

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BIANCA D'ARC

Spymaster

DRAGON KNIGHTS

Spymaster

Dragon Knights

Bianca D'Arc

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The Jinn Spymaster of Valdis Maj has been working in secret for years, but that's all about to change.

It's a turbulent time in the Kingdom of Valdis. There's a new face at the King's court - a hardened warrior looking to settle down in one place after a lifetime of wandering. He's earned the respect of the King and is asked to liaise with the spymaster. What he doesn't expect is that the spymaster is a woman. A very intriguing, very beautiful woman. Something about her speaks to him on a very basic level. He wants her. But, more importantly, he wants her in his life... forever.

Isolde is a very good spy, but she's never found one man who can make her weak in the knees, and also earn her respect. When she meets General Brighton, she suspects he might just be the one. It'll take two wild dragons and assassination attempts on their liege lord to throw them into danger - and prove their attraction isn't just a fleeting thing.

They might just have a shot at a real, life-long bond... If they both survive the trials ahead.

To my family. I miss you.

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Chapter One

“I guess I won’t be seeing you for a while,” Jimnel, the Captain of the Guard in the city of Valdis Maj, told the spymaster as they concluded their meeting. He was one of only a handful of people who knew the spymaster’s true identity, who was not also part of the Jinn Brotherhood. For the spymaster was Jinn, as was the network of spies that reported back through the many layers of authority that ended with the spymaster of Valdis Maj.

There were other spymasters in other cities and countries, of course, but a great deal had been happening in this land of late, making this spymaster’s information a bit more significant than usual. The Jinn had decided to ally themselves with Alric, the Blind King, who was blind no more after a series of epic battles involving both alchemy and mage craft. Great change had come upon this land in a very short amount of time, and it looked like things had not yet settled down.

“What takes the Captain of the Guard away from his duties to his liege?” the spymaster asked quietly.

Jimmel sighed. “Changes, my friend. Lots and lots of changes. King Alric is sending me to the border. Or, I should say, the *old border* to the north. He wants me to liaise with the Jinn mercenary companies that are now under King Alric’s banner. I fear I will be traveling back and forth from the old border for some time, until the Jinn are settled.”

“You don’t sound too upset about that,” the spymaster observed.

“Honestly, I’m not. Much as I love my King—and serving him has been my greatest honor—after witnessing such great changes in the world around me, I have discovered a longing for a bit of change in my own life. I fear my habits had become far too predictable, which is never good for a fighting man. Don’t want to grow soft, after all,” he quipped, patting his flat belly as if an ounce of fat would dare gather there.

Jimmel was a warrior in his prime, and the spymaster had enjoyed getting to know him over these past few months, but he was right. Change had come upon them all, and it wasn’t good to get too comfortable with anything. The nomadic Jinn knew this, perhaps, best of all.

Jimmel gathered up his things in preparation for leaving. He had brought a satchel full of papers for the spymaster. His final reports, for a while. The spymaster would miss him. Jimmel had proven a trustworthy operative with the ear of the King, which had made the spymaster’s work much more easily accomplished from the shadows.

“Don’t worry, though. I have a proposal for someone equally well-placed who could fill my role here, while I am away.” The spymaster nodded for Jimnel to go on. “As I go north, General Brighton will be spending more time in the capital. He has the opposite problem from me. He’s been on the move too long and wants to reconnect with the heart of this land. The King believes it is a good idea and has given his leave for Brighton to spend a bit more time at court for the next few months. He is ideally suited to being your liaison while I’m not here, though I expect you’d like to vet him yourself. If you are agreeable, leave the usual signal in the usual place, and I will set up a meeting for the three of us so that I may introduce you to him.”

The spymaster wasn’t sure about this idea, and Jimnel seemed to pick up on the skepticism. The spymaster would have to do a lot of investigation before allowing another outsider into the circle of trust.

“Just think about it. Do whatever inquiries you feel you must, but don’t take too long. I leave in a fortnight, and I’m not sure when I’ll be back. I’d like to have this settled before then.”

Jimnel took his leave, and the spymaster settled back in the chair. The Captain of the Guard had given the spymaster a great deal to think about.



General Brighton felt relief on entering the capital city. His battle horse, Wolfsbane, seemed equally happy to be nearing the end of their long journey. He and his men had spent the last two months in the north, meeting with the captains of the Jinn mercenary companies that were now settling and building towns around themselves in what used to be the wasteland.

A former mercenary commander, Brighton had already known many of the men he'd talked with, and had formed cautious friendships with the others. He had much to report to his King about all the changes to the empty land that King Alric had just annexed onto his country. All in all, Brighton thought it had been a good move. The Jinn mercs had always been a cut above most of the other merc companies Brighton had worked with during his early career. They had a private code in addition to the Mercenary Code that gave them just a bit more integrity than the others, if Brighton was reading his past experiences correctly.

Of course, they were Jinn. That equated to secretive in his mind. He wasn't really sure, even now, what their ultimate goals were in settling the barren land to the north and joining under Alric's banner. He hoped it would turn out all right in the end, and he had caught not even a whiff of treachery in any of the interactions he'd had with commanders and grunts, alike.

Time would tell, of course, but for once, Brighton felt reasonably positive about the immediate future. The King had just won some major battles without much bloodshed, which was always a good thing.

Much to his surprise and honor, Brighton discovered that Jimnel, the Captain of the Guard, had turned out a large group of his Guardsmen in a double row lining the street leading to the castle barracks. It was an honor usually reserved for troops returning from battle, and Brighton felt especially glad that the City Guard had chosen to respect him and his troops in this way. It was a good omen for things to come.

Brighton examined the faces of the men he passed as he rode through the Honor Guard, and they did not look displeased by this duty. In fact, they looked welcoming, despite the need to keep a straight face and strong stance.

Jimnel was waiting for Brighton at the gate. He was mounted, and Brighton brought Wolfsbane to a halt, the two horses and riders facing each other.

“Welcome home, General Brighton,” Jimnel said formally.

“Captain, you do me a great honor, turning out the Guard as you have. Thank you.” Brighton gestured to the men standing at attention on either side of the road.

“It is your due, General, and the men wanted to demonstrate their respect for you and the work you’ve been doing along the borders to keep our land secure.” Jimnel nudged his horse into motion, turning to ride beside Wolfsbane.

The formal part of the greeting over, Brighton squeezed Wolfsbane into a slow walk beside Jimnel’s white steed. They looked striking, two muscular war horses—one pure white, one darkest black—walking side by side, matching stride for

stride. The picture they made appealed to Brighton's well-hidden sense of whimsy.

Wolfsbane was usually a handful around lesser horses, but he had met Jimnel's mare before, and they seemed to have come to some kind of agreement to respect each other without any bad behavior. Brighton was grateful for that. They'd been on the road too long today to have to deal with Wolfsbane's antics.

It didn't take long for Brighton and his small group to traverse the distance inside the gates to the barracks. Grooms were ready to take the horses, and Brighton's own man took charge of Wolfsbane when he dismounted. Brighton hadn't traveled with the army, or even a small portion of it. His companions on this journey had been a small number of his own staff who would serve him here in the capital, as they had in the countryside. Several were clerks who wrote out the orders to be delivered to the commanders in the field. Most of the rest were his most trusted messengers. All in all, less than a dozen had traveled with Brighton to the capital, and they were easily housed in the castle barracks.

"We've prepared a corridor of rooms for you and your staff, including an office suite where you can work. Which would you like to see first?" Jimnel had dismounted as well and walked beside Brighton.

"It's been a long journey. Let's get my staff settled in their living quarters, and then, I'd like to see the work area," Brighton replied, stripping off his riding gloves and slapping

them together to pound out some of the road dust. It had been a long journey, indeed.

“Certainly, General. Right this way.” Jimnel led the way, a gracious host. The Captain’s demeanor wasn’t lost on the General.

Though Brighton’s title outranked the Captain of the Guard, their functions were quite different, and they both held about equal clout with the King. They were not rivals, not friends, exactly, but definitely equals. Brighton wanted to make certain Jimnel understood that, so they could get off on the right foot, if they were going to be working more closely together in the future.

Brighton walked beside the Guard Captain, his weary men walking behind. He knew, if he asked, they would jump right into work, but he wasn’t going to ask. They’d traveled hard and deserved a bit of time to recover. And Brighton needed time to figure out how this city worked and make contacts here. It had been too long since he’d worked in this kind of environment, but the landscape was changing rapidly, and it was time to learn more about the inner workings of the court.

“Here’s your corridor. There should be plenty of room for you all,” Jimnel said to the whole group as he and Brighton stood off to one side of the wide hall.

The men saluted and went ahead into the barracks, Brighton’s aide sorting out the room assignments based on rank, function, and need. Brighton turned, leaving that in their capable hands. They’d leave the biggest room for him, out of

tradition, and he knew his saddlebags would be there when he returned. His men had always taken good care of him, and he didn't expect any less now that they were in a city and not a camp.

“The office area is just adjacent,” Jimnel said quietly when only the two of them were left in the hallway. The Captain led the way to a wide door and opened it, ushering Brighton inside.

There were several rooms leading from a main central chamber that had a very large table at its center. Many people could work here together, when necessary, which suited Brighton's needs.

“Your office is through here, General.” Jimnel led him to the largest of the rooms attached to the central area and opened the door. They went inside, and Brighton looked around with approval.

“This will work very well. Thank you.” The General went around a large desk placed at the back of the room to look at a wide leather chair. It looked all too inviting after his long journey.

“General, if you're not too tired from your travels, there is a matter of some importance I'd like to talk to you about,” the Guard Captain said, closing the door to the office, sealing them inside.

Brighton sat behind the desk, glad to rest his weary body, and motioned for Jimnel to take one of the seats on the

opposite side of the desk. The Guard Captain sat and seemed to study Brighton for a moment before speaking.

“I know you spent years as a mercenary,” Jimnel began.

Brighton wasn't sure where this conversation would lead, but he was willing to humor the other man, for the time being. He simply nodded.

“I suspect you've had dealings with the Jinn even before encountering those mercenary companies now building towns in the wasteland.”

“I have,” Brighton said when Jimnel paused, seeming to wait for a response.

“Then, I suppose you know about their spy network.”

Brighton could feel his eyebrow rising in mild surprise. He hadn't expected this turn to the conversation. He said nothing, waiting for Jimnel to continue. He didn't have to wait long.

“The thing is, General...” He paused as if considering his words carefully. “This city is home to one of the more important spymasters in this region. I have met the Jinn spymaster of Valdis Maj and acted as go-between for His Majesty on many occasions. Since I plan to travel to the north and spend some time there, I've been considering who might fill my role with the spymaster here, in my absence. It would make sense for that person to be you, if you are agreeable. Contingent, of course, on the spymaster's agreement.”

Now, this was an interesting turn of events. Brighton was very well acquainted with the Jinn spy network. He had long

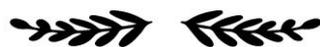
been envious of their resources for information and found it intriguing that they were working with the crown, even in secret. Then again, the King was set to marry a Jinn princess, and several thousand people affiliated with the secretive Brotherhood were currently building permanent homes in newly annexed lands to the north. The Jinn involvement in Valdis had grown by leaps and bounds.

“I would welcome the opportunity to work with the spymaster,” Brighton replied, already eager to get to work. Who knew city life could be so intriguing?

“Excellent. I have put the proposal before the spymaster and am awaiting a reply. If they agree, I will take you to a meeting with the spymaster and introduce you. Likely, it will be at night, after dark. I will try to give you as much notice as possible, but generally, just be ready. The Jinn, as you probably know, like to move swiftly once they have made a decision.”

Jimmel stood, and Brighton did the same, reaching across the desk to shake the Captain’s hand, warrior style.

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll be ready,” he promised. “And thank you, once again, for the warm welcome for me and my staff.”



The spymaster of Valdis Maj put down the latest report on the Jinn mercenaries who had been granted leave to settle in what had been a wasteland to the north of King Alric’s domain.

They were expanding their camps into full-fledged towns and developing a network of roads and supply lines over the river that had been the previous border of the Kingdom of Valdis, into the farmland to the south.

King Alric had appended that wasteland to his kingdom, expanding his border to the north. The wasteland had been empty and barren for so long that no other kingdom wanted to claim it. There was no problem in Alric annexing the wasteland, now that he had folks ready to settle it and make it livable. He had taken on responsibility for the land with the proviso that the Jinn mercenaries would settle the land and administrate the area.

The Jinn had always been wandering nomads with no permanent homes, for the most part. Only recently, times had changed, and the Jinn were now happy to have land of their own within the boundaries of a peaceful kingdom run by a good leader. A long-awaited prophecy had come to pass for the Jinn, and they were finally finding homes all over the lands. Many were settling in Draconia, near to the Jinn Queen and her King-Consort—Arikia and Prince Nico of Draconia—both of whom were black dragon shapeshifters.

Many other Jinn were settling in other places. The drifting mercenary groups now had their own place to the north within the new borders of Valdis, and the Jinn spymaster of Valdis Maj, the capital city, had big decisions to make. The nature of being a spymaster—especially in such a large city and kingdom as this—was to remain hidden. Nobody knew for

certain, outside of a small circle of trusted allies and agents, exactly who the spymaster was.

A meeting with King Alric had broadened that circle of trust, and now that the King was betrothed to the Jinn black dragon shifter, Lady Zallra, the time had probably come to widen the circle even more.

Prince Nico of Draconia was the exception to the rule that spymasters' identities need be secret. He was openly known as the Prince of Spies and had been the spymaster to his brother, King Roland of Draconia for most of his reign. Being known as the spymaster didn't seem to hinder Prince Nico's effectiveness at all. Perhaps being known as the Jinn spymaster of Valdis Maj wouldn't be such a bad thing.

However, caution was also in the spymaster's nature. If her identity was to become more widely known, she would start the process slowly.

Making her decision, she put the candle lantern in the appropriate place by the window. It was the signal to Jimnel that she would meet with him. And at this meeting, she knew she would also be meeting with General Brighton.

Stepping back, she looked at the candle lantern that illuminated one particular colored panel in the masterwork of stained glass that graced this most visible of windows. She had just set the wheel in motion. Only time would tell where it would take them all.

Chapter Two

“**W**hat do you make of the situation on the old border?” King Alric asked Brighton, the next morning during their first briefing.

“It’s beginning to stabilize, My Liege,” Brighton answered at once. “One of the farm girls from the southern side of the river has the ability to converse with the ice dragons, and one of the dragons has been helping her travel to establish communications with both the other farms and the mercenaries. The farmers are happy to have a new market for their crops, and the mercs are just as glad to have easy supply over the river for their new settlements. As you know, nothing much grows in the wasteland, otherwise somebody would already be living there. But with the farmers’ support, the new towns are doing rather well.”

King Alric and his betrothed, the Lady Zallra, were both meeting with the newly arrived General. Things would be changing now that Alric had regained his eyesight and formed alliances between his kingdom and several other powerful

entities. Among them, the Jinn Brotherhood, through the woman he clearly loved. For Lady Zallra was a noblewoman of the Black Dragon Clan of the Jinn. She had, according to Jimnel, already put Alric in touch with her brethren living and working in his city.

She was also half-dragon, which went a long way with the hidden enclave of fair folk that lived north and east of the wasteland he had just annexed to his kingdom. Those fair folk lived and worked with snow dragons and had surprising respect for Lady Zallra, for she was the descendant of the maker of dragonkind, the great wizard Dranneth the Wise. Likewise, the newly discovered ice dragon community that lived in the ice caves north and west of the wasteland, were sending a delegation to Alric's court after helping expel an invading army and settle the wasteland with Jinn mercenary companies.

“But what are the mercenaries doing to occupy themselves?” Alric wondered. “I hate to think of all those fighting men left to their own devices and causing mischief in the farmlands.”

Zallra laughed. “Mercs come in many different varieties, my love. The Jinn mercenary companies function very much as our Clans do. They are an extended family, of sorts, that travels and works together. Within any company, you will likely find all the skills necessary to sustain a small community. There will be farriers for the horses, builders, engineers, smiths, cooks, bakers, tailors and seamstresses, and people with many other skill sets. Such a community demands

discipline to run smoothly. The commanders will not allow their people to make mischief, even if they were so inclined.”

“If what you say is true—and I have little reason to doubt it—then the Jinn mercenaries are in much better position to settle into permanent towns than I expected,” Alric admitted.

Giving the wandering Jinn mercs a home in the wasteland not only expanded Alric’s domain, but brought strong allies to his kingdom. It also benefitted the Jinn, who were starting to settle down rather than constantly traveling in their brightly painted wagons. It was a sea change. Most of the Jinn had been wanderers for centuries, but Zallra had revealed what she knew of the great Jinn prophecy.

When Prince Nico of Draconia had found his mate in the lost princess, Arikia, descendant of Dranneth the Wise’s youngest child, the Jinn had also found their Queen. When that happened, long years of waiting had come to an end, and many of the Jinn had gathered in Draconia’s capital city of Castleton, expanding the city and settling new lands around it. The Jinn were finally coming home—wherever they decided to make their homes.

Alric clearly believed having a large population of Jinn warriors on his newly-expanded northern border and a lovely Jinn shapeshifter for his Queen was a good thing. Not just for him, but for his kingdom and his people.

“The farmers south of the river are pleased to have warriors between themselves and the new border,” Brighton reported.

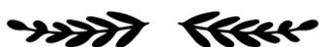
“They say it makes them feel much safer after the near-disaster we just avoided.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” Alric allowed.

It had been a near thing. If not for the aid of the new allies among the fair folk, snow dragons and ice dragons, Brighton doubted things would have ended so peacefully. That mass of non-aligned mercenaries on the northern border would have cut a bloody swath through the farmlands on their way to the capital, and Brighton wasn't altogether certain the King would have survived it.

All the more reason to play nice with the Jinn spy network. Their information was second-to-none, and Brighton suspected that the Jinn had known about the mercenary build-up along the old northern border long before the information had come to the King's ears.

Brighton hoped the spymaster would agree to his taking on Jimnel's role while he was away. To his knowledge, Brighton had never met one of the elusive spymasters of the Jinn, and he was intrigued to learn more about them and how they worked. Gathering intelligence was crucial in warfare—and likely, even more important in times of peace.



Glassmaker's Guild Artisan Isolde van Aidel sent one of her many apprentices up to the castle with a message for the King. Ever since King Alric had regained his eyesight, he'd become a patron of her glass shop. He claimed to like her particular

style of stained glass and had ordered a commemorative window to celebrate his upcoming marriage to Lady Zallra.

Isolde was also Jinn, but of the Wayfarer Clan. The Black Dragons were the rulers of all the Jinn Clans, and the actual black dragon shapeshifters from that Clan were the nobility of their secretive society. The Jinn Brotherhood, as it was known, was a band of wandering Clans that had grown over the centuries. They were musicians, entertainers, craftsmen, artisans, warriors and more. In recent years, some families had settled in various places, mostly owning taverns and inns that were part of the extensive Jinn information network.

Isolde's family had chosen to settle in Valdis Maj, the capital city of King Alric's domain, when she was a child. She'd been apprenticed to a glassmaker when she expressed an early interest and surprising talent for glass and had devoted much of her life to learning and perfecting her craft.

Her lesser-known talent involved the gathering, collating and passing-on of information. Isolde had started out as an apprentice spy for her Clan—a family calling, since her father and brothers were also highly-placed information gatherers—and had risen over the years into a position of power in Valdis Maj, albeit a secret power. For Isolde was now the spymaster of the city, due, in part, to her own skills. Mostly, she thought, the others had chosen her because of her profession. As a Guild Artisan of some stature, she had any number of apprentices and assistants who could deliver messages without raising an eyebrow. She also visited the homes of the nobility

often, fixing their windows or fulfilling commissions for glass objects.

Likewise, she had connections with the religious communities who also patronized her glass shop. Basically, she had connections all over the city in many different levels of society. That was a great advantage when seeking or passing information. She was ideally placed to keep track of intelligence operatives, and her organized mind helped her coordinate and analyze the information that came in. Her family helped there too. Her father, especially, enjoyed piecing together the various tidbits that came to her and making connections.

“I heard General Brighton and his staff arrived today,” Tamlin van Aidel, Isolde’s teenage brother said as Isolde sat down to the weekly dinner at the family home on the outskirts of Valdis Maj. “Did you see anything, Issy?”

Isolde passed the plate of beans to Jorel, her oldest brother, before answering. There were always many dishes to be passed around at these dinners, usually provided by her older brothers’ wives, who were much more domestic than Isolde, herself.

“I didn’t see anything myself,” Isolde told her little brother, “but I’ve heard about it. Apparently, the Captain of the Guard turned out his Guardsmen on the road leading to the castle barracks in an Honor Guard. The General appeared pleased they had made the effort, according to one of my apprentices who saw the whole thing.”

“A good start,” her father commented. “According to the mercenaries in our Brotherhood, General Brighton is a respected leader who has earned his position. It is good that the Captain showed him the proper respect. It would not do to have those two at odds. The kingdom would suffer, I daresay.”

“Well, it doesn’t appear that they are at odds, Father. In fact, I would say that it looks to me like they have agreed to work together for the common good,” she told him, catching his eye.

Nearly everyone in the family knew that she was a highly-placed spy, but her older brother’s wives and young Tamlin had not been let in on the secret, just yet. For that matter, they might never be. It all depended on whether or not they would need to know. Right now, they did not.

Isolde had told only her father about Jimnel’s proposition that Brighton take over his role as liaison while the Captain was away. They had discussed it at length, and her father had counseled her to accept Brighton, only after reaching out to some of his Jinn contacts in the Mercenary Guild. Once he had their good report of Brighton, he was willing to come down in the man’s favor.

Dinner proceeded. Isolde enjoyed these weekly gatherings, though it took her away from her work for several hours. Perhaps that was a good thing. She tended to get very focused on whatever problem lay before her—whether it be a glass design or a piece of political intelligence that didn’t quite make sense. It was good to take time away from those things

for at least a little while, to refresh her mind and reconnect with her family.

Since she had opened her glass shop in the heart of the city, she no longer lived at home. That wasn't necessarily out of the ordinary, but among Jinn, most often, the daughters stayed home until they were married. But Isolde had never been the typical Jinn female. Her art had called to her from a young age, and she had followed her passion for glassmaking and designing into an apprenticeship with a Guild Master.

As a journeyman, she had been brought into the Jinn spy network and discovered a passion for collecting and analyzing information. Once she had passed from journeyman status and gained the right to open her own glass shop, she had done so, happily. From that point on, it was her duty to the Guild to work toward her Master piece. A work so impressive, she might one day gain the title of Guild Master. There were only ever a few Masters in every generation, and each had earned the title by creating something truly impressive.

It could take years. Decades, even. Isolde was resolved to refine her skills with each commission until she learned enough and had enough experience to create something truly masterful.

“They say his horse is magnificent,” Tamlin enthused, scooping potatoes onto his plate. “A massive black warhorse with flashing hooves. Joey said someone polished the horse’s hooves to make them shine.”

Now that sounded a little far-fetched to Isolde, but she only shook her head and smiled. Joey was one of the younger stable lads, and Isolde knew he had quite the fanciful imagination.

“He rides a black. That much is true. It is not well-behaved with horses it does not know, though I heard it did not try to bite the Captain’s mare, so perhaps that is only a rumor,” she said as the meat platter was passed around. She knew of her little brother’s love of horses and often indulged him with stories from the stables in the city.

“Or maybe they already knew each other,” Tamlin said innocently, but his words made Isolde think. Why hadn’t she thought about the possibility that Jimnel and the General had worked together before?

The family meal went on for more than an hour with happy conversation and good cheer. It had never really been the same since Isolde’s mother had died a few years before. Her loss had hit the family hard, but they had survived and adjusted as best they could.

Her father had retired, and her brothers had taken over the family business, leaving her to her glass and allowing Tamlin to choose what he wanted to do with his life. So far, it looked like he wanted to raise and train horses. If that turned out to be his life’s work, the family would support him in his choice. Jorel, as the oldest brother, hadn’t really had the luxury of a choice. He’d been expected to take over the leather shop from his father and had been trained in the craft from his earliest days. Isolde counted it a blessing that Jorel actually enjoyed

the work. In fact, his skill was beginning to surpass their father's, which made the old man proud and brought new customers as the quality of the work increased.

Isolde left her family home an hour later, in the dark of night. Most people stayed indoors after nightfall, but Isolde was used to traveling back to the city after these dinners and had no fear of the dark. Especially now that she had Nightstar to carry her wherever she needed to go.

The lovely filly had been chosen for her by Tamlin, who had seen the horse as a yearling and been involved in some of her training. The young horse was three years old now, and fully trained. The breeder, Goram, was Jinn, and Tamlin had been working for him since he was just a lad. Goram had been willing to sell the filly to Isolde only because he knew her family and knew she would take good care of the creature.

Nightstar had a spacious stable behind the glass shop, and Isolde visited her every day, taking time to groom her and bring her treats when she didn't have any place to go. But Nightstar had a lot of energy, and Isolde allowed one of the young apprentices who had been brought up on a horse farm to exercise her daily and make sure she was in good health. Tamlin liked to visit too. He would come up to the city once a fortnight to visit his sister's shop, but Isolde privately thought it was just to see how Nightstar was doing in her care.

Riding across the fields in the dark of night was exhilarating, to say the least. Isolde gave Nightstar her head and gloried in the feel of the wind in her hair and the power of the young

horse beneath her. They had traveled this way many times, and the path was well-known to both of them. Before too long, they rejoined the road heading toward the city and had to slow.

Nightstar was black with a white star on her forehead. A stealthy shadow on a dark night like this. Isolde's cloak was of black wool, soaking in what little light reflected from the heavens so that they were mere shadows passing along the road.

As they neared the city gate, Nightstar slowed to a sedate walk, well familiar with the routine of re-entering the city once night had fallen. The gatekeepers at each of the gates to the city would examine those who sought entry in the night, lest troublemakers enter unseen.

Because she did this trek once a week, she had gotten to know the Guardsmen stationed at this gate. Generally, they just waved her inside, but tonight, they appeared to be stopping and checking everything. She frowned, wondering why, but then, she saw the Captain of the Guard standing nearby, just inside the gate, speaking with another man whose back was to her. All she could see was a dark cloak over what looked like powerful shoulders. A warrior, then. And someone important, if Jimnel was taking him around personally.

Isolde wondered if it might be the newly-arrived General, but was skeptical. The man had been traveling all day to get here. Surely, he'd be in his barracks room, fast asleep. Not touring the city wall with the Captain of the Guard.

Chapter Three

When it was her turn at the gate, Isolde greeted the Guardsmen on duty, and they addressed her by name, asking after the welfare of her family outside the city wall. The friendly banter was polite and correct, and proved to their listening commander that they knew exactly who they were admitting to the city and had a good relationship with the populace. Isolde didn't mind acting as a demonstration for the watchers, well aware that it was the Guardsmen being judged, not necessarily her.

She liked these two Guardsmen, in fact, and hoped they performed well in front of their commander. She might even put in a good word for them the next time she had Jimnel alone. Not that they would ever know it. Her relationship with the Captain of the Guard was a well-kept secret.

Jimnel met her gaze over the shoulder of the man he was talking to and nodded ever so slightly. They wouldn't overtly acknowledge each other in such a public place, but she knew he saw her, and vice versa.

She was still gazing in his direction, when the man he was talking to turned around, and her breath caught in her throat. Though she had never seen General Brighton in person, this hardened warrior had to be him. He had that command presence, and a piercing quality to his gaze.

When his deep blue, stormy eyes landed on Nightstar, she could see the appreciation and surprise in them. He walked closer as she continued her short conversation with the Guardsmen. It was a little unnerving to know that the man's intense scrutiny was focused on her.

Well, not exactly on her. He seemed to only have eyes for her horse. If that didn't crush a girl's vanity, she didn't know what else could.

She bade farewell to the Guardsmen and turned her attention to the road in front of her, but the man stepped slightly in front of Nightstar then raised his intense gaze up to meet Isolde's eyes.

"Your pardon, mistress," he said, his voice every bit as alluring as his ocean-blue eyes and flowing black hair.

His features were strong. He had a few scars, of course, but they didn't detract from the squareness of his jaw, the clean lines of his cheekbones, and a surprisingly straight nose. Most fighting men in her experience had bumps from breaks of their nose—sometimes multiple breaks over many years of working as a soldier.

"How may I assist you, sir?" she asked politely, as if they were on an afternoon stroll, not meeting in the dark of night by

the city wall.

“Your steed. Is she not a Jinn warhorse? I have seen a few in my time, but I did not know there were any in this city. If I may, where did you get her?”

Jimnel stepped forward to stand next to the other man. “Mistress Isolde, is that you?” He made a great show of recognizing her, as if he had only just become aware of her presence.

“Yes, Captain. I’m surprised you remembered me,” she said, as if slightly embarrassed by his recognition.

“Of course I remember you,” he chided, as if teasing her a bit. He turned to the black-haired man and spoke in an aside that all could hear. “Mistress Isolde has been spending some time up at the castle, installing stained-glass windows of excellent quality. She is a rising star in the Glassmakers Guild, and her designs have won the favor of our King since his eyesight has returned.” He turned his head to face Isolde once again. “Tell me, mistress, how goes your Master work?”

Isolde sighed, as if troubled, and shook her head. “I have not yet begun it, Captain. I have yet to find a subject worth immortalizing in glass that would be historic enough to earn my Master rank, but I’m hopeful. Spending time at the castle will surely let me see something of import.” She smiled somewhat conspiratorially. “I’m hoping to see enough dragons to understand how to depict them in glass, but so far, their shape eludes me. I need to be as accurate as possible, you

know. The Masters are harsh judges when it comes to inconsistencies.”

“I have heard that said,” Jimnel agreed, nodding. “But what of your horse? Forgive me,” he stepped back a little and gestured to the man at his side. “I did not introduce General Brighton. He is newly arrived in the city. I’m just showing him around a bit.”

“It is an honor to meet you, General. The whole city has been speaking of your arrival,” she said, glad Jimnel had seized the opportunity to make the introductions. “As for my horse, it is a simple story. My little brother has been working for the man who breeds these horses since he was old enough to wield a shovel. Our families are friends, and Master Goram knows that I treat Nightstar as one of my own family. She is spoiled by myself and my apprentices and eats better than I do most of the time.” Isolde laughed at her own words. It was true. She often forgot to eat altogether when she was busy working on a glass project.

“Ah, I understand,” the General replied, nodding and keeping most of his thoughts to himself. He had to realize that she was probably Jinn, but was too polite to ask outright. Promising. “She is a lovely creature,” he said, looking once again at Nightstar. “And better behaved, it appears, than my own war steed. He would have tried to bite someone by now, I’m sorry to say.”

“Well, I hear that’s a good thing in a fighting horse, but if you ever want to get him evaluated by old Master Goram, I’d

be willing to introduce you,” she offered. If this man was going to be her new liaison, it was best to have reasons that they might be seen together. His horse’s bad behavior was as good a reason as any, and Master Goram might just be able to do something to help moderate the horse’s behavior. Goram was a miracle worker with the animals.

“Thank you,” the General said with genuine feeling. “I might just take you up on that offer. I think it’s going to be harder for him now that we will be spending so much time in the city. It was easier to work out his aggression in the wide-open spaces.”

Isolde nodded her understanding. The General had impressed her. Any man who cared so greatly for his warhorse could not be all bad. The way a person treated animals said a lot about the person’s character.

