgiven you for invading my dreams. You did not know whose dreams you invaded until fairly recently, and I have a feeling that you were encouraged by someone else to do so,” he said. She glanced up at him and nodded in understanding. He cupped her cheek. She heard him sigh as his thumb gently found its way to glide across her

bottom lip. Her pulse raised, breathing heavier as she stared at him in the mask.

“I have to remedy something you said to me the other night,” he breathed out.

“I said many things the other night ... Gareth,” her lips formed an innocent pout, and she averted her eyes from looking at him.

The sweet gentleness of her voice caressed his insides. His name from her lips had his dragon spirit flutter with need. “The part where you said that no men have tasted your lips, outside of me in the dreams. I can assure you, tasting your lips in dreams is not the same as in the flesh,” he said. Her eyes went wide, she gulped staring back up at him. Before she was able to respond his lips found hers. He pulled her closer to him wrapping both his arms around her small frame. Eliza trembled, unprepared to feel the soft fullness of his lips pull and tug on hers. His scent, smokey, and leather washed over her. Gareth let go of her lips slightly to look at the turmoil he created on her face.

“Eliza, you can tell me to stop if you wish, or you can tell me to kiss you,” he gave her the option to choose again. He released her from his embrace, letting her breathe. She slowly got up and laid the bouquet down on the bench. “Not more than five steps away Eliza,” he reminded her.

She looked over her shoulder at him, biting her lip innocently. She approached him, standing in between his legs as she peered down at the slits of the mask to meet his silver steel gaze. “Gareth ... Kiss me. Kiss me the way you did in the last dream,” she said.

“As you wish, siren,” he pulled her onto his lap and claimed her mouth again. A surprised squeak managed to escape her lips as one of his hands curled and gripped her hair, holding her firmly to him. His tongue pushed through her parted lips, to taste and intently duel hers for control.

‘Goddess, he’s so relentless,’ she thought. He nipped her lip, continuing his assault on her mouth. His free hand moved along her robe, discovering the robe ties and pulling them apart to reveal her nightdress. She shivered slightly. The cold air now teasing and tweaking her exposed skin. He untied the small bow that kept the nightdress fastened against her breasts. She moaned into his savage mouth as he palmed her warm skin, before rolling her taut nipple in between his fingers. *‘Oh, my goddess,’* she sighed, running her fingers through his raven hair.

‘And she replied with a gift of your dragon King’s lips,’ he linked her. He released her lips and quickly descended onto her exposed breasts, licking her skin now pebbled with goosebumps.

She gasped as his mouth now nibbled at her exposed tight buds. Licking, sucking, and alternating so quickly between them that Eliza didn't have a chance to pull away. "Gareth," she mewled. Heat looping and twisting all through her insides. "Your mouth, it's so hot," she managed to say, squirming and squeezing her thighs together.

'It's not my mouth, siren. It's you. Your dragon spirit is in rapture. She wants more,' he linked her back, keeping his mouth preoccupied. His hands grasping and squeezing her hips. "Is this how you wanted me to kiss you? Or is there more you want me to do for you?" he let go of her nipple, grazing his nose against her flushed skin. His eyes landed on her thighs squirming and tightly rubbing. "You are aroused. I can smell it on you. I want to kiss you till your center bursts and showers me with your divine taste."

"Oh ... please," she yelped, as a throbbing ache now settled deep within her.

"Please, what Eliza? Tell me how you want me to kiss you, touch you, and fully taste you," his tongue took a long lick up her neck.

"I ... I don't know," she cried out as she pushed him slightly off of her.

“No? I think you do Eliza. You’re just not sure of what to ask for. But you’re teasing me too much with your moans. And I will have a taste of you,” he groaned and claimed her lips again. He stood up abruptly, lifting her up in his arms, and carried her to the pergola. Eliza continued to kiss him, colliding her tongue with his. He landed her on the lounge in the pergola. Letting go of her lips, he let out a deep breath seeing her suddenly confused. He hovered over her for a moment, as he put her arms up around her head. The sight of her, flushed and breathless, stirred his cock. Her fiery long hair spread across the back of the cushion. Her face cupped in between her arms. With her back arched up slightly, her exposed breasts perked up, her nipples were sharp little points, and the robe now hung off her shoulders spread open across the lounge. He swallowed, his eyes traveling across her body, now only slightly covered by her thin nightdress, on display for him.

“Breathtaking, fiery, bold, ... vixen ... tell me ... what birthday wish you want me to grant you?” he said as he took in her aroused state.

“Gareth,” she breathed out his name as if it was a musical note sung in the key of her arousal “... m-make me a promise that you will keep,” she said lowly, not knowing how to convey what she wanted without potentially angering him.

He knew what she meant. “I promise I will not take your virginity. You can be the one to decide when and if you want to even share it with me ... But my lips will taste you tonight ... properly,” he sighed as he took off his coat, dropping it on the ground. “Bend your knees up,” he instructed her. As she did, Gareth dropped to his knees onto the lounge in front of her bent legs, pushing her legs apart slightly. Her breath heaved with anticipation the ache now more prominent at her core. His hands slowly and simultaneously slid down her inner thighs, pushing the delicate fabric down at the same time. “Your skin here is smooth as glass and soft as feathers,” he said, pushing her inner thighs apart further and exposing her naked glistening sex. “Beautiful,” he licked his lips, eyes directed at his next meal. He gently grazed the back of his hand along the little fiery curls down to her slit, feeling her twitch at the contact.

She watched him in nervous silence bringing up his hand toward his face and taking in her scent. “Sweet, sweet, sweet,” he murmured under his breath. “I’m going to make you sing, my little siren.” He grinned at her before his lips crashed hungrily onto her inner thighs, causing her to gasp. His lustful tongue made a play for her already throbbing pussy.

“Ah!” her voice pitched as he licked her slowly at first. His fingers spread open her entrance for his tongue to taste her sweet ambrosia, while his beard scratched at her inner thighs.

“Delectable,” he rasped. His lips returned to their unrelenting way, nipping and sucking on her aching clit, making her whimper with each thick lick. Her moans were such glorious sounds enveloping his ears, he wanted to hear her more. Hear his name being sung in euphoria.

‘Your voice not louder than mine, remember!’ he mind linked her. His eyes met hers, while his tongue dove deep in between her walls.

“I’m t-trying, b-but what you’re d-doing ... I ... I ...” she sighed heavily. He continued to drive his tongue in with deep long strokes. Flicking her sensitive spot over and over with such ardor, she screamed out his name. Immediately covering her mouth to silence her yelps.

‘Move your hips, Vixen. Use my tongue and mouth to release your heat,’ he ordered. She grounded her hips, moving in tandem with his mouth. Her hands grasped at the back of the lounge, digging her fingers in. *‘Fuck, your pussy is tight, even for my tongue,’* he continued to hold the link while feeling her clench around his tongue. His hands held her firmly as she twitched, moaning to the gods and calling out his name while she released her first orgasm. Gareth took a long lick of her release, licking his lips and savoring her taste as he watched her calm her breathing.

“My goddess, Eliza, you taste wonderful,” he murmured against her thighs, leaving gentle kisses against the spots his beard had scratched her. He would have stayed in this position the entire night, with her thighs as his pillow. She shivered a bit, tugging at the top of her night shift to cover her exposed breasts. He peered up at her from in between her thighs, she looked completely disorientated, and yet somehow still holding herself up in silence. He pulled the hem of her nightdress up over her knees. And as if nothing happened, he pulled up the loose ends of her robe and wrapped it back around her. “You’re cold?” he asked, watching her take short breaths.

“No ... I mean ... I was ... but not anymore,” she breathed out, hugging herself in the process.

“You didn’t like what I just did?” he narrowed his eyes. He didn’t know what to expect from her, but surely this was not the end result. He pinned her back to the lounge, hovering over her as he cupped her cheek.

She peered up at him, catching the gleam of his silver eyes. “I did ... I mean I very much do, like it ... I just wasn’t sure what was supposed to happen ... or if I did what you wanted.”

“It’s not about what I want, siren. Have you never touched yourself ...” he looked at her for confirmation, but she shook

her head instead. “Your first kiss, first intimate touch, and your first orgasm ... they belong to me?” he cocked his head watching her nod. “Say it.” She looked up at him, doe-eyed, swallowing nervously as he repeated again, “say it.”

“All my firsts so far, belong to you,” she blushed, biting her lower lip.

“And you ... whom do you belong to?” his eyes concentrated on her mouth. Watching her lips press into a thin line contemplatively before she whispered her answer. “I can’t hear you, my little siren.”

“You ... I belong to you,” she sighed. His lips caught hers in midsentence. They remained in a lip lock, desperate to hold on for as long as they could without taking a breath.

When they finally broke apart, he smirked. “Now I think you have been thoroughly and properly kissed, hmm,” he hovered over her, before kissing her on the cheek. She blushed again. He turned his head looking toward the path leading to the mansion. “Eliza, I cannot stay any longer,” he took her hand and kissed her palm. She sat up glancing at him, speechless by his gentleness and by what she just allowed to happen between them. Somewhere deep in her mind, she knew it would be pointless to deny him, her King, he will always get what he wants. He picked up his coat and pulled out a small

box from a pocket. Sitting beside her on the lounge, he handed her the box.

“What ... what is this?” she asked surprised, looking at the velvet grey box.

“What does it look like? It’s a gift. Open it,” he said.

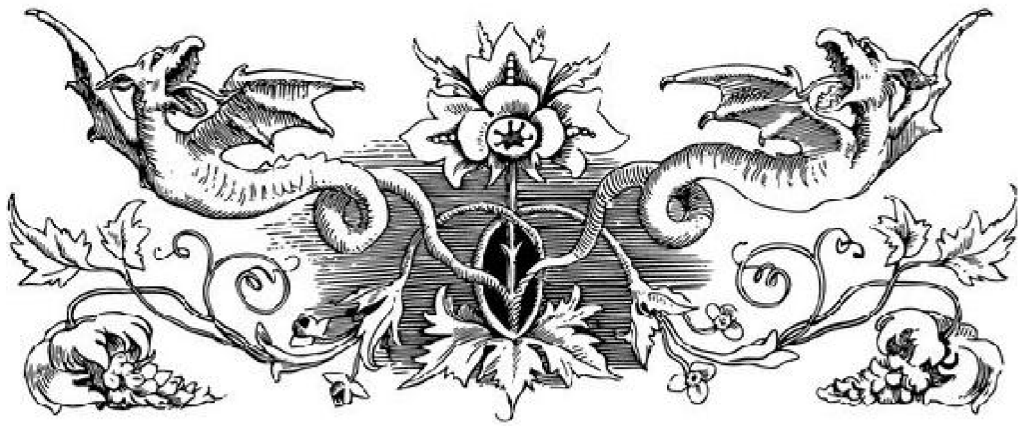
“Gareth ... I ... I don’t know what to say,” she murmured. Her eyes fluttered innocently at him. Her hands were shaking as she opened the box. Inside, a bracelet adorned with differently shaped diamonds, pieced together to form a head of a dragon, with a black diamond for its eye. Eliza’s eyes went wide as she stared at the unique bracelet. Looking back up at him she said “I ... I can’t possibly accept this. This is ... this is a fortune.”

“It’s actually priceless. I am giving you a gift, Eliza. It’s not polite to reject a gift, especially one from me. I think it will look beautiful on your delicate wrist when you wear it at the ball. Will you wear it for me?” he took the bracelet from the box and clasped it around her wrist.

“Yes, of course, I will wear it for you,” she nodded, a delightful smile grazing her lips. He leaned in and kissed her again.

“Happy Birthday, Eliza,” he said as he got up and put on his coat. “We will see each other soon.” He smirked as he admired the mess he created on her.

She nodded. “Good night ... Gareth”. She watched him walk towards the path to the wooded area where he first came from. He looked back at her and disappeared into the darkness behind the trees. “Good night, my beloved,” she sighed looking at the bracelet on her wrist with disbelief.



CHAPTER 22

Eliza walked down the hallway toward her room, when she heard a noise coming from the guest room where Nicola was staying. She stopped and gazed at the door. The noises were faint, but odd as she heard a masculine voice. She decided to knock, hoping that she was just imagining things. But before her knuckles connected to the door, her hand was snatched away, and a hand covered her mouth. Eliza turned and saw Marissa standing next to her pressing a pointer finger to her lips. Marissa pulled her hand and gestured for them to go.

Eliza understood and followed quietly back to her room. “Why did you stop me from knocking on Nicola’s door?” Eliza asked as soon as they walked into her room.

“You’ve been gone nearly two hours Eliza, where did you go?” Marissa asked panic settled in her voice.

Eliza rolled her eyes. “Don’t avoid my question Mari, with yours.”

“Did you really want to interrupt or better yet, walk in on Nicola and Vincent in the middle of ... fucking?” Marissa blurted out annoyed.

Eliza’s brows arched in surprise. “W-what d-did you just say,” Eliza stuttered.

“Oh please, how did you not know they are lovers? They have been like this since your sixteenth birthday. Since she delivered your invitation to Maskar two years ago. Why do you think he has been in Valance so often in the last year or so? It’s really to see her,” Marissa shook her head and walked over to the table. Picking up a vase she brought it back to Eliza. “Now answer my question, and I’m guessing you will need this to put those flowers into water,” Marissa nodded toward Eliza’s hands clenching the bouquet of peonies.

Eliza snapped out of her thoughts as Marissa took the bouquet and placed it into the water. “So? I’m waiting for your answer. I was worried. I saw you leave the room and thought maybe you weren’t feeling well. But when you didn’t return for an hour, I went to look for you. Hence how I knew it was Vincent, as he walked into her room,” Marissa continued.

“I went outside for fresh air,” Eliza looked away.

“What is happening to us? Why are we keeping things from each other?” Marissa narrowed her eyes, upset at the thought her friend was hiding something.

“I don’t know what to say. Perhaps we are afraid of the other’s judgment,” Eliza shrugged her shoulders, wondering if she should tell her everything.

“Fine! Tell me who the man was in the pergola with you?” Marissa grunted.

Eliza shook her head in disbelief, “how? When?” she asked.

“I told you I went to look for you. I thought maybe you left something in the game parlor, and when I walked in, I saw the open door to the terrace. So, I walked out, and by the time I figured out the path to the garden, I heard you scream out. I rushed in the direction of your voice and the next thing I see is you sitting on the lounge, and a man kissing you. I guess after you two said your goodbyes he left towards the wood. I wanted to walk over to you, but you had gotten up and walked over to the bench by the siren statue and picked up those flowers. I came back in and planned to meet you in the hallway, as I did. So now, who was that man,” Marissa said

with her hands now on her waist, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Eliza scratched the back of her head and sighed. “Okay. Okay. It was him. You know ... the one in my dreams. And he came here to wish me a happy birthday. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around what just happened,” Eliza said with a dreamy look on her face.

“Oh, my goddess Tiamat! How ... how did he know where you were, and how did he get you to go out in the middle of the night? Wait ... wait. Didn’t you say in the recent dreams or memories he was your age, but that’s not how old he is or how he looks? So, how do you know it was him? And what did he look like?” Marissa bared all of her excitement in her questions.

“Calm down, one question at a time. I will tell you something else too that I didn’t tell you before but please this is the most important piece of information. And I know how you will react, but it will all make more sense,” Eliza said, and Marissa promised not to overreact. “I know who he is. I realized who he was the night we parted after visiting your Alister in the palace. Do you remember in the painting gallery I was intently staring at a painting of a boy and his Dragon? His face was so familiar to me before Charles explained that it was King Gareth younger in his teens, and well that night I pushed my mind into the memory of that painting as it came to

life. And well it was him. The same boy on the beach that yelled at me to get out of his memories, and in this projection is when he did the whole mind trapping with his telepathy and scolded me as well. The young man, that invaded my mind and forced me into his memory, was him as well,” Eliza sighed with relief at being able to finally tell Marissa the truth.

“Did you just tell me that the man whose dragon spirit is your soul mate is none other than the High King of Drakon, King Gareth of Volos himself?” Marissa’s voice trembled. “And that the man that kissed you just now out there and did those things to you in your dreams is our King. I don’t know if I should be trembling from freight or be excited for you!” Marissa exclaimed.

“Shhh, don’t be so loud. There is nothing to be excited for ... as there is nothing,” Eliza said as she averted her gaze from Marissa while blushing.

“No, no, no. I know that look on your face. Spill it,” Marissa shook Eliza’s shoulders.