They chatted for a few moments longer, and then, Isolde took her leave. She thought she felt the weight of the General’s gaze on her back as she and Nightstar headed deeper into the city, but she didn’t dare look back to confirm her suspicion. This unexpected meeting would turn out to be a good thing, she believed. Establishing a reason for them to meet again.

If, that is, the General agreed to be her liaison. She had thought long and hard over the decision to accept him in Jimnel’s place. She suspected, especially after meeting him, that he would do the same over whether or not to accept the Guard Captain’s request.

Isolde rode back to her glass shop, thinking hard. The General was an impressive man, both in stature and in intelligence, from what she had just learned in their short conversation. She looked forward to their next meeting.

Brighton watched the woman on the black horse fade into the darkness, as if they were merely a shadow among other shadows. The dark cloak, the dark coat of the horse—except for that one shining star on her forehead—was a very stealthy combination. He wondered if the glass artisan realized it, and somehow, he thought maybe she did. There was something... odd about her. Something hidden. Something he wanted to discover.

She was also a beauty, and he wondered if his interest had been unduly influenced by that. It had been a long time since he'd been involved with a woman. The lifestyle he'd led to this point hadn't been conducive to a long-term relationship. Hell, it hadn't even allowed him to have even a short-term serious relationship.

He had lived hard and fought hard, both on the mercenary road and as a General. He had earned a little time of respite, though he wasn't sure that's what he would be getting here in the city. From all accounts, Valdis Maj was a city of intrigue and, sometimes, violence. He was here to work, but there was one advantage. He would be in one place for a while.

He wondered if he would be here long enough to find some comfort of the female variety. He was too old for casual

liaisons. What he wanted, was something more. Something real.

He hadn't even been in the city for one day and already he'd met a woman who intrigued him. Things were looking up. In this densely populated city, perhaps he would find a woman willing to put up with his limitations. If not the glass artisan, then perhaps another. Either way, for the first time in a long time, he had hope on that front. And an attraction he hadn't felt in ages. The little artist had roused the beast that slept inside him. He looked forward to their next encounter.



There was a message waiting for Isolde from Jimnel when she arrived back at her shop that night. General Brighton had agreed to be her liaison, and the Captain had arranged a meeting for them in the usual place the very next night. So, she thought, tapping the scroll against her chin, she would see the handsome General again.

Was that a little flutter in her tummy? Surely not. He was a handsome brute, but she had seen handsome men before. She would have to control herself better than this, if she was going to be working with the man. It wouldn't do to let him see that she was attracted to him. They were colleagues. Nothing more.

Why, then, did she dream of the two of them riding side-by-side on their black horses over the fields all night?

The next evening, Isolde entered the pub via the hidden door used only by certain members of the Jinn Brotherhood. This

pub was owned by a member of her clan, and the room she used to meet her operatives had been specially arranged by the landlord. It had two entrances. One from the pub proper and one hidden entrance from the pantry. That was the one she used for all her clandestine meetings.

Lately, though, she had been meeting with Jimnel here, more often than not. There had been a great deal to relate to the King these past weeks. She wasn't happy that she had to change liaisons midstream, as it were. She and Jimnel had gotten comfortable with each other and built trust. She would have to start all over with General Brighton, and she had her doubts how that would go.

For one thing, no matter how hard she tried to deny it, she was very attracted to the man. She hadn't had that problem with Jimnel. He was a nice fellow and all that, but he hadn't stirred her in any way. All it had taken was a brief conversation with the General last night to fuel her dreams. That didn't bode well.

But she would work with it. She would work with him. She had no other choice. This was a crucial time for the kingdom, and for her people. She would do her best by them both. As was her duty.

The Sleepy Dragon was busy for a weeknight. Isolde had used the back alleys for cover to get there and noticed that the stable yard was bustling more than usual for a Tuesday. The kitchens were just as busy.

She greeted the pub owner's wife, who was one of Isolde's aunts, with a kiss on the cheek as she passed by on her way out of the kitchen. They were too busy to chat. Isolde just said hello and kept going, leaving her aunt to oversee the kitchen staff's work. They were all used to seeing Isolde traipsing in and out of the kitchen, and nobody asked questions. They knew the kind of work she did, though they probably didn't know she was so highly ranked.

Stepping into the pantry, she went to the wall that held the hidden door into the meeting room. There was a small peephole off to one side and below eye level so she could check to see what was going on in the other room before she entered. She did so now, nodding to herself in satisfaction to see Jimnel and the General already seated, eating dinner. It looked like they had been there for about a half-hour or so. She had timed it perfectly.

Opening the hidden latch, Isolde slid the wall panel to the side and entered, closing it behind herself. Only then did she turn to face the two men waiting for her.

She read surprise on the General's face, followed by immediate understanding. She liked this clear indication of the quickness of his wits.

“Good to see you again, Isolde,” Jimnel said quietly. “Won't you sit down?”

Isolde sat quietly, taking a seat at the round table between the two men, as if they formed the points of a triangle. She nodded to both of them.

“Isolde van Aidel of the Wayfarer Clan, you’ve already met General Brighton,” Jimnel stated formally. “General, my apologies for the subterfuge last night, but it is never wise to reveal a secret in a place not of one’s choosing.”

“I understand. It is good to see you again, mistress,” Brighton said, nodding to Isolde. “I confess, I had no notion that you were not exactly what you seemed when we first met. Though I did suspect you were Jinn based on your horse. The Jinn breeders don’t let their best go to just anyone.”

Isolde bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment. “Nightstar is the one creature I cannot give up,” Isolde admitted with a smile, “even if her presence raises questions to those who can judge what she really is.”

“Understandable,” Brighton agreed amiably. “I confess, I am surprised the spymaster of Valdis Maj is female. Not that I haven’t shared the field with a number of sword-maidens in my career, but it is still somewhat rare in my experience for women to become embroiled in either fighting or intelligence work. Plus, I’ve heard a great number of things attributed to you that I frankly did not expect to have been done by a woman. I’ve been told the spymaster of this city fights right alongside *his* operatives when necessary.”

Isolde bristled a bit at his words but took them as an odd sort of compliment, rather than an insult. She’d hidden her identity so well that even this well-connected man had no idea of her true role.

“As you just confirmed, I am Jinn. We have always been a secretive people, though the time for that has been coming to an end as we settle in homes, at last. The thing is, we train our daughters and sons the same and allow them to choose which path to take for their life’s work as they age. I chose fighting skills and intelligence work alongside my more mundane occupation as an artisan. Our outward roles often serve our inner choices as well. A tavern keeper may be one of my operatives, reporting back on anything that is heard in his establishment. Likewise, a stable master can report back to me on the movements of people and goods. In my case, making wares that are delivered all over the city allows me to send messengers just about anywhere that will not be noticed.”

Brighton looked intrigued by the idea. “Very clever.”

“And now, through my agreement with the King, my network is at your disposal,” she said, hoping to impress upon this new man the deep level of trust and cooperation she had agreed to with the King.

“Until the Captain returns,” Brighton said, nodding toward Jimnel, who nodded back. “I am humbled and pleased to work with you, mistress. I have long envied the Jinn information network.”

They spent a few minutes going over the signal process and amending it to this new situation. The system of candles in the main stained-glass window would still work, but Isolde liked to mix things up once in a while to keep any watchers guessing. Now, as she changed to a new partner, was a good

time to change up the meanings of the different colored panes. And those candle signals were only good for nighttime. She also had to arrange for a reason for her apprentices to carry messages during the day.

It had been easy with Jimnel because the Captain of the Guard was involved with security while the castle was undergoing construction. Since the King had commissioned a window from Isolde, she had reason to send her apprentices through the castle gates during the day, and they could always slip messages to Jimnel. Brighton was in a slightly different position, so they resolved to come up with a new project for his new office that would require her presence the next day and allow for her apprentices to come and go from his office thereafter, without raising questions.

Once they'd arranged for their meeting on the next day, Isolde left. It was always better to keep her visits short. Less chance of discovery that way.

As she left The Sleepy Dragon behind, Isolde felt both a bit uneasy and eager for the meeting with General Brighton the next day. Something about the man drew her, which was uncommon in her experience. He was clearly a dangerous man who had seen more than his fair share of warfare. He had a honed edge to his personality that she found utterly attractive, but also...unsettling. There was no other word for it.

He bothered her on some unconscious level that she couldn't quite define. So focused was she on her own internal questions

that Isolde didn't notice the sparkling crystal eyes watching her from above.

Chapter Four

The next day, Isolde was walking up to the castle gate with her satchel of samples and writing implements when a shadow passing overhead made her look up. She stopped short in the middle of the road, as most others did, watching with awe as a flight of dragons circled above the castle.

In recent months, the people of Valdis Maj had almost gotten used to seeing the white snow dragons that were now allies of the Kingdom, with their fur-clad riders. They'd even come to know a single black dragon that sometimes flew, though mostly at night when it was hard to see her. But this...

This was a flight of ice dragons, their reflective scales sending shards of light dancing all over as they moved. It was hard to actually look at them in full sun because of the mirror-like polish of their scales. They were magnificent. And to a glass artist like Isolde, they were inspirational.

Already, she was wondering how she could reproduce an image of an ice dragon using mirrored glass in one of her

designs. It would be a pale imitation of the splendor she was seeing right now, but it would be a tremendous challenge that she would enjoy.

Moving to the side of the road, she quickly unpacked her sketchbook and began drawing hastily. The ideas were too good to let sit idle until she had time. As she watched the dragons circle, she took note of their proportions and wingspan, sketching as quickly as she could. This was a rare opportunity to see one of the rarest of all dragon breeds, and she wasn't going to let it pass without making some notes.

Her bag slung across her body and resting at her back, she began to move closer to the castle gate. The dragons were circling above, as if looking for places to land, and they were definitely homing in on the castle itself. She would get as close as she could, sketching all the while, for as long as she was able.

She might not get into the castle proper today, considering the dragons' unexpected arrival, but she had a scheduled meeting with General Brighton, and perhaps that might allow her entrance so she could get an even closer look at these amazing creatures. Determined to try, she kept walking toward the gate, which was in sight, even as everyone else stood still to watch the display.

She was glad to Jimnel himself at the gate when she got close enough. She made for him, hoping he'd let her in.

"Captain, I suspect this means my meeting with the General is postponed," she said, getting his attention, even as they both

watched the dragons circling far above.

“I suspect you’re right,” Jimnel answered with a brief grin.

“Might I impose?” She lifted her sketchbook and flashed one of the images she’d just made of an ice dragon in flight. “This is a great opportunity for an artist such as I,” she said with more than a hint of humility in her tone. “If I may be permitted to sit and sketch where I can see them?”

Jimnel seemed to think about it for a moment, then nodded. “I know I can trust you to simply observe and not impose.” He said it like a warning, but she knew him well enough by now to know that the words were meant more for his curious Guardsmen than for her. He nodded to a nook in the inner wall where she could sit and sketch. “I will let General Brighton know that you are here for your meeting with him, but this arrival will no doubt take precedence for the moment.”

“I understand and will be content just to sit and sketch as long as they don’t object.” She pointed with her graphite stick toward the sky where the dragons were slowly descending. “Frankly, I could watch them all day and count it a blessing. I suspect there will be a demand for mirrors with a dragon theme after today.”

Jimnel chuckled. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

The Captain grabbed a nearby page and sent the youngling off to tell General Brighton that the glass artisan was here and would be content to wait as long as necessary, if he still wanted to meet about the window he wanted to commission for his office. That done, Jimnel left to see to the dragons’

arrival, leaving Isolde to her little nook in the wall, where she sat and set up her sketch pad, drawing furiously as the dragons descended.



“You are an artist?”

A voice came into Isolde’s mind, and she recognized it for what it was. Tilting her head upward, she met the gaze of the ice dragon that had perched on the wall above her. Its head was lowered, its crystalline eyes focused on her.

“I am an artisan of glass, milord,” she replied gently into the mind of the dragon, as she had done only a few times before with her Jinn kinsmen who were both dragon and human. *“If you or your brethren would rather I not draw you, please just tell me, and though it will break my heart, I will destroy all the images I’ve created so far. I did not mean to overstep. My apologies, if I have.”*

The dragon seemed surprised for a moment. Then, its gaze turned thoughtful.

“You are a strange human. You can hear us in your mind and respond as if you have done so all your life. You seem to know the ways of dragons. How did this come to pass? Are you from the land to the east we have heard about, where dragons live among humans as partners and friends?”

“I have never been to Draconia, though I know about the land of which you speak. I am Jinn, milord. Although I am of the Wayfarer Clan, I have had dealings with my brethren of the

Black Dragon Clan. They are related to the leaders of Draconia, and many of them carry both spirits within their souls. They are half-dragon and half-human. It is from them that I have learned to converse with your kind,” she told him honestly, revealing a lot more than she ever would with a human acquaintance.

“I have heard of such things, but have never encountered such a one,” the dragon admitted in the silence of her mind.

Isolde looked at the main entrance to the castle where King Alric and his lady were just coming into view. She nodded toward the couple.

“I believe that is about to change, milord,” she said with a fond smile. *“Now, before you are distracted by that, is it all right for me to continue to make sketches of the dragons here? I would not continue to do so without permission.”*

He looked at her as if surprised, but nodded. *“You may continue to draw, mistress. We have no objections to that. We know we are a rare sight among your people and we do have a certain...vanity,”* he admitted, letting a little tendril of smoke rise from his nostrils as if he was chuckling. *“Your sketches are very good.”*

“Thank you, milord,” she replied, feeling absurdly pleased with the compliment. She tried to draw the moment the emissary from the Ice Dragons encountered the King, sketching furiously to capture the image she wanted to reproduce in glass someday.

“Is that the King?” the dragon continued speaking with her, even as she went back to work.

“Yes, milord. King Alric. He used to be called the Blind King, but you’ve probably heard by now of his adventures and how he finally found a cure. He can see now for the first time since he was just a boy.”

Isolde looked up to study the King. He was too far away to see the strange light of his eyes that was the only evidence left of his ordeal. They were beautiful, but they were also a reminder of the terrible things that had been done to him. Isolde had great compassion for Alric. She had heard so much about him before they’d met, in secret, to form their alliance. He was a good man. A good King. And he was beloved of one of the shapeshifters of the Black Dragon Clan, which made him doubly royal to any Jinn.

For the shapeshifters of the Black Dragon Clan were all direct descendants of Dranneth the Wise. It was the great wizard Dranneth who had struck the bargain with dragonkind all those centuries ago, to do that magic that would merge human and dragon in his descendants so that they could wisely rule over both races. They were royalty, and the descendants of the eldest son of Dranneth ruled in Draconia to this day.

It was a younger son who had gone on to form the Jinn and found the Black Dragon Clan, gathering all the other clans to him over time. The Jinn had laid in wait for centuries to fulfill a great prophecy, and that time was almost at hand. Each day,

they drew closer to the great conflict for which they'd been quietly waiting and training.

“And the woman with him. She is very magical,” the dragon observed, watching the leader of his wing greet the King.

“Lady Zallra of the Black Dragon Clan. She is a shapeshifter. One of the many descendants of Dranneth the Wise,” Isolde said in a respectful tone that echoed through both their minds. *“They are in love, and when she marries, he will become a prince of the Jinn while she becomes Queen of Valdis. They are a good, strong pair with a true life bond, if I am any judge.”*

“You speak as if you know them.” The dragon didn't quite ask the question, but Isolde responded as if he had.

“I am allied with the King and have met him. Lady Zallra is Jinn. She and I have spoken many times since she arrived in Valdis Maj. They both strike me as humble warriors despite their elevated positions,” she said candidly.

This dragon might very well learn all her secrets if she wasn't careful, but then again, if she couldn't trust a dragon, then her entire life had been a lie. The Jinn believed that dragons held the highest purpose and truest hearts in all the lands. Dragons were to be respected and trusted in all circumstances, for they were pure of soul and touched by magic far older and deeper than humans could comprehend. They were forces for good.

Or so she had been taught. Even though her natural inclination as spymaster was to be secretive, all bets were off

when it came to dragons. She had been taught since birth to trust no other as she could trust dragonkind.

“What sort of alliance can a King have with a glass artist?” the dragon asked after a moment.

Isolde sighed and concentrated on her drawing, though her mind was spinning with possibilities for her reply. She had to say something, but she wasn't sure her true role should come out this way, to an underling and not the leader of the ice dragons.

Then again, this way was probably more discreet and could serve the purpose of keeping her secrets. Nobody knew she was actually talking silently with the dragon. If any observed them, it probably just looked like the dragon was intrigued by what she was drawing and peeking over her shoulder from above, so to speak.

It was as good an opportunity as any, and the sooner the ice dragons knew that they could come to her for information, the better. It might also be taken amiss if she withheld her identity, even to this lesser member of the delegation. It might be seen as an insult or even a deception, which would set her off on the wrong foot with the ice dragons. With an inward shrug, she decided to reveal more than she would have to any human.

“I am not only a glass artist, milord, but a Jinn spy. The spymaster of this city, in fact. It is a closely held secret that many within my own clan don't know. If you could pass along my identity to your leader, I would also offer my services. The Jinn have always served dragonkind, and I'm certain Lady

Zallra will approve my offer. She is my superior, though she is newly arrived to this city.” Isolde didn’t look at the dragon, but she could feel his interest pouring down on her from above.

“I have never met a spy before,” he observed at last, sounding a bit smug. *“My Lady Esselyn leads our wing. I will tell her about your offer when she has a free moment. But what is your name, mistress?”*

“My apologies, milord. I am Isolde van Aidel, Artisan of the Glassmaker’s Guild. I have a glass shop in the city, and of late, I have been commissioned to make a few new windows for the castle, which allows me some freedom of movement within these walls. It also allows me to send my apprentices and runners to and from the castle without raising any questions.”

“Oh, that’s very clever,” the dragon complimented her. *“I have not spent much time among your kind, but I do understand spy craft. I just do it from the air.”* A certain tone of smugness came from the dragon, and she wondered if she had met her first dragon spy.

“Forgive me for asking, milord, but you are so shiny and sparkling. I would not have thought such things made for good stealth.” For a moment, she was afraid she had overstepped, but smoke rose from the dragon’s nostrils in little curls of amusement, and she breathed easier.

“Perhaps I will show you sometime how useful it is to have reflective scales,” was his only reply.

The King and Lady Zallra turned at that moment and went back into the castle, the leader of the ice dragons following behind carefully. The great hall would be big enough to accommodate even an ice dragon, but the doorway was a tight fit.

“I can see that changes will have to be made to your buildings if we are to spend much time in this city,” the dragon above her observed rather wryly. *“The snow dragons were right.”*

“I believe plans are already being made,” Isolde offered. *“I know King Alric wants to encourage cooperation between dragons and his people, and now that Lady Zallra will be our Queen, she will make sure of it.”*

“That is good to hear,” the dragon replied, shifting his weight on the parapet above her. Some of the other dragons were moving position, and a few of them were flying down to stand guard in the courtyard. *“I must attend my duties now. It was nice speaking with you, mistress. I am called Salveer. I hope we will meet again.”*

He launched himself off the wall and glided down toward the trio of ice dragons already standing in formation in front of the main door to the castle. It was an Honor Guard, she realized, and a very impressive one.

“I hope so too, Lord Salveer,” she replied as he took his place in the formation.

Isolde didn't speak to him again, since it was clear she had been dismissed, but she turned the page in her sketchbook and

began a new composition. She wanted to capture the majesty of the Honor Guard in all its glory.

Chapter Five

General Brighton had been looking forward to meeting with Isolde probably more than was wise, but he couldn't help it. The appointed hour had approached...and so had an unexpected flight of dragons. His plans changed, Brighton called for a platoon of his steadiest guards and attended the King in the great hall, where he was meeting with the leader of the dragon wing.

Brighton thought he recognized her as she'd flown in, but he wasn't completely certain until he walked into the great hall, directing his men into an Honor Guard around the perimeter. They would be facing outward, guarding the hall from intrusion, their backs to the dragons as a sign of respect and trust.

Brighton tried to hide his grin of satisfaction as he took his position just behind the King and his lady. This dragon was, indeed, the Lady Esselyn, whom he had met and worked with on the border.

He liked her a great deal and knew her to be one of the most reasonable and powerful beings he had ever encountered. He was glad she had come to see the King personally. These two would be good allies and could only make both of their subjects prosper by working together.

“It is good to see you again, General Brighton,” Lady Esselyn said directly into his mind as the King and his lady took seats and the dragon sat on the stone floor.

“I am honored you remember me, Lady Esselyn,” he replied humbly, bowing to her. He had learned to speak mind-to-mind with virkin while he was in Elderland and had been amazed to find that dragons spoke the same way.

“So it is true,” King Alric said, looking from Brighton to Esselyn and back again. “You can bespeak dragons.”

Now that the King’s eyesight had been restored, he didn’t miss much of what occurred around him. Brighton bowed his head to the King.

“Yes, Majesty. It is a skill I discovered while working in Elderland,” Brighton replied respectfully.

“You knew dragons in Elderland?” Alric probed.

“No, Sire. There are small creatures native to that land that somewhat resemble dragons, but that are to dragons what housecats are to snowcats, only much, much smaller. They are called virkin, and they are small enough to perch on a shoulder or arm. They do not speak in such clear words, but the method is similar,” Brighton explained as quickly as he could, keenly

aware he was taking time away from an important diplomatic event.

“I should very much like to see a virkin sometime,” Esselyn said, surprisingly, including the King, his lady, and Brighton in her communication.

“Me too,” Alric added out loud. “But for now, I want to thank you again for coming all this way, Lady Esselyn. We have a great deal to discuss, but I would defer to my Lady Zallra at this moment. I believe you two have an even more important connection to make.”

Alric remained seated as Zallra squeezed his arm and smiled at him, then stood to face the ice dragon. She walked a few paces closer to the dragon, then a black mist began to swirl around her, raising goose bumps on Brighton’s flesh. This was magic of the highest order.

Between one eyeblink and the next, Zallra was gone, and a compact black dragon stood in her place. Brighton had heard whispers about Jinn shapeshifters but had never really given much credence to the rumors...until meeting Zallra.

“I am Zallra of the Jinn, descendant of Dranneth the Wise, maker of dragons and he who merged with his creation so that future generations could work together in harmony.” The black dragon spread its wings and flapped once before settling them comfortably on her back. Brighton was gratified to be included in the silent communication. Lady Zallra’s words explained so much he had wondered about for a long time.

“Princess Zallra of the Jinn, soon to be Queen of Valdis,” Esselyn replied formally, *“you are the sign that we have been waiting for these many long years. We have long lived in the ice caves to the north of this land. Now that the Jinn mercenaries are settling in the wasteland that once separated our domains, we would like to have more interaction with Valdis. With you, Lady Zallra, and your mate, King Alric. We propose an alliance. We would like to bring our ice caves into your domain and under your banner. We want to become part of your kingdom.”*

Alric stood and moved next to his lady, stroking her long sinuous neck with one hand. He was clearly besotted with her, no matter what form she took.

“I confess, Lady Esselyn, this is more than I dared hope for and a very welcome piece of news. Although I had never intended on expanding the kingdom, it seems Fate has other ideas. I would welcome you and your fellows under my banner and pledge to work with you for the good of all within our newly expanded borders. Human and dragon alike.”

It was a good speech, Brighton judged. Alric was a unique monarch. He had faced such adversity and had not grown bitter. He was born of privilege, but it had never gone to his head. He was a humble man and a good leader. Now that he could see again, he was even more dynamic than he had been. Before, he'd led his kingdom by the power of his mind. He still did that, but now, he could be out front, leading the way to new ideas and pathways. He was a beacon his people were

happy to follow because the land had always prospered under his rule, and he'd been through so much.

Quite simply, his people loved him. Just as his amazing half-dragon mate loved him. She had brought a whole new dimension to this land, and Brighton was beginning to regain a lost hope that had lived in his soul for a very long time. He'd almost given up on the prophecy that had led him to Valdis, but now that there were dragons here, it just might be possible. Not probable, of course, but possible, nonetheless.

“Then, it is agreed,” Lady Esselyn said, her tone indicating satisfaction. *“We are now part of your kingdom. Like the wandering Jinn, it is good to finally have a home among the other beings of our world. The time of our hiding in the far reaches is at an end.”*

Zallra transformed in the blink of an eye back into a woman garbed in dark colors, as was her habit. Brighton felt the magic of it. He had always been somewhat sensitive to such things.

“Lady Esselyn,” Zallra began in a serious tone. “There is something you need to know. There is an ice dragon living in the royal court of Draconia at this very moment. He is just a baby, really, and was raised by the new Queen, who is like me, a descendant of Dranneth the Wise. From reports we have through our Jinn network, Queen Alania of Draconia was stolen as a child, along with her twin sister, Arikia. The twins were separated, and Alania was sent as a slave to the Northlands, where she was set to work in the stronghold of Salomar. Somehow, Salomar convinced the North Witch to

help him steal a dragon egg. He threw Alania in with the egg to tend fires and keep it warm. He apparently expected the baby dragon would eat her when it finally hatched, but instead, Alania bonded with the baby. They escaped Salomar together once the hatchling was old enough to fly and lived off the land for a time until King Roland happened across their path.”

The dragon seemed stunned by the tale, shifting on her feet in clear agitation. Her folded wings fluttered a little against her back as if in alarm. She seemed to get hold of herself, but her tone was full of dismay when she spoke again.

“I cannot understand how anyone could manage to steal one of our eggs. We are never careless with our offspring, since we have so few compared to the other races.”

“There is speculation that it was done by magical means. Loralie—she whom they call the North Witch, among other things—is a great mage, and for some reason, she agreed to help Salomar obtain the egg. Some say she did magic to make the mother dragon forget about her egg and simply fly off unaware. Nobody knows for certain. Salomar is dead, and Roland married Alania and adopted the baby ice dragon. His name is Tor, and he is the darling of the royal court of Draconia and, from all accounts, a happy child. But he is the only ice dragon anyone in Draconia has ever seen.”

“Then, we must go to Draconia to learn the truth. We do not simply let our children wander around alone. I am glad to hear he has found adoptive parents who have taken good care of him, but he is an ice dragon, and there are things only

another ice dragon can teach him.” Esselynn looked troubled. “And we must find out who he belongs to. Somewhere, there is a mother ice dragon missing her child. That cannot be allowed to continue.”

“The Jinn believe that King Roland and Queen Alania truly love the child. I offer the Jinn network to you if you would like to make contact with the King and Queen before you arrive. From everything I know of them, they are open to making contact and alliances with all kinds of dragons. Their land is well named, since all dragons are welcome there,” Zallra said quietly. “But since Tor is special to the King and Queen, perhaps giving them a bit of warning as to your arrival wouldn’t go amiss.”

Esselynn seemed to puff up for a moment, then deflated. *“Your words have merit, Lady Zallra. If the child has found a loving home, that is good, but he should also know his blood family. I will investigate on my end. Then, we will take action, depending on what we find. Either way, I believe a trip to Draconia is in order. And you are correct. It’s probably best that the King and Queen know we are coming.”*

“Yes, milady,” Zallra said softly. “They love Tor like their own child and have raised him with every consideration. He is the son of their hearts, and I believe he is very attached to them as well. It is said he formed the mother-bond with Alania when he was still in the egg. It would be cruel to tear their family apart, but in Draconia, extended families that include dragons and humans is more or less normal. I believe they would welcome Tor’s real parents, if they can be found, as part

of their own clan.” Zallra tilted her head. “Speaking purely on the political side, that would form a deep bond between your kind and the monarchs of Draconia. Bonds of family and love. On the emotional side, it would be kinder for the child. He has been through so much in his young life already.”

“I will consider your words at length, Lady Zallra. You make good points, and I must think about all angles. For now, thank you for telling me of this child. He will need ice dragon guidance as he grows, and I vow he will receive it. One way or another.”

Zallra bowed her head and moved back to stand beside Alric. “Then, that is all to the good.”

Brighton was amazed at all he’d heard. The dragons had included him in all their silent communications, and the humans had spoken aloud. He had just learned a great deal about the foreign land he’d so often dreamed about. As a young man, he’d dreamed of living in Draconia, but the prophecy given to him in Elderland had led him to Valdis and insisted he stay.

The trio discussed the details of their new alliance for some time before Esselynn outlined her plan to leave a few of the dragons she’d flown in with here in the city for several weeks. In fact, she wanted to keep an ice dragon presence in the city, rotating the members of her wing in and out of the city at intervals. The King agreed readily, then the talk turned to where the dragons would be quartered.

Ice dragons were so much larger than other dragons that it would be difficult to find them places within the city, Brighton realized. But Zallra came up with a solution that he hadn't quite expected.

“The Jinn always build with dragons in mind, whenever possible. We travel widely, and black dragons, though much smaller than your kind, still need accommodations friendly to those with wings and talons.” Zallra smiled. “There are several inns within the city that can house and feed dragons, though some might be a tight fit since ice dragons are so big. I will take you on an aerial tour tonight when the inn yards are lit up so you can judge for yourself which ones will be suitable. All Jinn welcome dragons and will be happy to have a dragon in residence. Just warn your fellows that the people of Valdis aren't used to having dragons around, so the inns might get busier than usual, just so people can catch a glimpse of you.”

Smoky tendrils of amusement drifted upward from the dragon's nostrils. *“I think we can handle that. We have rediscovered our liking for being out in the world and have made friends among some of those people living along the old border in the north. The mercenaries have even made us welcome, allowing us to share their campfires and listen to their music. I have missed human music.”*

“Then, you are in luck,” Zallra said happily. “Jinn musicians are among the finest in the lands, and every inn has at least one minstrel. More can be brought in if you like. I think people will vie for the opportunity to play for a crowd that includes a dragon.”

The accommodations taken care of for the moment, their talk turned to the political once more. Brighton was astounded by Zallra's depth of knowledge. Of course, she was Jinn. They had a network second to none.

That thought made him think of Isolde. He regretted not being able to meet with her today as planned. He had really looked forward to seeing her again. She was, by far, the most fascinating woman he'd ever known, and they'd only just met. Even Lady Zallra—astounding as she was—paled a bit in comparison with the crafty spymaster.

Isolde just intrigued him on so many levels. He couldn't wait to talk with her again and get to know her better.

“The black dragons never lost faith with the dragons of Draconia, though we lived in secret for many generations,” Zallra was saying, shaking Brighton out of his reverie. “And Draconia has been allying itself with others lately. Sea dragons have come out from the watery depths to form an alliance. Gryphons have come from Gryphon Isle at the behest of the wizard Gryffid, who is alive and well. Apparently, he performed some kind of magic to slow time on his island, hiding it for all intents and purposes. He recently reversed the spell, and the island is back in our time. There is now a dragon's lair there where a mated pair and their knights have set up residence.” Zallra paused for a moment before going on. “Draconia is also allied with Helios. One of the Draconian princes married the Doge of Helios not long ago. There are also dragons in the Northlands now, who have retaken the castle that was once home to the King up there. His daughter

and her mates have taken over. Her mates are knights, bonded with dragons, and they're all up there, reopening communications with the enclave of fair folk even farther north."

"I will send envoys to all these places," Esselyn decided. *"Everyone needs to know that the ice dragons are back, and we need to learn who and where we can help."*

That sounded promising, Brighton thought. It would take some time for the dragons to establish contact, but far less than if they'd had to travel by ground.

When everything that could be decided had been decided, Esselynn took her leave. It was dark outside, and Lady Zallra went with the ice dragon leader to give her that aerial tour she'd promised. Brighton wondered which of the many fine Jinn inns would be graced with a dragon in their courtyard that night. He supposed he'd be hearing about it soon enough from his soldiers. They were sure to hear all the gossip and pass it along post-haste.

As Esselynn and Zallra left, the ice dragon shared one last thought with Brighton and the King they left behind. *"You're going to have to make some improvements to your buildings if we're going to make a habit of this, King Alric."* A smoky chuckle followed her words.

"Already in the works, milady," Alric called after her, chuckling along with her. Alric clapped Brighton on the shoulder. "Well, that was an interesting development."

"It certainly was, Sire," Brighton agreed.

Chapter Six

It was well after dark when Brighton went out into the courtyard and discovered Isolde sitting in a little nook in the wall, sketching by firelight. One of the ice dragons was curled up about twenty feet away, and she was drawing him as he rested.

It looked, for all the world, as if the dragon was actually posing for her. But, of course, that was ridiculous. It had to just be a coincidence. Right?

“Mistress Isolde,” Brighton said, approaching her quietly. She jumped, clearly startled, but recovered quickly.

“General,” she acknowledged him. “Forgive me. You are very stealthy.”

“It’s considered an asset in a soldier,” he said, smiling at her. “Have you been here all this time?” He glanced at the pad on which she’d gone back to sketching.

“Yes. I arrived for our meeting about your window right when the dragons appeared. The Captain let me wait here in

case you were able to see me after all, though I'm sure he knew how much the artisan in me wanted to take advantage of having real live dragons to sketch. I already have plans for about a dozen windows and a multitude of mirrors, which I believe will depict ice dragon scales as well as possible in two dimensions. The dragons didn't seem to mind, and one was even looking over my shoulder as I worked for a bit." She smiled as she gazed at the dragon a moment before returning to her work. "They are magnificent, and I could not let this opportunity pass without at least trying to capture some images for the future."

"Then, I am glad you had recompence for my failure to make our meeting." He was really impressed by her talent. Even in the torchlight, he could see the strong lines of her sketch and how they captured the essence of the reclining dragon. She was truly gifted.

"More than you can imagine, sir. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event for me. I will be able to work from these sketches for months, if not years," she admitted enthusiastically.

"I suspect I could not tempt you away from this reclining dragon to hold our meeting now." His raised eyebrow made his statement a question, and she shook her head even as she continued to draw.

"I'm sorry, General. Perhaps I could come back tomorrow? We could do it first thing in the morning, if that is agreeable to you."

“I am busy most of the day, but if you wouldn’t mind eating breakfast in the barracks with me and my men, we could discuss the window plans then,” he suggested.

She looked up sharply at that idea. He met her gaze and hoped she could see the teasing light in his eyes in the torchlight.

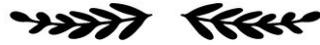
“I’m just kidding. I will ask the cook to provide breakfast in my office, and we can talk about the window as we eat. I’m afraid that’s the only time I have free tomorrow, and I really would like to get on your project list as soon as possible. The office space is grand, but it needs something to make it feel more like home. I think some functional art will do that nicely.”

It was a good reason for him to be meeting with the artisan, anyway. He’d never commissioned a stained-glass window before but was willing to give it a try if it meant spending more time with the pretty spymaster.

“Functional art,” she mused aloud. “I like that turn of phrase.” She went back to her drawing. “I will be here for breakfast then, General. Thank you for making the time to see me, even on such a busy day as you shall have tomorrow.”

Sensing he’d been dismissed in favor of the magnificent dragon lounging before them, Brighton didn’t take offense. He knew he could never compete for an artist’s attention with a rare and beautiful ice dragon sitting right in front of them. He shrugged and went on his way, glad in his heart that he would see Isolde again in the morning.

He could hardly wait.



Isolde made her way back to the castle after a mostly sleepless night in which she transferred some of her rough sketches into full-scale drawings she would use for glass designs. She'd been fired up after seeing the ice dragons and speaking with one of them and just couldn't sleep until she'd made some progress on the ideas coursing through her mind.

She yawned as she approached the castle gate and waved to the guards on duty, both of whom knew her from her frequent trips to the castle to oversee the installation of her windows. They waved her through with smiles and comments on the earliness of the hour. When she explained that she was meeting with the General, and breakfast was the only time he had free today, they nodded knowingly. General Brighton's work ethic had impressed them, they told her freely, since he had arrived.

"He's not one to let grass grow under his feet," the first guard said approvingly. "And he mucks right in with his men. He's not afraid to get his hands dirty. He doesn't loll about giving orders, he pitches right in with his men, and it's clear they love him for it."

"We wasn't sure what to expect in the way of the army men," the second guard added, "but the General sets the example, and most of those fellows are the kind of men I'd have at my back in any fight. He runs a tight ship from all

accounts, and his men are as good as any in the Guard. Some are even better. We've been training together and learning from each other. It's good to have them here. Gives us some competition and a reason to keep our skills sharp."

Isolde tucked that information away as she headed for the General's office in the barracks. She was glad to hear that the Guardsmen and soldiers were getting along. It could have been a minor disaster if they'd taken it into their heads to dislike each other. It sounded like General Brighton was a good leader who set an excellent example for his men, and the Guardsmen appreciated that since Jimnel was very much the same.

A soldier showed her into the General's office after she presented herself at the door to the barracks. He was an older man who limped as he walked, no doubt from an old injury. The man seemed to have scars all over his arms and face, but he was still in uniform and seemed glad to serve.

"The Gen'l be here soon. He t'was out with the men as usual this morning for early drill, but he said how ye was going to be joinin' him for breakfast," the old man said with a smile and a wink as he ushered her into the office and showed her where she could put her satchel of samples and drawing materials. "I set up a table for ye to share," he went on, showing her the table just in front of the existing plain clear glass window. "T'is the winder Gen'l Brighton wants changed. Thought it would be good to sit afore it while ye eat."

"Thank you, uh... What is your name, sir?" she asked with a smile. "I'm Isolde." She wouldn't stand on ceremony with

such a friendly and blooded soldier.

“Sergeant Simeaus Goodfellow, at your service, mistress,” he answered with a beaming smile. “I see to the Gen’l’s comfort these days and organize his schedule. I’m not much use in the field, but I knows everybody, and everybody knows me, so I help wheres I can. Got no family and nowheres else to be. Army’s all I know, and I knows it well.”

He said all of it with not one hint of sorrow or regret. This was a man who loved his work and the people he worked with. That was clear enough to Isolde.

“Well met, Sergeant Goodfellow. I suspect I will be seeing more of you if I can come up with a design for that,” she gestured toward the transparent window, “that meets with the General’s approval.”

“I seen the winder you’re doing up at the castle,” the Sergeant said unexpectedly. “Lovely work, if ye don’t mind me sayin’ so. I s’pect ye’ll come up with somethin’ just as nice for the General, and I’d be mighty happy to see ye here again, mistress. Now, let me just go fetch the food. Gen’l Brighton’ll be here shortly.”

Charmed by the old veteran, Isolde watched him go, then retrieved her measuring tape from her satchel. She might as well begin by examining the window and making some notes about its dimensions. She could easily make a stained-glass pane to cover the existing clear glass, but there was a hinged section on this window. She always liked to retain function in her designs, if she could. If she measured correctly, she could

add a small hinge to her stained-glass overlay that would allow the General to still be able to open the window on hot days, if he pleased. She would discuss it with him, but for now, she would take the measurements, so she had something to begin working with as soon as they settled on the subject he wanted depicted in the design.

She was stretching to measure the top of the window when the door opened. Isolde turned and saw Brighton striding into the room. His hair was damp as if he'd just come from washing up.

He probably had, if he'd been in drilling with his men before breakfast. His hair was curling slightly as it dried, and he was wearing black breeches and a loose white shirt. It was the most casual she'd ever seen him. The shirt would be covered by his vest and jacket when he went out again after breakfast, but for now, he wore just the shirt, and it was open at the throat, exposing a V of tanned flesh and just the tiniest curl of dark hair rising from his chest.

Her breath caught in her throat as he walked right up to her and took the tape from her hand. He was so close she could smell his masculine scent, and it did something to her insides. A quiver raced up from her nether regions, alerting her that the General was not just a figurehead, but a man with honed muscles and an intellect that challenged her whenever they spoke. She liked everything she'd seen of him so far, and his nearness took her breath away.

She stared up at him. He was so close she could see stormy blue of his eyes. Dark as the sky at midnight, his gaze met hers and held.

“Did you want to measure the inside of the opening or the glass itself?” he asked, his question seeming innocent as he held the tape higher than she could, reaching the top of the glass with ease. His gaze said something more intimate, his eyes flashing fire at her as if he was fully aware of how close they were and the sizzling attraction that seemed to spark between them.

“Uh...” Isolde cleared her throat and tried again. “Both, please. I need as much data as possible to work with, and I’ll have to do several fittings as we go along to make certain all my measurements match up.” Her mouth was dry as dust, but she brazened it out, allowing him to hold the tape up high while she measured below.

It really was much easier with his help, but his hard body standing so close to her was incredibly distracting. Damn. He was even more fit than she’d expected. She’d known he was a soldier, but he’d been a leader of men for a long time. Most Generals didn’t have the honed bodies of the career soldier, but General Brighton was a law unto himself, it seemed.

She hadn’t expected to find that he’d been up at dawn drilling with his men before breakfast either. She had harbored a lot of misconceptions that were being totally blown away by the reality of the man. Standing. Right there. Next to her. So

close, all she had to do was lean in and maybe raise her head a bit...

But she didn't dare. Accosting the man in his own office before breakfast was probably not the right way to start their working relationship.

The door to the room opened again, and the Sergeant bustled in with a tray. Brighton handed her the end of her measuring tape with a smile and went to help the old veteran. He took the tray and thanked the man, telling him to make sure he got back to the mess hall while there was still food left, and both men chuckled as Sergeant Goodfellow left and closed the door behind him.

Brighton brought the tray to the table and began setting out the dishes. This was a man who didn't wait for others to wait on him. Every little tidbit Isolde learned about him only made her like him more.

Putting away her tape for now, she set down her notebook and helped Brighton with the dishes. They worked together, setting everything out, and then, he put the empty tray on his desk for later use.

"Looks like Goodfellow brought us some of everything they had on offer in the mess today," he observed as he sat opposite her and put his napkin on his lap. "I hope you're hungry."

"Famished," she replied. She'd stayed up late and had worked right through dinner last night. "This all looks great. I didn't know soldiers ate so well."

“An army needs to keep up its strength, and we’re only as strong as our weakest man. I demand good cooks in our ranks, and the men appreciate it,” he said, offering her the little pot of jelly for her toast. “Of course, I don’t have the whole army with me here, but the Castle Guard does well for itself, and I’ve enjoyed learning more about how they live and work.”

“I noticed you and Jimnel appear to be getting along well,” she observed as they began eating.

“He is a fine warrior. I have nothing but respect for him and his training methods. He’s kept the Guard sharp, which I confess, was not what I expected, having seen how other palaces and castles are run in other lands.” He poured hot tea for them both.

“I think the fact that our King was so vulnerable for so long made those around him more wary about protecting him. He is well loved in this land and especially in this city,” Isolde said quietly, sipping her steaming tea.

Brighton nodded. “King Alric is, by far, the best King I’ve ever served. I was a bit surprised when the merc battalions wanted to come under his banner, but not completely. I’ve heard how the Jinn have been settling down all over the lands, and once I saw what they had done in the wasteland, I realized they’d already begun digging in for a long stay. It made sense they would ally themselves with King Alric. He will not take advantage of them. The ice dragons, though... They came as a much bigger surprise.”

“To us all,” Isolde agreed, laughing a bit. They ate for a moment in silence before she spoke again. “I suppose you’ll have to reconstitute the army a bit to take our new allies into consideration.”

“Indeed,” he replied with a grave look on his face. “I’ve begun discussions with the King and Lady Zallra, as well as Lady Esselynn, who leads the ice dragons. I’ve already talked at length with some of the mercenary captains that have settled in the wasteland to the north. I knew a few of them from my own mercenary days, so we have a good working relationship, and I freely confess, I know more about what to do with them than I do the dragons.”

“I suspect it’ll take the dragons some time before they figure out exactly how involved with us they want to be. The ice dragons have lived in seclusion a long time. I think they’ll probably have to discuss things with the snow dragons and maybe even the dragons in Draconia that live and fight side-by-side with human knights before the ice dragons will know how they want to deal with us,” she offered.

“I believe you’re right,” Brighton agreed. “And whatever they decide, it will likely mean some adjustment to the way we constitute the army. Unless, of course, they prefer to have nothing to do with us at all. In which case, we can just keep doing what we’re doing in adding the mercs to our consideration.” He shrugged and finished a piece of toast before speaking again. “Now, as for this window...”

Chapter Seven

They discussed design ideas for the window for a few minutes. Brighton was impressed by Isolde's ideas, and he liked that she considered functionality equally as important as design. While the window was more or less an excuse for her to be able to communicate with him directly, she was also building things into the structure of the design that would help him.

For one, she had already considered how to retain the utility of being able to open the window on hot days. For another, she had offered a design depicting one of the ice dragons she had sketched yesterday. She proposed using mirrored glass for the dragon, which would allow Brighton to observe the room behind him even when he was facing the window. That could be useful.

"I will have to fit the mirror panels carefully," Isolde was saying. "I can tilt them individually in such a way that the entire room is covered. Nobody will notice. But I have found

it's always useful to have a way to see what's behind you. You may never need this feature, but it's there if you want it."

"I had no idea you could do such things with glass," Brighton said, pleased by her thoughtfulness.

"Putting the mirror pieces at slightly different angles also increases the sparkle of the design, somewhat. So, it's a stylistic choice, as well as a practical one. I might as well focus the mirrored parts to best advantage, since I will be putting them just ever so slightly askew anyway." Isolde shrugged as she sipped her tea.

Brighton couldn't remember the last time he had enjoyed sharing breakfast with someone so much. Their conversation had been lively and interesting. The spymaster was proving to him, every time he talked to her, just why she was in her position. She was the cleverest woman he had ever met.

Not to mention the most intriguing. When he had come into the room and seen her silhouetted against the transparent window, his breath had caught in his throat. She was lovely. Curvy and soft looking, but eminently capable. The fact that she was shorter than he was had given him an excuse to go over to the window and take the measuring tape from her hand.

He'd been so close to her it had been all he could do to stop himself from leaning down and kissing her. He'd wanted to, more than anything. But they had only just met a few days ago, and they had to work together. He had counseled himself to behave, though it had cost him dearly. He'd sweated as

she'd stayed close to him, taking the measurements of the window.

As breakfast drew to a close, Brighton found himself annoyed that he had such a full schedule today. He would have liked to spend more time with the beautiful spymaster, but his time was not his own. He had plenty of work to keep him busy, and sadly, it would not wait.

Isolde stacked the used dishes back on the tray, a thoughtful gesture to make life a little easier for Sergeant Goodfellow, which Brighton liked. The old Sergeant had been with him for many years and was more than just his aide. He was a wise sounding board with an earthy kind of wisdom and a true feel for what would most benefit the common folk of the kingdom.

The last thing Brighton wanted to do was run roughshod over the folk who tended the farms and tilled the fields out on the border. They were the lifeblood of the kingdom, and some commanders didn't take that into consideration when marching their armies across the pastures. Brighton never wanted to be that kind of commander. Goodfellow's advice over the years had helped him achieve that goal.

"Well," Isolde said, surveying the table after the last dish had been stacked, "we have established the design and the need for me to come back a number of times to do fittings. Our mission for today is accomplished." She turned a bright smile on him that almost weakened his knees. He would like to see that smile aimed at him again, for much more personal reasons.

What was he thinking? He had to work with this woman. They had no time for attraction games! Not when the safety and good of the kingdom might be at stake.

“If you ever need to get a message to me and can’t find me, Goodfellow is a man I have trusted with my life on many occasions. He does not tell tales, and he almost always knows where I am,” Brighton told her, trying to keep his mind on business.

“Likewise, if you see any of my apprentices running around the place, feel free to send word with them. They are all spies in training as well as artisan apprentices. You can identify them by my badge.” She pointed to an embroidered square on her vest that he’d taken for simple adornment.

Now that she pointed it out, he recognized it as a subtle symbol that he’d seen on any number of youngsters working around the castle since he’d arrived. It was her monogram. Big I, little v, big A. Her initials, worked into a stylized design adorned with a few leaves and flowers.

She packed up her papers and put away the samples they had looked at and was on the point of departure when he realized he couldn’t quite let her go just yet. He wanted a few more minutes with her and scabbled for something that would keep her here just a little longer.

“Did you say something about making mirrors with the ice dragon designs from yesterday?” he asked, making her pause.

“I’ve already started,” she said, smiling conspiratorially. “I stayed up way too late last night working on designs and set

some of the apprentices to cutting pieces to size before I left the shop this morning. I'm making some pieces in all different sizes so that people from all levels of society can afford them. I think they're going to be big sellers after yesterday's display."

"I'd like one," he said impulsively. "Something about this size." He held up his hands and outlined the size of his metal shaving mirror. He was going to be here for some time and had been assigned permanent quarters in the barracks. He might as well decorate it a little.

She looked at him for a moment, eyeing him as she tilted her head. "I have just the thing in mind. Give me a few days to make it, and I'll deliver it myself. I'm planning to install the lower pane of the east window in the castle in five days' time. A task which will take all day. I will bring your mirror then."

"If your installation takes all day, then perhaps I can convince you to share dinner with me that night," he said quietly. She tilted her head again and seemed to consider while he held his breath.

"All right," she agreed, and he was able to go on breathing. "I will look forward to delivering your mirror and sharing dinner, provided my installation goes as planned. If there is a problem, I beg you don't hold dinner for me."

"I wouldn't dream of eating without you," he replied, realizing only after he said it that he was...flirting? He hadn't flirted with a girl since he'd been a boy, himself. What was it

about this woman that brought out things he'd thought long buried?

With an answering smile, she left him, taking her bag of tricks with her, as well as the sunshine, it seemed. His office was dull when she left, and even Goodfellow's hearty good cheer when he came in to get the tray didn't seem to brighten it.



Isolde was unaccountably happy that she was going to see General Brighton again in just a few days. She set to work on her designs, making a few test mirrors before she found the exact technique and design she wanted for the General's mirror. She wanted that one to be special and some of her best work.

Isolde didn't examine too closely why she was being so particular with the work she was doing for General Brighton. She tried to convince herself that it was merely an artisan's pride. The General was an important person in the kingdom, and she wanted him to have an example of her best work.

She tried not to examine too closely the way she daydreamed about him looking into this reflective glass long after she was finished placing it in its frame. Try as she might, she couldn't help but think about how this glass would reflect his handsome face, hopefully for years to come.

Making her wares was a labor of love, but this one particular piece felt a little more special than the others. Because it was

for him. If she was being brutally honest with herself, she had to admit that making something for him felt different.

She had even selected a special scene just for this mirror. She would make no other exactly like this one. Although all of her designs were different in small ways, very often, the mass production sort of items she designed were extremely similar.

This design, though she would re-create it in a slightly different form, was going to be for Brighton alone. A one-of-a-kind piece, handmade by Isolde herself. She would not relegate any part of this piece to any of her apprentices. Not even the prep work.

In the meantime, she had a number of practice pieces that were of excellent quality, though not up to the standards of the highborn of the land. These pieces, she routinely gave away to her friends or sold through one of her Jinn agents. Her aunt at The Sleepy Dragon often took some of the smaller pieces and hung them on the walls with discreet price tags attached. Mirrors were especially sought after and often didn't last long if they were put up for sale at the inn.

A few days after her meeting with General Brighton, Isolde felt in need of a small break. She had almost finished the mirror she would present to the General and had a number of smaller test pieces that she could deliver to her aunt. It was almost dinnertime, and it would be nice to have something she didn't have to cook herself, so Isolde packed up the half-dozen mirrors and headed over to the inn.

When she arrived, the place was much more crowded than she expected. Then, she realized why. There was a dragon lounging in the courtyard. Not just any dragon, she realized when she got a good look at him. It was Lord Salveer. The dragon she had talked with at the castle that first day.

He seemed to be in good humor, lounging at his leisure to one side of the courtyard. His position allowed him to watch everyone come and go, and his head was very close to one of the larger doors which had been thrown open so that he could hear the music. Jinn innkeepers knew how to entertain dragons, and it looked like he had everything he wanted at hand. There was a clean water trough full of freshwater to one side, and a basket full of melons that he could snack on if he wished.

She noticed that most of the patrons gave him a wide berth, though all stared at him with varying expressions of amazement and awe. A smile tickled the corner of her mouth as she watched one stableboy nearly trip over his own feet as he watched the dragon rather than where he was going. Seeing little tendrils of smoke rising from the dragon's nostrils, Isolde realized that Lord Salveer was equally amused by the boy's antics.

Deciding to be both brave and polite, Isolde walked up to the dragon and bowed low in respect. She was aware that some of the humans in the courtyard were watching her with interest, but she didn't let that stop her.

“Greetings, Lord Salveer,” she said to the dragon. “It is my pleasure to see you again. I am the glass artisan, Isolde van Aidel. We spoke when you first arrived.”

“Indeed, mistress. It is good to see you. Have you had any use yet from those drawings you made?” the dragon inquired in a friendly tone.

“Yes, milord,” she replied quietly, reaching for her satchel that held the mirrors. All had ice dragon motifs. “These are the practice pieces I have done so far to perfect the designs. My aunt and uncle own this inn, and they sell some of my practice pieces to their clientele, which allows even the regular folk to own things of beauty. I only charge for the materials on the pieces I sell here,” she told him. “I know it is simple work, but I have tried to capture just a little bit of your majesty in simple glass.”

She held up the first mirror and let him look. His crystalline eyes widened, and she wasn’t sure if that was good or bad, but she persisted, holding up the second piece for his inspection. This time, he grumbled low in his chest, and she felt the sound vibrate through her since she was standing so close. It sounded like approval, but she couldn’t be completely sure. She held up a third piece and let him look.

“This one is meant for a lady’s use. Hence the floral border,” she explained, pointing to the delicate flowers she’d put in around the edge. “And this one is meant for a man’s chamber,” she said, holding up a fourth prototype that had a dark border

in a bold strip all around the base of the mirror with an ice dragon perched, as it were, on top of it.

She had a few more to show him, and Salveer didn't say anything until the last one had been seen. Then, he craned his head forward to where she had rested them against the side of the building after she'd shown each one, and he settled on the manly mirror.

"I think I like this one best, but they are all quite handsome," he said at last. *"If I had use for such a thing, I would commission you to make one for me,"* he went on. Isolde felt herself blush.

"If it pleases you, you may have any one or all of these, milord," she offered softly. "Either these or one of the true production pieces I am making after doing these prototypes."

"No, mistress, though I am honored by your offer. I prefer to let the people who come to this tavern enjoy your prototypes. They show my people in a pleasing light, and they are excellent symbols of the new relationship we wish to cultivate between our kind and yours," he answered sagely.

"I understand," she said, bowing in respect to his wisdom. "And I'm pleased to hear that you and your kin will be seen more often around here. It's nice having dragons around. And I know my aunt and uncle are probably thrilled by your presence." She smiled and looked around at the busy courtyard.

The dragon chuckled, a bit of smoke rising into the night sky. *"Your kinsmen have been all that is kind and*

accommodating,” Lord Salveer replied politely. *“They do, indeed, understand the needs of dragons, which is most satisfactory.”* He reached over and stabbed a melon with one razor-sharp talon, then tossed it into his mouth, displaying rows of sharp pearly teeth. The melon disappeared with a loud, popping crunch. *“These are delicious,”* he went on after swallowing. *“We don’t get these often up north.”*

At that moment, she heard stringed instruments tuning up through the open door and realized there was more than just the one usual minstrel in the pub tonight. She thought she recognized the instruments and grinned.

“If that’s who I think it is, you’re in for a treat,” she told the dragon, still grinning.

“The music here has been exceptional,” the dragon said. *“Each night, there’s been a different musician. All of them have been very good.”*

“The Jinn are known as traveling minstrels for good reason. Jinn children who show an inclination toward an instrument are encouraged and taught from a young age, and we all sing. Those who have exceptional voices are usually coaxed into singing the lead parts and grow to be comfortable there. It’s rare to find a gathering of Jinn anywhere in the world that does not include at least a few musicians. But I believe I recognize that instrument and the hand that’s tuning it.” She moved closer to the open door and peered inside, waving at the man seated a few yards away. He saw her and grinned, waving back as he finalized his tuning. She turned back to the dragon. “My

cousin, Thaniel, is here tonight. He is one of the best of us.
We're in for a treat."

Chapter Eight

Isolde ducked inside the inn for a few minutes to give her aunt the mirrors and discuss pricing, then went into the busier-than-usual kitchen to get her own dinner. On busy nights like this, she would pitch in if needed, but it looked like the staff had everything under control. She wouldn't add to their work by making them wait on her, so she grabbed a tray and set up her own plate and mug of ale, taking it outside the busy tavern to eat in the courtyard.

There were a few little tables near the building that could be used by those who wanted to eat outside if the weather was fine, but it seemed that nobody was brave enough to sit out here with a dragon in residence. Isolde would change that. First making sure he didn't mind her company, she took the table closest to the dragon and gave him a few apples and pears she'd taken from the kitchen for him. He munched on them almost daintily, thanking her for her thoughtfulness.

"One does not live on melon alone," he rumbled in her mind as he crunched an apple.

“I hope my aunt has given you more than just the fruit,” she said solicitously, wondering just how much a dragon of this size could eat each day.

“Oh, yes. Do not worry. The King set aside a mixed herd for us to graze on, but we don’t need to eat more than once a week. I’m quite content, but I never pass up a sweet fruit when it is offered.” His dragonish face somehow conveyed amusement and put her mind at ease.

“Good. I would not like to think of you going hungry,” she said as the music began.

They didn’t speak again until the set was over. She could tell the dragon liked the music very much. Even the very tip of his tail was keeping time with the dance tunes. She smiled, happy to learn this surprising tidbit about dragonkind. Isolde ate her dinner while the music played and enjoyed sitting out under the stars with this most intriguing of beings.

The dragon was surprisingly good company, and Isolde knew she would count this night among the most special of memories in her life. Never had she thought she would pass an evening in the company of an ice dragon, sitting at ease in the courtyard of her aunt’s inn.

“You seem to have the best seat in the house.”

A deep, masculine voice came to Isolde out of the night that was lit only with the lanterns that hung on posts around the courtyard. She turned to look, finding General Brighton standing a few feet away. He eyed the dragon respectfully, bowing low.

“Lord Salveer and I have been enjoying the music,” Isolde told him, her heart speeding up a bit at his unexpected arrival.

Brighton squinted at her. “If I may ask, how did you come to know his name?”

“She can hear me, General. As can you,” the dragon butted into both of their minds. *“Now, go get your dinner and come back quickly. The second set is about to start.”*

“Yes, sir.” Brighton chuckled, saluted, then turned on his heel to enter the inn.

“He can hear you?” Isolde asked out loud, surprised by this turn of events.

“Indeed, he can. He is most practiced in the way of mind-speech. Learned it in Elderland, he claims, from some small beings known as virkin,” the dragon replied absently.

My, my. Isn't that interesting?

The General didn't make it back with his own tray until after the second set had already begun. He didn't say anything, just settled on the other side of the small table and began eating his own dinner while Isolde sat back to listen to the music, sipping her ale. He'd brought her a refill. Thoughtful man. Observant, too, to have noticed that her mug had been almost empty.

When he finished eating, he sat back as well, saying nothing. They had a great spot to hear the music, next to the open door. It was clear the dragon was enjoying himself, and it soon became apparent that the General liked the music as well.

Isolde noted the way his toes tapped when Thaniel played a lively jig, and she hid her smile behind the rim of her mug.

When that set ended with a flourish, a few of the early-rising patrons decided to leave. They bustled out the main door of the inn across the courtyard from where the dragon sat. Many glances were sent in the direction of the dragon, but nobody was brave enough to come over. A few doffed their hats in the dragon's direction, and Isolde noticed Lord Salveer nodding to those who made that show of respect toward him.

All in all, Salveer was an excellent ambassador for his kind. Quiet, physically imposing, yet not unfriendly. Tales would spread about the dragon in the courtyard, and Isolde knew that, for as long as Salveer stayed, her aunt and uncle would be busier than usual.

As she was musing about the dragon and the General, a dark head peered around through the open door near Salveer. It was her cousin, Thaniel, and his blue eyes danced with merriment and speculation. Isolde would nip that in the bud right now. She stood and moved closer to the door and the dragon.

“Lord Salveer, may I introduce my cousin, Journeyman Bard Thaniel of the Wayfarer Clan. Thaniel, this is Lord Salveer.” Her tone was both formal and somewhat amused as Salveer eyed her cousin, who made a low, showy bow, his long dark hair sweeping forward then back in a way that made most village girls swoon.

“It is my honor to make your acquaintance, milord, and an honor to play my humble songs for you this night.” Oh, yes,

her cousin was a charmer, and he was pulling out all the stops for the dragon.

“Thank you. I am enjoying it greatly,” Salveer said tentatively, eyeing Thaniel to see if he could hear. He included both Isolde and Brighton in his speech as well.

“You are most welcome, milord,” Thaniel answered, his words confirming that he could, indeed, hear the dragon speak in his mind.

Isolde hadn’t been sure that Thaniel had that particular gift. Even among the Jinn, they didn’t often have occasion to converse with dragons in dragon form.

“Tell me, sir bard, do you happen to know any songs penned by a man called Drake of the Five Lands? I’ve heard tell that he wrote a song about a dragon,” Salveer asked, clearly surprising Thaniel.

“Indeed, milord. I have, in fact, met Sir Drake. He is now a Knight of Draconia and partnered with the very dragon about whom he wrote. The Lady Jenet. She whom he called *The Golden Beauty*. For that is the title of the song, though for many years everyone thought he was talking about a human woman. It only came to light after his partnering with Lady Jenet that he actually wrote the song about her,” Thaniel told them.

“He knew her before they partnered?” Salveer asked, clearly interested.

“It is my understanding that they grew up together. Lady Jenet’s parents are a mated pair, partnered with Sir Drake’s parents. They grew up as siblings, but then, Drake left Draconia to pursue his music,” Thaniel said, studiously not looking at Isolde because they both knew that Drake had also been a consummate spy, reporting directly to the Prince of Spies, Prince Nico of Draconia, for most of his career as a bard.

“*Siblings?*” Salveer seemed to think about that idea for a moment. “*And you have met them both?*”

“Yes, milord. I only recently returned from Draconia. It was part of my Journeyman’s Trial, and soon, I hope, I will be elevated to Full Bard.” Thaniel bowed his head, his courtly graces on parade.

He wasn’t nearly so humble as he was making himself out to be. The entire Wayfarer Clan knew that Thaniel’s musical talent was a rare one, and he was starting to acquit himself well in spy craft as well. He’d gone to Draconia, in part, to learn from the true master of mixing the two roles. He’d spent time being tutored by Drake himself and had come back with much greater skill than when he’d left. In both music *and* spy craft.

“*I find it fascinating that the man and the dragonette grew up together, in the same home,*” Salveer went on. “*We ice dragons have not lived among your kind in a very long time. We’re not exactly sure how it’s done.*”

“I would be honored to tell you everything I observed at the Castle Lair, milord,” Thaniel volunteered at once. “Though I am, of course, an outsider. However, there is one ice dragon at the Draconian court that everyone has come to love. His name is Tor, and he is still quite young and exceptionally charming. He is the adopted son of the King and Queen, and Lady Jenet is one of those who sometimes looks after him when his adoptive parents have obligations indoors and the youngster wants to play.”