“Well, um, I am still unsure of things. Remember how I told you that being that strong of a telepath and using the power over and over can make the person irritable, as if incapable of reason? Well, that’s where he is confusing me. He made me feel unwanted at first, then he was overwhelming me with ferocious desires in the dreams wanting to punish me, and here

tonight he was so gentle, kind, and completely obsessed with wanting to kiss me, and as he said, “taste me”. But he gave me the choice to kiss him or not,” Eliza rambled on excitedly.

“Taste? There was more than just that kiss I saw tonight?” Marissa asked curiously. *‘That word again, same as Alister’s. What is it with our dragon men wanting to devour us.’*

Eliza nodded. “...Yes. A lot more than I should have ever allowed to happen but he is the King, and I am at his mercy. We all are.” Eliza swallowed, blushing as she continued thinking about Gareth, his lips, his scent, and his overall presence.

Marissa pulled Eliza to the chaise and divulged all of her recent experiences with Alister, making Eliza blush and cover her face innocently. “These men ... these dragon Kings, headstrong, eager, relentless, and in need to be tamed,” Marissa laughed.

“But he is the King. I do not even know what to do. He has been married and has so many mistresses. I ... I just do not want to be a notch on the list of women he sleeps with. If our dragon spirits are soul mates, shouldn’t that satisfy his desires?” Eliza questioned, looking down at the bracelet on her wrist.

“I honestly do not know. Alister has rejected all notions of other women. He has not been with anyone else since before we met. Which is also why he has been so frustrating and pushing me to open up to different sexual experiences,” Marissa ginned. “But I do not know King Gareth, and what his mindset is. He kept mistresses while he was married too. That untrustworthy womanizer! I think you’re doing the right thing by questioning his resolve. Do not just give in to his demands and be honest with him about what you want of him,” Marissa mustered up some advice for her friend.

A sudden knock on the door startled them, and Nicola walked in. “Why are you awake?” Nicola asked.

“Not the same reason you are, guaranteed?” Marissa chuckled.

“I was getting some water, and saw the flickering light, and heard your voices,” Nicola said narrowing her eyes at Marissa.

“Well since you’re here and fresh from sleeping with my cousin. Perhaps we can ask you a few questions about ... you know ... the deed itself,” Eliza blurted out, startling both Marissa and Nicola.

“Umm ... what ... ” Nicola blinked, stunned by Eliza’s sudden words. “For your information ... we weren’t,” she

crossed her arms.

Eliza mustered up her courage. “It’s alright. Whatever is between you and Vincent is between you two. I am not naïve, I know what you do, and what happens in Maskar. We are not judging your behavior. Just perhaps we want to know more. With the gathering approaching, that is, I am sure we will need to know,” Eliza said.

Nicola looked back and forth between the two, trying to figure out how they suddenly got the courage to ask her anything. “Never did I think that the sweet, good-hearted, and innocent Eliza Polignac would ask me, a Maskar mistress, for sex advice. Well since you are finally interested, I will share some details. Nothing too crude, but who knows,” Nicola wiggled her brows and then winked. “Perhaps you can join us at an event. To watch ... but no touching.”

Eliza’s eyes went wide. “I do not know about watching others do anything. I would just be mortified being in the same room with a naked man, let alone watching,” Eliza said while scrunching her nose. Marissa chuckled and Nicola grinned, as they got comfortable on the chaise and Nicola began to regale in detail her first experience through her favorite. Whenever she would mention Vincent or describe her experience with him Eliza would cover her ears or make a gagging noise, causing them all to laugh.



The morning arrived swiftly, and after Eliza's birthday breakfast, Marissa, the guards, and Vincent left the Earl's estate. Vincent's responsibility doubled, between obtaining and bringing a gift to honor King Gareth and making sure Marissa returns to the palace at Uther safely.

"It took me months to locate the perfect wild mare that still needs to be broken in," Vincent said to Marissa, as they rode into the center of Chester. "Since it is early spring, it is the perfect time for a mare to reproduce. I have high hopes that she will be a perfect gift for his majesty."

"Why a mare? The King has dragons," Marissa said confused by the odd gift of a horse.

Vincent chuckled, leading Marissa to a jewelry shop. "Lutz, the King's war horse has yet to reproduce. I know his majesty is eager to see this happen. And no matter how many mares have been paraded in front of him this last decade, apparently, Lutz just won't come near them." Vincent was hopeful that his knowledge of horses would produce the desired results for Gareth. "What are we doing here?" Vincent asked.

"Oh, I ordered a few pieces when I came here the other week with Nicola and Eliza. Before I found out that I was to

leave Drakon and then with everything that happened it slipped my mind. Nicola reminded me last night so hopefully, everything is ready,” she replied, before giving all of her order information to the clerk. “I thought you have never seen the King or his war horse. How do you know what his majesty would want?”

Vincent waited for the clerk to head to the back before replying. “If anyone knows the King, it would be my father. The only images I had seen of the stallion were the sculptures. But my father’s stories and descriptions gave me an idea. He suggested we do this for Lutz.” By the look on Marissa’s face, he knew she was surprised. Not many are aware of who was the King’s guard or protector when he was just a young boy. Though many know, his father Klaus has had a long-standing friendship with the King. Leading to unsavory comments and jealousy toward their family from other Drakon nobles.

“Marissa, are you almost finished? We have to be on our way,” Vincent returned to the shop after waiting for her with the guard outside.

“Almost. Actually, come here, I just need a final opinion on this ring,” Marissa waved Vincent over. “I had it made for Alister. It would go well with the ear cuffs that he often wears. What do you think?” she asked Vincent.

“I do not know,” Vincent shrugged his shoulders with disinterest.

“Ok, fine. What if you were to receive this as a gift, how would you react, or what would you think?” she asked annoyed at Vincent’s lack of enthusiasm.

Seeing her annoyed look, he said “It’s nice. I wouldn’t wear an emerald ring. But then again, I wouldn’t refuse a gift from the woman I love and would display it proudly.”

“Good, then it’s settled. The ring and the other ear cuff as well,” she said turning to the clerk.

With the packages in hand, Marissa got back into the carriage. “I have to say that mare is beautiful. I really hope it works out as the King desires,” Marissa said to Vincent as he mounted his horse, and readied for their journey to Uther.

Just a few short hours later the gates of the palace were in sight. Marissa peered at the small scar along her thumb. Remembering Lord Greyson’s words as they rode to Chester a few days prior. *‘The mind is a beautiful token. It must be protected at all costs. The blood bond on the other hand creates a mind bridge. If you’re not someone born with the telepathic gifts of the gods, the blood bond will unlock the gate*

to that bridge. It will strengthen your ability to mind link with your partner. Cherish it and use it.'

'Alister, I'm almost home,' the words echoed in her mind as she concentrated on the image of his face.

'I will be out in front waiting for you my love,' she heard Alister's voice come back to her. Her heart hitched and she looked out the window to take in the beauty of the green scenery they were riding through. "Wow, Vincent, look at the guest Mansion. Who are all of those people?" she asked Vincent, who was still on horseback beside the carriage and looked over to see the bustling noise.

"I see Magistrate Orson, and Magistrate Diego and ... that's Prince Marius of Fernier they are with. That means many of the royals have arrived, and King Gareth must be here if Magistrate Diego is here," Vincent explained. The prospect of meeting the royals excited him. Two, in particular, he has been anxious to see ... to finally meet face to face, no masks, no more secrets.

Marissa stared at Prince Marius from the distance, as they continued down the main road. She has never met a royal outside of Alister. The pressure was now abundant. After all, this was the family he had remaining. She peered back at Marius, their eyes connecting in an instant. A chill swept her body and small icicles formed in the open window. She

widened her eyes, seeing her breath cloud like on a cold winter's day. She looked back at Marius's icy stance. She gave him a polite smile and nodded. The icicle evaporated, bringing the natural spring warmth back to her skin as he turned his attention back to the two magistrates.

The horses came to a stop in front of the main south entrance of the palace. Alister was already waiting at the bottom of the steps with a handful of servants. His light blonde short hair, a bit disheveled, was swaying with the warm spring breeze. His sleeves rolled up and the deep v of his chest peered through his unbuttoned shirt. Marissa sighed seeing him like this, and she moved quickly to get out of the carriage. He flashed her a devilish grin as he saw her rushing out of the carriage, not wanting the help of the attendant.

They ran to each other. He embraced her and lifted her up off the ground face to face. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, he gave her a chaste kiss. Their lips in a tight embrace as they both sighed and continued to pepper each other with small kisses.

"Looks like you missed me, just after two days," Alister whispered against her lips as he broke away.

"Mhm ... yes," she let out a small moan, wiggling her body to get him to put her down. As he put her down, she wrapped

her arms around his powerful torso, and he held her firmly against his body.

“I missed you too,” he chuckled. Looking back towards the carriage he watched Vincent give directions to the stable boys and groom to take the black mare and his horse, while the servants took the belongings from the carriage.

“Vincent! That mare, she is beautiful. The King will want to see her in action, and possibly break her in himself,” Alister exclaimed to Vincent, while still embracing Marissa.

“Your grace...” Vincent voiced out before he was interrupted.

“No more formalities, it’s Alister from now on,” Alister nodded at Vincent, while Marissa pulled away and looked up at him gushing with admiration.

“Yes, Alister. And thank you for hosting my family for the gathering,” Vincent approached and shook Alister’s hand as both men grinned.

“Wow Alister, I knew she was beautiful, but Lady Marissa you are more, you are exquisite,” a voice appeared behind them. Marissa pulled away to look at the person addressing them.

“Marissa, Vincent, meet my dear little sister, Princess Helena of Fernier,” Alister said holding his hand out for Helena. She was statuesque, slender but yet soft in her presence. Vincent bowed and Marissa curtsied as Helena approached them. Her cold eyes took in all of Marissa’s warmth.

“Princess Helena it is a pleasure to meet you in person. Alister speaks fondly of you and your close relationship,” Marissa smiled sweetly, her eyes fluttering innocently.

“Aww Alister, you actually told her about the family. Well, I want to get to know you more,” Helena said as she embraced Marissa. Her eyes traveled to Vincent, seeing the surprised look on his face. “We will be sisters soon after all,” she whispered, Marissa’s smile didn’t falter when they parted.

Helena looked at Vincent, with a knowing smirk. *‘Here goes nothing.’*

“And you must be Viscount Vincent Polignac, the bright star of all of the young nobles of Drakon,” Helena eyed Vincent up and down, giving him her approving smile. Vincent widened his eyes, a blush settled on his cheeks. *‘Well then, my work here is done.’*

“Princess Helena, thank you for the compliment, but I assure you I am just a humble servant of the great crown of Drakon,” Vincent lowered his eyes.

“Oh please, I don’t even know the names of the children of my nation’s Dukes and Earls. But your name is in the inner circle of royalty. The King placed his trust in you, and with that, your star will shine brightly,” she smirked at him. Before he could respond, there was a sudden rattling in the air.

“INCOMING!” Xander yelled from above.

They looked up, and a dragon with silvery and orange hues hovered above them. It landed softly, and its tale, ending with a spike, covered in frilly scales, swung and landed between Helena and Marissa. Marissa grabbed a hold of Alister’s hand, as Helena and Vincent backed up to give the riders their space.

“Apologies, sometimes Rodan just likes to surprise the people on the ground,” Xander said as he slid off Rodan and helped Arden to disembark as well.

“And this is Prince Xander of Fernier and his lovely wife Princess Arden of Aketh. Who enjoys making an entrance as it seems,” Alister chuckled.

“Finally! We meet the lovely creature that stole your heart, brother,” Xander spread his arms going in to embrace Marissa, but Arden pulled him back.

“Don’t mind my husband, his words are always filled with amusement. Can we officially welcome you to the family, Marissa?” Arden chirped as she embraced a still-shocked Marissa first, followed by Xander. Arden’s warrior-like physique, height, and strength surprised Marissa.

“Officially it will be publicly announced at the ball,” Alister chimed in. Marissa didn’t know how to respond, feeling slightly overwhelmed with meeting three royals right away. All seemed to be interested in getting to know her, and the informal physical contact she never expected from them.

Helena observed Marissa’s minor discomfort. “Come let’s all go inside. I am sure Marissa is weary from the long travel from the Earl’s estate, and we might be overwhelming her with questions and our pushy presence. Am I right brother? Besides, I am sure Alister here is eager for you to meet King Gareth,” Helena said. She wrapped her arm around Vincent’s elbow, tugging him along. “We are going to be the best of friends, you and I. Walk with me, Vincent.”

Alister shook his head, holding in a chuckle, at Vincent’s startled reaction to Helena’s forwardness. Xander turned to

Rodan and lightly whistled. Rodan perked up, huffed a little, and took off flying.

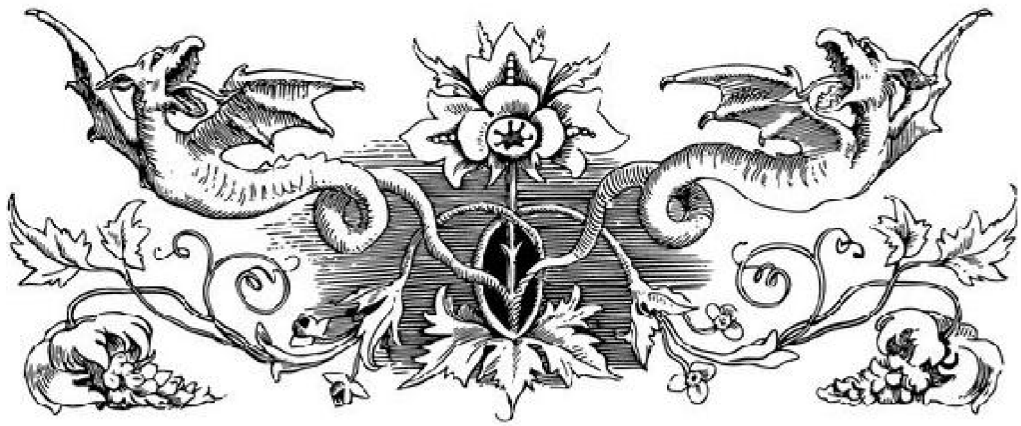
As everyone headed up the steps into the palace, Alister held Marissa back a bit. “Give us a minute we will be there shortly,” Alister called to the group. He gazed at Marissa, his face full of concern and she could see anxiety building in his eyes. He took a deep breath and said, “you know I am in love with you. You are my everything.” He held one of her hands to his chest as he caressed her cheek. “There is nothing in this world that I wouldn’t give to see you happy ... with me.”

“I know. I am hopelessly in love with you,” she said, her demeanor gentle and eyes softly gazing at him.

“I want you to meet my brother, Gareth. But I have to ask you for your forgiveness right now,” he said as he watched her narrow her eyes in confusion. “Just remember this, I will never lie to you, or keep anything from you unless otherwise instructed by him,” he gave her a pleading concerned look.

“Okay, I am sure whatever you were keeping from me is harmless?” she cocked her head.

“You can say it’s harmless. We may even laugh about this later,” he said as he took her hand and they walked into the palace, heading towards the main ballroom.



CHAPTER 23

Marissa and Alister walked into the ballroom. Her eyes took in its enormity, and the beautiful way it was coming along for the celebration. Candles floating in crystal ornaments, hung from the large glass ceiling, though not yet lit. Hydrangeas, peonies, lilies, and tulips cascaded down the walls. The rich silk and satin, green and white fabrics covered the small round tables on the sides of the space. Gold-colored chairs were draped or intertwined with vines. The dance floor was stenciled by two painters still lying on their bellies enthralled with their work. On the opposite side of the ballroom, several platforms of varying sizes. Each platform boasted multiple thrones and royal insignias.

Marissa recognized each one by the color of the dragons etched beside them. A sapphire dragon of Ladon and a gold dragon of Valance, side by side. While on the opposite end were insignia for the crimson dragon of Aketh and the light silver dragon of Fernier.

On the center platform, she saw the emerald dragon of Orlean. Two small gold thrones, adorned with radiant jewels, and green velvet cushions were perched on the first step of the platform. She looked to the top of the platform seeing a large platinum throne. Adorned in onyx stones and diamonds, with a platinum carved sun atop the headpiece, dragon scales running down the armrest ending in dragon claws on the feet of the throne, and the Kings insignia of the great shadow dragon of Volos.

Alister squeezed her hand gently. “Are you ready?” She nodded as he called to the man, she finally noticed, standing with his back to them. He was tall, his build broad but carved like a statue. His raven black hair shimmered as it freely flowed to his shoulders. “Gareth,” Alister caught his attention.

As Gareth turned to look in their direction, Marissa’s eyes went wide. She whispered to herself “Greyson?”

Gareth smirked slyly as Alister said, “Marissa this is my brother and our High King of Drakon. Gareth of Volos.” Marissa swallowed, her nerves took over and she was having a hard time saying anything at all. Her eyes were still wide in surprise and confusion as Gareth came down from the platform and approached them.

Gareth laughed and said, “what’s wrong Marissa, you look like you have seen a ghost.”

She furrowed her brow. The man she has come to know as Greyson, but slightly different in appearance. “Is ... Is this for real ... or ... or are you two playing a trick?” she said.

Alister grinned and shook his head. “I swear I am not ... Gareth was, but not I.”

Marissa opened her mouth about to say something to the extent of scolding them both for their deceit but thought that this is not the right place or the right people to scold.

“Are you having a hard time deciding on how to address me now?” Gareth asked.

“I ... um, your majesty?” she glanced up at Alister for some sort of affirmation, but all he did was shrug and grin.

“I understand, you are quite surprised and perhaps confused. Let’s simplify it. You two are not married yet, so ‘Your Majesty’ or ‘My King’ will do in official public outings. Amongst immediate family you can call me Gareth or stick to formalities, up to you,” Gareth said nonchalantly. “And once you two are married, you can drop all formalities.”

“I understand. But why the deceit to begin with?” she was still visibly confused.

“Alister can explain it to you later. For now, though, continue to keep the secrecy till I am introduced at the ball,” he said to Marissa. “Alister, have Vincent meet me in the north office,” he turned his attention to Alister now.

Alister sighed, rubbing his face. “I think Vincent may need a stiff drink or several after today. I think he really admired Lord Greyson’s boldness, knowledge, and decisiveness,” Alister chuckled.

Marissa nodded and suddenly giggled thinking of Vincent’s potential reaction. Marissa glanced back at Gareth still in disbelief that the entire time she was interacting with the King like he was just another man. And then a thought crossed her mind causing her to widen her eyes and cover her mouth from shock.

“What is that look?” Alister caught Marissa’s sudden appearance and worry in her eyes.

Marissa looked back and forth between Alister and Gareth and whispered, “Eliza”. She looked to Gareth, a scowl sat across his face, his eyes narrowed, and arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Perhaps you should mind where you walk in the middle of the night by yourself,” Gareth snarled. He knew that it was

Marissa in the garden's pathway in the night, causing the interruption between him and his desire for Eliza.

"I am lost, someone fill me in on what I missed," Alister took a firm stance with his body shielding Marissa. Gareth's ominous glare in Marissa's direction spiked Alister's worry, and he needed to end whatever was going through Gareth's mind.

"She can fill you in on your way to get Vincent. And Marissa ... you cannot tell Eliza. Let her find out as everyone else will at the ball," his tone stark and to the point.

Alister glared at Gareth. "Fine. Come, Marissa," he said as he grabbed her hand and pulled her under his arm to walk out of the ballroom. They headed down the hallway, passing a number of servants rushing about in preparation for arriving guests. It's been decades since the Uther palace had seen such activity and this many guests staying on its premises for a long period of time.

Before reaching the south end of the palace, Alister stopped them by the staircase leading to the guest rooms. "So, will you tell me, or do I have to wait to ask Eliza?"

Marissa looked around, seeing some servants in the distance but they were not in hearing range. "There is something

between them. I cannot explain it. But whatever it is, it caused him to come to the Earl's estate last night. In the middle of the night that is. He used his telepathic abilities to summon her out of bed and to meet him in the garden. I saw her leave the room and when she did not return for an hour, I went looking for her. I ... I saw them kissing out in the gardens," she said low enough for him to hear her.

"What are you talking about? He was with Narcissa Maskar yesterday. He did return earlier than expected today. But I assure you the plan was always for him to stay with Narcissa after he escorted you safely to the estate. Wait, are you saying Eliza saw his face?" Alister asked confused by Gareth's actions.

"No, that's the thing, he wore a mask. She never saw his face. She has only seen him in the paintings when he was much younger or in ... in ..." Marissa paused not sure how to tell Alister about Eliza's dreams.

"You mean in dreams?" Alister said. "I know about it. He told me that she had pushed her mind into his dreams, and it has been eating at him for months. He was angry. I'm sure of it. But this is not what I expected of him. He may end up hurting her if she persists."

Marissa arched her brows. "Oh ... so you know." She wondered if he knew the extent of the dreams, and what

Gareth had been doing to Eliza. “She said that when she found out who he was in her dreams she pulled away, promising to end it. It has been him now ... pushing her, pursuing her, taunting her scandalously.”

Alister chuckled. “That is my brother. It’s just dreams, though. I’ve had plenty of vivid dreams of things I’d like to do to you,” Alister winked.

Marissa lowered her eyes. “Not the same. She told me she would wake up completely ... completely set on fire and in need of something to soothe her. And last night was not a dream. I might have seen them kiss a bit, but before I saw them, he had apparently ... well ...” she blushed. “Ugh, great goddess ... he had given her an orgasm.”

Alister continued to laugh, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Blushing over words spoken. It’s not like you witnessed them.”

She shoved him playfully and shook her head. “She is my dearest friend, and I can’t think of her in such an intimate way. But she will be hurt by his deceit. She genuinely has feelings for him even though he has been torturous apparently,” she lowered her head and pressed her forehead against his chest, as he continued to hold her in his arms. “I hope they find a way to co-exist and not hurt one another,” she sighed.

“I cannot speak for Gareth. His mind is convoluted, and he does what he wants on his own terms. She should be thankful that he did not strangle her mind when she was first pushing into his. He could have easily done far worse,” Alister kissed Marissa’s forehead. Taking her hand, they walked up the staircase to find Vincent speaking with Anthony and Sandra.

As soon as Marissa saw Sandra, she pulled away from Alister and ran over to embrace her. “Mom!” she squealed with excitement to see her.

“Sweetheart, Vincent told us you had returned. I am so glad you are back. Come, we must take a quick look at the dresses Belinda sent over,” Sandra said pulling Marissa to walk with her. Marissa glanced back at Alister who nodded for her to go. As she turned back, she noticed Anthony gazing at her serenely.

“Anthony, it is good to see you,” she squeezed his arm before she and Sandra left the men standing and gawking at them.

“Alright, Vincent I think his majesty is eager to see you. He is in the north wing office now,” Alister said. “Anthony let’s make our way to the gallery to evaluate how the setup for the art exhibit is going. Onri will be arriving soon, and I am sure it will be the first thing he will want to see tonight.” Vincent stared at Alister at the mention of Onri’s name.

As they reached the office Alister let Vincent know he will be seeing the king on his own and to be strong-willed about what he wanted to do regarding the Marques Anders title he was offered. A servant announced Vincent's presence before he entered.

"Your Majesty, Viscount Vincent Polignac is here as per your request," the servant said before Vincent entered the room. Alister and Anthony remained outside, tight-lipped.

"I do hope that this will be the last time you are announced as a Viscount," Gareth's voice was heard clearly through the open door.

"Lord Gr? ... wait ... what the ... Oh My God!" Vincent's startled voice croaked.

Alister and Anthony looked at each other and couldn't resist but burst out laughing.

Gareth's mischievous chuckle rang out. "I've been called that before ... but formalities will be fine for now," he said.



Helena stood at the edge of the cliffs watching the sunset. The multi-colored Wisteria trees at her back swayed with the mild

breeze. Her hands clasped in front of her as she focused on the speck of light approaching from far above the sea.

'Onri?' she linked him. 'How much longer?'

'We are leaving right now,' his voice caressed her mind so vividly. 'I cannot wait to see you, little cherry.'

'I've missed you so much, my golden King,' she replied in their link. 'I've met Vincent today.'

'I know. Alister warned me it was going to happen,' his voice not strained, not jealous. 'I love you.'

Helena's heart fluttered. *'I love you too.'*

She began to murmur the song of safety on the dreaded sea for Onri, Exian, and Lidiya. Knowing they had agreed to meet and travel through the water passage to Orlean. She peered down onto the beach seeing Rheem playing with Rodan. *'I know you feel them coming, my darling. I haven't told Onri yet. But here and now, at this gathering. Here is where it will all happen. Everything I had seen thus far in many of my visions for us. And for our High King.'* Helena sighed thinking of her visions. Of Onri and their future. A chill ran up her spine as something cold prickled her skin.

“What do you want Xander?” she said, feeling her twin brother’s presence.

“Don’t act harshly but everyone is coming up this way, so, just breathe,” he whispered. She glanced sideways at him wondering why he would say this to her. Before she could ask him, she watched Gareth, her father, and Marius walking side by side. They were being trailed by Alister, Marissa, Arden, and Idrani holding Mihail against her protruding belly. They were all gathering to greet the rest of the arriving royals and dragons.

The light that Helena was watching from the distance had dipped down into the sea below. A dragon growl came from a distance followed by cooing and on the beach below the cliffs Coy, Rodan, and Rheem were playing chase while playfully snapping at one another.

Gareth stepped forward to the edge of the cliff, with closed eyes and arms spread open, he let out a sharp roar. The dragons on the beach stopped playing, heads turned in the direction of the sea as they bent low to the ground and stayed there eyeing the waves.

A large wave crashed onto the beach and pulled back into the sea until all they could observe were three dragons emerging from the empty space created by the departing wave. One dragon of gold-colored scales, with a sharp spade on its

tail, flapped its large wings and flew up to the cliff. Sea water still dripping off of its large torso. The other two dragons of varying blue and sapphire coloring, with charcoal horns, elongated bodies, and fish gills on their throats, cooed and walked towards the cliff. Passing the other dragons still bowing to them. Both dragons began to climb the face of the cliff with their riders strapped to their seats, their wings pulled in tight.

Marissa's eyes were glued to the gold dragon as it settled down on the edge. Alister put his arm around her shoulder and whispered, "Onri".

"Onri! Welcome my young brother!" Gareth exclaimed.

Marissa observed the man on the back of the gold dragon. He was wearing what appeared to be a form-fitted suit of gold dragon scales from head to toe. As he slid off the dragon and walked toward Gareth, with a flick of both of his wrists the suit began to dissipate. Each dragon scale pulled into one another quicker than Marissa realized, all gathering into the bracers on his forearms and disappearing completely. Marissa blinked, seeing the man that is the ruler of her former home of Valance. She remembered seeing a glimpse of him last at the art gallery in Aureata, which Alister invited her to nearly five months earlier, but she never officially met Onri. *'Paintings of him do not do him justice,'* she thought. His eyes were radiating a golden light. His chiseled jaw was covered in a

short stubbled beard. His skin was darker gold in comparison to Alister's, and his hair, a dirty blonde with white streaks pulled into a half tail, while the rest was wavy, messy, and cascading below his shoulders. There was a regal but soft light about his presence.

“Brother!” Onri exclaimed. “It is good to see your light again!” Onri and Gareth embraced like two close brothers that have not seen one another in years. “I am sorry I was not present at the funeral. I hope you have forgiven me?” Onri bowed his head.

“How could I ever be angry with you? I told you not to come as it would have taken days for you to arrive. I am glad we can see each other now,” Gareth said as he patted Onri's back and both men turned to the cliffs as the other two dragons emerged.

Marissa remembered the sapphire dragon and the man that helped rescue her from her captors. She was eager to finally meet King Exian and his bride-to-be, Princess Lidiya. She noticed that both riders wore the same scaled suit of armor as Onri, but in varying blue shades. They slid off the two dragons and also with a flick of their wrists the suits began to dissipate. What surprised Marissa most was seeing Lidiya wearing trousers and a waistcoat when the dragon scale suit had dissipated into her bracers.

Exian and Lidiya held hands as they walked toward Gareth. At the same time, Helena ran past Gareth and embraced Lidiya, knocking Exian's hand away.

"Sister, I have missed you so much!" Helena exclaimed while her tall figure enveloped the tiny person that Lidiya is.

"I see you didn't miss me," Exian chuckled and moved around the two women. "It is good to see your face after almost a year brother," Exian said to Gareth as they embraced as well.

"You have the easiest access to Volos. You could have joined me anytime on the Isle," Gareth arched his brow and slapped Exian's chest. Exian winced and stumbled back a little. "You will make it up to me tomorrow morning by sparring with me. Alister here needs a break," Gareth nodded toward Alister.

'Marissa, besides you, me, Exian, and Gareth, none of the royals yet know of what happened when you were taken. Gareth wants to keep it that way for now until we have our council meeting tomorrow. Do not say anything,' Alister mind linked her. She glanced at him and nodded in understanding. Marissa then watched as Onri greeted King Furrier, Marius, and Idrani, while Mihail ran to Lidiya and Helena.

“So, this must be Lady Marissa?” Exian’s lazy drawl drew Marissa’s attention back to the man now standing in front of her and Alister.

“Your majesty it is an honor to finally make your acquaintance,” she said as she curtsied. Giving him a polite smile while mouthing the words thank you, he took her hand and pressed a light kiss to her knuckles. His build was slightly wider than that of Alister’s. His short dark brown hair waved to one side, and his turquoise irises were set in large round eyes. “Let me introduce you to my betrothed. Lidiya, come,” he stretched out his other arm towards Lidiya.

Lidiya and Helena, with Mihail now sitting on Gareth’s shoulders, neared Exian. Marissa has seen a painting of Lidiya as a teen girl amongst her rather large family. She didn’t realize how small Lidiya was in comparative size to the rest of the dragon royals, even in comparison to her own height.

“Alister, you were not exaggerating. Marissa, you are striking,” Lidiya held out both of her hands to grasp Marissa’s hands, while Marissa bowed. Lidiya’s deep gaze made Marissa blush. “And humble when receiving compliments as well. I think I will genuinely like you,” Lidiya said before she embraced Marissa. “Welcome to the family. Finally, we have another woman amongst these dominating men,” Lidiya whispered making Marissa chuckle.

“Oh, I know the feeling, spitfires we have here,” Marissa nodded making Arden laugh in the back of them. Alister smirked and walked away toward Onri.

“Arden! I cannot believe it! And to think you were married before me, and I was not present during the ceremony,” Lidiya waved to Arden and Idrani to join the group of women, while still holding one of Marissa’s hands.

“Where is Queen mother Alessandra?” King Furrier addressed Exian, who has yet to greet him.

“Oh Uncle, she will be arriving shortly. Just like you, she prefers the longer way. Two days by sea. She should have disembarked in the port and will be arriving by carriage with her lady’s maids shortly,” Exian said as he embraced both Xander and Marius.

Marissa observed as Onri and Alister exchanged words, while Gareth played with Mihail by lifting him up in the air and making Mihail pretend that he was flying. All of this to Marissa seemed quite normal, just a regular family gathering together, no formalities, no talk of power or royal duties.

“I have to say, it’s slightly sad to see one of my gifted subjects leave Valance,” Onri grinned at Marissa. She couldn’t help but bat her lashes and bow her head.

“Your Grace, it’s with a heavy heart that I make such a journey in my life. But I must go where my heart is,” she said glancing at Alister.

Onri cocked a brow. “Tsk ... that’s not fair Alister. How am I to steal her back now?” Onri chuckled making Marissa’s eyes go wide and stare at Alister who was trying his best to hold in a laugh.

“I don’t think so, brother. Just because she was born in Valance doesn’t mean she belongs there. Marissa was always meant to be mine,” Alister said as he pulled Marissa into his embrace and kissed the tip of her nose.

“Aww young love,” Helena sighed.

Onri cleared his throat. “Ahm ... Helena,” Onri cocked his head and smirked.

Helena rolled her eyes as she looked him up and down, watching him roll up his sleeves. A new tattoo wrapped around his forearm of a wreath of cherry blossoms and tulips. “I see ... for Gareth and glory, you finally leave your beloved Valance. Welcome to Orlean, your Grace,” she turned and walked toward Gareth.

“Whatever you did, you better apologize. The last thing we need during this gathering is to have you two be at odds,” Alister said to Onri, who just shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I painted a few more portraits for the new collection,” Onri said as he looked at his dragon Bash. He was grazing at the cliff’s edge, a rider’s seat and two large satchels were still attached to his back. The other two dragons, Star and Sien, had already climbed back down the cliff and submerged into the crashing waves.