“We have only just learned of this child, and I believe plans are being made to make an official visit to Draconia to learn the truth of it. We’ve also dispatched word to our ice caves and are looking for the mother. It would be good to know what happened on this end before we go talk to the child. This will be hard enough for him as it is.” Salveer’s eyes grew stormy, and smoke rose from his nostrils in a stream that he quickly brought under control.

“He is a precious child with a good heart, milord. And it is obvious to anyone who has seen him, he is well-loved and cared for in Draconia, but it would be good to know his origins and if he has family out here somewhere,” Thaniel said with laudable discretion. He looked back into the taproom and then turned back. “I have to get back,” Thaniel told the dragon, “but it was a pleasure speaking with you, milord. I will play as many of Drake’s songs as I can during the next set, especially for you.”

“My thanks, Bard Thaniel,” Salveer said formally, bowing his head slightly in Thaniel’s direction.

Brighton had heard *The Golden Beauty* before, but never quite as well-played or sung. Mercenaries traveled far and wide in the pursuit of employment and brought back many things from far off lands, including music.

“Your kinsman is very talented,” he commented when there was a break between songs.

“We are all very proud of him,” Isolde replied, smiling fondly. “He has a lot of potential, and the journeyman trip he just returned from clearly marked a jump in his abilities. He’s grown a lot since he left.”

“Traveling across the Dragon’s Teeth is not a trip to be undertaken lightly, but I have heard that Jinn tradesmen do it with some regularity,” he said, hoping she would pick up the comment and share something about her mysterious and secretive people that would add to his knowledge of the Jinn brotherhood.

“Some clans do,” she said. “Myself, I like to stay put in one place. I think a lot of the Jinn are tired of travelling and just as happy that we’re finally settling down as a people in various homelands. But there is the wanderlust that has been bred into us for generations, so I doubt very much that every last Jinn will make a permanent home. Some will continue to wander, like those traders that crisscross the Dragon’s Teeth each season.”

So, she liked staying put. Interesting. He’d thought all the Jinn liked to travel—or, at least, most of them. He filed that tidbit away in the mental collection of observations he was

forming of this woman. This fascinating woman. A woman he wanted to get to know much, *much* better.

When the music ended and the inn started clearing out, Brighton knew it was about time to leave. The dragon turned to them and spoke.

“I have seen your shop’s courtyard from the air, and I believe I will fit,” Salveer said to Isolde, though he included Brighton in the conversation politely. *“May I call upon you in the morning? I have a commission I would like to discuss with you.”*

Isolde looked surprised but replied graciously. “I would be delighted by your visit, as would my apprentices, I’m sure.” She smiled at the dragon. “I am glad to help you in any way I can.”

“Excellent. Then, I will see you in the morning, after breakfast,” Salveer said, nodding his great head in her direction. *“Your kinsmen have graciously allowed me to bed down here for the night. I find this courtyard most comfortable, but I understand from your aunt that building plans are already in the works to accommodate dragons of my size. Apparently, smaller dragons can get at least partially inside most Jinn inns, but they hadn’t designed their places with ice dragons in mind.”* A little chuckle from the dragon sent tendrils of smoke skyward.

Isolde stood and collected the plates and tankards that were left on the table. Brighton helped, and they both took their leave of the dragon before returning the items to the inside of

the inn. They fell into step together, and Brighton was happy enough to walk her home. It was late, and though this part of the city was mostly safe, he wanted to spend more time with her and learn where her shop was.

“You don’t have to walk me home, you know,” she said at one point, laughing as she turned to look at him in the dim night lit only by the occasional streetlamp.

“I’m sure you can take care of yourself, but humor me,” Brighton replied, dropping his voice lower and leaning toward her. “I like being with you.”

She looked up, her face so close he could kiss her, but he refrained...for now. The look in her eyes gave him hope. It was a soft look. A tender awareness that he hadn’t expected.

Isolde was such a strong presence usually that he had been caught by surprise twice now by the more delicate nature she usually hid. First, when she had been sketching the dragons. He’d seen the magic in her eyes when she looked at them and been touched by how deeply she felt when she created her art. And now this. A simple word of truth about how he liked being around her, and she had reacted more openly than he had expected. Perhaps she was as attracted to him as he was to her. He could hope.

Chapter Nine

Isolde felt like one of her teenage apprentices on her first date. Not that this was a prearranged date. Tonight had been more of a casual meeting of friends by accident that had evolved into a lovely evening spent together. With a dragon as chaperone, oddly enough. Now that had been unexpected.

“I didn’t know you could bespeak dragons,” Isolde said softly as he moved away, and they kept walking slowly toward her shop.

“I didn’t know you could either,” he replied with a grin.

“Fair enough, I suppose,” she mused, smiling back at him. “It is a rare gift, from what I understand.”

“I have heard the same,” he told her. “When I was working in Elderland, I befriended a few virkin, and apparently, it is the same kind of thing, with the same rarity, even in that land.”

“I’ve heard about virkin, though I’ve never seen one,” she admitted.

“They are amazing creatures,” he told her, describing the virkin he had known when he’d been in Elderland for the rest of their walk back to her place.

“Well, this is my shop,” she said as they paused in front of the door to her building.

The word shop was somewhat inadequate to describe the workshop that lay behind the small sales area at the front of the building. And the upper floors held apartments for her apprentices, as well as workrooms. In the back of the building were the ovens and furnaces where they heated the glass.

He looked upward, then back to her. “It’s a lot bigger than I thought. Especially if an ice dragon as large as Lord Salveer can fit in your courtyard.” His smile was charming, and it did funny things to her insides.

“It might be a tight fit,” she breathed as he moved closer, only realizing as the words left her mouth the way those words could be interpreted into something really naughty.

“I think that’s a given.” His voice rumbled low as he moved another step closer. He was so close she could touch him if she just leaned a little bit...

Her hands went to his chest as he put his arms around her, not harshly, but with a delicate touch she hadn’t expected from such a big, muscular warrior. She wanted to say something smart or funny or just...intelligible, but being in his arms seemed to have taken all the air from her lungs.

She gasped as his head lowered, and his mouth moved ever closer to hers. Slowly. Seductively. Giving her plenty of time if she wanted to duck away, but she didn't. Not in a million years would she duck out of this moment. The moment she had been looking forward to almost from the first time she laid eyes on him, if she was being honest with herself.

Then, his lips touched hers, and all remaining thought fled. Her hands roved up over his chest to curl around his neck and draw him closer still. The moment she did that, he deepened the kiss, taking her places she hadn't known existed from just a simple kiss.

She was learning quickly that when it came to this man, there was nothing simple about him. He challenged her and delighted her with his quick wit. He seemed to respect her talent, but she thought he also saw beneath the roles she played of spymaster and artisan to the woman underneath. At least, she hoped he did.

Isolde hadn't let herself be vulnerable with a man in a long time, but then, he'd appeared, and he'd just blasted through all her protective barriers as if they didn't exist. He'd puzzled her, then pleased her, and right now, he was making her feel things she hadn't felt in too long a time. She'd had to be in control of every last facet of her life for so very long. It felt freeing to be able to just let go with him and enjoy this moment. This very pleasurable moment out of time when they could just be a man and a woman, sharing an intimacy she had granted to very few in her life.

A clatter on the cobblestones of the road just a few yards away drew them apart. He raised his head to peer into the darkness and shook his head.

“Only a cat knocking over a broom someone left out,” he reported in a low voice. Then, he looked down, refocusing on her face. “Should I apologize?”

She thought about that for a split second. “No. I...” She didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t make her sound like a wanton.

“I take nothing for granted,” he told her quietly. “I have no expectations except that you be truthful with me. If you’d rather I leave you alone, just tell me now, and I will respect your wishes, though I could hope that you will not turn me away. For I like you an awful lot. You’re the most fascinating woman I’ve ever had the good fortune to meet, and I would dearly like to get to know you better.”

She had to catch her breath. What he was saying sounded almost too good to be true, but she saw the honesty in his eyes.

“I—” She swallowed and tried again. “I’d like that. To get to know you, I mean.” She sounded like an idiot. “I know we have to work together, and I don’t want it to be awkward, but I do like you. Very much. I’d like to learn more about you and perhaps spend a little more time together. Outside of our duties, I mean. Like tonight. The music was even more enjoyable than usual with someone to share it with.” She smiled, and he echoed the grin faintly.

“You mean the dragon, right?”

It took a moment before she realized he was joking. She tapped his chest with her palm, having removed her hands from around his neck when he'd raised his head at the cat's interruption.

"It was fun dining with a dragon too, but just so we're clear, I enjoyed spending time with you, General." Now, he was smiling, and his hands went to her waist, holding her gently against him. It was a comfortable embrace that made little tingles run up and down her spine.

"Samnir," he said softly.

"What?"

"My name. I'd like you to call me Samnir. Or just Sam, if you prefer. So few people do these days." His smile looked a touch vulnerable, and her heart melted a little.

"Sam," she said slowly, imbuing the single syllable with a bit of the attraction she felt for him.

"I like hearing my name on your lips," he said, his voice almost a growl as his eyes darkened.

"I'm Isolde," she told him, hoping for the same intimacy.

"Isolde." The way he said it made it sound mysterious and beautiful. Sort of the way he made her feel when he took her in his arms.

She reached up, and they kissed again, sealing the moment. They were just man and woman again. Not spymaster and General or artisan and warrior. Just Isolde and Samnir, sharing a moment out of time.

Then, she heard the distinctive squeak of one of the upstairs windows opening, and she knew their time together was over. One or more of her nosy apprentices had opened the window and were now spying on her. Little devils.

She drew away from the kiss and glanced upward. “We are being observed,” she said in a soft voice. “My little mischief makers aren’t quite as stealthy as they think.”

He didn’t look up but moved a little apart from her. “How do you know?”

“The windows squeak,” she said simply. “I keep them that way on purpose.”

A grin broke over his handsome face. “Ingenious.” She felt the warm glow of his compliment and held it to her heart. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles as he drew farther away from her. “You should go inside now. I want to make sure you’re safely indoors.”

“As you wish. Again, I had a lovely evening. Thanks, Sam.” She opened the door to the shop and went in, closing the door softly behind her as he waved, then walked away.



The next morning, the dragon came to call.

Isolde had set the younger apprentices to cleaning the courtyard as early as possible so that there wouldn’t be clutter around when the dragon landed. She assumed there would be a bit of wind from the dragon’s wings, so she had the courtyard

swept clean as much as possible and any small items brought indoors. She wanted to avoid any accidents and also put her best foot forward for the dragon. It wasn't every day a dragon visited her shop.

She had also sent one of the girls out to the market for a few bushels of fruit in case Lord Salveer wanted to snack while they talked. It was only polite to offer refreshment. Any leftover fruit wouldn't go to waste with all her apprentices in residence. She also had one of the water troughs brought out to the courtyard and scrubbed clean, then filled with clean water.

Everything was in readiness when a shadow passed over the courtyard. Isolde looked upward to see the sun sparkling off an ice dragon's scales as it circled and descended. She stood, transfixed. He was so incredibly graceful in the air, and he landed perfectly in the center of her courtyard.

The apprentices were all standing at the edges of the courtyard, staring as well. Most of them had not yet seen an ice dragon close up. A few of the older ones had been at the castle after the ice dragons had arrived, and they had been spreading tales about them to the younger apprentices.

She gave them a hand signal to shoo them all back inside. She didn't think being stared at by a gaggle of children of various ages throughout their visit would be considered polite. The kids could watch from inside just as well. Already, most of them had their noses pressed up against the glass in the windows and doors.

“Lord Salveer, welcome to my humble shop. I am honored by your visit,” she greeted the dragon formally, bowing low as she had been taught. Dragons, she had been told many times, could be sticklers for etiquette.

The dragon bowed his head in return, though neither one of them lowered their gazes. As was only correct between warriors. To lower one’s gaze would be a sign of disrespect, indicating no fear of the other being’s skill and lethality. Warriors—the good ones, anyway—preferred to be both respectful and wary at the same time.

“It is good of you to see me, mistress. I have a commission I would like to discuss with you.”

She noticed that the dragon had a sort of pack strapped across its chest. What she could see of it looked to be made of leather with metal plate, chased in silver. It had a flap and a large clasp that could be worked by Salveer’s talons. He did so, opening the pack and extracting a few dark objects of irregular shape.

“Do you know what this is?” Salveer placed the objects on the ground between them.

Isolde walked closer and bent to examine what looked like shiny rocks. She tilted her head to look up at the dragon.

“May I touch them?” she asked permission, as was only polite.

“Certainly,” he replied, bowing his head slightly.

Isolde picked up one of the rocks and looked at it closely. She noted sharp points on some of the edges that nearly cut her skin. The rock was cool to the touch, and it had a shine that was somewhat familiar. It was deep black, but she held it up to the sun and saw that the sharp sections were almost transparent, though still dark in color. The weight of it, the feel of it, it all felt familiar.

“This feels like glass,” she said, thinking aloud. “But if so, it is a kind of glass I have never seen before. Where does it come from?” She held the black glass as she met the dragon’s gaze, curiosity coursing through her blood. She loved working with glass, and this was a mystery that fired her imagination.

“These pieces come from deep in a cave I know. It is part of an old volcanic system, and what you hold is glass that was formed in the depths of that volcano a millennia ago,” he revealed, making her gasp.

“Obsidian? Bright stars! I have heard of it, of course, but I have never seen it in this form. The small piece that I have seen in person was a blade of stunning beauty and small size. And it was worth a king’s ransom. Obsidian is very rare indeed.”

“Which is why I think it will make a handsome gift to symbolize our new alliance with King Alric. I have already spoken to a metalworker who will make the body of the blade I envision, but I want you to craft the actual blades that will be placed in it,” the dragon told her. *“If you will reach into my pouch, there is a drawing of what the piece will look like. The*

smith designed it to my specifications and drew a plan for your part. He also put his contact information on the parchment so you two can get together to discuss how to proceed.”

Salveer reared up a little so she could approach and put her hand into the satchel strapped to his chest. It was a fine piece of metalwork and leather she saw. Top quality work. She thought she recognized the artisan who might have made this for him. The most gifted artisans in the city all tended to know each other, though they were part of different guilds.

“Is this Edvardson’s work, milord?” she asked as she pulled out the scroll of parchment and withdrew.

“It is. He is also the metalsmith who will be making the base of the scythe,” Salveer replied.

Isolde nodded. “I know him. He is probably the finest metalsmith in the land, not just the city. You’ve chosen well, and he and I have worked together before, though never on a weapon.”

She unrolled the parchment and was stunned by the drawing of the weapon. Edvardson had drawn several views, including a close-up of the blades she would have to make from the precious obsidian, including their exact dimensions and shape. Scythe was probably the best word for the weapon, though it didn’t look much like any farm implement she had ever seen.

The wickedly curved blade was as broad as an axe where it joined the pole which the wielder would be holding. It also had chased metal designs of exquisite beauty and craftsmanship on its face. The metal part of the fanciest scythe

she'd ever imagined would contain gold and silver design work, but the edge of the blade itself would be the obsidian, encased in the metal so that the wickedly sharp edge of the volcanic glass was both exposed and somewhat protected by the metal around its base. A fascinating design. And a challenge, to be sure.

Isolde immediately started thinking about how she would do this. Working with obsidian wasn't like working with regular glass, but she knew she could do it. This was the chance of a lifetime to make a ceremonial weapon that would remain in the kingdom's treasury forever. If she did this right, this thing would become a part of her country's history. That was a lofty honor for any artisan, and she would do her best to live up to Salveer's faith in her abilities.

"Well?" Salveer prompted.

"This is..." She looked up at him. "It's magnificent. I would be honored to work on this project."

"That is a relief to hear," the dragon said. *"I will pay you for your efforts in more obsidian, if that is agreeable."*

"Milord, even just the little cast offs that will come from turning these specimens into the blades you require will more than compensate me for my time and effort. Obsidian is extremely rare and expensive. It would be remiss of me to not explain that to you before we start."

"I respect your honesty, mistress. Nevertheless, I shall give you more obsidian in payment for your work. It is of little

value to me, but if it can help your business to thrive, then I am happy to give it to you.”

“You are too kind, milord.” She bowed her head again, accepting the dragon’s judgment.

This was an unexpected turn of events. It looked like she was going to become the source for obsidian blades—at least for a little while. As long as the rocks he would bring her would last.

Not long, if she was any judge of the city’s nobility. As soon as they saw the finished scythe, obsidian blades were going to become all the rage, she was sure. The nobles were like that sometimes. Some of them were extremely competitive with each other, and some of the younger ones liked to show off their wealth in ostentatious ways. This would be right up their alley.

“Excellent. How long do you think this task might take?” Salveer asked.

“No more than a week, milord. I will contact Edvardson today to make arrangements. It is likely that my part will be done before his. Though, I believe I should be the one to place the blades into the metal housing. I have more experience in setting glass in metal so that it will never come out.”

“I’m happy to let you work that out with Edvardson. And the timing sounds perfect. We would like to present the blade to the King in a fortnight, to commemorate our new alliance.”

Chapter Ten

Despite her apprentices' wishes, Salveer didn't stay much longer. Once he had given her the task, he launched himself up into the sky once more, his powerful wings beating the air into a frenzy within the courtyard. Isolde was glad she'd had the children sweep the area and remove all the small objects that most definitely would have taken flight in the maelstrom created by the dragon's wings.

When he was gone, she set to work. Obsidian was going to be a challenge, and she needed to make some test cleavages to see how it would behave. Referencing the drawings made by Edvardson, she realized she had plenty of obsidian to work with. More than enough to practice with before she committed to making the sections of blade that would be embedded in the final piece.



General Samnir Brighton didn't see Isolde again until their planned dinner a few days later. With the ice dragons in the

city, he had been kept busy with his duties to the King. But he had thought about her in every spare moment. He had even considered sending her gifts of flowers or confections, as he had sometimes done with other women he had courted, but decided against it.

Isolde was special. She wasn't just some woman he was courting to get into her bed. Certainly, he wanted to be there, but he knew deep in his heart that, once he had taken her into his arms the other night, everything had changed. Something about her made him want to keep her in his life. Forever, if possible.

When she arrived at his office on the appointed evening, Brighton could hardly contain his enthusiasm. He'd been longing to see her again. And that wasn't usual for him. No, not usual at all.

There was something special about this mysterious woman with such secrets in her eyes. She was so much more than she appeared on the surface, and he only knew a small part of it. He ached to know more. To know everything about her and reveal all her secrets.

But it wasn't just the mystery of her that drew him. He also liked her quick wit and the elegant way she comported herself. Her skill with glass and the creativity that he'd seen in her talent. The drawings she'd made—both of the dragons and for the window he had commissioned—were impressive. *She* was impressive in almost every way.

She arrived at his door accompanied by Sergeant Goodfellow, who was holding a large wrapped parcel, which he leaned against the wall near the door. He smiled at Isolde, saluted Brighton, then left, closing the door behind himself.

Isolde had clearly charmed the old veteran. Brighton wasn't the least bit surprised. She'd charmed him as well.

"Is that my mirror?" he asked, moving closer to her.

She nodded. "It is, but let's wait until after dinner. I couldn't bear to stay if you didn't like it."

Her smile wasn't nervous. She was just playing a flirtatious game with him. He didn't mind. In fact, it boded well for the future.

A future he couldn't stop thinking about that held her in it. In his arms. In his bed.

"I have no objections, but I will remain curious all throughout our meal," he flirted back, escorting her to the table they had used before. Goodfellow had brought in the trays just a few minutes before she'd arrived, so everything was hot and ready.

Isolde enjoyed her dinner with the General even more than she'd expected. She kept thinking about kissing him again and hoped there would be more of that later in the evening. Perhaps a *lot* more of that. And maybe even more.

Isolde wasn't a shy virgin. Jinn girls learned the facts of life early, though they weren't as promiscuous as some people claimed they were. Isolde had dabbled with an early boyfriend,

but decided he wasn't for her, and since he'd left with his family's wagon train a decade before, there had been no one. No one to interfere with her rise to become the spymaster of her city and a guild artisan with a fine shop and a gaggle of apprentices. She had excelled in her chosen careers—both the public one and the hidden one.

But since meeting the General, she thought maybe she'd been missing out on something. Something important. He was intelligent, witty, and he made her feel special. Being with him made her feel good about herself in a way that she hadn't felt in a very long time. He made her feel feminine and...pretty.

Isolde wasn't a woman who spent a lot of time looking into the mirrors she made for others. She knew she had passable looks. The men she'd known as a younger woman had told her she was beautiful, but being praised for her looks wasn't something she had ever really craved. She had much rather preferred to be respected for her abilities. The things she had put effort into learning, rather than just an accident of birth and good genes.

But being with the General—no, *Sam*—made her feel strange in a good way. As if she wanted him to like her for herself, not the competent persona she put on for the world. She wanted to get to know him the same way, which seemed odd on such short acquaintance.

Usually, she didn't let people into her life that deeply. It was always easier to keep up her barriers and protect her secrets. So few people knew of her true role as spymaster. That alone

made Sam closer to her than almost everyone else in the city. Even people she'd known for decades.

They talked of a wide range of topics during dinner, from politics to logistics and everything in between. They talked about the dragons and of the small creatures that superficially resembled them from Elderland. The virkin Sam had known when he worked in that land to the east. He asked about her glass work, and she told him some amusing stories about the hijinks some of her young apprentices got up to when she left them alone too long.

All in all, she could not remember a more congenial dinner or livelier conversation shared with a man. Sam was unique in her experience. A warrior who was both widely traveled and cunningly intelligent. He was easy on the eyes too. When he smiled, something inside her quivered, and when he looked at her with that particular molten gaze, she melted.

They lingered over the tasty wine that he had served with their dinner until finally, his eyes went to the wrapped parcel propped up by the door. He looked at her, with a smile lighting his eyes.

“I think I’ve been very patient,” he began in a teasing tone. “Are you planning on keeping me in suspense all evening?”

She felt her pulse leap. Why did she always hear a naughty double meaning behind his words? Wishful thinking, perhaps? Or was this a subtle game of seduction he was playing with her? If so, he was already winning.

“Yes, you have been very patient,” she agreed, ignoring the other possible meanings behind his words as she stood to retrieve the parcel. She brought it over to the table, which he had cleared of the dishes, putting them back on the trays for later pickup.

Slowly, she unwrapped the thick fabric that had served to keep the glass safe as she’d carried it through the city. She held her breath, wondering if he would recognize the significance of the scene she had chosen to commemorate in glass for him. Especially for him.

“This is from that first night. The dragon that looked as if he was posing for you when I found you still on the castle wall after dark had fallen. You were sketching by torchlight,” he said, tracing one of the metal lines that held the colored pieces of glass in place. “That was Lord Salveer, wasn’t it?” He looked up at her, holding her gaze.

“It was,” she agreed. “He was the first of the ice dragons to speak with me. He saw me sketching earlier in the day, and when all the hubbub died down, he sat as I sketched, and we chatted for hours. He’s a very inquisitive fellow.”

“This is amazing,” Sam said, looking closely at the intricate design she had created with mirrored glass, plus a few accent pieces of darker colors. “Absolutely stunning. You have captured the feel of the moment and the mood perfectly.”

Did he realize it was a piece she had done just for him? It commemorated a moment of their new relationship that she had thought about again and again. He’d been so kind when

he'd discovered her still sketching long after dark. He'd been so handsome by torchlight. Not that he wasn't handsome in the full light of day, but the flames flickering across his chiseled countenance had given him an air of danger and mystery that had haunted her dreams.

She had dreamed of him that night. In a very scandalous setting that had made her cheeks flush with heat when she woke up and realized it had only been a dream. Even the cool water she had splashed on her face hadn't helped douse the flames that had ignited within her imagination.

He went over to a side table that held a number of scrolls on top of it and placed the mirror at the back of it, leaning up against the wall. He made sure it was secure, then stepped back to take a look.

"This is marvelous," he said, gazing with admiration at the mirror. Then, he turned to her, a light in his eyes that warmed her. "I shall treasure this always." His voice lowered to more intimate tones, and somehow, the space between them shrank.

He took one step closer, as did she, drawn by some invisible force that she did not fully understand. Brighton—no, *Sam*—had an almost magnetic pull on her that she could not deny. She went into his arms and leaned upward to meet his kiss. Then, all thought fled.

When she was in his arms, it wasn't about thinking. It was all about feeling. Feeling the magic that sprang up between them with so little effort. The magic of attraction and desire.

His arms were so strong around her. His lips were commanding yet gentle. His body pressed against her in a way that made her squirm against him. He felt so good. So right.

The kiss deepened and expanded into realms she had never visited before. Pleasure fought with desire for dominance in her body, and all she wanted was more. More of Sam. More of his passion. More of the pleasure he brought her. She wanted it all.

His body was warm and hard against her, and he smelled of leather and his own clean masculine scent that set her senses on fire. She was aflame with excitement and the languorous pleasure of his kiss. She could hardly breathe, but she didn't ever want to come up for air. Sam was her breath. Sam was her air. She could live on his kiss alone for the rest of her life...if he'd let her.

She put her arms around his neck and held him to her. Tilting her head, she slid her tongue along his, reveling in the sensation of his hardness against her body, his taste, his touch. His hands began to move over her body, and she invited him with subtle movements to take what he wanted. What they both wanted.

Isolde wanted to experience the way he would touch her body in all the interesting places. She pressed her hips into his as he growled, and his hand clutched at her waist, then lower, pulling her closer. He moved against her, and she gasped as she felt the hardness of him against her, their clothes in the way, but not hiding much.

He was a big man. All over. She would have licked her lips in anticipation, but she licked his instead, reveling in their kiss and making a small sound of desire in her own throat. She couldn't help it. He was the most attractive man she'd ever had the good fortune to kiss. And she wanted more. So much more.

He lifted her, his big strong hands under her buttocks, and strode over to his desk. He placed her down on the edge of the desk, pushing things away. He didn't seem to care that some of his papers fell off the desk on the other side. He seemed too impatient to give a damn. Just like her.

His mouth left hers, but only to nip at her jaw, licking his way to her ear. She shivered and tipped her head back, giving him better access. Her eyes closed of their own volition as he worked his magic over her flesh, and the lack of sight only intensified the sensations coursing through her blood.

His hand stroked up from her hip, over the curve of her waist, until he cupped her breast. The touch was delicious and stirred her passions even higher. There was still fabric between them, but her body reacted with answering fire. Her nipple tightened as he caressed her, still teasing the delicate skin of her neck with his lips, tongue and teeth.

She opened her legs and pulled him between, scooching forward to the edge of the desk so she could feel him against her where she most needed him to be. There were too many clothes blocking full sensation, but it didn't matter. She felt

wanton and needy, and she hoped he understood what it was she wanted of him.

His hand left her breast, and she made a small sound of protest that died when he pulled up her skirt. She wore britches and leathers when she worked, but like most women, she wore skirts for everyday wear. Especially when visiting the castle—except when she was actively working on an installation.

She was glad of her skirts now, because it meant less barrier between her skin and his hands. Cool air brushed over her bare calves and thighs as he inched the skirt higher. She spread her legs farther apart, inviting the touch she so desperately wanted. His hand rose, stroking over her inner thigh until it encountered the edge of her panties.

Loose cotton, they were no barrier to his exploration. He simply moved his long fingers under the edge of one side until he found what he was looking for. His fingers grazed the little nub that cried out for his attention, and she gasped, freezing as he drew back and met her gaze. Passion smoldered in his eyes and met the fire in her own blood.

“Do you want this?” he asked, his voice a raspy whisper that melted something inside her.

Mutely, she nodded.

“Say it, Isolde. Do you want me?” That sexy rasp made her his slave.

“I want you,” she whispered back. “Please.”

At her plea, his eyes flared with hunger, and he took her lips again as he slipped his finger along her crease. She squirmed closer, clutching at his shoulders. His touch grew bolder as she moaned. Then, he pushed one finger inside her, using his thumb to circle the little nub at the apex of her thighs.

She was wet and ready for him. She gasped as he stroked his finger within her a few times, then added another finger, stretching and pushing her excitement higher. She loved what he was doing to her, but she wanted more. She wanted his cock. Inside her. Now.

He seemed to know what she needed because his hands disappeared, but before she could whimper at the absence, she realized he was freeing himself from his pants. He broke the kiss, and she delighted in watching his strong hand fumble. He was shaking just the tiniest bit, which made her feel powerful. Finally, his cock sprang free of the confining cloth and leather, and she looked her fill.

He was powerfully made. Long and thick, he did not disappoint. She wondered what it would feel like to be possessed by him and then nearly squealed when he flipped her skirts up past her waist, knocking over any number of items on his desk in the process, but revealing her bare thighs to his hot gaze.

The panties had to go. She shimmied out of them, annoyed by the necessity. He watched her with hungry eyes as she hitched herself back up onto the desk and spread her legs oh-so-slowly. She touched herself wantonly, spreading herself

before him. She'd never behaved in such a scandalous way in her life, but something about Sam brought out the hussy in her. She liked the way it felt.

He made her feel bold and powerful. He made her feel wanted and almost...cherished. And hot. Oh-so-hot.

Chapter Eleven

Sam moved closer, taking his place between her thighs as if he belonged there, and perhaps he did. He held himself ready and aimed for the place that wanted him most. She pushed her hips forward, meeting him as best she could without falling right off the desk. One of his hands cupped her hip, holding her steady while the other guided him into her tight warmth.

The entrance was slow and steady, for which she was grateful. She hadn't done this in way too long, and he wasn't a small man. He had to ease himself inside, though she was wet enough to make his passage easier. Still, it took a moment to get used to his possession, and she found herself holding her breath as the pleasure built and built.

When he was fully seated, he paused, meeting her gaze.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his voice a bare rasp.

“Fine,” she gasped, unable to hold still. She squirmed in his arms and wanted desperately for him to start the motion that

would bring her what she expected to be the greatest pleasure of her life based on these preliminaries. “Please, Sam,” she begged him, unable to articulate more.

He growled and put both hands on her hips, burying his face in her neck. “Hold on to me,” he advised before he began to move. Slowly at first, he seemed to lose control after a few strokes and began a wild, plunging ride that made her want to cry out in delight.

She knew she mustn't. There were people around everywhere. If she screamed, some of them might just assume she needed help and barge inside. She'd be mortified to be caught in the act, though something about needing to keep silent heightened her pleasure.

The idea that they were sneaking around while other people were going about their day all around them added a secret delight to this interlude. She hadn't realized she would find pleasure in such things, but she did. Then again, she was a spy. She loved sneaking around in all its forms, so this shouldn't surprise her all that much.

Sam rode her hard, and she went eagerly where he led. She shivered and shook as one climax after another rang through her body. Never had she experienced so much pleasure from a single joining.

When he finally went over the edge, he took her with him into the biggest freefall of ecstasy she had ever experienced. They clung together amid the maelstrom of sensation. She barely knew where she ended and he began. It felt almost as if

their souls had combined and then slowly released back into their separate parts, but she was probably just being fanciful.

He came hard, groaning as he released into her depths. She wasn't too worried about conceiving. Jinn women knew what to do, and she knew the herbs to consume to prevent unplanned fertility. In fact, as her attraction to the handsome warrior had grown, she'd decided to begin taking the herbs, just in case.

She clung to him as their breathing came in great gasps and slowly lessened to something approaching normal. He lifted his head and met her eyes, his spent member still inside her. The light in his eyes was the most intimate thing she'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry if I rushed this, but I'm not sorry it happened," he told her. "I find you the most alluring, amazing woman I've ever met."

She smiled at him, feeling her heart open and take him inside, much as her body had just done.

"I like you too," she said simply, unable to say more with the avalanche of emotion and physical satiety swallowing her whole. She needed to do better. He'd been so eloquent, and her response had been lame. "I don't do this with just anyone," she tried again.

He smiled a bit as he slipped out of her. "I could tell," he said candidly. "You're tight and utterly delicious." He licked her lips before kissing her again, then drawing back just a little to meet her gaze once more. "And I want more."

She swallowed hard. This man could drive all coherent thought from her head.

“Me too,” she whispered.

“Can I walk you home?” His voice dropped low, with an almost teasing tone.

“Yes,” she replied, wondering what he was driving at.

“And can I see you inside?”

“Oh.” She understood now. “Yes. Most definitely. You can even tuck me into my bed...and join me there.”

A smile lit his dark eyes. “Then, I count myself the luckiest of men.”

She stood as he moved back. He handed her the discarded panties, and she used them to wipe her legs a bit, then stuffed them into her pocket. She would launder them later. For now, she'd walk home with slippery thighs and remember with a naughty grin what had made them that way. Good thing it wasn't a long walk.

She'd be thinking about making love with him again all the way there, and it would be a miracle if she didn't jump him the moment they were inside her bedchamber.



Sam had left her the following morning before dawn. Before anybody else in her building was awake. He kissed her thoroughly then stole out into the darkness before dawn, heading back to the castle and his duty. They'd made love all

night, each time more pleasurable than the last. She hadn't known such things were possible.

She knew she wouldn't see him again for a few days, at least. They both had busy schedules and duties that took up most of their time. That was all right. She understood how important his work was to him, and she thought he probably understood the same about her. They were well-matched in that respect.

Two uneventful days later, one of Isolde's regular contacts alerted her that a Jinn wagon train was approaching the city. She always received regular reports from the traveling Jinn when they passed through Valdis Maj, but if something was out of the ordinary, they sent word ahead to any one of several Jinn innkeepers that would then alert her. As a result, she knew to be ready when the wagon train was within a reasonable distance.

If the information they had to impart was important enough, she would go out to meet them so she could hear it as quickly as possible. This seemed like one of those occasions. At least according to her informants, who sent word through the regular chain.

That's why Isolde was on the back of her beloved Nightstar, galloping through the night to reach the slow-moving wagon train and learn what they had to tell. She could make it there and back to the city before daylight, if all went according to plan. They weren't too far away, but their wagons took extra time to traverse the distance.

She reached the inn where the wagon train had stopped for the night. Most of the patrons had left already to seek their beds, but the masters of the train waited for her. None of them knew that she was the actual spymaster of the city. They only assumed that she worked for the spymaster and would bring their information to that exalted person. It helped that most people assumed the spymaster would be male. Many thought it was one of her male relatives, and they all enjoyed fostering that opinion whenever possible, in subtle ways.

The masters of this particular wagon train were two older couples who had a great deal of experience on the road. They routinely traveled over the Dragon's Teeth and beyond, into far-off lands even beyond the borders of Draconia. What they had to tell her was very grave news indeed.

“Though we have not seen it for ourselves, we have heard from reliable sources that strange creatures are being brought into this land out of the mountains to the east,” the elder of the men told her.

He was a hearty soul with a bushy beard. His wife was plump and a friendly soul, matching him well. The younger couple were only slightly younger. They were all friends and had been traveling together a very long time, along with their extended families.

“We've also heard tell of men with tattoos of eyes on their faces, heading in this direction,” the slightly younger man said. “I hope you know what that means, lass.”

“Indeed, I do. But the Eye assassins have never come this far west. As far as anyone knows, the farthest they have traveled before was into Helios,” she said, thinking hard. The assassins known only as Eyes were said to be among the deadliest and most pernicious in all the lands.

If they had been hired by someone in Valdis—or one of Valdis’s enemies—then their target could only be King Alric. That was the only thing that made sense to her. He had been making big changes to the kingdom, and it was very likely that others in power might object. They might object so strongly that they hired foreign assassins to carry out their disgusting plans, believing it would never be traced back to them.

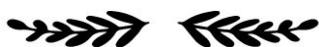
Certainly, the Eyes were said to be able to eliminate their targets without leaving any evidence behind. They were feared in the lands in which they operated, but so far, they had never come into Valdis. At least not that anybody was aware.

Whoever had hired them to come such a great distance had to have paid a very high premium. And Eyes didn’t come cheap to begin with. If assassins had a nobility, they were it. They only handled the most sensitive and expensive of assassinations. At least, that was their reputation.

Isolde thanked the wagon masters for their information and headed back to the city. She had a great deal to think about, and wheels to put into motion. Alric had to be protected at all costs.

And this was something that General Brighton—dear Sam—needed to know about as soon as possible. Every warrior in the

castle, and in the city, had to be on their guard. Now perhaps more than ever.



Isolde was on her way to the castle the next day on the pretense of a fitting for Sam's window when a shadow passed overhead. This was becoming all-too-familiar. She looked up to find a flight of snow-white dragons passing overhead, clearly coming in for a landing in the castle courtyard. Isolde hastened her pace.

Those dragons had riders on their backs. She thought she recognized a few of them. If so, it looked like Lilly and her new husband were back from their travels. Good. Lilly had been part of the King's personal guard for many years before discovering that she had healing magic. She was also a good friend of Alric's. He might listen to her about taking precautions for his own safety before others. Isolde would try to enlist Lilly's help.

She had become acquainted with Lilly and her new mate, Luc, when they had inspected the building adjacent to Isolde's shop. They were setting up a healing school, since Lilly had recently discovered she had a strong healing magic. King Alric had sanctioned it and had even purchased the large building from its original owners to facilitate Lilly's new vocation. He had also invited skilled healers from all over to come to Valdis Maj so they could teach a new generation of healers. Something the city, surprisingly, lacked.

Lilly was also the King's liaison with the enclave of fair folk far to the north. Luc was the fair folk's envoy to Valdis. The pair were deeply in love, it was easy to see, and had been granted positions that would allow them to travel freely between their two homes while still accomplishing important work.

Luc was partnered with a young snow dragon named Shilayla that Isolde had seen just once. She was magnificent, and the bond between the warrior and the dragon seemed to be deep and true. Isolde looked forward to seeing more of all of them when they finally moved into the building next door. It had been renovated while they were away.

The building had been home to a religious sect that had dwindled to just a few members. They hadn't needed such a big building any longer, and the crown had given them a good price for it while also finding more fitting accommodations for them nearer the temple they all attended that belonged to a sister sect.

Isolde walked through the castle gate with a nod to the Guardsmen on duty and noted that a number of the snow dragons had landed in the large courtyard. They were looking around with interest, and Isolde noted the differences she could now discern between the snow dragons and the ice dragons.

Snow dragons were a bit smaller of stature, but it was widely known that ice dragons were the largest of all dragons. There were about a half dozen snow dragons and almost all of them

had a rider attending to them, but there was one that had no saddle or other indications that it had been ridden by anyone. It was walking around, looking at everything, and its path, if it continued on its current course, would intersect with Isolde's. She tried to pace her steps to avoid any sort of conflict with the large creature. She didn't want to make any assumptions just because she was now on friendly terms with a few of the ice dragons.

Isolde allowed the dragon to cross in front of her intended path and then continued on her way, but the dragon stopped short and whirled, necessitating Isolde to do the same. She gasped, coming very close to being whipped with the dragon's thick and sharply barbed tail.

"I do beg your pardon, milady," Isolde said quickly in a soft voice, hoping to pacify the startled dragon. She bowed her head, holding the dragon's gaze as a show of respect.

"I'm sorry," the dragon said tentatively in Isolde's mind. *"You startled me."*

"It is I who am most sorry, milady," Isolde assured the dragon. "I did not mean to startle you at all. I was trying to let you pass in front so I could go on my way to the barracks. I have a window to fit." Isolde raised the wrapped parcel she had under one arm.

The dragon looked at her closely. *"You can hear me?"*

"Yes, indeed, milady," Isolde replied quietly. "I am Jinn. We know the ways of dragons, and some of us have the ability to speak with your kind."

The dragon looked intrigued, its snow-white scales so different from the mirrored iridescence of the ice dragons. It tilted its head at her.

“You are a glass maker?” the dragon finally asked. *“You make windows?”*

“Yes, milady. Both artistic pieces and functional pieces. Some are both.” Isolde shrugged and smiled up at the dragon.

“Did you make any of the windows here?” the dragon asked, looking around with interest.

Isolde pointed to the stained-glass window she’d installed as her first commission from the King. Since then, she’d been making quite a few more as Alric asked her to make decorative overlays for almost every window in the castle. All the better to keep her handy in case he needed quick access to her spy network.

“That is the first, but I am working on more. Now that King Alric can see again, he is on a mission to beautify his home—both the castle and the city,” Isolde told the dragon.

The dragon seemed to consider both her words and the window. *“I like the colors and the design. It is lovely work,”* the dragon said finally, sighing so that a puff of smoke rose from her mouth toward the sky. *“I am Bathshera, but you can call me Shera.”*

“Lady Shera,” Isolde replied formally, bowing low. “I am Guild Artisan Isolde van Aidel of the Wayfarer Clan of the Jinn. Please just call me Isolde, if you like.”

The dragon bowed her head in reply. “*You are my first friend in Valdis Maj,*” Shera observed and seemed to smile, if a dragon could truly be said to smile. Regardless, Isolde felt the joy and wonder in the dragon’s words in her mind.

“And you are the first snow dragon to honor me by speaking with me. I am happy to have you as a friend, Lady Shera.” Isolde smiled at the dragon again, reevaluating her estimate of the dragon’s age.

Shera spoke more like an adolescent—more like one of Isolde’s apprentices, if she was being honest—than a fully adult dragon. Perhaps Shera was one of the younger dragons, which might explain why she had no rider or partner among the fair folk. If, indeed, that really was the case. It certainly seemed that way to Isolde.

They might have spoken further, but Lilly came over at that moment to see if everything was all right.

Chapter Twelve

It was clear that Lilly was also able to bespeak dragons, and she went right up to Shera and asked her how she was feeling after the long flight. Lilly then looked at Isolde and seemed to recognize her.

“Oh, Isolde! How nice to see you. I hope you are well,” Lilly said politely.

“Very well, thank you, Lilly. Welcome home. Your building looks to be coming along nicely,” Isolde told her in a neighborly way.

“I’ve heard very good things, and I can’t wait to see it, but I must make my report to the King first and get these dragons settled. I didn’t realize the ice dragons had arrived already,” Lilly admitted with a nervous grin.

“The ice dragons are bedding down in the courtyards of various Jinn inns all around the city. Some of the larger ones will have room for another dragon if some of the snow

dragons want to get to know the ice dragons better,” Isolde offered.

“Oh, that sounds like a very good plan,” Lilly said, clearly thinking about it. “And their heartmates could stay at the inns, as well, and be disbursed throughout the city for safety.”

“I want to stay with Shi,” a plaintive dragon voice sounded in both women’s minds.

“Of course you can stay with Shilayla, my dear,” Lilly answered Shera at once. “We will likely be moving into the new building, and there is plenty of room there for you both. And it is right next door to Isolde’s glass shop, so you will already know someone else besides Luc, Shilayla, and me in the neighborhood. What do you think of that?”

Oh, yes. This dragon was definitely younger than Isolde had first thought, though she was nearly full-grown. At least by Isolde’s admittedly inexperienced reckoning.

Shera looked at Isolde and then back at Lilly. *“I like that plan,”* she said, good humor restored.

“I have many apprentices at my shop,” Isolde volunteered, explaining to both the dragon and Lilly. “Youngsters who are learning the glass arts. They run errands and keep the furnaces stoked. Some of them are able to handle prep work for my designs, and some are making production pieces. I know they all are fascinated by dragons, and I’m sure they’d love it if you would visit us. You are welcome anytime, Lady Shera.”

“Thank you,” Lilly said before Shera could say anything, her tone filled with gratitude. “This is Shera’s first time away from her home in the north. She’s never been around this many people. She doesn’t live among the fair folk but is a wild-born dragon who appeared as we were leaving and asked to come along.”

Now, wasn’t that interesting?

“I’m on a mission,” the young dragon said, nodding in agreement with its own words.

When the dragon didn’t say anything more, Isolde looked askance at Lilly, but she just shrugged. Isolde let it go and lifted the parcel in her hand to settle it against her hip.

“Don’t let us keep you,” Lilly said politely, looking pointedly at the package she held. “I’m sure you’re busy, but I did want to tell you that window is lovely. It wasn’t finished when we left, and it was the first thing I noticed when we landed.” Lilly gazed over at the big stained-glass window at the front of the castle. “Gorgeous work.”

Isolde ducked her head a little and thanked Lilly for her kind words, then took her leave of both Lilly and the young dragon. The part of the window that she carried wasn’t especially heavy, but it was somewhat cumbersome. She still had to go around the side of the castle to get to the barracks and Sam’s office. She hoped he was in. She had sent word, but she wasn’t certain he had received her message. Still, the news she had to impart was too important to wait. If he wasn’t in his office, she would track him down.

Luckily for her, Sam was in his office when she presented herself to his Sergeant. The old veteran insisted on carrying her parcel, as he walked her into the General's office. Sergeant Goodfellow put the parcel down where she directed, and she thanked him for his help before he left, closing the door behind him. She was alone with Sam. For the first time, Isolde felt just a tiny bit awkward, but she squared her shoulders and got on with business.

"I have heard grave news from travelers coming over the Dragon's Teeth," she began, and Sam's expression went from welcoming to grim. Now that she had his attention, Isolde told him what she had learned from the wagon masters.

"You think these assassins have been hired to kill the King?" he asked after she had finished her report.

She nodded. "I do. Eyes don't come cheap. Especially all this distance. Whoever hired them was rich, and probably expects more riches to flow his or her way after the deed is done. There are any number of noblemen and merchants who would profit from chaos in this land, and the best way to create that chaos is to kill King Alric."

"You'll get no argument from me on that point," Sam agreed, his expression grim. "So, it sounds like we have two separate things we need to protect against. First, the human assassins with the Eye tattoos. I have heard rumors about these Eyes, even in Elderland. They are more myth than substance, and I wonder if their reputation is as potent as their reality."

“Everything I’ve heard from my network says they are even worse than their reputation,” Isolde told him. “I think we have to take them as a very serious threat.”

“Agreed.” He met her gaze, and she appreciated the fact that he was treating her as an equal as they sorted through the information. “And the second thing we need to be wary of is this report of strange creatures. It’s a shame we do not have a better description from your sources. These creatures could be anything up to and including a small skith, if anyone was crazy enough to try to transport one all the way across Draconia and the mountains as well.”

“Perhaps the dragons can help us,” Isolde offered.

She had heard that dragons were the only real defense against the venomous creatures that lived in the hills on the eastern border of Draconia. Skiths were the natural enemy of dragons and would try to eat almost anyone that came across their path. Their land was called Skithdron and was ruled by a tyrant, from all accounts, though she hadn’t had any recent news from that area in a while.

“I will ask,” Sam replied. “Good idea.”

She felt warmed by his praise. “And I will activate my network and have them all keep an eye out for the Eyes. I’ll put the distress signal in my window if we locate them, but if they’re as good as their reputation, I fear we will not spot them before they take action.”

“I fear you’re right. Which is why I will discuss this with the King and Lady Zallra immediately and have them take

precautions.” Sam stood and rounded the desk, surprising Isolde by wrapping his arms around her. He placed a kiss gently on her lips. “Thank you for bringing me this information,” he said, holding her gaze for a moment before he let her go. “I will act on it.”

He stepped away, heading for the door, but she remained. He looked back at her, a question in his eyes.

“I still have to do the fitting for your window,” she reminded him with a lopsided smile. “Go on. You can send Sergeant Goodfellow in to keep an eye on me,” she suggested. “Just to keep up our pretense, of course.”

He winked at her. “Of course,” he agreed, opening the door and heading out as she unwrapped the section of window and set to work.



When Isolde returned to her shop a few hours later, she discovered that Lilly, Luc and Shilayla had, indeed, moved in next door. Bathshera was with them, her long neck making it simple for her to peer over the brick wall that separated their backyards so she could spy on the apprentices going about their work.

The way her shop was set up, Isolde taught the older apprentices who then passed on those lessons to the younger. Each apprentice was trained in accordance with their abilities and skill level, as well as their age. The youngest did the simpler tasks, like sweeping up and keeping the workspace

clean and ready. The older apprentices made production pieces.

Some blew glass into molds with the help of others to make decorative bottles. The most talented of the apprentices did free-form designs. Some blew large cylinders of transparent glass that were then cut open and laid flat to make sheets that could be used for windowpanes, among other things. The best and most flawless of the sheets were silvered, turning them into mirrors. Some apprentices also blew cylinders of colored glass and opened them into sheets while they were still malleable, creating the stock for her stained-glass designs.

Some of that glass was textured using various techniques. Some of the colors were deliberately mixed into certain patterns. Each one of these skills, and others, were taught to the apprentices one at a time, until they mastered a particular skill then moved on to the next.

Isolde had mastered all of the basic techniques during her journeymen trials and had been approved by the Guild Masters to train the next generation of glass artisans while she worked on her own masterwork that might elevate her to the level of a Master someday.

Different stations had been set up in various parts of the large yard. There were a multitude of small furnaces and kilns for each group that was working on a different technique. This way, Isolde could easily see who might need help or was struggling and could split her time among the different groups.

Even when she wasn't at the shop, regular production work could still go on. The older apprentices were skilled enough to be able to supervise the younger ones in making the basic articles that would hone their skill over time. Everything they made was put on sale in the front part of the building, where there were different sections containing bottles, glasses, mirrors, lanterns, lamps and all sorts of other things that they made, separated by skill level and price.

There was really something for everyone, at all levels of society, offered at Isolde's shop. The apprentices' work was the least expensive, priced only for the cost of the materials. If the work was a better quality, the price rose accordingly. And, if something just sat around and never sold, it could always be melted down and turned into something else. But Isolde liked to put the apprentices' works up for sale to both give the poorer population of the city the option of having something nice for their homes, and also to give the apprentices the pride of knowing that their work was on display and might even end up in someone's home.

If an apprentice piece sold, Isolde would give that apprentice a little bit of the profit as a bonus. She thought it gave them an incentive to do the best they possibly could with each assignment handed them. So far, her shop had turned out more journeymen in the past two years than any other of its kind in the city. Isolde was proud of what she had built here and also proud of her apprentices who had graduated to journeymen.

Not only were they accomplished artisans, but almost every one of them was also now a part of her spy network. Not all of

her students were Jinn, though many were. She liked the idea of her spy network expanding to include those who were not members of the Jinn Brotherhood. She thought it gave her an edge, though that was more gut feeling than proven fact at this point.

Isolde saw immediately that the dragon was causing quite a stir with her interest. Not only were the apprentices—especially the younger ones—completely mesmerized by the appearance of the dragon’s head over the top of the wall, but she kept moving about, trying to get a better view, if Isolde was any judge. With a grin, Isolde walked straight for the wall and the curious dragon.

“Greetings Lady Shera. I see you have moved in with Lilly and her family. Welcome to the neighborhood,” Isolde said brightly, bowing to the dragon in greeting.

“Hello again, new friend Isolde,” Shera said, nodding her own head over the wall. *“I am happy to see you. Can you tell me everything that is happening in your courtyard?”*

The young dragon sounded so eager that Isolde had to hide a grin. “Of course,” Isolde agreed. “But it might be easier if you hopped over the wall and came to join us here. Is that permissible?”

“Let me just ask Shi,” Shera said quickly, her head disappearing below the level of the wall.

Isolde heard some of the younger apprentices groan at the dragon’s disappearance, but Shera wasn’t gone for long. A

moment later, she climbed daintily over the wall as if it wasn't even there, enchanting the apprentices in the process.

Isolde decided she might as well make introductions since it seemed apparent that no more work would get done today until the matter of their new dragon neighbor was settled. She whistled for attention, using the loud two-fingered whistle her brother had taught her. It came in handy sometimes when the apprentices were getting rowdy.

They all stopped what they were doing and came over to where she was standing with Shera. There was a bit of shuffling, but most of them were struck silent by the dragon in their midst. She'd been working on manners with some of the younger boys in particular, and it looked like her lessons had stuck. At least for now.

“Everyone, this is one of our new neighbors, Lady Bathshera, a wild snow dragon from the far north. She is not used to being among so many people, so I want you all to be on your best behavior and treat her with the utmost respect.” She eyed two of her worst troublemakers among the youngsters, and they nodded their little heads up and down. “Milady, these are my apprentices.”

“Hello, Apprentices. Can any of you hear me?”

Shera broadcast her voice to all the minds present, surprising Isolde. The ability to hear dragons was rare, but much to her amazement, at least three of the apprentices cocked their heads and raised their hands. The eldest was a young man named Kurt, who was almost ready for his journeyman trials. The two

others were younger. A teenaged girl named Malea and one of the youngest, a little boy named Hunter, who had only recently come to live at Isolde's shop. She called all three closer.

"Lady Shera, this is Kurt, Malea and Hunter," she introduced them in age and seniority order. "It seems all three have the gift, and perhaps they can tell the others what you say, so you may interact with more of my little tribe." Isolde smiled broadly. "You are most welcome here at any time since I know the heat and fires of our furnaces can do no damage to you. It is rare that we allow anyone who is not part of the craft back here because it is dangerous to those of us who are not impervious to flames and being burned by molten glass."

"*Oh,*" Shera's mouth formed a little semi-circle of surprise as smoke rose from her nostrils. "*I didn't realize fire was so hazardous for your people.*"

"It can hurt us very badly," Isolde told the young dragon. "Even kill us if we're not careful. Which is why the first lesson all my apprentices learn is that of safety. But you are a dragon, and fire is your friend. I know nothing here can hurt you, and so you are most welcome."

"*Thank you, Mistress Isolde,*" Shera replied prettily.

"Now, if I may be so bold, can I ask what might be considered an impertinent question?" Isolde smiled at the dragon and softened her words. "I hope you will take no offense, but I suspect you are younger than you look. It is very hard for us, who have never really been around dragons, to know how to judge a dragon's age."

“Oh, that’s not impertinent!” Shera said joyfully. *“I am ten winters. That means I am not done growing yet, but getting there, as Shilayla puts it.”*

“I see. Hunter is also ten winters old, but he will keep growing for another ten until he is full-sized for a human,” Isolde told the dragon. She looked encouragingly at the three who could hear the dragon’s words.

“I’m fourteen, milady,” Malea said, dropping a little curtsy as she spoke.

“And I’m eighteen,” Kurt put in, his deeper voice a bit louder than Malea’s. “I’m almost finished my apprenticeship and will begin my journeyman trials as soon as Mistress Isolde says I’m ready.”

He shot Isolde a slightly sheepish look. She was still his master in the craft, and everyone knew an apprentice’s progress wasn’t based on age alone. It might be a factor, but what was more important was the mastery of basic skills and the accrual of knowledge the apprentice would need as they broadened their abilities on the journeyman’s road.

“We don’t call it ‘prenticing, but we have something like that in the wild,” Shera told them. *“My clan lives away from people, but we are aware of what goes on in the wider world. My kin taught me to fly and all the skills I’ll need, but it was a seer who sent me on this journey to both prove myself and to forge an alliance with both the snow dragons who partner with the fair folk and the people of your land.”*

Isolde was fascinated. That was a lot to put on the shoulders of a youngster, but if a seer was involved—and it occurred to her that she'd never imagined dragons could have seers among their number—then there was a specific reason Bathshera was the one who had been sent. Isolde tucked that information away and decided she would have to pass on the salient points to the crown.

She tried to hide the smile that thought brought. Another reason to see Sam again.

Chapter Thirteen

“I promise to help you do that in whatever way I can,” Isolde told the young dragon. “And if you want company, you are always welcome here. After work is done for the day, we clear the center of the yard and play games. You’re welcome to join us if any of our games interest you. These three,” she indicated the three who could hear the dragon, “can tell the others what you say so you won’t lack for companionship, if you want it.”

“That sounds great.” Shera sounded excited. *“What kinds of games?”*

Isolde looked around the yard and then up at the sun. “I think we can end work a little early today in your honor. Everybody, secure the work areas and let’s play!”

A cheer went up from the younger apprentices who ran for the cubbies where various equipment was kept. Some took brooms to sweep up any glass fragments. Some went for the balls and nets and other things they used for play. The older apprentices banked the fires and finished up any pending items

before closing up the various stations. Each area that had banked fire also had a latticework covering that kept any stray balls from entering the area and knocking things over.

Once everything was secure, Kurt came back with a big net in his hands. He showed it to the dragon.

“Sometimes, we play netball. We stretch this net across the yard and then split up into two teams. We pass the ball back and forth over the net. When someone misses returning it, they’re out and have to step to the side until there’s only one person left and that one wins.”

Isolde didn’t think the dragon could really play that game. She raised a skeptical eye at Kurt, who seemed to realize the same thing. He backed up a bit.

“Sometimes, we just toss the ball back and forth to each other. That’s fun too,” he said.

“Once in a while, we split into teams and play kickball where we have to try to get the ball into the opposite team’s goal without touching it with our hands. We can only use our feet,” Hunter said, coming up beside Kurt.

That was the most words she’d ever heard Hunter say at one time since he got here. He really was a shy little boy, but it looked like the dragon was drawing him out of his shell, which could be a very good thing.

“I like when we play circle games,” Malea put in. “We sit in a circle and take turns doing different things. Sometimes, we pass messages and see how mangled they end up after a full

circle. Sometimes, one person is *it*, and we have to guess what they're thinking based on clues they give us. That can be really funny." Malea's smile brought out dimples in her cheeks.

"Why don't you start there? You three can hear what Lady Shera says and tell the others so she can play with you," Isolde suggested.

She thought if they started with a low-energy game, it might be safer until Isolde could gauge how good Shera was at managing her larger size around humans. She'd hate it if the dragon accidentally hurt one of the children without meaning to, and Isolde suspected Shera would be traumatized by something like that as well. She really was a delicate soul based on all of their interactions so far.

Isolde watched the children form a huge ring. Everybody wanted to play the game the dragon was playing, and the three who could hear her sat beside her, telling the others what she said. Even the older apprentices joined in. Having a dragon in their midst was a novelty none of them could resist.

Isolde sat at one of the tables at the back of the building and watched them while she considered the drawings she'd gotten from Lord Salveer. She was going to start work on that obsidian he'd given her, but she had to consider her steps very carefully with such a precious substance.

The children were busy and enjoying themselves immensely, so it looked like now was the time to figure out where to start with the blades Lord Salveer had commissioned. She got the

drawing and the obsidian from inside and set it out on the table, then fetched some tools she wanted to try, including a magnifying lens with which she set about examining the obsidian in minute detail.

She would study and test carefully, on small sections, before she did anything more daring. This substance was precious, and she had to be judicious. Tapping lightly on the volcanic glass, she began to learn its secrets.

She'd been so fascinated by her study that she didn't realize at first that the circle game had ended, and the children were on to something a bit more strenuous. They'd set up one of the little lattice structures that served as a goal when they played kickball, but they seem to have created a new game where they kicked the ball at the goal, but Shera was acting as goalie, and she was blocking the ball with surprisingly accurate swishes of her tail.

Isolde watched them play for a bit, a smile on her face. It was clear the children—even the older ones—were enchanted, and Shera looked to be having a good time as well. Isolde went back to her work, her heart light.

The days passed. Isolde had not seen Sam, but he had sent little presents to her at the shop with his regrets that the King had been keeping him much too busy to have any free time the past days. If Isolde had been less secure, or less well-connected, she might have doubted his sincerity, but she knew how busy things were at the castle.

Her apprentices still observed and brought back information from there every day. They saw General Brighton all around the place, working with his troops, attending meetings and liaising with the dragons. Most often, he was in the company of Lord Salveer.

All of her apprentices could all distinguish which ice dragon was which. Isolde had shown them her drawings, and they'd talked about differences between the dragons that could be used to identify each one.

She missed seeing Sam, but she knew his work was as important as her own. They were both trying to track down the possible threats against the crown. He had his soldiers and the Guardsmen on high alert, watching for any signs that assassins were on the move. She was doing the same through her own sources, but things had gone quiet. That didn't necessarily mean that the plots weren't proceeding, just that she had no news of them, which concerned her, but there was really nothing more she could do but watch and wait.

Isolde had spent a lot of her work hours fashioning the obsidian blades that would fit into the metal scythe Edvardson was making. They had agreed that she would be the one to set the blades into the metal channels since setting glass in metal was one of her specialties, and Edvardson had never worked with any sort of glass. He would deliver the body of the scythe to her the next day, and then, she would set to work, incorporating the blades she had painstakingly made to fit.

Lady Shera was a regular visitor to the yard. She came every evening after work was done to play with the children, and they loved it. Occasionally, Shilayla would drop by for a few minutes as well, watching or even joining some of the games. She was older than Shera, but still young enough to find joy in play apparently, and they had been devising new games like the one where the dragons used their tails to defend a goal while the apprentices did their best to kick a ball past their guard. When both dragons played, the children split up into teams, and the dragons took opposite goals.

They had even drawn a bit of a crowd of onlookers. Not that anyone was allowed into the yard itself, but there were two wide accessways set up as showrooms for the lesser works on either side of the building that led to the yard. Archways that were gated on both ends. The less expensive glassware was displayed inside the arch-covered areas, and the gates to the street were open during the day while the gates to the yard were closed. Each night, as part of the cleaning process, the gates to the street were closed, and the ones to the yard were opened so that any new apprentice works could be added to the wares for sale, and the things already in place could be dusted and cleaned and made ready for the next day.

But one afternoon, the apprentices finished up early when both dragons had come to play, and they'd left the street-facing gates open. Some shoppers in the showrooms had been drawn to the games on the other side of the back gates and had stopped to watch. Word had gotten around about the spectacle, and before Isolde knew it, both showrooms had a line of

people at the back gates watching the game and cheering on one side or another.

Isolde and a few of the older apprentices went around front as the game ended and were there to collect the money or barter goods for those who couldn't resist taking a piece of glassware home with them after getting a look at what was on offer. Quite a few of the apprentices earned bonuses that night, and everybody was cheered by the unexpected gains.

After that, two of the older apprentices stayed in the two showrooms each night while the younger set played with one or both of the dragons, and a good number of people came to watch. If they chose to buy a piece of glassware on their way out, so much the better, though it was not a requirement. Isolde did not want to charge admission or profit in any other way from this happenstance. The goodwill the dragons were creating by being seen to play with the children was a great benefit, and Isolde thought it would endear the dragons to the regular folk of Valdis all that much more quickly to see the younger dragons having as much fun as the apprentices as they played.

The day after Edvardson had delivered the scythe's body to her, Isolde was hard at work setting one of the blade pieces she had made that would eventually fill the entire curved channel of the scythe. She was wearing the leather leggings and apron that protected her while she worked with hot and sharp objects and was concentrating fully on the intricate work. Setting the piece successfully, she took a deep breath and smiled to herself.

“Looks good,” a deep male voice came to her from just over her shoulder. Sam. She whirled, holding the half-finished scythe in one hand.

“How did you get back here?” Isolde blurted out, only then realizing her words might have sounded a bit impolite. “I mean, my apprentices usually keep anyone from entering the yard, especially during working hours.”