“Come everyone, back to the palace. Alessandra has arrived,” Gareth said as he walked with Helena under one arm while holding Mihail in the other.

“Helena and Gareth, they seem close,” Marissa whispered to Alister.

“Oh, they are close, but more like a very big brother and little sister relationship. Though Furrier thinks now that Gareth is widowed that he may want to remarry, and no doubt will push Helena in front of him. I expect that the other nobles will do the same with their daughters. Imagine, this would be the perfect situation. So many will be here during the gathering. It will be a dragon fight for sure for these young women. The prize ... The King and a throne. And he will have free terrain to do as his insatiable self feels like,” Alister said.

“What about Eliza?” she furrowed her brow.

“What about her? A king would not spare a life if they were not worthy of it. He let the last eight months of her presence in his dreams off without actually harming her,” Alister narrowed his eyes.

“But what about their intimacy? I am sure that should account for some kind of feelings on his part too?” she questioned.

“Him giving her an orgasm is his way. He enjoys this, hearing women call his name to the very gods. Perhaps if you weren’t in the garden, he would have fucked her too,” Alister flared his nostrils, annoyed that the conversations about Eliza and Gareth have overtaken any free moment he has with Marissa. “It is not like those dreams weren’t a precursor of what she wants,” Alister said abruptly, shaking his head. “Let me be clear. He is not planning on remarrying. He said so himself. It would be best if you tell Eliza if she wishes to be his mistress then make the move. If she wants to keep her virginity intact till she is married or joins the Meiji then she should be stern and reject his advances now,” he let out a breath as he pulled Marissa’s arm to catch up to the rest of the family.

Marissa was beside herself. She couldn’t believe Alister was so abrupt, but most importantly she felt a rush of guilt. Her

friend was in over her head, and she wanted to warn her. But it would have to wait as she had to face the whole royal family of Drakon for now. She did not have the chance to hold a conversation with King Furrier or Prince Marius yet, just a formal introduction by Alister where Furrier gave her a judging cold look, and Marius was just silent and unreadable.

Somewhere in her mind, she was glad she didn't have the chance to speak with them, as she did with the rest of the siblings. The last few hours were overwhelming. Finding out that Lord Greyson was actually The High King himself was already intense. Meeting the rest of the royal court members was overwhelming because of their stark differences in their individual behaviors, and the bombardment of questions and information that followed.

However, what topped the evening so far for Marissa was what she found out during the fitting for the ball gown earlier. Sandra revealed that she was in love with Anthony. Furthermore, the King had approved the dissolution of Sandra's marriage to Nathaniel. Sighting his traitorous behavior and kidnapping of Alister's fiancée. Everything was happening quickly, quicker than Marissa thought it should be.

Alister and Marissa caught up to the rest of the family at the main palace entrance to greet King Exian's mother. Several carriages were being unloaded by the staff of the palace and servants Marissa had not seen before.

“Alessandra. It has been a while since we last saw each other. I am at peace knowing you are here, and we can spend some time all together,” Furrier held out his hand for Exian’s mother to take while stepping out of the carriage.

“Furrier! It has been some time. I received your letter regarding Xander and Arden. Both sons married, and now just a daughter left. I am sure this gathering will prove fruitful for us all. Now where are those unruly children,” she said looking past Furrier to see all the rest of the young royals gathering to greet her. Her rich brown hair with streaks of silver was gathered in an elegant updo, opening up her face and her intense turquoise eyes for everyone to see.

“Ah yes, the children. Though grown adults in their own right, still are children in their behaviors,” he turned around and gestured toward the rest.

“Mother, I told you it would have been quicker on Star or Sien, but you insisted on a longer journey,” Exian approached Alessandra and kissed her cheek, while Lidiya remained near Helena and Gareth, at the front of the group.

“Queen Alessandra, welcome to Uther. We are joyous to have you here,” Alister bowed low, the type of bow only reserved for a senior monarch.

“Alister it’s only been two months since I saw you. You do not need to be the one to greet me. The rest of you unruly children who refused to visit their favorite aunt this past year are all in trouble and get no gifts,” she grinned with adoration for the young royals gathered in front of her. She looked directly at Gareth and used her pointer finger to beckon him to approach her. “And you, Your Majesty, owe your auntie a kiss,” and then pointed to her cheek.

“Alessandra, you know your beauty makes me breathless. But I don’t know if you can handle my kiss,” Gareth smirked teasingly. He approached her and wrapped his arms around her. “Auntie.” He leaned down and planted a long and loud kiss on her cheek.

“Oh, your majesty, a bit fervent, aren’t we?” she teased him back, causing everyone observing the interaction to burst out in hysterical laughter. Alessandra laughed in a self-aggrandizing way and stopped as she noticed Marissa standing near Idrani. “Alister, I believe introductions are a must. Come child,” she put her hand out and gestured for Marissa to approach.

Alister gave Marissa a reassuring look, and she approached Queen Alessandra, curtsying gracefully. “Come child, closer, let me look at you,” she said as she put the tips of her fingers under Marissa’s chin pulling up to look over her face. “Mhm, I see, very pretty. What is your name child?”

“This is Marissa Irvine, my betrothed,” Alister winked at Marissa who seemed to be confused why he was using Sandra’s maiden last name as hers.

“Irvine? Really? I could swear it would have been something else, Alister,” Queen Alessandra narrowed her eyes at him.

“I think we should all go inside. Get refreshed and reconvene for dinner in the banquet room. I can hear Onri’s stomach growling,” Exian stepped in to change the subject and everyone else laughed at Onri’s expense.

Onri shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know why you are all laughing. It is true, I am starving.” He chuckled, staring at Helena. *‘I could eat cherries all night long,’* he linked her.

‘Is that a promise?’ she turned her attention to Lidiya, doing her best to avoid smirking or blushing.

‘I’ve never broken a promise to you before. I don’t intend now either ... Look at me,’ his voice more demanding. She peered back at him, as she walked into the palace with Lidiya. Their eyes met as he followed behind. *‘I’m sorry for whatever I did to make you upset.’*

'You didn't upset me. I just needed to be cold toward you ... when truly all I wanted was to jump into your arms. I've missed you so much.' She swallowed, turning back and letting go of Lidiya's arm as they headed up the staircase.

'I need to speak with Gareth. And afterward, meet me in the studio. It's adjacent to my room,' he stood at the bottom of the staircase waiting for Gareth to enter.

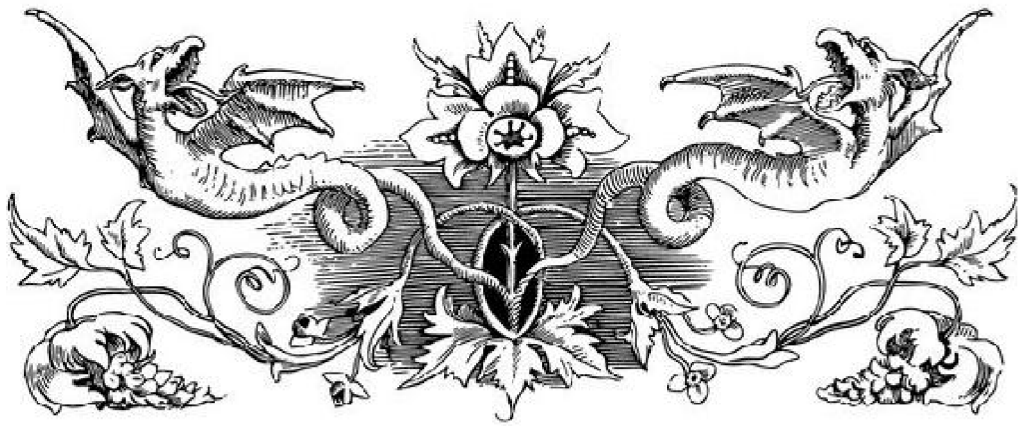
'I know where it is. I helped to set it up for your arrival,' she hurried up. Onri sighed, watching her.

Alister and Marissa remained outside, watching everyone ascend the few steps to the entrance. He wanted a moment to hold her. He felt her uneasiness with so many eyes on her now. Sooner or later Alessandra will say something.

"Why did you use Sandra's maiden name?" she asked.

"I knew you would ask that. Can you just trust my judgment? There is a reason for everything. I will tell you once we get through tonight," he held Marissa's hand against his chest. She looked into his eyes trying to read his resolve. "Trust me, please," he murmured and kissed her forehead.

"I do," she whispered back.



CHAPTER 24

As everyone ascended the stairs to their respective rooms, Onri got a hold of Gareth's arm. "Gareth, I need to speak to you. It's a bit urgent."

"Everything alright?" Gareth asked, furrowing his brow.

"Yes, I just have to show you this new painting I did a few days ago," Onri nodded towards several tubes strapped across his back.

"Let's go to the east wing. We can talk there," he nodded at Onri. "Charles, can you show King Furrier, Marius, and Idrani to the gallery," Gareth gave directions.

As soon as they entered Onri's room, Onri immediately pulled out one of the canvasses and started to unroll a small size drawing.

“This is still fresh, but I had to bring it,” he explained as he handed the drawing to Gareth. “Last week, I had an interesting dream. It was more like a memory, but I am not sure if it is a memory or just a random dream,” Onri was speaking fast while unraveling the rest of the canvasses. He did not pay attention to Gareth’s reaction as he stared at the drawing. Gareth was silent allowing the drawing envelope his mind.

“In my dream, I was young and was running to meet you in the tulip fields with Finnigan. It was the same day I had painted you for the first time. There was this girl sitting on a swing in the garden. And I stopped to talk to her, and I asked her to follow me to watch me paint. Once I reached you, you had this look of disdain. You then called to me, and when I was near Finnigan you walked over to this girl. It appeared as if you were angry with her. I couldn’t hear what you were speaking of, but she seemed fearful and sad. You then kissed her, and the dream ended. So, I sketched her...” Onri turned to look at Gareth and was surprised to see Gareth’s reaction to the drawing.

Gareth looked like he had seen a ghost. “You know who she is, don’t you?” Onri cocked his head to see Gareth put the small canvass down on the table.

“What else do you remember? From the dream that is?” he asked his voice monotone.

“Well, the thing is, it’s not the only drawing I have of this girl. I had another dream a few weeks ago, but this was a premonition dream,” he said as he unrolled a large canvas. “This is Exian’s wedding I dreamt of. Look at all of us by the waterfall and lake. Here is Exian and Lidiya in their royal wedding blue, while all the onlookers are wearing white simple tunics and dresses. Here you are performing the ritual. And well if you look right here in the corner, you can see her. It’s the girl amongst the rest of the guests present. I painted this as a gift for the newlyweds. But seeing this girl in this premonition and then dreaming of her again, in a memory of a past she was never in, to begin with. She’s not just someone random. It means she has a capable mind. Just like ours. So, do you know her?” Onri asked again, trying to read Gareth.

Gareth nodded. “She has capabilities like us, but she has a lot of training still. And even though she appeared in your memory, she was not there for you but for me. There is nothing to worry about though,” he shrugged. “If you do end up having any other premonition dreams ... of her that is, let me know,” he said as he looked back at the canvass. Onri swallowed, not wanting to show him another sketch he had discovered he had of her.

“Okay. As long as there is no danger, I guess I can throw this out then.” Onri picked up the small drawing and was about to throw it into the fireplace when Gareth snatched it

from his hands. “Really, brother? I guess there is more to her than I thought,” Onri smirked.

“Do not tell anyone about this,” Gareth said sternly, his eyes glaring as he rolled up the small drawing and tucked it into his jacket’s inner pocket. “Well at least it will be easy to set up the ceremony space for Exian and Lidiya now that we have this image here,” Gareth changed the subject. “I’ll see you downstairs. It’s good that you are here,” he said before stepping out of Onri’s room.

‘Fuck, Eliza! I told her that he would be dreaming the same thing. All I need now is Onri’s influence on this ... this ... thing between us. I’m going to have to give her a good punishment when I see her next,’ Gareth thought to himself as he paced down the hallway, not noticing the servants scattering away because of the raging look in his eyes and his long, determined loud footsteps echoing behind him.



Marissa was nervous, fidgeting with her hands at the entrance to the dining room. Though she recalled the last few days having to just eat in the intimacy of Alister, Sandra, Anthony, Augustus, and Gareth, this was different. They were the royals, each with their own strengths, powers, and will. She wondered what she would hear, see and how they will behave all together.

“Follow my lead,” Alister said. “The younger royals walk in first to greet the older generation and obviously the high king at the end. We are invited to sit when Gareth sits.”

“Yes, that I am aware of. What about seating arrangements?” Marissa asked.

“It has already been predetermined by rank, guest of honor, host placement, and sometimes the King may want to sit next to someone for purposes of mingling. Technically I am the duke here so I would be the host, but I relinquish gathering hosting duties to Gareth. We all would do that no matter where we hold the gathering. Tonight’s guest of honor is Queen Alessandra, she has chosen to sit across from Furrier. That will be interesting,” he chuckled.

“Oh, I am sure. She is lively isn’t she,” Marissa giggled. “I have to ask you something, on a different subject ... If I was not kidnapped, and nothing would have happened with my father. And we were here for the gathering as normal guests. Would you have moved this quickly as well?” she asked.

“The truth?” he narrowed his eyes, and she nodded. “I was the one to send the invitation to your family. Therefore, I planned on inviting you all to stay in the palace as my personal guests. And would have done everything to make you mine ...

in every way possible,” he winked. She lowered her head to avoid his heated gaze as he made her blush.

“Right under my parent’s presence you would behave as such?” she asked, still avoiding his gaze.

“Stop avoiding my gaze, Mari. I very much enjoy your flushed cheeks ... see how easy it was for me to say that. With your mother not too far from us. And to answer your question ... Yes, and more.” He leaned in and whispered huskily, “I want to suck on your pretty little clit.” She snapped her head up, eyes wide. He winked, before pecking her lips.

“Aww, how cute are you two?” Helena approached them. Fixing her hair and adjusting a shoulder strap to her dress. “I cannot wait till we can start planning your ceremony!” Helena beamed.

“I think we can manage ourselves” Alister sneered. *‘You two couldn’t wait to fuck after dinner?’*

‘If it wasn’t for this dinner, we would be fucking in multiple positions right now. Not just a quicky against the wall.’ Helana crossed her arms, staring Alister down.

Marissa unaware of their link, saw Helena go from beaming to rather annoyed. “Alister, do not be rude to Princess Helena.

I would gladly accept her help with planning a royal wedding ceremony filled with traditions I am still learning,” she snuffed his chest.

“Well, Marissa already has a maid of honor,” he rolled his eyes at Helena.

“I did not say I wanted to be maid of honor, now did I?” Helena cocked her head, seeing Onri approach from the opposite end. His hair pulled up in a messy bun, as he buttoned up his jacket.

“Alister you’re being rude. Apologize,” Marissa said.

“It’s alright, this is how we always speak to each other. And may I remind you, Alister, I am the descendant of Nicor the ice dragon. I should be the cold one, not my warm earthy brother,” she chuckled, trying to pinch his cheek while he swatted at her hand. “Onri! You’re sitting next to me,” she grabbed his hand and pulled him to follow. Onri smirked at Alister.

‘Vincent is inside. Don’t get me into trouble, is all I ask,’ Alister linked Onri.

‘How thoughtful of you to invite ... my partner,’ Onri laughed internally. The younger royals and the additional

guests, consisting of Sandra, Anthony, Vincent, and Augustus all waited standing at their assigned seats for the senior royals and Gareth to arrive.

Alessandra stared wide-eyed at Anthony as she passed him to her seat next to Gareth. “I do not believe my eyes. Anthony Norester. You are still by Alister’s side after almost 20 years. Alister, I thought you had already let Anthony retire from his personal knight duties several years ago?” Alessandra looked down the long dining table to see Anthony sitting between Sandra and Vincent.

“Queen Alessandra. I retired from my personal knight duties when his grace turned 18, but my interest to stay on as captain of the royal guard was not overlooked. Besides I am going to be taking over my father’s lands as Duke Norester soon enough,” Anthony bowed his head at Queen Alessandra.

“Well, that is great news. I am truly sorry for your mother’s passing. She was an amazing woman, and a dear friend,” Alessandra nodded at him, peering at Sandra and then at Marissa at the head of the table with Alister. “Is this going to be one of the title changes you will be announcing during the ball?” Alessandra turned to Gareth.

“At some point during the gathering, but a few others first,” Gareth responded sipping from his wine glass.