Sam smiled that rare, intimate smile she loved so much. “Lady Shera vouched for me with a young man named Kurt,” he told her with obvious amusement. “I’ve been hearing about dragonball games, and I wanted to come check on the rumors myself.” His voice dropped low. “I also wanted to see you. It’s been too long, Isolde, and for that, I’m very sorry.”

“That’s all right. I know how busy you’ve been,” she allowed.

He chuckled. “I almost forgot how many little eyes and ears you have coming and going from the castle each day. But in this case, I’m glad you realize that only duty prevented me from seeking you out sooner. If I’d had my way, I would have courted you every day, seducing you with lavish meals and all of my attention.”

It was her turn to laugh. “We both know we’re bound first to our duties. Only after that can we consider our personal desires. Don’t worry, Sam. I understand. We have similar constraints upon us.”

He tilted his head, considering her. “I guess you do understand, at that. Huh.” He seemed taken a bit aback but

then smiled again. "I'm not used to being involved with a woman like you. Sensible. Hardworking. Gorgeous, and probably smarter than me." He chuckled aloud this time. "You continue to enchant me, Isolde. And your skill is remarkable. I take it that's the commission Lord Salveer keeps talking about."

"It is, indeed." She moved the scythe around from her side to place it between them so he could get a better look. "Edvardson did a beautiful job with the body of it. He really is a master craftsman. The balance is impeccable." She moved back to gain room and did a few experimental twirls with the long weapon above her head. She had studied all kinds of weapons work and knew how to wield pikes and axes. This thing was a combination of the two. More or less.

Sam watched her move, and she could read the appreciation in his eyes. That, and the surprise. She liked surprising him.

"I know how to wield many weapons, my General," she fairly purred as she settled the scythe at her side once more and moved back toward him.

"Indeed, you do," he muttered, the heat in his eyes flaming bright. If they'd been alone, she thought he would have pulled her into his arms and kissed the breath out of her. As it was, they were surrounded by her nosy apprentices, all of whom were probably watching them covertly. She'd never had a man visit her here before. They were bound to be curious.

"The blades I am adding will not disturb the balance," Isolde went on, her mouth dry. "I checked before I started working on

it. This piece needs to be as perfect as Edvardson and I can make it since it will be presented to the King.” She offered the scythe to him. “Do you want to test it out?”

He took hold of the staff just below her hand and met her gaze. “The blade you just set is secure?”

She nodded. “As secure as I can make it. It will not come loose, even with your strength behind the swing.”

Sam moved farther away than she had. He had longer reach, of course, and he tried a few experimental swings, then moved into a sequence that was blisteringly fast and accurate. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched him move. He was, indeed, a skilled warrior. She’d spied on him drilling with swords with his men, and he’d been lightning fast and as good as any swordsman she’d ever seen. Quite possibly the best she’d ever seen. But to be so good with sword and then to pick up an odd weapon like this and show the same level and quality of skill? Damn. He’d just impressed her all over again.

And he wasn’t putting on a show. Not really. The look on his face as he twirled and struck, swung and jumped was of a man considering the weapon, not his own prowess. When he swirled to a close, he stood still for a brief moment then held the weapon in his hands again, as if weighing it, locating the exact center of balance between the staff and the enormous blade. Then he righted it again and walked back to her.

“It is an exquisite weapon, worthy of our King,” he pronounced, handing it back to her. “Or it will be, once you

finish adding the rest of the blade.” His wink and smile made her lady parts heat.

Chapter Fourteen

“Thank you, my General.” Isolde liked the way Sam’s eyes lit when she used that form of address. It was polite, but it also indicated that she had some intimacy with him. A little joke between lovers. “I hope to finish it tomorrow. If you see Lord Salveer, could you tell him? It will be ready by the end of the workday tomorrow, barring any unforeseen interruptions.”

“I will be sure to tell him,” Sam replied easily.

“I hear you and he have struck up quite the friendship,” she observed, teasing him just a bit but also curious about his relationship with the ice dragon.

“He is a very interesting fellow, and we have discovered a common way of thinking of certain things,” Sam told her. “He’s been observing my troops as much as I’ve been trying to observe him and the rest of the dragons. Now that the snow dragons are here as well, it’s gotten very interesting up at the castle.”

“And at several of the Jinn inns in the city,” Isolde agreed. “The larger inn yards now have two dragons each night, and though few can really know for certain, it looks like the dragons talk and talk amongst themselves while enjoying the music and treats. Every minstrel and bard in the city and anywhere within riding distance has been called upon to provide entertainment for them, and they are all—the inns and the musicians too—making a very nice profit from the increased business.”

“Good for them. I suppose your cousin, Thaniel, is raking it in,” Sam said, smiling to soften the words.

“That, and breaking girls’ hearts. That scoundrel is too handsome for his own good,” Isolde joked back. “But he has a good heart underneath all the bluster and shenanigans.”

“So, what is this I hear about dragonball games? It’s causing quite a stir, I can tell you. Apparently, some of the young Guardsmen came down here last night after their shift and were part of the audience. It was all they could talk about today, telling all their fellows about how the dragons use their tails with deadly accuracy.”

“If you can stay for an hour or so, you may get to see it for yourself. Whether they play the full game or half will depend on whether Lady Shilayla joins us or not. Lady Shera always comes over at the end of the workday. I think she was, at first, curious about what we did here, but I think she’s also a little lonely for company closer to her own age.”

“She is rather young, isn’t she?” Sam asked. “I haven’t had much chance to speak with her, but I get the impression that all the other snow dragons are both protecting her and a little wary of her.”

“She’s new to them,” Isolde explained. “She told me she was born and always lived in the wild. The other snow dragons here live more closely with the fair folk. And she’s only ten winters old.”

“That’s all?” Sam was clearly surprised by the revelation, his raised eyebrows giving him away.

Isolde nodded. “Luckily, three of my current crop of apprentices proved to have the ability to hear her speak, so they’ve been passing on her words to the others. She seems more at ease with the children than with others, and I know they all enjoy the games they’ve devised. Speaking of which...” Isolde placed the scythe down on the table and whistled loudly to get everybody’s attention. “Clean up time,” she said in a loud, carrying voice.

Immediately, the youngest went for the cubbies with the brooms and other equipment. The older students began securing their workstations for the night and getting out the lattice enclosures that kept them safe. Those light wooden structures had proven essential since the ball games had started to get a little more rambunctious.

“You have them very well organized,” Sam observed, watching the apprentices attend to their duties.

“The older ones teach the younger ones now, so the tasks get passed on without my having to intervene too much,” she said, shrugging. “I watch the games but don’t participate. So, I can keep working on this, or... I can sit with you and explain the rules of the games, as far as I can figure them out.” She chuckled.

“What about the spectators?” Sam asked.

“They can’t get into the yard. They watch from the gates. And the older apprentices have been taking it in turns to man the shops while the games are going on. We’ve been selling a lot more of the apprentice pieces from the shops, and the apprentices who make them get a bonus from those sales, so everybody’s happy about that little added benefit.” She chuckled. “I even took a bit of that extra money and brought it to a leatherworker I know. She’s going to make a larger ball that might be able to stand up better to dragon tails. She’s making it out of multiple layers of the toughest leather she has. The children don’t know about that yet, though. It’s going to be a surprise.” Isolde smiled conspiratorially at him, and he smiled back. She liked sharing secrets with Sam.

She put aside her work for the night, and as the yard cleared and everything was stowed for the morning, Lady Shera peered over the wall. Shilayla was with her, and in moments, they’d hopped the wall that was really no barrier to them. The children greeted them both enthusiastically, and the older ones set up the goals. Everybody split into two teams, and the game was on.

Sam watched with her, cheering when good plays were made along with the other onlookers. She looked at the gates and realized the crowds had grown since that first night, but they were still manageable. After the game was over and night was falling, Isolde invited Sam to stay for dinner.

“We eat as a group,” she warned him. “We have a large room that we use for meals and lessons where everybody can fit together. It’s traditional that we all eat together. Also traditional is the notion that any apprentice can ask any question of any older apprentice or me at mealtime, so it sometimes turns into a learning opportunity. Lately though, most of the discussion has revolved around inventing new games to play with the dragons,” Isolde said, chuckling.

“Sounds like fun. I thought of a few things while I was watching the game. Such activities would be useful in training both the dragons and the soldiers how to work together,” he told her. “We’ve been discussing creating a special unit that would have both soldiers and dragons, but the training has been the sticking point. I’ve suggested to the King that we might invite some of the fighting pairs from Draconia to come talk to us—or we could send someone there, though that would be less efficient.”

As they walked into the building and headed for the central hall where the side tables were already laid with food, they kept chatting. Isolde liked being able to show him her domain. She’d spent a lot of time building this little community into what it was now, and she still had bigger plans for the future.

“The children are washing up and will be trailing in shortly,” she explained. “I always like this quiet time before the starving horde descends to make sure everything is going well for the cook and housekeeper and their staff.”

Sure enough, Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Everest were already sitting at one of the tables, eating their dinner. They got to eat first, since there would be plenty of work for them to do after the apprentices were done, though, of course, the apprentices were taught to clean up after themselves. It still took the small housekeeping staff to make certain that the standards of cleanliness Isolde insisted upon were maintained.

Isolde led Sam to the table and introduced him. “Mrs. Cooper is our cook, and Mr. Everest oversees our small household staff that are only here during the day while the apprentices are at work,” she informed the General. “He also leads the apprentices in drills every morning. We do our best to teach them all basic self-defense. If any of them show special skill, Mr. Everest provides additional instruction.”

“I seem to remember a swordsman named Everest who was rapidly rising in the ranks when I first got here,” Sam said contemplatively. “Then, I heard he was badly injured and left the service.”

“Aye, General. That was me,” Everest replied, not taking offense at the General’s probing words. “My leg didn’t heal straight, and I’ll always have a limp, but I can still teach the youngsters. Just can’t fight up to my old standard.”

“There is no shame in that, my friend,” Sam said kindly. “It’s important that these younglings learn what you know.” He didn’t say exactly why, but they all knew the apprentices were being trained as spies as well as artisans. That Sam didn’t mention it showed his discretion. He didn’t know if the cook, for example, was in on the secret.

“It was a bitter pill when it first happened, but I’ve come to terms with my lot,” Everest told Sam. “And working with Mistress Isolde is a lot more comfortable than bivouacking with the army. Begging your pardon, General.”

Sam laughed. “You’ll get no argument on that from me. I rather like being in the capital now that I’m here. I may switch places with the Guard Captain permanently, if I can manage it.”

They all laughed at his jest, and Isolde excused them so they could fill plates from the sideboard before the apprentices descended on the buffet.

By the time they had their plates, Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Everest were finished with their dinner and going back to their duties, so Isolde and Sam had a few minutes to themselves before the crowd gathered. She led him to the table she usually sat at, which would also include the oldest of the apprentices once they arrived. It wasn’t necessarily assigned seating, but they usually fell into a pattern. One of the older apprentices would have to find another place tonight because Sam was going to sit right next to her. Right where she wanted him.

Well, if she was being honest, she'd rather have him in her bed, but there was still time for that. She was already planning how she was going to accomplish it with all the nosy kids around, but she'd make it happen. She wasn't the top sneak in the city for nothing.

Sam was duly impressed by the community Isolde had built inside her shop. She called it a shop, but it was really so much more. The first floor was a consumer shop broken into three parts. There were the two large passageways on either side of the building that had been turned into gated areas where the goods of lesser value were on display. The younger apprentice work and the like. The central showroom held the really expensive items. Things that Isolde made herself or the really fine work of the older apprentices. People would have to come inside to see those items, and there was an area where they could consult with Isolde on commissioned work as well. Behind that indoor showroom was a stockroom.

On that first level of the building, the general public could buy or barter for the wares made by everyone who worked in the back of the building, which was the real *workshop* area. There were also a few rooms behind the stockroom that she had shown him on the way in, where she laid out the more intricate designs. Those were workshops as well. Then, on the second floor were the communal living spaces. The big room where they all gathered for meals and lessons. The kitchen, the servants' quarters, large bathing chambers—one for boys and one for girls—and a laundry. The uppermost floor was basically a barracks where the apprentices slept. The younger

children had six to a room. The older apprentices only had to share with one other, and the eldest had single rooms, and they looked after all the others.

Isolde's suite was on the second floor, at the front of the building, where the ornate glass windows gave a luxurious feel to the space. He knew she had made those windows. As she'd made, or overseen the making of, every window in this exceptionally windowed building. It was one of the only buildings in the city with more than just a few small glass windows. Examples of their work, he knew. Everyone could see their quality just by looking at the building.

Clever advertisement, Sam had thought. And beneficial to those who lived here as well since they had the advantage of a lot of sunlight inside, if they wanted it, and a beautiful place to live.

Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Everest also had rooms on the second floor. In this way, all three of the adults slept on the floor below the apprentices and would be on alert if anybody tried to sneak out in the night or got up to other kinds of mischief.

After dinner, which was lively and full of conversation, Isolde and Sam lingered over their slices of pie while the apprentices left one-by-one to do their evening chores before they went to bed. Night had fallen in earnest while they'd eaten. It was clear to see from the giant windows at the front of the building, which comprised one wall of this very large room. There were massive wooden support beams here and there throughout the room, but they didn't impede anyone's

movement. They were probably very necessary to keep this large building standing upright.

There was a cut-stone fireplace along the back wall of the room, which heated the place sufficiently. It was probably quite toasty in winter. The chimney went all the way up through the center of the building, so there had to be other fireplaces above and below as well. It made sense. Winter wasn't exactly mild in Valdis.

Isolde led Sam to two seats near the fire that had been pushed against the wall but put back in their places by the apprentices after dinner was over. They'd cleared off the tables and brought their dishes to the door at the side that Isolde had said led to the kitchen. A few of the children went into the kitchen, no doubt to wash all those dishes before they could seek their beds, so everything would be ready for the morning.

Mrs. Cooper appeared to check that everything had been put to rights in the room, in readiness for breakfast, then disappeared back into the kitchen. Mr. Everest had also come back to get his own small work party to sweep and tidy the rest of the building, in readiness for the next day.

And then, finally, they were alone in the big room.

"I must confess, I'm really impressed by the way you run your shop, Isolde," Sam said, draining his mug of the light ale he'd been served with dinner.

"Thanks," she replied with a shrug. "It works for us. My shop is a little different from most of the others who take apprentices in this city. All of my apprentices are orphans, and

I give them a place to live and a trade they can learn. I didn't learn this way. I did what my little brother is doing. I went to the master's shop only during the day and went home at night, but my apprentices don't have homes of their own, so I give them one."

Sam didn't think he could be any more impressed with this woman, but she'd just hit him in the heart with the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. It took a moment for him to gather his emotions before he could say anything.

"That—" He cleared his throat and tried again. "That is a noble and kind thing, Isolde. I don't talk about my past much, but I was orphaned by war at a young age. I was just old enough to be picked up by a mercenary troop as one of the pot boys. I worked for my keep, and luckily, the old soldier who acted as camp cook had a gruff demeanor but a kind heart. If not for Smitty, I don't know where I would have ended up. He took care of me and the other boys. He made sure nobody messed with us. It is a dangerous thing to be alone at such a tender age."

He felt tears gather behind his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. It was just his seldom-used emotions getting the better of him, which hadn't happened in years. Leave it to Isolde to break through his every last barrier.

She stood and moved toward him, stopping in front of his chair. She held out her hand, and he took it silently. When she tugged, he stood, but she didn't move back. Instead, she

moved into his embrace, laying her cheek against his chest as her arms went around him in a hug.

“You understand,” she murmured. “I can’t just let the little ones live on the street. If they have the slightest interest in learning the glass art, I take them in.” She squeezed him, and he felt the warmth of her and understood the depth of her heart. “I’m glad Smitty took care of you.”

They stood there, hugging for a long moment before Sam’s riled emotions began to settle down. But even as his emotions settled, his body roused at Isolde’s nearness. He wanted—no, he *needed*—to kiss her again. Kiss her and whatever else she’d let him do.

He’d kneel at her feet and beg at this point, he was so desperate to be with her again. No woman had ever made him *feel* so much. He wasn’t sure he liked it, but he needed more of her. Of them together. Of whatever she could spare of her great big heart for him.

He knew he was getting desperate, and that alone should have scared him, but he couldn’t bring himself to regret a moment of being with her. Isolde made him aware of the world around him as he never really had been before. She gave him a sense of belonging that he had seldom experienced and a feeling of acceptance that made his heart perk up and want to be counted for the first time in a very long time.

When she drew back, she smiled up at him. She moved farther away but took hold of his hand.

“Can you stay tonight?” she asked, her smile turning devilish.

The answer to his prayers. Praise be the Mother of All.

“I can stay,” he told her, his voice dropping low with desire. She smiled again and led him from the large room by the hand. They went down a short hallway and into another room toward the front of the building. Her room.

Chapter Fifteen

Isolde's heart had nearly melted into a little puddle when Sam had revealed that painful bit of his past. She knew he was a private man who didn't share his thoughts easily. That made what he'd told her of his past and Smitty even more precious.

She drew him inside her private chamber and paused only to light one of the glass lanterns near the bed and draw the curtains over the ornate windows that fronted the entire room. Some of her very best work which she'd kept for her own use. And why not? She liked pretty things, and if she could make them for herself, so much the better.

She'd traded more of her work for the lustrous sheets and blankets that graced her featherbed. The bed itself was another thing she'd traded with another artisan for. It was spacious and soft with lots of colorful pillows. Her own oasis of peace where she could spend her nights in luxury that she had earned with the sweat of her own brow.

Likewise, every last stick of furniture had been purchased with barter goods from her workshop. It was elegant and ornate, and Sam's ultra-masculine presence seemed a bit *off* in the feminine surroundings, but the delicate furniture only emphasized his muscles and height. His warrior's physique was set off against the soft surroundings in the most delicious way.

She paused at the side of her bed and held his gaze while she took off her clothes. He licked his lips, watching her every move in a way that made her feel powerful and wanted. She tried to take her time, but urgency was building within her. She wanted to feel his body against hers. His mouth possessing hers, his body owning hers. She needed it like she needed her next breath.

When she was naked, she looked at him with all the daring in her soul. He made her brave. He made her feel as if she could ask for what she wanted and that he would always give it to her. No other man had made her feel so strong and desirable.

"Now, come over here and kiss me, General," she dared him, feeling bold and sassy.

He paced forward, like a stalking jungle cat. "I'll do more than that," he promised, and she felt a thrill of anticipation roll down her spine.

He pulled his shirt off over his head and tossed it aside as he stalked closer. Then, he was in front of her. His mouth crashed down over hers with feverish intensity. His arms went around

her, drawing her close so that they were skin to skin. Her soft breasts against his hard chest. It was heaven. It was torture!

She wanted more. So much more!

She raised her arms, twining her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. He deepened the kiss as desire built in her core. Oh, how she wanted this man. This amazing warrior who had given her the gift of his past. A vulnerability she knew he would not share lightly.

He clasped her against his chest as he arched her back. She had to bend her knees slightly to accommodate the new position, but she would do anything for Sam. For his touch. For his love.

He cupped her backside as he pressed against her softness. Only his pants lay between them as her legs parted to allow him access.

He stepped closer, lifting her off her feet and then laying her on the bed. She fell across it, feeling wanton. Sam stood for a quiet moment, just looking at her. Then, his hand went to the closure of his pants, and he did a slow strip for her as she watched him with appreciation.

He toed off his boots before allowing his pants and underpants to fall to the floor. Stepping out of them, he left it all in a puddle on the floor at the side of the bed. He was eager to get to her, and she was just as eager to have him.

He prowled forward, and she spread her legs. Sam growled low in his throat, turning her insides to jelly.

“Scoot back a bit,” he instructed as he put one knee on the mattress. She complied, wondering what he might do. Never in a million years would she have expected what he did next.

Sam moved her knees upward and began there, kissing his way down the inside of her thigh until he reached the center. Pushing outward so there was no block to his access, he kissed her intimately, swirling his tongue around her parted folds and spending extra time on the little nub that cried out for his attention. She gasped as a small climax rocked her, and he rode her through it, pushing into her with his fingers in preparation for the possession she craved.

Before she could catch her breath, he was over her, joining with her in the way she most wanted. He slid home within her tight sheath and just...stayed. She opened her eyes, and he was looking deep into her soul.

“You’re special to me, Isolde. I want you to know that,” he whispered, then began to move. “So special.”

She wanted to tell him that he was special to her too, but she couldn’t form words. Thought was almost beyond her as sensation took over. His movements quickly grew out of control, but she was right there with him. Losing control and giving up to the greatest pleasure she’d ever known with the most incredible man she’d ever had the good fortune to know.

Isolde clung to his strong shoulders, feeling his possession down to her soul. She had come to respect his intelligence, lust after his body, and as she watched him with her orphans and

talked to him about his own childhood, her heart had opened to him in friendship...and love.

She loved the man, but she might never be able to tell him.

With that stark realization, she came apart in his arms. He joined her a moment later, and they rode the storm of ecstasy together.

As the waves of pleasure ebbed and flowed over her, she stroked his shoulders and his back. She loved the feel of him against her. Within her. She wanted to keep him with her always, but she might only have this short time.

Clinging to him more than she ought, she tried to hide her emotional reaction to the revelation that she'd given her heart to a man she might never be able to have. At least not for the long term.

Resolutely, she decided she would take anything he had to spare. She was that much in love already that she would gladly live on scraps of his affection if it meant she could be near him. She knew she was pathetic in some ways, but it also felt kind of noble, in others.

They both had duties. She was leading a double life, herself. Their duty might keep them apart a lot of the time, but for these special moments, when everything aligned, they could make magic together. Pure magic.

They made love twice more during the night, resting in each other's arms between. It felt so right to be with him. To have him in her bed. She'd never had another man in this bed. Since

opening her shop, she had just about given up on finding a life partner. She'd had dreams that the right man would find her in her youth, but as she'd gotten older and wiser and had claimed ever-increasing responsibilities, her love life—or lack thereof—had taken second place to her other pursuits.

As a result, Sam was the first man she'd ever invited here, to her private oasis of luxury. He fit into it very well, if she was any judge. He hadn't made any comments about how feminine everything looked. If she was being objective, her decorating style was rather lush. She liked darker colors and rich fabrics. The kinds of things that would be at home in any rich merchant's boudoir. Oddly, Sam didn't seem out of place here, even if he was a battle-honed warrior.

He had a confidence and ease about him that made him at home in any setting from a bloody battlefield to the King's court and anywhere in between. She contemplated his strong features as he slept beside her. The lantern wick had burnt down and would flicker out in another few minutes. For now, though, she was cocooned in the low light and the warm bed, held in her lover's arms.

There was no doubt in her mind that Sam had faced adversity in his life. Yet, she also had no doubt that he had come out on top, every time. This man was not a quitter. He was a force of nature that kept going, ever onward, toward his goal.

She wasn't sure exactly what he was seeking, though she could hope part of his life's plan included her, at least for a

little while. He'd already achieved so much, and knowing of his humble beginnings impressed her all that much more. She knew the emotional trauma carried by many of her apprentices. She did her best to help them heal those hidden scars by giving them purpose and a loving home. She could only hope they turned out as well as Sam had.

He'd overcome adversity to rise to the top of his profession. She thought some of her students had a good shot of doing the same. She would be so proud of them if they managed to gain Mastery in the Guild. But that was years off. She was still working on her own Master piece to attain that status for herself.

She thought she had just the thing. A project that inspired her like no other. She was going to combine one of her sketches of Salveer, done that first night they'd met with a few other elements. One of whom was lying beside her. She wanted to immortalize Sam in the stained glass. She'd show him from behind, approaching the dragon. Only she would know it was Sam, which was probably the way he'd want it.

Isolde wouldn't want to give up the piece after it was finished, but she would put it on display. She would build a wooden box to hold it against the wall at the back of the public shop downstairs. She'd give it room so they could light it from behind with lanterns, to really show off the transparent parts while the mirrored parts representing the dragon would reflect the light from the front of the room. She planned to put small channels of transparent glass at some of the major design

points of the dragon to give it more versatility and really give the look of ice that the real-life dragons had.

Dreaming of how she would depict the man lying next to her and the dragon who was his friend, she drifted off to sleep as the lantern burned low.



Sam was gone when Isolde woke in the morning. She wasn't surprised, but she was a little disappointed. She knew he had duties—early morning drills and inspections—at the castle. For that matter, she had duties of her own here at the shop. But she could wish for a quiet morning with just the two of them, lazing in her big bed and enjoying each other a little bit longer.

Alas, it was not to be. Not that morning. Isolde got out of bed and began her normal morning routine. Mr. Everest might be the drill instructor, but Isolde participated in the drills, herself. Every morning, like clockwork, she got in her exercise.

Sometimes, she worked with the youngest of the apprentices, showing them the basics. Sometimes, like this morning, she would work with the oldest, perfecting their sword work, knife fighting and throwing, ax work, and other skills.

After the weapons practice, she and the children all trooped back inside to wash up and get ready for the workday. Isolde planned to finish setting the blades in the scythe this morning. She was excited to get back to the project.

Dressed in her work clothes—breeches and a tunic with protective leather chaps and apron over it—she set to work. By mid-morning, the blades were set, and she was marveling at the beauty of the weapon Edvardson had forged. It was stunning. And probably very lethal in the right hands.

Isolde couldn't resist trying some of the moves Sam had done the day before and found the weapon didn't fight her but flowed into the motions. Its perfect balance and heft gave it a force she hadn't expected, and the blades glittered in the sun, sparkling and shining in a way she found almost seductive.

She set the weapon to the side, cleaning up her work area and collecting every last shard of the precious obsidian for later use. Even the smallest pieces could be set into jewelry items, and she had an apprentice who was particularly talented in making faceted glass by grinding it down on successive turntables. The jet-black obsidian glass would make for beautiful and expensive mourning jewelry, and she had just the goldsmith who would take any of the stones they could make. Obsidian was rare and, therefore, expensive.

She was just finishing up when Lady Shera arrived unexpectedly. It wasn't even lunchtime yet, and normally, she spent her days with the other dragons. Isolde looked up and realized that Shera was in a state of agitation.

"Issy! Issy!" the dragon cried in her mind. Shera had shortened Isolde's name in recent days as she'd become a regular at the shop. *"You have to come with me! The King is in great danger!"*

Chapter Sixteen

Isolde would do anything in her power to help King Alric. She moved closer to Shera, but the dragon pointed with one long talon.

“Bring the weapon, Issy! You’re going to need it.”

“I’ll get my horse—” Isolde began, reaching for the scythe, though she didn’t fully understand. Still, Shera was a dragon, and perhaps she had knowledge passed on from the other dragons.

“No horse! No time! Get on my back, Issy!” Shera crouched low so Isolde could get on, but Isolde hesitated. She’d never been on a dragon’s back before. She’d never *dreamed* of being on a dragon’s back at all! And Shera was so young...

“Have you ever carried someone before, Shera?” Isolde asked hesitantly.

“No, but I know I can do it. I know I can carry you. Though, you may have to jump off because I don’t know how to land with a person on my back yet.” She sounded so sure and so

earnest. *“And I promise to fly really low, so you don’t get hurt when you jump. But we’re wasting time. The King, Issy! The King needs us!”*

Faced with the plea in Shera’s voice, Isolde knew it was crazy, but she got on the dragon’s back and tried to find a comfortable place. She put her legs just in front of the wing joints and behind the shoulders as she’d seen the fair folk do, and that seemed to work.

“Hold on to the pouch strap and my spines,” Shera counselled. *“I’m going to leap upward, then beat my wings, so be ready.”*

Shera had taken to wearing a large leather pouch around her neck that fit close to her chest, as had many of the ice dragons. Lady Zallra had commissioned them and gifted them to all the newly arrived dragons as a gift of friendship. Like any youngster, Shera had been collecting things in her little bag and showing them to the other kids when they played circle games. In fact, a whole game had developed around guessing what might be in Shera’s bag based on questions the children asked her.

Isolde gripped the strap and wrapped it twice around her left arm, grabbing onto a small spine to the left of Shera’s neck. It was pointy, but smooth to the touch. It felt solid. Isolde held the weapon in her right hand, with the staff of it across her lap.

Without further warning, the dragon leapt into the air, then began beating her wings. Isolde almost fell off at that point, but the strap and the position of her legs before the wings and

behind the legs helped, and she managed to stay on. Once they'd gained altitude, Shera began leveling out and heading to the southeast of the city.

Isolde strained her eyes to see if she could make out anything on the ground. If not for the urgency of the situation, Isolde would have really enjoyed her first flight. As it was, she was worried about the King and also a bit afraid the dragon might drop her, regardless of Shera's belief that she could carry Isolde safely.

Clinging to the dragon's back, Isolde began to wonder what she'd been thinking as they left the city behind and were flying over the fields of a farm. There were smaller towns in this direction. In fact, they weren't too far, as the dragon flies, from her father's home. She knew the area well, which was why she could see the problem almost as soon as they got close enough for her eyes to make it out.

"I'm going lower. I think it's over there," Shera said in Isolde's mind. The dragon was clearly concentrating hard on her task and finding the source of the danger.

"It is," Isolde shouted, not sure if Shera could hear her over the wind rushing past them both.

Isolde held on tight as the dragon descended, cupping her wings subtly to slow and drop lower. As they neared, the scene came clearer. For some reason, Alric was alone. Why in the world was he all alone out here? Somebody had screwed up badly to let him go out by himself.

Then she saw the creature sliding through the grain field behind Alric, and though she had never seen such a nightmare before, she knew it was up to no good.

“Shera! The snake monster!” Isolde cried out to the dragon, and Shera veered her path slightly.

“You have to jump, Issy!” Shera’s voice sounded anxiously in her mind. *“I’ll get you as close as possible, but then, you have to jump.”*

“No problem,” Isolde replied, but in her mind, she was wondering if she was about to fall to her death or make a stunningly majestic dive out of the air to rain death on the monster thing that was stalking her King. They’d know in the next few minutes.

She had to time this just right. Unwrapping her left hand from the strap that looped around Shera’s neck, Isolde pulled her feet up one at a time to get them under her, while raising the scythe up and back. She had to jump first, then swing the scythe as she headed for the ground and the monster that was slithering its way across it.

Isolde got her feet under her and waited for the exact moment...

Then, she leapt off of Shera’s back, bringing the scythe down on the neck of the creature that was like a nightmare. It screeched as it dropped, cut cleanly in half by the obsidian blades. It writhed a bit more as Isolde rolled away from it, coming up onto her feet with the scythe dripping blood that sizzled as it touched the ground.

Isolde looked down at herself, glad that anything that had splashed from the creature was on her protective leathers and not her skin. She looked all around but didn't see any other threat. King Alric had stopped his horse and was now surrounded by soldiers on horseback and dragons flying above—both ice dragons and snow dragons.

Shera landed on the road and trumpeted plaintively. *“Issy? Are you hurt?”*

Isolde walked toward the road, going to the dragon, only then realizing she'd somehow sprained her ankle in the jump and roll. She couldn't really put weight on it, so she leaned on the staff of the scythe and hopped as best she could.

“I'm fine, Lady Shera,” Isolde said, panting with the adrenaline coursing through her system. “My King, are you unhurt?” She sought out Alric's gaze.

“I'm fine. Stupid, but fine,” Alric admitted. “I cannot thank you enough for your actions here today, Mistress Isolde. That weapon...” Alric seemed at a loss as he regarded the scythe.

“It was a commission, Sire, made especially for you and ordered by one of the ice dragons,” she explained.

Lord Salveer craned his neck upward, drawing attention. *“It is supposed to be a gift to symbolize our new alliance, Your Majesty,”* he said, his deep voice in their minds.