“Wonderful. How about any more engagement announcements? Other high-ranking nobles will surely be announcing engagements, as well. I am very excited about the prospects. All the beautiful parties, all the beautiful couples falling in love, and most importantly, more little babies to come soon,” Alessandra said proudly nodding at Idrani, as Exian almost choked on his food. “I know I am speaking for myself, but Exian and Lidiya’s wedding is just days away and we have been waiting for this day for quite a while,” she said.

Lidiya nodded in agreement. “I can concur with you queen mother. We have been eagerly awaiting this day.”

“Mhm, that’s not all you’re waiting for,” Arden murmured, earning herself a glare from Exian and Lidiya across the table. Alessandra was so busy chattering that she did not notice the exchange of stares between Exian and Gareth. Their eyes glazed as they linked.

‘Are you serious Exian! That’s incredible news brother. How far along is she?’ Gareth exclaimed in their link, overjoyed for Exian and Lidiya.

‘Not long, just a little over two months. You know we are already married by Ladon law, but we want the Dragon ceremony to bless our union,’ Exian responded, with a playful grin on his face.

“Marques Vincent, when do you think you will be up in the Anders territory? As the territory borders Fernier, we should make arrangements to discuss how we can help each other, and the stark differences between the laws in Fernier and the laws here in Orlean,” Marius addressed Vincent from across the table.

“Your Grace. I will be traveling up to the territory right after the end of the gathering. But we can arrange meetings between us while we are here in Uther during this month to discuss anything beforehand,” Vincent bowed his head in response, avoiding Onri and Helena as best as he could.

“No business talks at the dinner table please,” Gareth intervened. “Besides, Marius, the marques had just accepted the titles and the deeds. Give him some time to readjust to his new role in Drakon.”

Alessandra interrupted, “Your majesty if you had it your way, we would be sitting here in silence. I am sure you are used to such things in your ominous castle, but we love vibrancy and interaction of all sorts, am I right Furrier?” Alessandra picked up her glass and clinked it with Gareth’s, while Furrier nodded in agreement with her.

“Auntie, I assure you my castle is not ominous,” he took a big swig of the remaining wine in his glass. “You are right that it’s always quiet, especially in the recent year. But you must

remember, there aren't that many people occupying it either," Gareth shook his head in dismay.

"Well, perhaps it is good for you to be here at the gathering. With so many nobles and all of the beautiful young women that will be presented, I am sure you will find your next bride. And then a royal heir!" she winked at him playfully. Gareth swallowed hard at the comment, peering sideways at Marius and Idrani. Marius's hand caressed her visibly growing belly.

Marissa observed the interactions amongst the royals, they bickered like a regular family, they joked around at each other's expense and without taking offense. Some were more on the silent side, and some were way too talkative. Marissa looked down the table to observe Sandra and Anthony. They whispered to one another, something she couldn't hear, and she watched as Sandra would blush a little as Anthony would find a way to caress her hand or her cheek. Something about them being so close and so quick surprised Marissa. *'I want you to be happy Sandra,'* Marissa thought.

Marissa looked happily over to Augustus, but he was in a deep conversation with Lidiya, something regarding the use of seaweed for its richness. She turned to Helena, who sat on her left, seeing her eyes glazed she wondered who Helena was linking. Marissa moved in her chair, dropping her napkin to the floor on accident. When she bent down to pick it up, her eyes fell on Helena's lap. There it was Onri's hand on Helena's

upper thigh. Marissa raised her brows in surprise but quickly sat up. She peered at Onri, seeing his eyes glazed as well, and then back to Helena, seeing a slight smirk on her lips. *'How interesting,'* Marissa grinned.

'Alister, is there something between Helena and Onri?'
Marissa linked him.

His eyes widened in surprise, and he looked over to Marissa. *'How can you tell? They are being cautious.'*

'He is just as hands on as you are,' she winked back at him, and then looked down at his hand on her thigh.

'Ugh. I understand they have not seen each other in three months, but with her father, Marius and Gareth this close, they need to be careful,' he sighed. *'I need to ask you for a favor, my love,'* he added.

'What is it?' she responded, forking her fish.

'Helena wants to stay in the palace instead of the guest mansion. The only way her father will allow this is if she is preoccupied. I was hoping you can offer her your unused third bedroom in the duchess's quarters. This would satisfy Furrier tremendously as he will be glad to have her help you in preparations for our ceremony. What do you think?' he

glanced at her with his usually narrowed eyes now large and begging her to say yes.

'Oh, I was hoping to give that room to Eliza so she would be close to me. But I guess if duty calls, then I will oblige,' she pressed her lips into a thin line.

'Don't worry about Eliza, she will certainly be staying in the second room. Sandra has already shifted her things to Anthony's suite in the east wing. She will still be close to you,' he said glancing back and forth between Sandra, Anthony, and Marissa. *'Did she not tell you?'* he asked.

Marissa shook her head in complete surprise. The rest of the dinner was not as eventful as all the revelations Marissa had experienced.



After dinner had ended, the men converged in the library, while the women took a walk in the gallery which has officially been prepared for viewing. The portraits of all the high nobles and royals throughout the last several decades hung in order of ascension by the Kingdoms they represented.

“Princess Helena...” Marissa said but was interrupted.

“Please, just Helena. No formalities between us, we are sisters,” Helena gave her a reassuring smile.

Marissa beamed. “I was hoping to take you up on your offer to help me plan the ceremony. But I wouldn’t want you to have to stay in the mansion and be a far walk away. I was wondering if you would be willing to stay at the palace. I have another room available in the duchess’s quarters, and honestly, I need the company of those near my age,” Marissa extended the invitation as Alister asked, but she rather actually wanted to have Helena by her side.

“That is generous of you. I would love to stay in the palace,” she hugged Marissa. “I’m just so happy for Alister and you! I am gaining a sister after all!”

Alessandra stood in front of the portrait wall, staring at several paintings of Orlean nobles. “Ah, Irvine. Now I remember where I know that name from,” Alessandra said as she observed a painting line up of former magistrates of Uther. “Lady Sandra,” she called out to get her attention. Sandra broke away from the others and crossed the room to where Alessandra stood tall.

“Queen Alessandra, how may I be of assistance,” she asked, curtsying at the same time.

“Was your father the former Magistrate Irvine of Uther?” Alessandra asked looking at the portrait of Sandra’s late father.

“Yes, Queen Alessandra. That is my father in the painting,” she said.

“I remember him and your mother. I am sorry for your loss. To die so tragically and here on the grounds of the palace along with Alister’s parents. You must have been just seventeen or younger. Were you here in Uther at the time?” she asked.

“No, my older sister and I were educated in Valance. And my sister was engaged at the time to be married. Not a day goes by that I do not think of them,” Sandra said as she glanced over to Marissa. Seeing the small action, Alessandra looked at Marissa as well.

“She is lovely, and what a small world for her and Alister to meet. She has your eye shape, cheekbones, and a bit of your hair color, but she resembles someone else I was close to.” Alessandra observed Marissa’s graceful mannerisms, as she looked at a painting nearby.

“I would say she resembles her father’s side of the family more,” Sandra said lowly, knowing Alessandra has already

recognized the stark resemblance to Anthony's side of the family.

"Yes, I would say that too," Alessandra smirked and walked to another painting. "Oh, look here. Wedding portraits of several high-ranking nobles. These must be originals, as some of them are no longer with us," Alessandra continued. Marissa approached from the side wanting to see what Sandra and Alessandra were observing. Both hers and Sandra's eyes landed on one particular portrait of a couple. "Duke Norester and his beloved Duchess. My dearest friend Sophie. Anthony's mother. May her spirit find peace with our dragon gods," Alessandra kept talking, not noticing the look of astonishment on Marissa's face.

"Are you alright?" Sandra whispered to Marissa, trying to take her hand, but Marissa quickly pulled away.

"I feel a bit lightheaded. Queen Alessandra, may I be excused? I feel a bit faint," Marissa put her hand to her temple. Yulia was there to immediately escort her out as Alessandra nodded for her to go.

Helena narrowed her eyes, concerned for Marissa. *'Alister, I think you need to check on Marissa. She is not feeling well and is heading back to her room,'* Helena mind linked him.

Sandra took a deep breath contemplating what to do. “I need to check on Marissa, please excuse me,” Sandra said.

“Poor thing, she doesn’t know, does she?” Alessandra sighed, watching Sandra rush out after Marissa.

“Hm, what does she not know Auntie?” Helena asked cocking her head and staring at the portrait of Anthony’s parents.

“Who her real father is. The drama this palace will face if she doesn’t accept the truth, and quickly, will be astounding,” Alessandra said. “We will need to keep this a secret.”

“She is strong. We need to help her Auntie. Especially for Alister. He deserves happiness in his life after all,” Helena said. She smirked at the painting. *‘No wonder her earthly abilities are so potent. She is a Norester and an Irvine. I wish you luck my earthy brother ... your mate can best you in a fight if she really wanted to.’*



Alister burst through the door to Marissa’s room, heaving his breath. “Mari, what’s wrong? Do you need a physician?” Allister observed her cradling her head in her hands while rocking back and forth on the sofa. The vines from the bedpost have already shifted to surround her, creating a small barrier.

He cocked a brow seeing the vines move. *'Her defense mechanism.'*

“Your grace, be careful,” Yulia pointed to the ceiling as large ivy began to whip profusely.

Alister huffed as he gave the ivy and the vines a stern look. They paused their movements and began to shift back to their original space. “My love, what’s wrong?”

“What do you know?” her tears blurring her voice.

“Know what?” he narrowed his eyes, standing in front of her.

“About who I am, where I come from?” she sobbed.

“We can talk about it. But I need you to calm down,” he said as she suddenly stood up. Still sobbing, she crashed against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and let her sob against him.

“Sweetheart, are you alright?” Sandra said as she ran into the room.

“I think she needs to hear the truth,” Alister said to Sandra.

“The truth is hard, and it may hurt,” Sandra replied.

“Why ... why d-do I look l-like the Duchess Norester?” she stuttered as she continued to sob against his chest.

“Because she is your grandmother,” Anthony stepped in through the doorway. “I am so sorry Marissa. We had hoped to wait till after the gathering to tell you everything. But there is no avoiding the truth now,” he sighed. Marissa peeked at Anthony from her tear-filled eyes.

“How? A-are you my real f-father?” she whimpered, burying her face further against Alister’s chest.

Anthony’s eyes wouldn’t leave her as he spoke. “Yes, Marissa, I am. Though I only found out I had a daughter and that it was you when I delivered Alister’s invitation to you back in Valance a few months ago.”

“Marissa, we want to tell you everything. If you wish, we can talk about it tomorrow morning when you’re more up to it. Or stay up as long as you want, all night, if need be,” Sandra approached Marissa, running her fingers through Marissa’s loose long hair. Marissa pulled a little away from Alister, her eyes red and puffy as she peered at Sandra.

She swallowed. “Mom?” her voice a faint whisper. Sandra nodded as her own eyes were on a verge of tears. Marissa looked up at Alister “So you knew?”

“Um ...” he nodded in return. “I think you should talk with them ... now. And tomorrow you can spend the whole day in bed crying and being pampered.” He kissed her forehead and lightly pushed her forward to Sandra.

“I d-don’t need t-to be p-pampered. I only w-want the truth,” she stuttered through her tears. Seeing her disheveled made Anthony’s heart ache. He quickly approached and embraced her.

“I am so sorry,” he was finally cradling his daughter in his arms. Sandra’s eyes welled up, seeing them together.

Alister waved for Yulia to leave. “I am going to step out and let you three speak. If you need anything ...” he nodded at Anthony.

“Where do you want us to begin?” Anthony asked her. Marissa sniffled, looking up at him and then back at Sandra.

“W-when did ... how did this ... how did you meet?” she mustered up the words. The three of them just held each other close for a little while, helping Marissa to calm down. They

stayed up most of the night just talking about everything that happened between Sandra and Anthony, and Marissa's real lineage

“So, Nathaniel would technically have been my uncle?” she watched Sandra nod. “I never felt like he was a father figure, to begin with. Always short-tempered, never around, and never a nice thing to say,” she shook her head. “I am just confused on one thing though. Mom, you were willing to leave everything behind, including Anthony, to go wherever Nathaniel was taking us to. Why?”

“After you had departed for Orlean with Eliza, he had returned from his business trip. I told him you were in Orlean, waiting for us to arrive for the gathering, and that I had made arrangements for us to stay with Magistrate Orson. He was so angry, and he said that he had secured a proposal for Ermina abroad, and that he was in talks to secure one for you too. And that we need to get you back and leave. He left the very next day, but before he did, he said he wanted me to go to Orlean and make you understand that we were to leave for good. I couldn't do anything, nor did he ever mention where we were heading to. I knew that I couldn't lose you. You are my priority and so decided to travel here as quickly as possible. But seeing how you were glowing after spending time with Alister, and Anthony's presence still unwavering. I had to do something, to convince him not to leave from here,” Sandra tried to explain.

“And that is why Nathaniel was angry with you, for disagreeing with him?” Marissa asked.

“Amongst other things,” she glanced at Anthony. “You see, we had already rekindled our relationship in Valance as soon as we realized that we never stopped loving each other after all this time. Before everything that just happened, we had planned on speaking to Nathaniel. Asking him to agree to a divorce,” Sandra took in a deep breath, contemplating her next words. “We, Nathaniel and I, haven’t lived like a husband and wife for several years, and well, there is no other way to say it ... but Anthony and I are expecting.”

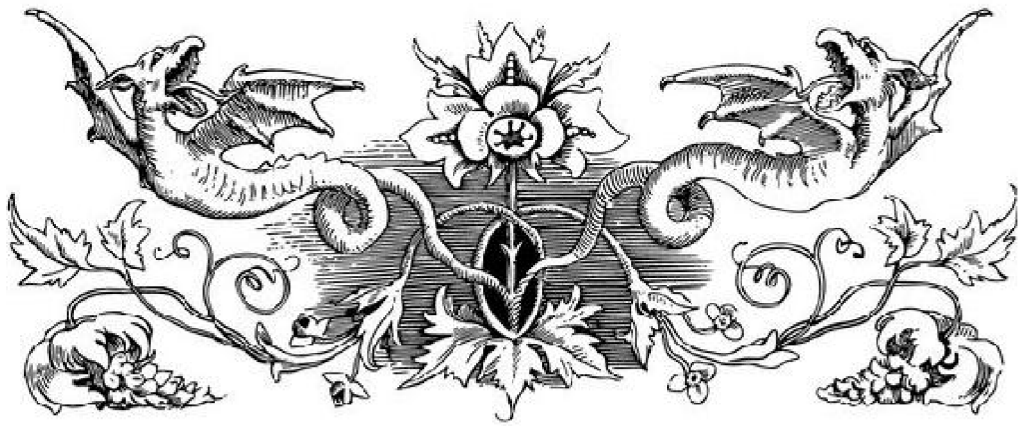
“Expecting?” Marissa narrowed her eyes, confused.

“Yes, expecting, a baby,” Sandra tightened her hold on Anthony’s hand. “All those early years with Nathaniel and I never became pregnant. I thought it was me, and that you were my one miracle. But it turns out, that Anthony was always my mate. We may not be royals that claim and mark each other’s dragon spirits but that doesn’t mean we don’t have mates,” she heard Anthony let out a subtle growl.

“Oh, my goddess!! Mom, you’re pregnant!” Marissa embraced her, almost toppling her off the sofa. Anthony chuckled, elated by the prospects of his family growing beside him. “How long?” Marissa exclaimed excitedly.

“Well, Augustus had done the count for me a few days ago and it appears it’s still in early stages, not yet two months.” Sandra was beaming, her hand on her still small belly. “Why do you think I needed Belinda to loosen up some of the dresses for me?”

Anthony took Marissa’s hand, as he sat down on the opposite side of her on the sofa. “I will always be here for you. I know it will take time for you to trust me. Or see me as your father but I hope you will give it a chance, to accept me in your life.” Marissa squeezed his hand, nodding in understanding.



CHAPTER 25

At dawn, Alister tossed and turned. Leaving Marissa for yet another night made him anxious. “One more day before we announce to all of Drakon that we belong to each other. My sweet blossom ... my mate,” he whispered staring at the pillow beside him, imagining her face looking back at him. *‘It’s only dawn and she is most likely resting. I hope ...’* his thoughts interrupted by soft footsteps. He turned to see Marissa tiptoeing into the room. “What are you doing?” he whispered hoarsely.

“I couldn’t fall asleep,” she crawled onto the bed beside him. He pulled the blanket over her, and she nestled in against his chest. “You’re so warm.”

“And your nose is cold,” a slight shiver went up his spine. She giggled, pressing tighter against him and breathing in his scent.

“Alister ... stop it,” she felt the twitch of his cock push against her thigh.

“I can’t help it. It’s morning and you’re pressed up against me,” he whispered. “Every moment spent without you is a moment too long. All I want is this. You, breathing me in, and me holding you tightly for all eternity.”

He left her sleeping in his bed a few short hours later. The vines and flora nestled around her.

Gareth had called for a council meeting after breakfast, in the north office which he has taken over as his. His goal is to discuss the potential threat of Dunne on the rise once more and other findings.

“I see Exian managed to get a hit off of you?” Alister smirked cockily. The morning sparring took place without him. And at breakfast, that is all Exian and Onri could talk of.

Gareth peered up from the documents on the desk he was sorting. He huffed and shook his head. “No Marissa and her family at breakfast? Is everything alright?” he asked.

“They stayed up till the break of dawn speaking. They are in a better place now,” Alister rocked back and forth on his heels before perching against the large desk.

“I see ... that’s good news. Am I to officially add Anthony’s title change and announcement as well to the already long list?” Gareth asked.

“No, he wishes to do so at the end of the gathering. He doesn’t want the announcement to take away from Marissa. We will continue to use Sandra’s maiden name as Marissa’s, to keep away all association with Katheris’s name,” Alister glowered thinking of Nathaniel and what he had done. “You summoned everyone for the meeting?” he asked Gareth but was interrupted by Onri’s sudden burst into the office.

“What is this?” Onri stormed in with heavy strides. He threw a document in front of Gareth on the desk. “Why is Magistrate Diego asking for my royal seal of approval for the dissolution of an almost 18-year marriage? You know Valance law, no divorce, no dissolution without due cause. Diego couldn’t tell me, so why don’t one of you tell me what this is!” Onri’s golden irises were engulfed, like molten gold.

“Did you read whom it pertained before you burst in here demanding me to explain my decisions?” Gareth glared at Onri.

“I can see who it is, but I do not see a cause written. Explain!” Onri yelled, causing Gareth to get up from his chair and let out a disapproving growl. “This pertains to the citizens

of my land. I need to know why I would go against laws that have been governing my lands centuries before my birth. Explain,” Onri adjusted his tone. He did not want to question or anger Gareth, knowing the other may intentionally throttle him. Gareth closed his eyes and sighed, staying like that for a moment, his hands tightening into fists before he released them.

“Lord Katheris committed treason, against Valance and Drakon. Sandra Irvine had no part in it and should not have to be further ridiculed or punished for choosing to marry him for her daughter’s sake,” Alister started telling Onri. Before he could say anything further Exian, Furrier, Marius, Xander, Arden, and both magistrate Orson and Diego all arrived in the office.

“I summoned you all as I think we need to talk about what happened here a few days ago. Arden ... I have already sent wyverns to your father and General Khalib to further investigate the situation, and your father wants you to be present during these meetings,” Gareth nodded at them and gestured for everyone to sit. “A few days ago, there was a presence here in Uther of the Dunne goblins. Tronk, commander of Ziel’s goblin forces was present as well. They came here under the pretense to take Marissa, as Lord Katheris from Valance, had made an arrangement to give her to Ziel,” Gareth began to say, then gesturing to Magistrate Orson.

The magistrate took the opportunity to tell them what he witnessed the night Nathaniel and the goblins arrived and what had happened. Furrier, Xander, Arden, and Diego were the only ones with shocked expressions.

“Marius, you had written to me a few months ago about a situation you came across in Fernier. Three young sisters of some dragon blood were reported to have run away from their home in the Tundre region. One was found dead, close to the borders of Fernier and Dunne. What about the other two?” Gareth asked.

Marius swallowed looking back at his younger brother and then at Gareth. “We have not located them, and there has been no word. It is like they vanished into thin air. If there was foul play, their parents would have received a ransom notice, but nothing. The only thing we came forward with was one of the maids had found a badly burnt letter. The elder of the three girls received from a Lord Maleas, with the interest of courtship of sort. We have not located anyone of that name, nor had the parents ever met or heard of him. It was the elder sister that we found that was dead,” Marius had explained. He was surprised that Gareth brought this up but hoped his findings and situation in Fernier were closely related to what occurred in Orlean.

“Why have you not spoken of this, brother?” Xander narrowed his eyes at Marius.

“You were too busy in Valance courting Arden to do your duties. Tundre is your region of responsibility, but you went off to Aketh and then to Valance for a year. Failing to do your work to govern and protect your borders,” Marius snapped back at Xander.

“Let’s not let personal issues cloud what we are on a precipice to resolve,” Exian tried sounding reasonable. “From what I saw on the ship, they have been re-grouping, though they were definitely not ready to face us. Judging from their surprise they did not think we would be there at all to take Marissa back. I saw commander Tronk and the man I am assuming was Katheris on the ship before Star landed, but then they used the water passage to retreat,” he continued to explain what he observed.

“The water passage?” King Furrier’s face was riddled with confusion. “But that is ancient magic only bestowed upon the old dragons, and Ladon’s lineage. We can barely summon the passage, and the goblins were able to perform the ritual that quickly without having Ladon’s dragon blood?” his brow furrowed.

“Yes, it was surprising to see that as well. But since I and Star can summon the passage, I was able to recognize what they were doing. We will need to inform General Khalib, while sending in his spies into the Dunne territory, to find out

what other ancient rituals the goblin prince is aware of,” Exian advised.

King Furrier looked like he spaced out for a moment and then heaved a deep sigh. “Something of similarity happened about forty years ago,” he said as he shook his head. Everyone looked at him. “It was a gathering as well held in Fernier. Alessandra, Duchess Norester, and Lady Savi were in the snowy park close to the palace and several of the goblins appeared, walking out of a pond. That included a man as well. The man took hold of Duchess Norester but she used her vines to strike at the man and push him away while a tree uprooted itself and attacked this man. Alessandra pulled all the water out of the goblins’ bodies and incased the goblins in water spheres. They said that this man was strong. He destroyed the tree and the vines with ease, taunting them. He kept on saying all he wanted was to collect their blood, their knowledge and their powers. Savi grabbed a hold of both Alessandra and the duchess and used her ability to fluctuate them back to the palace. We never found a trace of this man or the goblins. Only a few bodies of the servants that were present with them,” he said.

“Savi? Who is that?” Arden asked.

“She was just a young girl. Her family were nobles of Fernier, but she was the last of her bloodline. When her powers to fluctuate from place to place, and that of foresight

began to manifest, the Meiji took her as one of their own. She is now a Priestess of Meiji,” Furrier sighed, glancing at Marius.

“I don’t think it’s just about possessing the powers of the ancients,” Gareth said. “I think they are trying to create offspring with a mix of dragon and goblin blood. The goblins are mortal too, they may have longer life spans than we do, but they too, die of old age. We will need to tread carefully during the events of the gathering and keep close, the princesses of the bloodlines. The last thing we need is for one of them to be taken,” Gareth shook his head.

“Um, do you still want to travel to Okumi after the gathering?” Alister addressed Gareth. Everyone looked at Gareth for an answer.

“Yes, we must. There is a lot we can learn from the other artifacts and perhaps we will get more answers regarding what the Dunne are after. Marius and Onri will join us, as well” Gareth nodded towards them. “Meeting adjourned.”

“Exian, let’s go see your mother. Perhaps if she remembers what that man looks like, I will be able to pull the image from her mind and sketch it,” Onri offered. Exian agreed and they left along with Marius and Furrier. Alister took both magistrates to the adjoining room, to speak about finances and the rest of the events, leaving Arden and Xander with Gareth.

Gareth glared at Xander and Arden, his face riddled with disappointment. “You two could have come to me about your relationship. All I ever asked from all of you was honesty and respect. I would have given you both my blessing. Perhaps I would have asked for you two to wait a little longer, you’re both so young still. Arden you’re only nineteen and Xander you just turned twenty-one. You’re both still children,” Gareth shook his head disapprovingly.

“We ... we are sorry, brother. But we no longer wanted to be apart. It was a surprise to us both when we realized that our dragon spirits were mates, and since then we just never wanted to be parted,” Xander lowered his gaze to Arden’s hand clasping his.

“How long was this going on?” Gareth asked.

“Not 2 years,” Arden spoke. “Xander did technically ask my father’s permission to marry me, so we did not just randomly elope. And my father did punish Xander at first, too.” Xander got up and took off his jacket, lifting up his shirt to reveal scorched skin from his side through his back.

“Serves you right. Aarif went easy on you. I would have done worse if someone would defile my daughter. You didn’t ask your father to heal that for you?” Gareth smirked.

“He said what you said and told me to live with it,” Xander’s gaze still lowered away from Gareth’s piercing glare. “We want your blessing brother,” he said.

“I bet you do ... There on the desk, are your new governing region assignments. Show me I can trust you both to help make this land thrive,” he nodded. “You both have a lot to learn still. I’m expecting you both will participate in the various festivities, including the Fight and Flight. Show everyone your strength and capabilities.”

“Absolutely!” Arden exclaimed as she jumped up from her seat and ran over to hug Gareth. He embraced her while glaring at Xander. A dagger floated up in the air from the desk, circling close to Xander. *‘I would have slaughtered you if this was my daughter you defiled,’* he mind-linked Xander.

Xander gulped nervously and responded, *‘I am sorry, but I would have fought you tooth and nail. I will do anything for her. I love her more than my nation, more than the ancestral blood that runs through me, and more than anything else in this world. I hope one day you will understand this kind of feeling brother.’* Xander dropped his eyes back to the floor.



Marissa paced back and forth in her room. The day went by quickly with all the preparations for the ball and meetings the

senior royals held. Besides crawling into Alister's bed at dawn, she had not seen him the rest of the day. And now her nerves regarding the events have been slowly eating at her. Helena had spent most of the afternoon and evening with her, rehearsing her part in the blessing and what to expect next. *'She is so lovely and high-spirited,'* Marissa thought of Helena. She was now officially occupying the second guest room in the quarters.

Marissa sighed and decided not to wait for Alister to come to her. She grabbed her warm robe and the master key as she headed out to the secret passage. As soon as she stepped out, she heard faint voices in the passageway. She narrowed her eyes skimming the darkness of the hallway when she observed Onri walking into one of the doors and Helena standing by the doorway. Their eyes met, and Helena pressed her index finger against her lips to signal Marissa to keep quiet. Marissa smirked, nodding as she approached Helena.

“This will be our secret. Only Alister knows, and Arden ... my twin suspects something but please...” Helena whispered.

Marissa nodded, and the two embraced hands. “You have my word, no one will know. Definitely, not him,” Marissa said pointing up with her chin. Helena understood she meant Gareth.

“Oh, I can handle him. Though not sure if Onri will be able to hold his temper if they are to collide again. I will see you in the morning,” Helena whispered as they hugged.

“Enjoy your night,” Marissa winked and scurried toward Alister’s side of the dim-lit passage.

Alister was startled by Marissa’s sudden bursting into the room. “Are you alright? Did something happen?” he asked.

“Why does something have to happen for me to come to you? I have barely seen you all day, and I’m feeling anxious about tomorrow,” she lowered her gaze and crossed her arms.

“It has been hectic the last few days, I know. After tomorrow it will ease up. Gareth will take over hosting the events, and we can focus on us and planning our wedding.” He closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. He took in her scent. His chest rumbled. “It’s not helping to ease my pent-up desire with you this close.” He felt a sudden pecking on his back and turned to see the vines from the bedpost hovering over him. “Seriously, I am the master here, and you’re going to obey her now?” he gave the vines a stern look, while Marissa giggled.

“Clearly, they like me better ... sing my beautiful lilies,” Marissa pulled away from his embrace, allowing the vines to

wrap themselves around her. They lifted her slightly off the floor, while the trumpet lilies hanging on one of the walls emitted a melody that only they both could hear.

“Not what I expected, but that’s fine. We can battle it out for dominance over the plants and the earth,” Alister narrowed his eyes and snapped his fingers. The vines immediately retracted, dropping Marissa on her feet, and the trumpet lilies now emitted a low piercing sound, until Marissa whispered to them to calm down.

Marissa arched a brow, taking a firm stance. “Well, then I will be participating in the Fight and Flight. I’ll show you how dominant I can be.”

Alister held out his hand to her. “Come I want to show you something for tomorrow.”

“I’m too tired, please can we just go to bed? You can show me whatever it is tomorrow morning,” she pouted as she stretched, and walked backwards to the bed while still eyeing him up and down with a mischievous grin.

He smirked, following her slowly. “To sleep? Or to ...?” he said as he wiggled his brows.

Marissa shrugged her shoulders and got on the bed, “somewhere in between both.”

“Mine,” he let out a low growl, before pinning her to the bed.

They spent the rest of the night somewhere in between, the satisfaction of sleep and the ecstasy of pleasure. In the morning Marissa woke up to an empty bed, though his warmth was still lingering across the pillows and sheets. ‘*Sparring again,*’ she thought to herself. She made her way back to her room through the passage, just to be greeted by Yulia and her mom once she was back in her room.

“We have a long day ahead of us. Belinda will be here soon with the dresses. Princess Helena wants to have breakfast with you. And many guests that are staying in the palace have started to arrive. Vincent will be helping his father and uncle settle in later on in the day. And we have to make some time to get ready for tonight,” Sandra held Marissa’s hands as she led her to the dressing room to get ready.

After breakfast with Helena, both women strolled down the hallway near the gallery and piano room. “I was wondering if you wanted to know something about your future?” Helena asked Marissa.

“Um, Alister did tell me about one of your abilities. I do not think I am ready to see what awaits me,” Marissa blushed.

“Ha, are you sure that’s the reason you won’t let me kiss you?” Helena laughed. Marissa blushed again and nodded. “Do you hear that?” Helena narrowed her eyes, grabbed Marissa’s hand, and pulled her to the closed doors of the piano room. “Let’s see who is playing,” Helena said as they entered the room. Looking around, they both saw in the far corner of the room Gareth at one of the pianos, with his eyes closed and his hands moving elegantly across the keys.

There was melancholy in the melody, a loneliness in the sound of each keystroke. They listened for a little bit more before Helena spoke. “Beautiful, brother.”

Gareth stopped abruptly, opening his eyes, he glared at both women. “Shouldn’t you two be doing something more productive, than staring at me?”

“Shouldn’t you play more often for the public?” Helena shot back.

“Leave, now,” he hissed through his teeth.

“We were just paying you a compliment,” Helena huffed and glared back at Gareth. He widened his eyes, surprised by

Helena's boldness to talk back to him.

"What do you want Helena?" he snarled.

"You know what I want. Arden and I are still waiting for you to agree to spar with us. We can't keep watching you wipe the floor with the rest of them. Today you took on Xander and Alister at the same time, and both were face down in the sand," she said.

"So, you want me to wipe the floor with you and Arden? I won't go easy on you just because you are girls, hence why I said no. Now leave me!" he growled.

"I ... I think we should go. My King your playing is really beautiful," Marissa lowered her eyes as she pulled Helena's hand.

"My King? You have to be kidding me! Gareth! Your favorite brother's fiancé still addresses you formally! You're a complete egotistic jerk!" Helena snarled, steam permeating from her nostrils. Marissa pulled Helena's hand harder to leave the room.

"See you later little sisters!" Gareth shouted as they walked out, the door slamming behind.

“Why did you say that Alister is his favorite brother?” Marissa asked as the two walked back to the Duchess’s quarters, where Belinda was waiting with all the dresses.

“It’s nothing, just something everyone has come to observe,” Helena said.

“You don’t think that may cause a rift between all of them if he continues to favor one brother over the other,” Marissa asked.

“The only one that this impacted is Marius. Gareth and he used to be extremely close, as they are the closest in age and spent most of their younger preteen and teen years together,” Helena sighed.

“W-what happened between them?” Marissa was curious about the evident distance between Marius and Gareth now.

“You don’t know?” Helena narrowed her eyes in confusion, as Marissa shook her head.

“At the gathering about twelve years ago, Marius and Gareth participated in the Fight and Flight event, and naturally they were the last two standing. They went up against each other using all of their abilities. Gareth is by far stronger, and quicker, both on his feet and intellectually than them all.