Alric looked pleased. “It has done that very well indeed, Lord Salveer. I thank you for thinking of me and for having created the only weapon that could possibly lop the head off

that creature with a single blow. I have never seen such a feat, and I owe all of you thanks for your parts in this.”

“You are most welcome, Majesty,” Salveer replied. *“We’ll clean up the blade before presenting it formally to you. From what I understand, skith blood is corrosive to organic materials, so we will need to wash the blade thoroughly in water before it’s safe to handle.”*

“So that really was a skith?” Alric asked.

“A small one,” a petite black dragon replied, stepping forward. Lady Zallra was here. *“I’ve seen full-grown skiths, and I am certain it was one, but it’s smaller than the adults I’ve seen.”*

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” Alric said, echoing what Isolde was thinking herself. “Still, it is a long way from where it belongs. I can only believe that someone brought it here deliberately.”

“Aye, Majesty, that must be the truth of it,” Isolde replied. “But this was not the only threat we’ve heard about in recent weeks.” She had to remind them that not all the threats had been neutralized. Alric was still vulnerable to the Eyes.

“So I’ve been told,” Alric replied, looking at Sam and then back at Isolde.

Sam moved slightly forward, drawing attention. “Sire, might I suggest you fly back to the castle? It is not that easy to protect you on the open road.”

Alric dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to one of the soldiers. “I will do as you say, General. Having been stupid enough to get myself into this situation, I’m afraid I must rely on our dragon friends to get me out of it.”

He went over to the black dragon and hugged her neck briefly before turning to one of the larger dragons. Lady Esselynn offered her services, and Alric gratefully accepted. The dragons took off as a group—all except for Shera and Salveer.

Sam saw to his men, directing some of them to guard the skith corpse until arrangements could be made for cleanup. They weren’t guarding the skith so much as they were guarding the area to keep other people from getting hurt by the thing. Its blood and venom were still dangerous, even in death.

“Are you really all right?” Shera asked Isolde quietly, coming nearer.

“I am really all right. I just sprained my ankle when I rolled, I think. I’ll hop for a few days, but I’ll be all better in a week or so. I’ve sprained it before.” She made light of the injury, though it was beginning to throb. She leaned heavily on the staff of the scythe.

“Oh, good. Though I am sorry you got hurt at all. Even a little,” Shera said, then brightened. *“Still, you were amazing! You did such a good job killing that thing!”*

“Yes, Mistress Isolde,” Salveer came over and looked at her. *“You did very well. And the blade? Did it perform to your expectations?”*

“Above and beyond, Lord Salveer,” Isolde told him. “I hope you don’t mind that I used it today. I had just finished it when Lady Shera said I must come with her because the King was in danger.”

Salveer reared back a little to send a somewhat surprised and suspicious look Shera’s way, but the petite snow dragon held her ground. She said nothing in response to Salveer’s scrutiny. Eventually, Salveer answered Isolde’s question, apparently deciding to let the matter of Shera’s advanced knowledge of the problem drop. For now.

“I do not mind at all,” Salveer said graciously. “In fact, it is a good thing. The weapon has been blooded. It has proved its mettle against a worthy opponent. It is a much better gift now that it has already saved the life of the King once. Hopefully, it will never be called on to do so again, but it is good to know that it can do the job, if necessary.”

“Edvardson did an amazing job on the weapon itself,” Isolde agreed. “And the obsidian blades slice like a hot knife through butter.” She was proud of her work on the blades, but she really needed to get off her foot soon.

Sam came back from instructing his troops and went to his horse, which he had tied to a tree by itself. The other warriors had put their horses at some distance from the General’s. They apparently knew about its bad temper, Isolde surmised. Sam got something out of his saddlebags and walked toward her.

“I think you should ride with me,” Sam said, his voice dropping low. “I can see the way your ankle is swelling from

here.” He dropped down to crouch at her feet. “Let me take a look, and we can wrap it tight to keep it from getting any bigger.” He looked pointedly at the smoking spots on her leather chaps. “I think you’ll need to take off the chaps too. The skith blood is burning through the leather.”

“Ugh,” Isolde said, looking down at her work leathers. “You’re right.”

There was a tree stump not too far away, so she hopped over after Sam straightened, and set herself down, using the staff of the scythe for support. Then, she laid the scythe down at her side and unfastened the buckle that held the chaps, taking them off carefully to avoid spreading any of the acidic stuff that was burning through them.

“We can dispose of these with the body of the creature,” Sam said, looking at the wadded up leather. “The dragons say the only way to get rid of a skith safely is to burn it. Unless you want these for some reason, we can burn them with the creature.” Sam shrugged. “Although, if we could get enough water onto them now and dilute the acid, you could save them and have a neat souvenir of the time you killed a creature that isn’t even supposed to exist in this land.” He chuckled, and she joined in.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” she told him. “I bet the apprentices would get a kick out of seeing the acid holes.” She cringed as she stretched her injured foot out in front of her.

“I’ll get one of my men to see what they can do,” Sam promised. “They’re going to need to douse this whole area

with a lot of water to prevent the skith blood from contaminating the soil here. The dragons are going to come back and help as soon as the King is safely back at the castle. These dragons have never dealt with a skith before, but Lady Zallra has the knowledge, and she's going to oversee the burning and the decontamination of the land."

He took off her shoe while he spoke and began wrapping her swollen ankle in the strip of strong cloth he'd retrieved earlier from his saddlebags. It appeared he had a field medic kit in his bags, which was a good thing for her at this moment. Shera had come over to the tree stump and was hovering behind Isolde, looking down over her shoulder at Isolde's ankle.

"Why is it so big compared to the other one?" the curious dragon asked.

"That's what happens when we stretch one of our joints too far and things tear and stretch inside. Fluid rushes to the spot to try to fix it, and everything puffs up until it's fixed," Isolde explained in terms she hoped the young dragon would understand. "It will be puffy like this for a few days, and each day, it'll get a little less puffy and hurt a little bit less too, until eventually, it'll be back to normal."

Or almost normal, she thought carefully to herself. She'd had experience with bad sprains before, and it was going to be a good long while before this stopped giving her trouble.

But it was worth it. She'd saved the King. That was well worth a few weeks of discomfort.

Finished with her foot, Sam sat back on his haunches to look at her. “It’s a long way back to the city.”

“But not so far to my father’s house,” she replied, making a quick decision. “If you could just get me there, he can help me out, and then, I can go back to the city tomorrow. I’ll need someone to tell my apprentices what happened and where I am. Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Everest can take over for one night.”

“I can do that, after we get you settled at your father’s home. And I’ll come back tomorrow with a coach so you can ride back to the city in more comfort,” Sam promised.

“I don’t want to be too much trouble,” she told him, secretly pleased that he had volunteered to go to such lengths for her. Oh, how she loved this man.

“No trouble at all for the hero of the day. Without your quick action—and Lady Shera’s quick thinking in getting you and bringing you here—things could have gone so much worse.” Sam stood, gazing down at her with approval shining in his eyes. “It was too close a call for me to be comfortable with what happened. I still haven’t figured out why the King was out here alone, but whatever caused him to take such actions will have to be prevented in the future.”

“He was tricked,” Shera said unexpectedly. *“Someone told him that Zallra was out here, hurt, and he didn’t stop to think because he loves his mate so much.”*

Sam grimaced. “We’re going to have to track that down. If there’s an enemy in the King’s court that we don’t know about, it could be very dangerous indeed.”

Chapter Seventeen

“I can help,” Isolde offered. “If I ask the right questions, I can usually find the answer. And now I think we’re on the right track to knowing what questions to ask.”

Sam nodded and went back to his horse, stowing the supplies back in the saddlebags. Then, he talked to one of his soldiers as he untied the horse and brought it closer to Isolde.

It was a beautiful horse, but she could see that it had bad manners. She hoped her little brother would be at home when they got there so he could take a look and maybe give an opinion as to whether or not he could work with the brute. Sam should be able to depend more on his horse, and there was nothing wrong with the beast’s conformation. It would be a perfect warhorse if not for his questionable behavior.

It took some doing, but they got her aboard the tall beast, sitting in front of Sam, with his arms around her. Her ankle hurt. A lot. But they weren’t too far from her father’s place, and she’d be able to elevate the injury and get a healing poultice on it soon enough.

“We will fly above your path to make sure there are no more of the creatures or any other dangers in your way,” Lord Salveer said unexpectedly while Shera nodded her snow-white head in enthusiastic agreement.

“Thank you, milord, milady,” Isolde said, nodding to each of the dragons. “That’s very kind of you both.”

They said nothing in return, but launched into the air. The sun shone in iridescent sparkles off of Lord Salveer’s glittering silver scales and turned Shera even more impossibly white than she had already been. They were breathtaking to watch, but the older and larger Salveer quickly outpaced the younger Shera. He flew much higher and scouted ahead while Shera kept to the lower altitudes.

Held securely in Sam’s arms, they made their way slowly toward her father’s home. Shera flew overhead, sometimes circling so she could stay close to them. Niggling thoughts were bothering Isolde, so she tried to project her thoughts to the young white dragon circling above her.

“Shera, can you hear me?” Isolde tried.

“I can. Very good, Isolde. Not all who hear us can project their thoughts to us as well,” Shera told her. *“But if anyone could, it would be you.”*

“Why do you say that?” Isolde asked, curious. *“And how did you know what was going to happen? Lady Shera...are you a foreseer?”*

“Actually...yes. I am. My elders tell me it is a very rare gift and that my ability is particularly strong. I told them what I had seen, and though I am still very young to be away from home, they agreed that I needed to come here. And when I saw that you were an artisan of glass, I knew you were the one I had been seeking. I saw prisms and mirrors and windows of colored glass in my vision, though I didn’t really recognize what they were. My elders knew, and they explained that part to me. I knew there was a person who made such things and that I would befriend that person and help prevent something terrible, but I didn’t see your face in the visions. I didn’t even know if you were a girl or a boy.” The young dragon seemed to chuckle, smoke rising into the sky from her nostrils as she flew lazy circles over their path. *“But when we met in the courtyard of the castle, I knew. That window you pointed out. I’d seen that window in my vision, so I knew it had to be you.”*

“Can you tell me any of the other things you’ve foreseen?” Isolde asked cautiously. She had dealt with a few Jinn seers from time to time, and they were always cagey about the future.

“Some,” Shera replied. *“I came here for you, and to save the King and our new alliance. But I also came for the ice dragon who is so friendly with the General.”*

“Lord Salveer?” Isolde was intrigued. *“Why?”*

“Because in a few years, when I’m grown up, he’s going to be my mate.” Shera’s voice was filled with both certainty and dreamy fascination. Isolde was astounded.

“Really?” She couldn’t help but ask for more, since the dragon had been more forthcoming than any seer she’d ever spoken with.

“Oh, yes,” Shera replied. *“But you mustn’t tell him. He has to figure that out for himself when the time is right. But I trust you, Isolde. Because... Well, I can’t say exactly why just yet, but we’re going to be friends for a very long time. It all starts here, and it goes on for the rest of your life.”*

Isolde gasped, and Sam’s arms tightened around her. She could hardly believe what the dragon was implying.

“Are you in pain?” Sam asked. He’d been concentrating on keeping his horse under control and giving her space, but he was alert to her every move.

“No, I’m talking with Lady Shera, and she’s been telling me the most amazing things.” Isolde knew she was close to babbling, and she had to get that under control. She also had to lay down some groundwork with Shera so she knew what she could and couldn’t say. “Hang on a minute. I have to ask her something else.” Isolde redirected her thoughts. *“Lady Shera, can I tell the General that you are a seer? Is that all right? I won’t reveal anything else you’ve said unless you tell me explicitly that I may. I promise.”*

“I trust you, Isolde. Since the other dragons will figure out about my gift after this, you might as well tell the General. But please ask him to limit who he tells to the King and Lady Zallra. My abilities are best utilized while nobody knows I have them. That’s what my mother said, anyway.”

“I understand. And since we’re sharing confidences, I feel it’s only fair to tell you my real identity. It’s also a closely held secret that only the King, Lady Zallra and General Brighton know of those that live in the castle. I am the Jinn Spymaster of Valdis Maj.”

“Oh!” Shera seemed to understand. *“Then all your apprentices are...?”*

“Apprentices of the glass arts, yes, but also my eyes and ears, and spies in training.” Isolde hoped her amusement came through in her tone. *“Perhaps you can be the first dragon member of my network. What do you think?”*

“I think it sounds like fun!” Isolde watched as Shera executed a loop-de-loop in the sky above their heads. She really was incredibly graceful in the air. It was mesmerizing to watch her.

“What is she so happy about?” Sam asked in a low voice near Isolde’s ear.

“Lady Shera thinks it will be great fun to be the first official dragon member of my spy network. I just told her my secret identity.” Isolde looked back at him and smiled.

“Is that wise?” Sam asked, one eyebrow raised.

“It seemed fair. She just shared a big secret with me, and she gave me permission to tell you as long as you limit who you tell to King Alric and Lady Zallra.”

“I so swear,” Sam said loud enough that the dragon could hear as she swooped closer on her next circle.

“Then I am free to tell you that the reason Lady Shera knew to come here and bring me with the weapon is because she foresaw it. She’s a seer. That’s the whole reason she came here with the other snow dragons, despite her young age,” Isolde explained. “She is a wild-born dragon. I suspect none of the other snow dragons who live among the fair folk knew her before she showed up on the edge of their Vale and asked to come along when they left for Valdis.”

“Mama asked them to let me come,” Shera put in from above, sending to both of them. She was clearly listening in on their conversation. *“They said it was irregular, but they agreed.”*

“I believe, after today, they will be very glad that they let you tag along, my dear,” Sam said. It was obvious he felt some affection for Shera, as did Isolde. She was a loveable child who was so very capable. And she had a brave innocence that was endearing.

“You really think so?” Shera asked in a tone that would have been breathless had she been able to speak aloud.

“I do,” Sam answered immediately.

“And so do I,” Isolde seconded. “King Alric is much loved by his people and key to keeping the new alliances together. I have sworn to use all my skills to protect him, and I am so very grateful that you knew what was going to happen and brought me to help. Though, I think we should probably hide my part in the affair from public knowledge. I would be happy to let you and Lord Salveer take credit for dispatching the

creature. It would be better to let that be the public story anyway. Nobody needs to know about my weapons training. As far as the world is concerned, I'm just a glass maker. Nothing more."

"I guess I understand, but I'd feel strange taking credit for something I didn't do," Shera said tentatively.

"But you *did* do it, Lady Shera," Sam said loud enough for the dragon to hear. "You were the entire reason Isolde was able to kill the skith. You brought her here. You told her to bring the weapon. You flew her here yourself. And I'll tell the same thing to Lord Salveer. He commissioned the weapon, and it was the perfect thing for killing that creature. If I didn't know better, I'd think he had some power of foresight as well." Sam paused a moment, then went on. "The two of you together, my dear, brought about this victory. Maybe you didn't use your claws or teeth or fire, but you could have just as easily done that. Instead, you created a situation where the perfect solution was ready when it was needed. No matter exactly how it was done, you two are directly responsible for the death of that thing. You deserve the credit. Especially as it will take some of the attention off my lady, here. Isolde needs to preserve her anonymity, if at all possible. On that, I agree. Right now, only a few of my men saw what she did, and they are part of my hand-picked platoon of confidants. If I ask them to keep this to themselves, they will."

"All right," Shera agreed a little shakily. *"But the other dragons will know the truth. I'm not old enough to know how to kill a skith. Neither is Salveer, really,"* she told them.

“He isn’t?” Sam asked sharply. “Just how old is he?”

“*Older than me, but not by a lot,*” Shera admitted. “*He’s like Kurt, and I’m like Hunter,*” she added, using the journeyman and the young apprentice she knew as examples.

“So, he’s almost a full adult, but still in training and you’re just beginning your training,” Isolde interpreted. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” Shera said, executing another acrobatic move in the sky as she followed their path. “*He thinks I’m still a baby, but he’ll learn.*”

“After what you did here today, milady,” Sam told the snow-white dragon, “you have earned everyone’s respect. You may be young in years, but you are a capable lass with a heart of gold. That is clear to see.”

“*Aw, thank you, General.*” She executed another aerial flip that looked impossible yet beautiful at the same time. “*I like you too. You and Isolde are my favorite humans, so far.*”

“I think that’s the nicest thing anybody’s ever said to me,” Isolde told the dragon, feeling unexpected tears behind her eyes.

Shera was the sweetest, kindest, most innocent child... Yet, she had such an amazing ability and a depth of courage Isolde had seldom encountered, even in seasoned warriors.



There was an older man sitting on a wide porch when Sam and Isolde rode into view of the house. The man stood when he saw them and came down the steps, concern on his face. Sam pulled the horse up short of the man.

“Sorry, sir. This horse isn’t well behaved,” he said to the man who was most likely Isolde’s father.

Isolde slid down from the saddle with Sam’s help and landed on her good foot, wincing only a little at the jarring motion. Sam gave her the scythe from where they’d stowed it across the horse’s rump, and she used it as a crutch as she hopped away from the horse and closer to the man.

“Hi, Dad. Is Tam here, by any chance? General Brighton has a bit of a problem horse, and I thought if Tam was around, he could take stock and see if there was anything he could do, since we’re here. Oh, and I sprained my ankle. Can I stay here tonight?” she asked, moving closer to her father.

He reached out and hugged her. “Of course, you can. How did you get hurt?”

“It’s a long story,” Isolde replied, “but I’ll tell it all to you over dinner, if that’s all right. Everything is fine now, but I have to see to my ankle before it gets any bigger.” She drew away and turned to Sam. “General Samnir Brighton, this is my father, Tanner van Aidel, retired Guild Master of the Leatherworker’s Guild.”

Sam tied his horse to the rail of the fence and walked over to shake the older man’s hand.

“A pleasure to meet you, sir,” Sam said politely.

“Good to meet you too, General. I heard about your arrival in the city, and my youngest talked non-stop for days about your horse.” The older man’s face crinkled with amusement. Sam looked back at the black beast that would listen to no one but him.

“Wolfsbane?” he wondered aloud. “I didn’t realize people were talking about him. He has his quirks, but there’s no horse I’d trust more on the battlefield. He’s a better fighter than some of my trained soldiers.”

At that moment, a youngster appeared from behind the barn that was set at a short distance from the house. When he saw them, he broke into a jog.

“Ah, there he is. Now you’ll see just how much my youngest is besotted with horses,” Tanner said with good humor. “He has a talent for it though. Or so his master tells me. Tamlin, come meet General Brighton and his Wolfsbane. Your sister turned her ankle and appears to have the most intricate and odd-looking weapon that I have ever seen in her possession. She says it’s a *long story*.”

His emphasis on the last two words were almost comical. As if he was used to his children showing up with wild tales on the spur of the moment. Perhaps he was, Sam mused to himself.

Isolde laughed outright and rolled her eyes as she began hopping her way up to the porch. Torn between making sure she didn’t have some kind of mishap going up the steps and

protecting her young brother from his unruly horse, Sam didn't quite know what to do.

"May I take a look at your horse, sir?" Tamlin said as he drew closer.

"He's not friendly," Sam warned, still torn as to which direction to move. "He's been known to bite and kick."

The youth smiled. "Oh, don't worry, sir. I know what I'm doing. I just want to see how bad he is, and then, maybe I can tell you if he can be fixed and still keep his fighting spirit."

Sam had his doubts about whether or not the boy could do as he promised, but he couldn't take the indecision anymore. He got to Isolde just as she started to mount the steps and hovered behind her, in case she lost her balance. Sam was aware of her father giving him the side eye, but he didn't much care. Isolde was hurt, and that bothered him on some basic level he hadn't fully understood until now.

It hurt his heart to know that she was in pain. If he thought about it too long, he might just realize that he was in love with the woman.

The realization hit him like a bolt of lightning out of the blue. But he couldn't think about it now. Not when he'd just met her father for the first time. Sam had to have his wits about him, lest he make a bad impression on her family. That wouldn't do at all. Not if he was going to court her with the idea of making their relationship permanent.

She had been so incredibly brave today. She had put her own life on the line to save another. To save the King.

In reality, that was Sam's job. But he hadn't been there. And Shera and Isolde had swooped in to save the day. Thanks be to the Mother of All.

The kingdom needed Alric. If he was murdered, the entire country would be in an uproar, and all the new alliances might just fall apart. The whole country would go backward instead of forward to the bright future that Alric was working toward.

It would be a blow to everyone in Valdis if Alric was killed. It would also mean that Sam had screwed up, royally. He would blame himself. He might even give up soldiering. Losing a monarch was not something an officer could just bounce back from. Nobody would trust him. He wouldn't even trust himself.

Isolde's actions today had saved more than just the King's life. And he was so damn proud of her.

He loved her. And he was going to marry her.

He would be on his best behavior with her family. He didn't want to screw things up now.

Chapter Eighteen

Sam didn't stay long at her father's house. Isolde knew he had to get back to his men. There would be a lot of work to do to decontaminate the area where the creature had been killed, not to mention disposing of the carcass. The dragons would help, but Sam would be leading his men in all the tasks that people had to perform.

The dragons had kept their distance, much to Isolde's surprise, until after Sam departed. Tam had spent the entire time with Wolfsbane and had come to the conclusion that he could help train the beast to behave better, if given some time with him. Sam had looked skeptical but agreed that he would be in contact to set up a time for his next free afternoon.

As Sam rode away on Wolfsbane, Lord Salveer dove in from above, making Tam jump then whoop for joy at seeing an ice dragon so close. Salveer did a low pass over the house and the road, including Sam and his horse, then flew ahead, keeping an eye out for danger from above.

Shera decided to land in front of Isolde's father's house. She stood there with Tamlin gawking at her until Isolde called out from the porch. "Lady Shera, that's my brother Tamlin. Tam, this is Lady Shera. She's a very young, wild-born snow dragon from the far north. She's been playing ball games with my apprentices. Maybe you two could amuse yourselves while I get my foot fixed up?" Isolde's father was already inside, getting a poultice together or she would have introduced him as well, but her ankle was really hurting now, and she knew she had to get off it as soon as possible.

Isolde left the weapon on the porch, laying it off to one side, and hopped into the house. She cautioned her father about it as she settled on a chair by the door.

"Don't touch that blade. It's got acid on it that burned right through my leathers. I'm going to have to soak it in the river or something to clean it off."

"What *is* that thing?" her father asked, coming over with the poultice he had prepared.

Isolde sighed. "It is a commission. Edvardson did the body of it, and I was asked to do the blades. They are made of obsidian."

Her father's head came up, and he met her gaze. She could read the surprise in his eyes. Even though he was a leather worker by trade, he knew how rare and expensive obsidian was.

"Who commissioned such a piece? One of the noblemen?" he asked. He knew that weapon wasn't anything a commoner

could afford.

“As a matter of fact, it was ordered by the ice dragon that just flew overhead. Lord Salveer is his name, and he brought me the obsidian too. He is going to pay me with more of it, though I have enough scraps left from what he gave me to make the blades to make a tidy profit already. I told him so, but he insisted that he will be giving me more. Apparently, he knows a cave where he can get some decent sized rocks of the stuff.”

“Amazing.” Her father shook his head as he set to work unwrapping the field dressing Sam had put on her ankle. It was raised on the second chair she had tugged around in front of her. “Did the dragon also specify the size and shape of the weapon? What would you call that thing anyway?”

“It’s sort of a combination of a pike and an axe, but it looks more like a scythe. I’ve been calling it that, though I have no idea what the King will make of it. Lord Salveer intends to present the weapon to the King in commemoration of the new alliance between the ice dragons and our kingdom,” she revealed.

“If it’s such a costly item, why do you have it here? And why is it covered in acid?” her father asked astutely.

Isolde sighed as the cold poultice was applied to her inflamed skin. That felt really good.

“That’s all part of the long story,” she told him with a faint smile. “I was just finishing putting the last of the blades into the scythe this morning when Lady Shera landed in my yard,

in great distress. She insisted I come with her immediately and bring the weapon. She also insisted that I ride on her back,” Isolde said, still hardly believing herself that she had flown on the back of a dragon.

“You flew? On a dragon?” Her father looked both alarmed and impressed.

Isolde shook her head in continued disbelief. “I did. It’s all kind of a blur now, but that’s how I got out here. Somehow, the King had been lured out all by himself. He was riding on the old farm road down by South Meadow, and someone had laid a trap for him.”

Her father frowned. “That’s not good. We knew the King had enemies, but if they are actively plotting assassination, then things have ramped up.”

“I agree,” Isolde said, also frowning as she thought about it. “Well, someone must have paid a lot of money to get someone else to capture and transport the juvenile skith.”

“A skith?” Her father’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“That’s what the dragons say,” Isolde replied. “Lady Zallra has seen them before. She was able to confirm that the carcass was indeed a skith. Albeit a small one.” Isolde shivered. “It was heading right for the King when I jumped off Shera’s back and lopped its head off with the scythe.”

“You did what now?”

“You heard me.” She eyed her father. “We’re going to try to give the credit for the kill to the two dragons you just saw.

Only a few of us will know the truth. Otherwise, it will draw too much attention to me and could interfere with my other role.”

“Ah.” Her father leaned back and nodded. “I see what you mean. It’s a shame, but probably wise.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t really want the notoriety. It’s bad enough that my shop has become known as the place where the dragons play every night.” She rolled her eyes and chuckled.

“That’s your shop?” her father asked with a grin. “I’d heard that some of the snow dragons play with apprentices at somebody’s place, but I didn’t realize it was yours.”

“It’s mine, all right. Since Luc and Lilly have started moving in next door, Shilayla and Shera have been hopping the wall after work hours to play ball with my apprentices. Shilayla doesn’t always come, but Shera is only ten winters old, and she likes playing with the children. She comes over every evening.”

“That’s amazing.”

Isolde looked out the door just to her right. “*She’s* amazing. We’ve become quite friendly.”

“I can see that.” Her father beamed. “And she seems to like Tam as well.”

Both of them looked out the door to see the young dragon and the boy playing together in the front yard. Tam was laughing, and Shera looked happy, with little rings of smoke

rising from her nostrils to float into the sky. Dragonish laughter.



After a restless night with her leg propped up on pillows, Isolde felt a little better. She had left some clothing at her dad's place for those nights when she stayed over after their family dinners rather than ride back to the city in a storm. She had risen early, bathed as best she could, and changed into fresh clothing.

Much to her surprise, Shera had bedded down in the barn overnight. Tamlin had set her up with fresh water and a little nest of hay for comfort. Being so young, she didn't have much fire in her yet, so there was little chance she would have an accident and set the place ablaze. Even if she did, dragons were masters of fire. She could put one out as easily as she could start one, either by stomping on it or depriving it of air with one massive swipe of her wing. Fire couldn't penetrate her tough hide, so she could simply lay on it or tamp it out with any part of her body and not get hurt.

Isolde had breakfast with her family, enjoying the change in routine, even if she didn't enjoy the reason for it. Her ankle ached, and it was still swollen and painful. It was turning all sorts of colors today too. This was going to take some time to heal.

Unable to help with the cleanup from their meal, Isolde sat at the table with her foot propped up on a spare chair. She didn't

know what time to expect Sam to come for her, but she had agreed to let him do so. It was kind of romantic, how much he seemed to care for her injury. It was nice to be able to lean on a man for help when she needed it.

She'd always been able to seek help from her family, and her clan, but this was different. She had never had just one person—one man—she could depend on. She had never been fortunate enough to find a lover who not only made her feel desired, but also cherished. Somehow, Sam did both of those things.

She was daydreaming about him when she heard the approach of the carriage. Unable to just pop up from her chair to take a look, she waited for her father to tell her what he saw out the window when he got to it.

“Well, I’ll be.” When her father didn’t say much more than that, Isolde did her best to tamp down her frustration.

“What is it, Dad?”

“It’s the fanciest carriage I’ve ever seen, and it’s got the King’s crest on the door. Either we’re about to get a royal visit, or the General asked a favor of the King.” Her father sounded impressed. She was too.

“I’d bet on the latter,” Isolde told him with a chuckle. “With any luck, the King learned his lesson yesterday and won’t be making any trips outside the safety of his castle until after we’ve caught whoever is trying to kill him. I suspect King Alric sent the coach in thanks for what I did yesterday.”

Although, she thought Sam must have asked, since Alric hadn't known she hadn't returned to her shop last night.

There he went again. Making her feel cherished and special. She loved the man, but he wasn't a safe bet. He was a soldier. A warrior who moved from place to place. Before he'd become the leader of Alric's army, he'd been a mercenary, traveling all around. She thought he might have itchy feet. He'd been with Alric for a few years, but that was no guarantee that he would stay here forever.

And unlike most Jinn, Isolde was happy staying in one place. She had her shop and her careers. She had her friends and apprentices. She had a full life here with her family nearby. She didn't want to move around. Even for love, she would not give up everything she had here.

Especially since men who liked to roam often didn't stay with just one woman. It would be dangerous in the extreme to expect him to remain faithful. That was a good way to get her heart broken, and Isolde didn't want to let herself in for that kind of pain.

Better that she enjoy the time they had together while it lasted. She couldn't really hope for more.

On that depressing thought, she stood to hop back into the guest room where she had spent the night and pack up her things. Sam had brought the royal coach. She was about to return to the city in style.



Lord Orthan seethed. He had spent a great deal of money and time to find untraceable assassins that he could loose on Alric. The man he despised.

They had almost had him yesterday, but those damned dragons had intervened. Those blasted creatures were no better than vermin. He was disgusted at the way they had the run of the castle and grounds. They were animals. Not people. Alric had yet to learn that if you laid down with dogs, you got up with fleas. Whatever the Dragon equivalent was to fleas was bound to be disgusting and most probably dangerous.

He'd heard they could talk...somehow. But he'd never heard a dragon talk, so as far as he was concerned that was just some kind of scam. It was like the trainer at the circus that could make his horse do math. Nothing more than that.

One of his informants had even brought Orthan some wild tale about *that woman* Alric was besotted with. The informant had claimed she could turn into a dragon at will. Orthan had ordered the man beaten for telling lies.

But now...he wasn't so sure. Perhaps he'd been hasty to cripple that informant. It was clear to Orthan now that there was something supremely odd about *that woman*. Some dark magic that tainted her and all she touched.

Orthan didn't like magic. He'd done well dealing with Osmian the Alchemist all those years because Osmian was a man of science. Magic didn't enter into it. Orthan liked that. He loathed all that had to do with magic, and the dragons were probably the worst of that lot.

If Orthan was in charge, there would be no dragon alliance. The dragons could all go back to where they'd come from and stay there. Valdis didn't need their kind of interference. Valdis had always been a place for men. Not creatures. Alric had turned his court into a freak show, as far as Orthan was concerned.

But he dare not let any of his disdain show in his demeanor. He had to act the noble lord who served his idiot King no matter what. Orthan's plots depended on his being thought loyal to Alric. So, he seethed quietly and tried not to let his disgust for those creatures show on his face.

He'd been working for months to engineer a fatal accident for the King. It had been easier to imagine killing the bastard while he was still blind. Now that he could see, Orthan had decided to go outside the usual places and hire specialist help from faraway lands.

He'd been content to pull Alric's strings for the many years he'd been blind. Orthan had enjoyed leading the pathetic blind boy down the paths he'd wanted him to take and had profited greatly on several occasions that had enriched his family coffers. But now that Alric could see, he was much more independent. He was also an adult now and about to be married to *that woman*.