Gareth used his telepathic abilities to drown Marius's mind and break him down without even touching him. Marius lost all control and was in such agony writhing on the ground in the arena that Ice, Marius's dragon, snapped and attacked Gareth," Helena spoke. Marissa's face was in complete shock listening to Helena describe the event.

"Ice spits poison and he lunged at Gareth while spiting his venom. As far as I know, Ice scorched the right side of Gareth's chin and jawline, and almost ripped his entire dragon suit apart. A priestess and Augustus were present. They assisted immediately by removing the poison before it seeped into his bloodstream. I know he grew his beard out to cover the scars that were left, even though my father wanted to heal him of the scars. It could have been worse if Finnigan wasn't in the arena. He pinned Ice down and ripped some of his scales out while burning one of his wings. Giving Gareth the time and ability to get out of the arena. That was the first time I had seen Gareth too, though I did not officially meet him till a few years later," Helena recalled.

"I had no idea. Is that why Ice isn't here, because he cannot fly or?" Marissa asked curiously.

"He can fly now, but he is in hibernation. Some of the dragons are hibernating since the war with the goblins. To recuperate their strength and perhaps lay new eggs. Coy was hibernating, but something ... or someone woke him up,"

Helena grinned at Marissa. “But regarding Marius and Gareth, I think they both just do not know how to move forward from what occurred. Ice should have never been able to attack Gareth. Our dragons are connected to us. They choose us and we choose them in return. They reflect what we feel. So, because of this situation they rarely speak to each other. There is still respect and trust, but not a closeness like Gareth has only with Alister.”

“Maybe we can assist or mediate a conversation between them both to get to a better place?” Marissa cocked her head.

“I will have more luck sparring with Gareth than get him to open up to Marius, and the same goes for my icy brother,” Helena laughed. “Speaking of sparring. Arden and I usually spar in the afternoons. Obviously not today, but maybe tomorrow. Do you want to join us? It is good to practice our abilities and build up our strengths. We both will be participating in the Fight and Flight later on in the gathering. Idrani and Lidiya will not participate as they are both expecting,” Helena rambled on.

“I will definitely consider it. I too, wish to participate this year ... wait did you just say Lidiya is expecting. As in she is pregnant too?” Marissa paused, as they entered the hallway of the duchess’s quarters. “So many pregnancies.”

“Yes, Lidiya is about two months if not a little more, while Idrani is just about four months. We will need more participants to make this a worthy event though. I expect the others will participate.” Helena nodded as they entered the sitting room where Belinda was waiting with their dresses.



‘How did this happen to me?’ Marissa questioned as she stared at her gown hanging up. Stitching dipped in gold, emeralds covered the bodice, and the chiffon of the skirt swayed. Shaking her head with a smile plastered from ear to ear, she heard his voice in her head.

‘Sweet blossom, where are you? I still need to show you something for tonight,’ Alister mind linked her.

‘I’m in my room,’ she responded. It has become easier for her to mind-link him. But she still couldn’t link with others and wondered if there was something she had to do differently to be able to do so.

‘Can you come to see me? I’m in my suite,’ Alister said.

“I’m here!” she ran up behind him.

“That was quick,” he laughed as she embraced him from behind, her arms wrapped around his waist.

“Before you show me anything, I actually have something for you. I didn’t know how to give this to you earlier,” she said as she presented two small, gift-wrapped boxes. His eyes widened from the surprise, and he stood speechless gawking at the gifts she handed him. “What’s wrong?” her voice slightly trembled.

“Um, nothing. I’m just surprised that is all. It’s my responsibility to shower you with gifts, not yours!” he said, a look of embarrassment crossing his face as he took the boxes from her and slowly unwrapped them.

“You don’t like them,” she spoke low.

“What? Stop that. They are both beautiful pieces,” he said as he slipped on the emerald ring and added the ear cuff beside his own. “I only ever wear this ear cuff and my royal crest ring. I do not wear jewelry unless like tonight, it’s a ball and I must. Why did you get this for me?” he was confused but at the same time elated by her gesture.

“Well, it was your birthday not long after we last saw each other in Valance. The ear cuff just reminded me of you so much, and the ring is a token of my devotion to you, Orlean, and Nagendra,” she averted her gaze. He smirked, wrapping one of his hands in her hair, causing her to crane her neck up to look at him as he leaned in to meet her lips. The moist

caress of his tongue pushed through her hesitation. Savoring each other's decadent taste. Pulling away they both had to catch their breaths. He took her by her hand and led her to the table by the fireplace. Across the entire table, there were several chests, large boxes, and a glass case. Marissa's jaw hung low as Alister began to open each one of them.

"I wanted you to choose something yesterday to wear tonight but you wanted to be naked in our bed instead," his voice suddenly raspy.

Marissa rolled her eyes at his teasing words. "I'm confused. What ... what is all of this?" she asked as she stared at countless of sets of precious jewelry, and in the glass case a diamond and jade tiara, and a gold and emerald crown.

He wrapped his arms around her, forcing her forward and closer to the table. "These are some of my favorite pieces of the royal crown jewels of Orlean. So, what would you like to wear tonight?" he whispered before he started to nibble on her earlobe. She squirmed from the tickling feeling and giggled as he pulled her close against him. "Which of these pieces caught your eyes?" he asked again.

"I ... I ... stop tickling me!" she squirmed against his probing fingers playing with her sides. "You should choose. I simply cannot, this is a bit too much."

“Alright, then I will deliver my final choices to you once you are ready,” he kissed her cheek. “I will see you shortly my sweet blossom,” he let go back to her suite to begin getting ready.



Eliza stepped out of the carriage, her mother and aunt at her side as they entered the palace. Vincent along with Sandra and Anthony were waiting to greet them. “My friend! Sandra! I am so relieved to see you here,” Duchess Luisa embraced her. “We were so worried as we knew of nothing of your whereabouts. But his Grace told us of everything. And the amazing news about him and Marissa. Will the official announcement happen tonight?”

Sandra breathed out relieved to see her friend as well. “It is so good to see you finally, Luisa. Our girls will never be separated it seems,” Sandra said. “Yes, the news will be officially announced tonight. And we need to hurry. You were meant to be here hours ago. We all need to be ready for the royal presentation after sundown.”

“Klaus,” Anthony greeted the Earl.

“Anthony, cannot address you as Marques Anders anymore now,” Klaus said, Anthony shook his head grinning a bit.

“Your family rooms are near ours. Vincent knows the way. However, Eliza will be staying within the duchesses’ quarters as Marissa insisted on having her nearby.” They spoke for a few more moments before Eliza followed Sandra to Marissa’s rooms, and the rest headed to their guest rooms.

“Your things are being unpacked in your room, so for now Marissa just wanted to spend some time with you,” Sandra said as they entered Marissa’s bedroom. Marissa and Eliza embraced, though it’s only been a few days since they last had seen one another. “I will leave you. Yulia and the other maids will be in shortly to assist you all in your respective rooms.” Marissa and Eliza acknowledged Sandra before she left them.

“Ahm,” Helena cleared her throat, entering the room behind them.

Eliza widened her eyes, knowing well who Helena is. Her rather tall and slender figure held poise and gentleness Eliza observed. “Your Grace,” she curtsied immediately and lowered her eyes.

“Helena! You’re just in time,” Marissa exclaimed before introducing Eliza to her. Helena kept her eyes narrowed on Eliza, taking in everything Marissa had previously mentioned about her friend. *‘I’ve seen you somewhere before,’* Helena put on a tight smile.

“It’s a pleasure, Eliza. Marissa can’t stop gushing about your friendship.” Eliza blushed, thanking Helena and Marissa for their words. Helena’s piercing gaze made her shiver. “Vincent is your cousin? Am I right?” Eliza nodded, explaining their direct connection through their fathers.

“I’m so nervous,” Marissa pulled Eliza to sit with her, while Helena looked over Marissa’s gown. They chatted about the ceremonial introduction of all the royals. Eliza kept her reactions to mentions of Gareth limited, not wanting to give away how nervous and excited she was to finally see him ... the real him.

“Do not be,” Helena said. “I’d think meeting the High King, and the rest of us would have made you struggle, but you held it together. Just be you.” Helena peered at the clock on the mantel. “I’m going back to get ready. I suggest you both start as well.” She hugged Marissa and winked at Eliza. “I think we will be great friends.” Eliza blushed as they watched Helena leave through the passageway instead of the main entrance.

Eliza was taken aback by the secret passage and stared at Marissa in disbelief before Marissa finally explained the tunnels and the hidden passages. “This is amazing. Does this secret passage lead to other parts of the palace?” Eliza said excitedly.

“I can see you’re daydreaming ... Eliza,” Marissa pinched Eliza’s arm. “Look, I need you to understand something. He ... the King ... he is just above us. And..,” Marissa sighed remembering Gareth’s words. “... well, just be careful.”

“I am rather nervous to see him,” Eliza swallowed, her hands twisting against her skirt. “And I do not pretend that I want to see him ... that I want him. My dragon spirit has never been so alive and in so much need of him, his presence, and his touch. I understand,” she put her pointer finger against Marissa’s lips silencing her friend. “I understand that he is no mere man ... he is our King. And dragon blood runs deep and potent in him. I will respect the boundaries set forth by our elders. He knows we are supposed to be mates. And I will leave it to him to make the appropriate decision on what happens next ... to us. But tonight, it’s about you ... and your engagement so let’s not talk about him and me anymore.” Marissa nodded, seeing Eliza’s resolve.

A knock on the door signaled Yulia’s arrival with the rest of the maids. Eliza left Marissa to get ready in her room just down the hallway, passing Helena’s suite.

“Is this really my life now,” Marissa stared at herself in the mirror in disbelief. The regal gown fit her like a jeweled glove. She took a deep breath, expelling her inner butterflies.

“Stunning ... just stunning,” Alister approached her from behind, looking at her reflection in the mirror. “You will take everyone’s breath away. And surely steal and break more hearts.” She turned seeing he indeed was wearing the matching jacket and vest to her emerald and gold dress, with a single shoulder cape falling below his waist on his right side. He was wearing her subtle gifts along with his royal jewelry. “You look like you don’t believe me. And yet you’re the only woman I want to look at for the rest of my life.”

She closed her eyes sighing. “It’s not that. I’m just nervous about what people will say. It’s not just family and close friends now. It’s people I have never met before, people that will question what I ... a nobody ...”

“You are my mate,” Alister interrupted. “Where is all of this coming from?”

“To be honest ... I do not even know ... I’m just nervous,” she said finally noticing a case in his hands. “What’s that?”

He smirked, setting the case down. “Turn facing the mirror.” She turned slowly, watching him open the case. “For you,” he took her hand and slid two gold bangles covered in diamonds onto her wrist. “For you,” he said again as he wrapped a thick choker-like gold necklace around her long slender neck, teardrop diamonds spread across her bare shoulders, and down her chest and back. He leaned down and trailed soft kisses

along her exposed shoulder. “For you,” he smirked looking at her in the mirror. He held out his open palm, a set of earrings to match the necklace were in his hand.

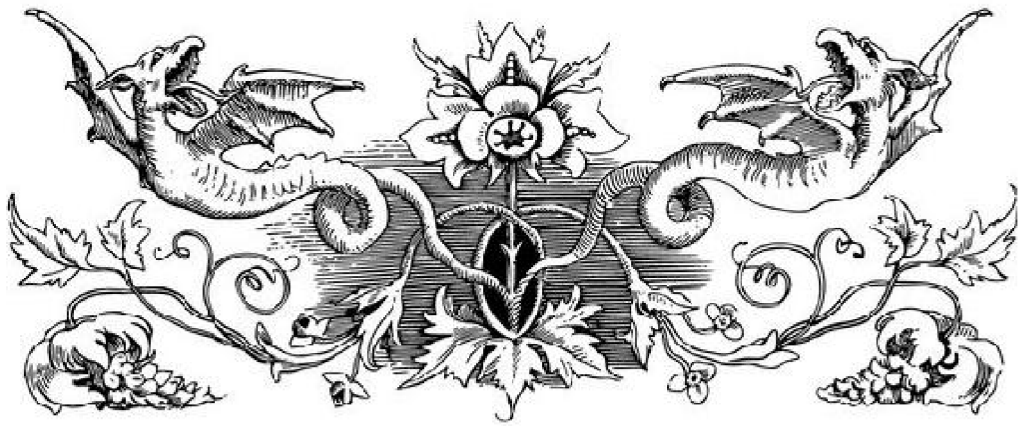
“Alister, this is too much,” she said.

“Not enough actually,” he replied as she put on the earrings.

Her golden hair was picked up and pinned in the back, with a few strands floating around her face. He then placed a gold thin wreath tiara on her head. “This was my mother’s first tiara. I know she would have gifted it to you,” he wrapped his arms around her waist. Her lip trembled thinking about his parents and how much he must miss them, especially on a night like tonight. “Please don’t be sad for me. I cannot miss something I didn’t really know I had.”

She turned, peering back at him. “But you do have now. We are a family.” He pulled her into a longing kiss. “I love you,” she murmured against his mouth when they finally parted.

“My heart is yours. Always,” he said. “Your parents are waiting for you. I will see you in the ballroom,” he said before leaving.



CHAPTER 26

The ballroom was even more breathtaking than when Marissa first saw it being prepared. The illumination from the candles in the crystal chandeliers, and those floating from the glass dome ceiling set a warm tone. Stars and the moon crescent were clearly seen through the ceiling. The cascading flora and greenery across the room made the scene of the grand room utopic, and serene. Marissa had her hand intertwined with her mother's as they walked around the already bustling ballroom. There were people she recognized from the noble families of Valance, and ones she had read up on of Orlean. Many guests from other kingdoms that she had no idea who they were let alone had enough courage to introduce herself to at random. She looked at the different thrones perched up on their platforms, realizing that before the end of the night she will be officially a royal sitting beside Alister at one.

At the entrance to the ballroom, Eliza fidgeted with the dragon bracelet Gareth had given her as a gift. Since the midnight hour of her birthday, days ago she has not seen

Gareth. He had not come into her dreams, nor tried to link her otherwise. She had figured that Gareth may in fact be busy with the preparations. She was elated to finally have the ability to set her eyes on him, not the young boy that scolded her, not the young man that ravished her mind, and not the man in the mask that was gentle and yet possessive over her.

“Cousin, I think I am going to have to be your personal bodyguard. Look at all these men gawking at you,” Vincent narrowed his eyes at a group of men staring at Eliza down the hallway. “I already had to tell a few of them to wait to ask you for a dance after the ball begins. Did you have to wear such a dress that even the princesses might be jealous of?” Vincent wrapped his arm around her shoulder in a protective stance. “Ah, there is Lord Quine I’m going to need to set a time to meet with him this week regarding the bordering lands of Fernier and the Anders territory.”

“Vin, enjoy the ball and mingle. I will be fine with my parents,” Eliza replied, pulling away from him.

“Vincent, Eliza!” Nicola had appeared beside them. Vincent’s eyes stared at her as his breath caught in his chest. A smirk appeared on Nicola’s lips, getting the reaction she had hoped for.

“Wow, Nicola. Your hair is pink. How?” Eliza asked surprised to see the fun, floral, and elegant dress along with

pink tinted hair on Nicola.

“It’s a color tint for your hair. I wanted my white hair to have some color as my pink dress,” she said as she glanced at Vincent, his eyes have not left her.

“You look beautiful, doesn’t she Vincent?” Eliza was amused by his sudden reaction to Nicola’s presence.

“Oh, yes. Like confection,” he smirked, watching Nicola’s face accepting his challenge.

“Thank you! But Eliza your dress it’s so rich and luxurious,” Nicola ran her hand along Eliza’s waist, feeling out the velvet texture. “The deep blue color, the heart-shaped corset, and the bare shoulders and arms. And the embroidery of the dragons is stunning. That sapphire necklace and earrings make your eyes stand out. No wonder all of these men are surrounding you like vultures. I think Vincent and your little brother will have their work cut out for them tonight,” Nicola giggled.

“Vincent, will you escort us both in?” Eliza snickered seeing Vincent unable to take his eyes off of Nicola. He nodded and offered his other arm to her.



“This is so enchanting. Really it has been almost 7 years since the last gathering, and not all families or royals were in attendance all the way in Aketh,” said Duchess Luisa to Sandra. “Has the King given his approval for the dissolution of your marriage? I still can’t fathom what that bastard did!”

“Yes, he has a few days ago, and now Marissa can have her real father in her life,” Sandra and Luisa continued to whisper.

“All this time. I was the only one you entrusted with your secret. And I am so happy you and Anthony have been reunited, and your daughter,” Luisa laid her hand on her heart. Watching Marissa laughing with others.

Sandra watched Marissa open up and step out of her comfort zone. “So, has Eliza decided? Will she pursue an education with the Meiji, and become a priestess, or will she find herself an eligible suitor? I am sure your husband would rather hold his grandchildren than lose his only daughter,” Sandra said, thinking about her second pregnancy and Anthony’s father’s reaction when he arrived earlier in the day. Sandra has never seen an elderly man cry so much for the happiness of his son, and now his grandchildren.

“She has not made a decision yet, but the Meiji are testing her in many ways. She won’t tell me what it is they want her to do but we will know soon enough of their decisions. It’s not hers at the end of it all,” Duchess Luisa whispered, seeing

Eliza being greeted by several men. The surprised look on Eliza's face spoke volumes of her discomfort. Vincent was beside her that moment, pulling her away to mingle with his friends.

Several chimes rang out, and the royal herald, perched on the balcony overlooking the guests, made the first announcement. "His Grace ... Alister, High Duke of Orlean and prince of Volos descendant of earthly Nagendra, and our gracious host of tonight's first gathering." Everyone looked at the grand double doors to the ballroom, watching Alister walk in, making long proud strides to the center. His eyes were completely engulfed and shining emerald-green while his hands were spread out palms up. The floor began to sprout grass and small flowers with each of his steps. The rest of the flora in the ballroom was swaying and emitting loving humming sounds. The guests watched in awe, and either curtsied or bowed low as he walked past them. Once in the center of the floor, his eyes landed on Marissa, and he bowed small to her.

"Honored guests, brethren, dragon families. On behalf of the royal families of Drakon, and the people of Orlean, I welcome you all to Uther where the first of our gatherings will commence. The gathering as we have come to call it over the centuries is our way to bring our family and dragon spirits together. To see one another, to re-invigorate our relationships with one another, to create and strengthen our loyalty and

bonds, and most of all to solidify our family of dragons. Tonight, like all the other times before, it will all be about family,” Alister spoke proudly. He held out his arm with his palm open facing down now, and as the grass and flowers started to dissipate, a cold breeze seeped into the space.

The herald spoke again, “His Majesty King Furrier, of the Kingdom of Fernier, and his daughter, Princess Helena, descendants of icy Nicor.” The guests watched as Furrier walked in through the double doors with Helena beside him. Their tall proud figures strode slowly, their white and silver hair flowing naturally as their almost translucent pearly skin shined with a pale silvery hue. The traditional white and icy silver-blue colors ran through their luxurious clothing. The floor they walked on started to turn clear, their steps turning into smooth gliding, while a chill seeped through the onlookers. Alister bowed low to Furrier and embraced Helena’s hands, kissing the back of both as she curtsied. Furrier and Helena proceeded to their designated thrones on the platforms.

The herald spoke again. “His Grace, Marius, the Crown Prince of Fernier, and his beloved Princess Idrani, descendants of Nicor.” Light snow began to fall inside the ballroom, and on the floor, a snowy pattern of Nicor appeared. The snow picked up and swirled like a cyclone in the center, and as it settled back down Marius and Idrani appeared with a flash of white around them. Gasps were heard throughout the crowd, and

everyone bowed deeply. Alister smirked at Marius's cockiness, using his ability to fluctuate from space to space. The three embraced, leaning their foreheads against one another, letting a light permeate between them.

Marius and Idrani proceeded to their spots closer to Furrier. A warm fog pushed through, misting the ballroom with shades of light blue suddenly changing to orange and then a fiery red. "Arden, the warrior princess of Aketh, the descendant of the great fire breather Aketh, and His Grace Xander, Prince of Fernier, a descendant of Nicor," the herald announced. Streaks of fire emerged from the floor and then suddenly cooled into small ice sculptures of flames, as Xander and Arden emerged from the entrance. Arden was wearing a high-neck, cropped-sleeve belly top, adorned in fiery agate and rubies, with a gold chain around her bare midriff. A floor-length, body-hugging, crimson silk skirt sat on her hips, making the flat of her dark bronze curves dance as she glided on the floor, her hand clasping that of Xanders. He wore a traditional Akethian tunic and tapered harem pants in colors matching Arden. A thick gold chain wrapped around his waist, while embroidery of intertwined dragons of icy blue and tangerine agate hues danced on his tunic.

Xander picked up one of the ice sculptures and as he handed it to Alister, Arden rubbed her palms to create a small flame and placed it on top of the ice sculpture. The sculpture

dissipated into mist. The three of them laughed, hugged and the couple proceeded to their seats.

The ice sculptures on the floor began to melt into puddles of water, and swooshing sound of waves breaking enveloped the space of the ballroom. “His Royal Highness King Exian of Ladon, a descendant of the water serpent Ladon, and Her Royal Highness and future Queen, Lidiya, mistress of the Tertane sea.” The puddles pulled together and created a tall wall in the center of the floor, as the water swayed and crashed down to the floor Exian and Lidiya were standing amongst the water now at their feet. They wore their sapphire and royal blue colors through their clothing well. Lidiya had light blue streaks running through her wavy brown hair, adorned with a multi-blue coral wreath, while Exian’s platinum and sapphire crown stood tall.

“Her Majesty Alessandra, Queen mother of Ladon,” the herald said as the water trickled from Exian’s feet to the entrance, everyone looking curiously. The water swirled and slowly rose up forming small droplets before everyone felt a light misting as Alessandra made her way into the ballroom. After Alister kissed both of her hands, the three made their way to the opposite platform where their thrones awaited.

“Everyone is making such grand entrances,” whispered an onlooker to another woman that was standing near Marissa.

“I wonder why there are four more thrones, I thought it was just the two princes and the King left. Who do you think it is for?” the second woman whispered to the first.

“I heard that perhaps one of the princes may be secretly married, but I thought that was Prince Xander and Princess Arden. Perhaps tonight we will hear great news,” the onlooker said. Marissa’s skin crawled with goosebumps.

‘Mari, breathe, stop being so nervous. I can feel it,’ Alister snuck a peek at her while he linked her. She took a few deep breaths and fanned herself.

“Lady Marissa, it is wonderful to see you here tonight,” one of the women she knew from Valance stepped closer to her. “But where is your father? I only see your stepmother here, and very confusingly on the arm of another man. Assuming the reason we have not seen your father in Valance in over six months is that they have separated?” the woman said snarkily.

“I was going to say it is lovely to see you here as well. But you seem to only want to feed the rumor mills and gossip. My mother is a woman of strong will, and it is not your business what my family does. Enjoy the rest of your night,” Marissa turned on her heels and walked over to her mother clasping her free hand.

The light from all the candles in the ballroom flickered and started to shine brightly, illuminating the space as if it was the brightest day of the year. What appeared to be small streaks of gold lightning pervaded across the ceiling, and then flickered through the middle of the floor, crashing thunderously in the center.

The herald spoke again. “His Grace, Prince Onri of Valance, the light of the four corners of Drakon, the descendant of the beautiful dragon Tanit.” Onri was practically floating a foot off the floor with the help of the electric current he was emitting from his hands. His dirty blonde and white wavy hair parted in the middle, while a gold crown adorned his head. He wore a gold embroidered waistcoat and fitted black trousers, with white and light silver threading, while a half cape adorned his left shoulder. Alister and he embraced, each letting out a chuckle before Onri ascended the platform to his throne. His eyes flickered as he stared across at Helena.

‘You should be beside me,’ Onri linked Helena.

‘Soon enough. We have a lifetime ahead of us,’ a gentle smile appeared on her cherry red lips.

‘The soul knows no time,’ he cocked his head.

‘Only the love of its mate,’ Helena responded.



Eliza felt her palms clam up. Butterflies settled in the pit of her stomach as her dragon spirit uncoiled and stretched. *'She is ready to see her mate. But am I?'* Eliza swallowed. This was it, she will finally get to see him, the real him, her beloved King. She looked across the ballroom floor at Marissa, her eyes big with anticipation and her smile widening with excitement. Marissa glanced back at her the same way, sighing and then mouthing the words *'I'm sorry.'*

Eliza furrowed her brow in confusion and then looked at Vincent beside her. "Cousin, I forgot to ask you. You have been here two days now ... have you had the chance to see his majesty?" she asked.

Vincent grinned and said, "Oh cousin, you will be up for a big surprise."

The large glass doors leading out to the gardens from the ballroom were pulled open by several servants, the drapery pulled back, revealing a large floor-to-ceiling wide open space. The guests spread out so they could all see the entrance from the darkness of the garden. A loud rumble in the distance and then the roars of several dragons sounded, the walls around them practically trembled. Through the lit-up glass ceiling and crystal dome, the guests and the royals finally saw silhouettes

of several dragons flying before they landed in the path leading to the entrance from the garden.

Eliza's hands trembled, her heart racing all of a sudden as she waited for the herald to speak, to say the name of the man she has dreamt of. The man that has woken a side of her she didn't know existed. Her mate. *'Mine.'*

Alister turned to the guests in the center of the ballroom and began to speak. "His Royal Highness, the High King of Drakon, and the Dragons of old. King Gareth descendant of the great shadow dragon Volos, The Grey Sun of our lands," Alister announced. A large charcoal grey dragon, with elongated horns, and sharp spikes across his chest, peered into the entrance of the ballroom and let out a low rumble.

The dragon slowly strode in pushing through the space, but seeing a large number of people, he stopped and turned sideways to reveal his rider. The dragon's eyes met Eliza's as he turned. He let out a cooing noise as he cocked his head, glancing with his stainless-steel eyes at her. Eliza remembered this dragon from her dream with Onri and Gareth, this was Finnigan the great protector of Drakon.

The rider slid off the large dragon and turned to look at all the guests gathered. His extravagantly long draping grey cape with gold leaves adorned his shoulders and floated far behind him as he stepped forward. The guests all bowed deeply and

curtsied, avoiding meeting his gaze. Gareth's broad frame and height were intimidating even though his steps were gentle and cautious. His raven black hair was neatly pulled back into a half tail, opening up his face and his neat short black beard lay clean against his dark tanned skin. His tall gold crown adorned with dragon scales and black diamonds perched comfortably on his head, making his silver steel eyes shine iridescently.

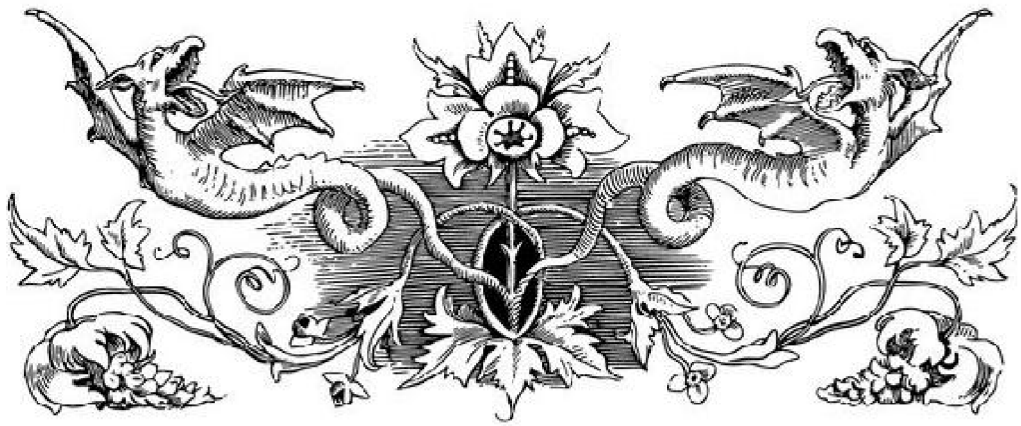
Eliza had her eyes down as she heard the footsteps near where she was standing. Her dragon spirit purred. Eliza swallowed and dared herself to gaze at him. She slowly raised her eyes taking in his appearance from the bottom up, as he now stood in the center next to Alister. His charcoal leather tapered trousers perfectly framed his long muscular legs and curves. A leather short waistcoat adorned with the same gold leaves as the long trailing cape, and one shoulder covered in a dragon-scaled pauldron, while a white long-sleeve shirt peered from the openings of his jacket. Eliza's eyes widened. She was stunned to see him, to see the face she recognized as that of a man she had already met as Lord Greyson. Though his hair and facial hair have changed drastically, she knew it was him all along. *'All this time ... all this time.'* She breathed out. Their eyes met, hers laden with shock and his with mirth.

THE STORY WILL CONTINUE

DRAGON KING

Insatiable Series book 3





GLOSSARY

Characters and Dragons of Note

Some of these were first introduced in *Kiss of Sight*, and will return in future books.

DRAGON GODS

- 1-Asterot (first dragon god) – the black knight
- 2-Tiamat (first dragon goddess) – the white light
- 3-Samael (dragon god/ gatekeeper) – shapeshifter, Goblin King
- 4-Ladon (dragon god/ gatekeeper) – water
- 5-Aketh (dragon god/ gatekeeper) – fire
- 6-Nagendra (dragon goddess/ gatekeeper) – earth
- 7-Nicor (dragon goddess/ gatekeeper) - ice/air
- 8-Tanit (dragon goddess/ gatekeeper) – lightning/mind
- 9-Volos (born of the first dragon gods) – telepath/shapeshifter/unlimited strength

10-Kaida (born of the first dragon gods) – able to move through different worlds

CURRENT DRAGONS (more in other books to come)

1-Finnigan (Volos's descendant)

2-Lutz (Volos's descendant)

3-Coy (Nagendra's descendant)

4-Bash (Tanit's descendant)

5-Ice (Nicor's descendant)

6-Rheem (Nicor's descendant)

7-Rodan (Nicor's descendant)

8-Star (Ladon's descendant)

9-Sienne (Ladon's descendant)

10-Haze (Aketh's descendant)

11-Nessa (Aketh's descendant)

CHARACTERS OF NOTE

1-High King Gareth of Volos

2-Alister, High Duke of Orlean, and adopted prince of Volos

3-Klaus Polignac, Earl of Chester

4-Vincent Polignac, Viscount Chester

5-Marissa Katheris/Irvine

6-Eliza Polignac

- 7-Captain Anders aka Anthony Norester
- 8-Sandra Irvine
- 9-Nicola Maskar
- 10-Narcissa Maskar
- 11-Lily, Priestess of Meiji
- 12-Yulia, lady's maid
- 13-Exian, King of Ladon
- 14-Lidiya, Queen of Ladon
- 15-Alessandra, Queen mother of Ladon
- 16-Furrier, King of Fernier
- 17-Marius, crown prince of Fernier
- 18-Idrani, princess and Marius's wife
- 19-Xander, prince of Fernier
- 20-Arden, princess of Aketh
- 21-Helena, princess of Fernier
- 22-Onri, crown prince of Valance
- 23-Luisa, Duchess Polignac of Valance
- 24-Duke Polignac of Valance
- 25-Nathaniel Katheris
- 26-Tronk, goblin commander**
- 27-Ziel, goblin/dragon prince of Dunne

28-Laura Trachis, Alister's former mistress, Samael's daughter

29-Samael, ancient dragon god, goblin King

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If you didn't already know, I love a cliffhanger. Book 3 is in the process of being edited. Hoping to have it out to you in early 2023.

I had started writing the Insatiable series as an ongoing serial on a reading app. After just a few months I moved the original first draft of Dragon Blood and what will be book 3, Dragon King, to Kindle Vella. The original first draft, no matter how crazy it is, remains on Kindle Vella even now.

I want to give a huge thank you to my betas. Marta, for her enthusiasm for the developing storyline. Larisa, for screaming grammar, while also making me crawl under a table when she read the smutty scenes out loud. The ARC readers that have been waiting for book 2 arrival, and now will be waiting for book 3 ... I love you guys for all of your patience and excitement (the real reason I continue writing is to see and hear what you think)

**During the initial drafting faze nearly two years ago. My friend, Lee, offered up names for the Goblins ... Tronk is the one that remained.

LINKS

You can find more information on the author, by visiting

<https://janeawriter.com>

Sign up for Jane's Newsletter at

<https://mailchi.mp/acfca4d32163/untitled-page>

Public Social Media pages

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TikTok

<https://www.tiktok.com/@janeawriter>

Other works:

Kiss of Sight (Insatiable Series Book1)

<http://amzn.to/3xGWyl6>