Orthan refused to call her by name. She was the ruination of all his plans. Orthan had been working for years to convince the King to marry Orthan's daughter. She was ugly and barren, but what did it matter? Alric hadn't been able to see. And if

they'd had no children, so much the better. Orthan was distantly related to Alric, and he'd long ago established exactly who he'd had to kill to make himself the only living heir to the throne. He had silently eliminated the closer relations over the past years, and now, there was only one child standing between him and the throne. The child was negligible. Orthan would control him or kill him. It didn't much matter which.

But now Alric was planning a wedding to *that woman*, and Orthan was going to have to kill the silly boy before the big event. Orthan couldn't have a widow around, mucking up the succession. Or he'd just have to kill her too. He could kill them together, but that wasn't exactly easy. Just getting Alric had proven harder than Orthan had thought possible.

The easiest way would be to get Alric before he tied the knot. Quick and simple. Only...it hadn't proven to be all that simple. Orthan had sent his operative out all over the lands to find the best assassins, and they'd come back with two supposedly *foolproof* plans.

The skith had been a stupid plan from the beginning, Orthan thought now that it had failed, but he'd had high hopes for it before yesterday's debacle. Getting Alric out of the castle hadn't been easy either. He'd had to give up one of his operatives inside the castle to make it happen. He'd promised the man a flight to safety, but it was safer for Orthan to just have him killed and the body disposed of where it would never be found.

The long-time castle staff member had given Alric the message about *that woman* being in peril, and like the besotted fool he was, Alric had saddled up his horse and headed for the countryside. Directed by the note to exactly where the skith had been let loose to chomp him to bits.

Only those damned dragons had intervened. Orthan should have realized. The most ancient legends said that the wizard Dranneth the Wise had created dragons to be the natural enemy of skiths, who had been created by the wizard Skir. Dranneth and Skir had been engaged in battle, and the creatures had been their proxies. Now that there were dragons in Valdis, the skith plan had been doomed from the start.

That left the assassins known only as Eyes. They had cost a small fortune to lure to this land, but Orthan had managed it. Just. He anticipated taking over the entire treasury once Alric was dead, so what did it matter? He'd get it all back and then some.

He just had to kill Alric as cleanly as possible with no blame coming to rest on Orthan's shoulders. He had to appear innocent if he was going to step in to save the realm. And once that happened, he would kill a few dragons and have their heads stuffed as trophies for the throne room as a warning to all who dared dabble with magical things.

Chapter Nineteen

Isolde didn't leave her shop for the next week. She spent her days with her foot propped up on a stool while she sketched out new patterns or cut colored glass panes to make the shapes she needed for a new window she was working on for a temple at the edge of the city. The apprentices brought her things when she needed them, so she didn't have to get up any more than necessary.

Sam had brought her a set of crutches from the castle infirmary when he'd brought the carriage to take her back from her father's house, and she'd been using them ever since. They had stopped to wash the scythe in the river on the way back from the countryside so it would be clean of the acidic skith blood that had dried on it. Someone else—probably Edvardson—would clean it more thoroughly and polish it up for its presentation to the King. Isolde would have done it, but she couldn't quite manage the more physical tasks yet with her ankle still swollen and uncomfortable.

Shera came every night to play with the apprentices and check on Isolde. The dragon stayed later than she ever had, sitting in the yard and talking with Isolde while the apprentices went in for dinner. The city had been blessed with fine weather, and Isolde had a comfortable chair with a place to raise her foot, so she was just as happy to have her dinner outside, keeping Shera company.

The stairs were still a bit of a problem, so she was sleeping in one of the workshops at the back of the building that had been cleared out enough to fit a cot and some of Isolde's personal items. A few times she'd awakened in the night and looked out the window to the yard and seen Shera sleeping just on the other side of the glass, keeping Isolde company, even as she slept.

They were becoming even better friends, and Shera was a delight. She had such a unique way of looking at the world. She was still a child in so many ways, but she also had a maturity about her that was unlike human children. Perhaps it was a dragon thing. Isolde wasn't sure, but she was coming to really respect Shera as a person.

Maybe *person* was the wrong word, but Isolde couldn't think of a better term to describe her new friend. She wasn't a creature. She was a dragon, but her heart was as deep and true as any human Isolde knew. Shera was a being of light with a pure soul and a seemingly bottomless heart, and Isolde felt privileged to have her friendship.

She even admitted to herself that she loved the young dragon. Like a sister. And not necessarily a little sister. Shera might be young in years, but she had an intelligence about her that sometimes made Isolde feel as if she was talking with an ageless being of infinite wisdom.

Sometimes, they talked silently at night while Isolde was in bed and couldn't sleep, and Shera was outside the window. The more she practiced sending her thoughts to the dragon, the better she was getting at it.

"Salveer is getting very close with your Sam," Shera observed one night as they were chatting.

"He's not my Sam," Isolde objected with an inner amusement that came through in her tone.

"He certainly thinks he is. Malea told me about all the little gifts he's been sending to you every day. Your favorite sweets. Specially baked fruit bread. Spice tea from Elderland. The girls are all practically swooning at how romantic he's being."

Isolde felt her face heat with a flush. Sam *was* being romantic, but she knew she shouldn't read too much into it. He was a soldier with wandering feet. Sooner or later, he'd leave, and she'd be alone again. She just wanted to enjoy it while it lasted and try not to think about anything permanent because he probably wasn't.

"He's very attentive," she agreed finally. *"But he probably isn't staying. I can't set my heart on him."*

Shera was uncharacteristically silent for a long moment, then changed the subject. Isolde suspected she did that when she knew more than she could say about the future, and Isolde respected the seer's right to filter what she had foreseen. Even if it did drive her crazy with curiosity.

“Do you think the General realizes that Salveer isn't fully grown?” Shera asked next.

Isolde had to think about that for a moment. *“Actually, no. I don't think Sam has thought about it at all. Salveer is so...big. I mean, all ice dragons are really big, but he's about as large as the rest of them, so it's hard to judge his age by his size. I'd say Sam doesn't realize it.”*

“Are you going to tell him?” Shera's tone was a bit sly and amused.

“I don't know. Should I?” Isolde didn't wait for an answer. *“I suppose I could leave it for a surprise. I wonder what Sam will think when he finally realizes that Salveer isn't fully grown yet.”*

“He'll probably start wondering just how big Salveer is going to get, but really, he's not going to get too much taller. He's almost at his full height now. He's just going to fill out...a lot. But I'm going to get big enough to be his counterpart without us being too mismatched.” Shera's voice went dreamy as it usually did when she happened to mention Salveer and the future she foresaw for them together. *“Our hatchlings, though. They're going to be mighty. Large like their father and*

agile like me.” She sighed mentally. “They’re going to do great things. Just like your babies.”

“Wait a minute.” Isolde startled out of her near-doze. *“My babies?”*

“Well, you’re going to have children. Eventually. That can’t be too much of a surprise, can it?” Shera was backpedaling, which meant she’d said something she probably hadn’t meant to say.

Isolde was just a little too shocked to pursue the topic. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know that much about her future family anyway. Some things were best left to Fate, she decided, and let it go.

“I like the idea of being able to tease Sam,” Isolde told the dragon a few minutes later. *“For so long, my work has always just been work. I haven’t really had anybody to play with that way. Spy craft isn’t usually a laughing matter. But it’s different with Sam. He has a way of making me find joy even in my secret work. It used to be that my mischievous side only came out in my glass work.”*

“How so?” Shera asked.

“Sometimes I put small things into my compositions that don’t quite belong there. It’s especially easy with stained glass, and I don’t do it with the works commissioned by religious orders. But, for example, there was a particular nobleman who wanted a stained-glass window for the great hall in his city mansion. He wasn’t the nicest fellow I’ve ever had to work for, so I added a little extra to the image he wanted me to feature.”

She smiled to herself, remembering that particular job. *“It was a hunting scene showing the nobleman’s favorite horse, and himself riding it. I can’t do exact portraits in glass, but I can get the colors right, for the most part. And we paint on the faces for people, so we can get pretty close to the right features. This nobleman also wanted at least two of his favorite dogs depicted. It was a very large window, and it took me many weeks to create, but I got in everything he wanted, and then some. I put in the horse, and him riding it, and a good half dozen dogs. But most of the dogs are behind the horse, not in front. He’s the one being chased...forever in glass, though he never even realized it. All he saw when he accepted the final piece was himself as the center of attention in the middle of the composition.”*

“I should like to see that someday,” Shera said sleepily.

“The next time he has a ball at his mansion, you can sit outside and see the window illuminated from within,” Isolde replied, yawning. *“I’ll let you know if I hear he’s throwing a party.”*

“That would be nice.” Shera’s voice faded away as they both finally fell asleep.



Across the city, within the castle grounds, Sam was lying in his own bed in the barracks. He’d been so busy recently. He hadn’t had a chance to see Isolde since he brought her back from her father’s, and he found that he missed her. She was the

kind of woman he could envision spending the rest of his life with. And wasn't that a scary thought?

But when it came right down to it, it really wasn't that scary after all. There was just something about her that made him want to be in her orbit for all time. He'd had time to come to grips with the discovery that he was in love with her, but he hadn't been able to figure out what to do about it. His future was so uncertain.

He wanted her in his life. He wanted to marry her and keep her for all time, but he didn't know how it was going to work.

He still couldn't figure out how his current situation might lead to the fulfillment of a prophecy he'd been given years ago when he'd been working in Elderland. Those small flying lizard-like creatures known as virkin had befriended him, as well as a few other special individuals. One of the virkins' friends was a seer who had received a powerful vision about Sam's future. The old man had counseled Sam to leave Elderland and seek his destiny in Valdis. Sam hadn't really been convinced, but the virkin could be very persuasive. They had worked on him until he had agreed to go, though he had regretted leaving the small group of virkin behind.

Still, things hadn't worked out too badly. He'd gone from being a simple mercenary officer to becoming a General, leading a nation's army. That had been a huge step for Sam, but not anything he couldn't handle. He also really liked this land, and its people. He particularly admired its King. Alric was one of the finest men Sam had ever met, who genuinely

cared about his people and would sacrifice everything for their comfort, safety, and future.

Sam had not run across many leaders who felt the same way. In fact, Alric was a rarity to be cherished and protected. Sam felt like he had found his true calling here among the people of Valdis, which he had not necessarily expected.

But he still didn't see how the rest of the prophecy could come true. Becoming a General had been the first part, but the second part—joining his life to that of a dragon—had seemed completely out of reach. Although...maybe not so much anymore.

The dragons who had come to Valdis were not like the dragons of Draconia. They did not habitually form partnerships with humans. Certainly, some of the snow dragons joined with fair folk, but those magical people were not the same race as humans. They were immortal, or so it was believed. Until recently, they had been more legend than reality. They had lived in their northern enclave and never really interacted with anybody outside of it.

And the ice dragons had not been seen in the lands of men for centuries. From their own accounts, they had chosen seclusion and were only just now coming out of it. They were very mysterious, but they seemed to have prophecies of their own which they were following.

Sam had been told that he would join his life to a dragon and play a key role in stopping evil in lands to the east. He had interpreted that to mean that he would have to cross the

Dragon's Teeth and find his destiny in Draconia, but the virkin had objected. They'd insisted that he go to Valdis, and that all would be revealed if he was patient enough.

He had been in this kingdom for almost a decade. In fact, he had stayed much longer than he had originally intended. Secretly, he had always expected to take the long journey across the mountains and see if things were different in Draconia, but now, it looked like he wouldn't have to go that far. Dragons were on the rise in Valdis, which was something he never could have predicted or expected.

For the first time in a long time, Sam was beginning to wonder if that prophecy he had been given so long ago might now be ready to come to pass. But hope is a fragile thing, and he still wasn't sure that he was worthy of such a destiny. He didn't really understand how any of it could work, but hope was simmering deep in his heart again, nonetheless.

His growing friendship with Salveer was part of what gave him hope. He was able to talk to the dragon as if he was a brother. A comrade-in-arms. A fellow warrior who understood a lot of what had brought Sam to this place at this time.

Salveer was a good listener, and they'd been spending time together working to keep the King as safe as possible, even within the castle grounds. Alric knew that the dragons had taken the task upon themselves of keeping Alric safe, but there were plenty of places in the castle that dragons could not fit. For that reason, they had enlisted the help of certain warriors.

Sam didn't know what criteria the dragons used to choose the men they approached, but they probably had some way of determining the loyalty and strength of the men they saw working the battlements and drilling with Sam each morning. They'd chosen well, and now, all of the specially chosen men reported to Sam, and he reported through Salveer to Esselynn, the leader of the ice dragons. She was working hand in hand with the snow dragons who had arrived more recently, and Alric was none the wiser that a special force had been put together to keep an eye on him at all times.

This was above and beyond the King's own personal royal Guardsmen. This was a covert group, and only Sam and the dragons knew exactly who was part of the secret team.

Sam wanted to talk it over with Isolde, but he hadn't been able to get away to visit her. Stars! How he missed her. She'd gotten under his skin with so little effort. He'd spent a lot of time and effort ordering special treats to be delivered to her shop each day so she wouldn't think he'd forgotten her.

If not for the continued threat to the King, he would steal away for a few hours to see her in person, but the dragons insisted that the threat level was higher than ever, and Alric needed every loyal person and dragon watching out for his safety. The dragons had to have some way of knowing things that eluded mere men. Sam didn't dare naysay their certainty. If he dismissed their concerns and got Alric killed, then it would be all his fault. Better to err—if it really was an error—on the side of caution. Even if that meant not seeing Isolde for a few days more. As painful as that was to his heart.



“Lilly tells me that Luc’s heartmate, Shilayla, and another young snow dragon have been playing games with children in the city,” the King surprised Sam by saying, one afternoon after his audiences for the day were done and some of the courtiers will still milling about in the great hall.

“Yes, Sire. I have witnessed it myself. The children are the young apprentices of Mistress Isolde van Aidel, the glass artisan. Her shop is located next to the new house of healing Lilly and Luc are setting up. I believe their yards are separated by only a wall that is very easy for the dragons to see over. I’ve been told the dragons were very interested when they first saw the children playing after their work was done for the day and wanted to join in. Since then, it has become something of a sensation, with many folk in the area dropping by to watch. Apparently, the children and dragons have adapted several ball games to include the dragons.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about this from several sources.” The King looked thoughtful for a moment, then went on. “I would like to invite the dragons to play one of these games on the festival field so that everyone who wishes to see it can watch.”

All the courtiers within hearing were watching and listening now. Sam realized that the King had spoken very deliberately, in order to gauge interest and activate the rumor mill.

Salveer, who was sitting to one side of the great hall that day, observing, raised his head. The dragons had been taking turns

watching over the public audiences the King held each day. In fact, one dragon or another had been present whenever the King was in a room in the castle in which a dragon could fit. Sam also knew a few of the specially-chosen warriors were also always present wherever the King was in the castle. The dragons really had taken a close interest in keeping Alric safe.

“Sire, I would volunteer for such a spectacle,” Salveer said in the minds of all who could hear in the room. *“I believe the young snow dragon, Lady Bathshera, is the one who has been playing most consistently with the children from the glass shop. Lady Shilayla has also been playing from time to time, but we just discussed it, and it might be good to have a representative from both the snow dragons and the ice dragons for a public game.”*

King Alric bowed his head toward the ice dragon as he smiled. “Excellent. But I don’t think we can ask a bunch of children to play in public, though they can be consulted as to the rules, and they should have seats of honor to watch the game. We will need to find some athletes to play on the teams. As I understand it, there are two teams and the two dragons each guard opposite goals. We will need good runners with stamina and good footwork.”

“If I may, Your Majesty, I can find such people for the teams, if you would allow me the honor,” Sam said. “There are many young warriors in excellent physical condition who enjoy such games in their off-duty hours. I can easily find enough suitable individuals.”

“Wonderful,” the King replied with a wink that only Sam could see.

Chapter Twenty

Sam realized then that he'd been masterfully maneuvered, but he didn't mind. Alric had his reasons for doing things the way he did them. The King was much wiser in the ways of his court than Sam would ever be, and Sam preferred it that way. He would gladly leave the politics to the politicians and just handle the defensive strategies, which were complex enough for his tastes.

As it turned out, Sam didn't have to search far for the men who would make up the teams. Every one of the warriors specially chosen by the dragons stepped forward to volunteer. Sam selected a few more from among warriors he knew personally and added a few more with special talents for good measure. They didn't all have to play. Some would sit on the bench or be used as alternates if anyone got too winded or injured.

But they would all be on the lookout for trouble. Each and every one of them was loyal to the crown and would put the safety of their monarch above their own. A few had field

medic skills and would be able to help if there was fighting, in addition to the healers who would be assigned to each team for injuries incurred during the course of the game.

As word of the event spread, the plans grew to include a festival built around the spectacle. Vendors started setting up their festival pavilions and readying their wares. The playing field was readied by the King's gardeners, and there was an air of excitement building in the city. Sam had tried to get in to talk to the King privately but hadn't managed to do so until the day before the festival was to begin.

Salveer was there, in the throne room, but Sam didn't mind speaking candidly in front of the dragon. The important thing was to impress upon the King how dangerous it was for him to appear in public. Lady Zallra sat at the King's side, and as the last courtier left the room, Sam closed the door behind him and turned to the King.

"My Liege," he said, approaching the monarch respectfully. "I would be remiss to not tell you that your plan to attend the festival is fraught with danger."

"Exactly so," Alric answered, smiling. "If this doesn't smoke out the assassins, nothing will."

Sam was taken aback. "But the risk!" he blurted out before he could temper his words. "Sire, your people need you. If you fall, everything you have achieved in Valdis will be destroyed. You have no heir yet to carry on your work."

Alric reached out to clasp Zallra's hand, smiling at her. "We're working on that, General. I assure you." They both

laughed as if the danger didn't exist.

“My love, you're frightening the General,” Zallra said softly. “May I tell him what we've come up with?”

“If you must,” Alric replied, chuckling. “It's just too tempting to tease such a serious fellow. My apologies, General. The dragons and my lady love have all well in hand, but you're right, of course. You need to know what they've cooked up.”

“The men on the teams have already been briefed by their dragon friends.” Lady Zallra picked up the explanation. “You may not realize it, but the special group of men they chose to work with can all hear dragons speak. That was essential to forming a force to protect Alric. Those men can summon help without alerting the enemy.”

“I—” Sam was stunned, but he should have realized this long ago. “I didn't know. Forgive me. I should have realized this long before now.” He felt really stupid not to have questioned why the dragons had chosen those particular warriors in more detail.

“No, General, we should have talked to you sooner. My apologies,” Lady Zallra said graciously. “The dragons and I have been plotting and planning, but you are ultimately responsible for the warriors in this land, so we should have included you in our counsels.”

Sam bowed his head respectfully. “I'm just glad you've told me now. What else have you come up with, milady?” He

really needed to know. He did his best work when he had all the facts in hand.

“I’m going to present the King with that special blade Isolde used to kill the skith,” Salveer put in unexpectedly. *“It’ll be a special ceremony before the game starts.”*

“We have to have some pomp and ceremony before the game,” Alric added. “It’ll give the spectators something to talk about in addition to the game.”

“And the weapon will be there in case it’s needed,” Salveer added.

“The royal box will be well defended,” Zallra went on. “If there’s trouble, the two dragon goalies will defend the front of the box with their bodies while the two teams of warriors will take down any attackers. You’ll be inside the royal box, as will I,” Zallra told him. “I will shift shape, if necessary, and protect Alric with my own armor.” She chuckled, looking at the man she loved. “Worse comes to worst, I can always fly him out of danger, but that would be a last resort.”

Sam nodded, picturing the action in his mind. It might just work. “What about the back of the box?”

“Well, you and I will be there,” Zallra repeated. “And though we haven’t talked to her yet, Mistress Isolde and her apprentices will be seated nearby. She has proven her abilities before. She could be prevailed upon to assist.”

If Sam knew Isolde, she wouldn’t have to be asked. She’d dive right in the moment she sensed danger.

“Some of her older apprentices are also accomplished warriors,” Sam replied, clearly surprising the King and his lady. Sam grinned. “She teaches them more than glass work down at her shop, my King. The apprentices follow very closely in their mistress’s footsteps, if you take my meaning.”

“Ah,” the King said. “I hadn’t thought about that. I mean, I knew they probably reported back to her, but I had no idea she was training them in more than just the craft of glass.”

“She has a former officer in the army drilling them every morning, and he works with those that are gifted with the sword separately. He was a swordsman of great skill and speed until he was injured in battle. Isolde employs him as a sort of overseer of her house and trainer for the children,” Sam revealed.

“A resourceful woman,” Zallra commended Isolde’s ingenuity. “We Jinn often kill two birds with one stone. I should have realized Mistress Isolde would have more tricks up her sleeve.”

“She does. I would remind you only that her ankle is still not fully healed from the incident with the skith,” Sam said quietly.

“Ah, I had not thought of that,” Alric replied. “I guess that’s why we haven’t seen her at the castle of late.”

“Exactly so, my liege. She has been working quietly at her shop, keeping her foot raised on a stool,” Sam replied, then realized he had just admitted to knowing a lot more about the glass artisan’s routine than a mere acquaintance or work

colleague. He saw the way Lady Zallra's eyes narrowed on him and tried not to squirm.

"Please pass along our best wishes for her recovery," Zallra said, her eyebrow arching.

"Yes, please do," the King added. "Is there anything she needs that we can provide?"

"I don't think so, Sire. She has all the help she needs in the form of her apprentices and the people who help her care for them." Sam brazened it out, but they did not probe further into his exact relationship with Isolde. "Now, can you tell me more of your plan for the festival? We need to make certain that your route to and from the grounds is as well-protected as possible."

"No need," Salveer put in. "The King will be flying in on my back. We thought it would make quite a spectacular entrance and more firmly cement our alliance in the minds of the people."

"It's also a lot safer," Zallra added. "I'll arrive separately by ground and be waiting in the royal box for Alric to join me."



The plan worked as intended on the day of the festival game. Alric arrived by dragon. Salveer's shiny scales were impressive in their mirror-like shine. Sam had seen him rolling around in the sand, polishing his scales to their present shine, especially for this occasion. Vain dragon, Sam thought with an inner chuckle.

But it had been worth it. The people in the stands were clearly in awe of the sparkling ice dragon who alighted so easily with their King on his back. Once the crowd saw Alric, the cheers were almost deafening. It was clear his people loved him and were even more impressed by the dragon's entrance knowing their King had been brave enough to fly on the sparkling dragon's back.

Alric waved to his people and then jogged over to join his lady in the royal box. He was the epitome of a fit, handsome young King. Very unlike the blind man he'd been until recently, who had seldom been seen in public and needed a guide to get almost anywhere.

Alric's life had been one of service and pain. He was still serving his people, but his situation had improved drastically. Not only had his vision been restored, but he was clearly deeply in love with the mysterious woman who waited for him in the royal box. They were introducing Lady Zallra a little at a time to the people of Valdis, and the wedding had already been announced.

The planning was taking place mostly among the noblemen. A wedding of state had to be meticulously structured so as to invite all the right people and create the most desired effect. Zallra and Alric were content to let someone else come up with the wedding plan. They would go over it and accept or reject parts of it when the time drew nearer.

Lady Zallra was taking care of her own wedding dress. She had some of the finest Jinn seamstresses in the city working on

a dress that would be fit for a queen. The design was top secret and would be revealed only on the day of the wedding when she was wearing it. So far, none of the seamstresses had succumbed to the bribes and threats some of the noblewomen had been attempting. They were loyal to Zallra as nobility of the Jinn. They would not betray her in any way, even just letting slip what she would be wearing to her wedding.

It might seem inconsequential, but noblewomen who wanted to show up the new Queen could do a lot with their own fashion choices to upstage Zallra if given the chance. Sam didn't pretend to understand the way women went after each other over fashion, but Isolde probably comprehended it all and the reasons behind their backbiting.

Sam saw Isolde, already sitting in the stands in a place of honor, very near the royal box. Her apprentices were arranged around her with Mr. Everest and Mrs. Cooper sitting with the littlest children. Alric made it into the box and greeted Lady Zallra with a kiss that made the crowd in the stands hoot and holler and stamp their feet. Alric waved at them, smiling as he let go of his bride-to-be and seated her before taking a seat, himself.

Lady Shera arrived a moment later, taking her place at the end of the field near the goal she was going to defend, but there was one other thing that they had to do first. The smith, Edvardson, approached Salveer and presented the polished scythe to the dragon, standing by at the dragon's gesture to present the weapon to the King. He also had a parchment in

his hand, from which he read in a strong voice. The crowd quieted to listen.

“Noble Majesty, King Alric of Valdis, this message is from Lord Salveer, who stands before you. In commemoration of your new alliance with dragonkind, Lord Salveer has commissioned this ceremonial weapon of myself, Master Smith Edvardson, with blades honed out of the rarest obsidian by the glass artisan, Mistress van Aidel.”

Sam knew they had talked over, in detail, whether or not to include Isolde’s name in the proclamation. In the end, they’d decided to take a page out of Drake of the Five Lands’s book and allow the fame of her artistry be known so as to hide the more clandestine of her activities in plain sight. That was a new idea for her, but she was willing to give it a try. She would not make Master in her Guild by forever staying in the shadows, and her work for the castle was of Master quality, if Sam was any judge. She just had to create her Master piece before she could be fully inducted into the ranks of the Masters of the Glassmakers Guild.

“Please accept this small gift as a token of the new alliance between Valdis and the ice dragons,” Edvardson continued. He lifted the scythe which gleamed in the sunlight, and a cheer arose from the gathered crowd.

Salveer took the staff of the scythe very carefully in his talons and presented it to the King. Alric stood and took the weapon out of the dragon’s hand and lifted it high for all to see. When the crowd finally quieted, he spoke.

“Thank you, Lord Salveer, for this most excellent gift. I can see you and your chosen artisans spent a great deal of time and effort creating this unique weapon. Now that I look at it closely, the blade portion resembles the curve of a dragon’s talon. It is ingenious, and I thank you for this thoughtful gift.”

Salveer nodded, holding up his talon next to the blade so all could see exactly why it was shaped the way it had been crafted. Even Sam hadn’t put that together until just now. He really had to be slipping to have missed the similarities in shape. Either that or he was too preoccupied with a certain lovely glass artisan to have thought much beyond when he would see her next.

He chastised himself. Thinking too much about Isolde would not keep the King safe. He had to focus.

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize why Salveer wanted it shaped exactly that way,” Isolde said privately to Shera. *“I feel like a dolt for not figuring that out long before now.”*

“Not a dolt. Just a female preoccupied with a male,” Shera teased her.

“That’s not fair,” Isolde insisted. *“I haven’t been with Sam in days.”*

“But you’ve been thinking about him all the time, haven’t you?”

Isolde remained resolutely silent. She probably had been thinking about Sam way too much. That had to be why she’d

missed something that should have been so obvious. And speaking about missing things... The game was about to start.

The game that was played as an exhibition for the citizenry of Valdis Maj had little in common with the more innocent version invented and played by Isolde's apprentices each night after work was done. Salveer protecting one of the goals added flash and sparkle to the game while the warriors on both teams added a level of athleticism that her youngsters couldn't yet match. They were too widely separated in age, and most weren't fully grown yet to play with such conviction and strategy.

The game was exciting and polished. It was also a lot faster than the way the children played it. And the dragons were using a lot more force with their returns from the goals. Isolde found herself watching the game with real interest until...

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of a man's hand. A hand with a tattoo of an eye on it. Gasping, she immediately went on alert.

"Shera, I just saw a man with an eye tattoo in the stands. He's on the move," she told the dragon who was still busy on the field.

"I see him. There are two others making their way toward him," Shera said with such calm that Isolde was taken aback.

"Does Sam know?" Isolde asked. *"Someone's got to warn him and the King."*

“You know, you could talk to him directly if we bonded fully,” Shera offered, surprising Isolde into silence as she watched the man with the tattoo move carefully through the crowd. She hadn’t spotted the other two yet, but if Shera said they were out there, then they were out there.

“Bonded?” Isolde asked, unsure what the dragon meant.

Chapter Twenty-One

“If we opened our connection to each other,” Lady Shera told Isolde, “we would be joined for life. Your lifetime would be extended by sharing in my magic, but you would still die before I do in the natural course of things. Still, we would be together for the rest of your life, and you would share in my magic and I in yours.”

“I don’t have any magic,” Isolde whispered in her mind, flummoxed by the dragon’s proposal. Did she really mean to bond with her the way she’d heard dragons bonded with knights in Draconia. A life-bond. A lifetime partnership?

“But you do,” Shera insisted. “The magic of humans is not to be discounted. It may not be obvious, but you have magic in your soul that comes out in your art, my friend.”

That was beautiful, and it touched Isolde’s heart to hear Shera say it. If the dragon truly wanted to share her life, then there was no question in Isolde’s mind. She already loved Shera like the sister she’d never had, despite their differences.

“If you’re absolutely certain, then... Yes, Shera. I love you. You’re already in my heart. Already a part of my family. If you can put up with my crazy life, my clandestine job, my gaggle of apprentices and all the rest, then I would be honored beyond measure to bond with you.”

“Great!” Shera’s joy and excitement were palpable. *“Hold on, this may be a little disorienting at first.”*

That was all the warning Isolde got before the small bond linking their minds blew wide open. If Isolde had been standing, she’d have been knocked off her feet by the surge of energy and information. She suddenly could see through the dragon’s eyes, and she easily picked out the three assassins converging at a point in the stands that was too far away for Isolde to reach easily.

Isolde blinked and she was back in her own body, seeing through her own eyes. The flash of the bond had taken only a moment, though it had felt as if time had slowed while the bond formed. She could feel Shera’s presence deep in her soul, never to be removed. It was...comforting.

“I feel the bond,” Isolde said, unable to say more, but she knew Shera could feel what Isolde was feeling. Joy, awe, wonder and fear for the King. She had to act, but she wasn’t sure what she could do.

“I know what to do,” Shera reassured her new bond-mate. *“We planned for this. Now, this is what you need to do...”*



“There are three assassins in the stands, converging before they launch their attack.” Salveer’s voice came clear into Sam’s mind as he stood guard behind the King and Lady Zallra in the royal box. *“Two more are coming in from the sides.”*

For a moment, Sam froze, then his mind started working at lightning speed. *“Did you tell the King?”*

“Yes, and the warriors on the field. We are preparing to meet the attack from the front. You’ll have to deal with the ones from the sides. You and Isolde. Zallra will protect the King, but you must end the threat of the assassins we cannot cover.” Salveer paused a moment, then continued. *“This would be easier, you know, if you were to bond with me.”*

“Bond? Like the knights of Draconia? That kind of bond?” Was Salveer serious? That sort of thing was said to be a lifelong commitment.

“Yes, that kind of bond. We will share our souls and our lives. I can think of no other man I would want to bind myself to in this way, except you, Samnir. You are a man of honor and a good match for the dragon I want to be.”

Sam was touched by the dragon’s words, but he knew there had to be total honesty between them before they took such a huge step. He had to come clean about the prophecy.

“When I was in Elderland, I was given a prophecy by another friend of the virkin I knew. He said I would bond with a dragon, one day. To be honest, I always thought that meant I would end up in Draconia somehow. I just want you to know

that I'm glad it's you, Salveer. I can think of no other dragon I would rather share my thoughts and my life with than you. You are already my brother, and I'm humbled and gladdened by your proposal."

"Excellent. Then hold on to something. I'm going to open the bond, and it could rock you a bit," Salveer warned.

"What? You mean right now?" Sam was shocked. They didn't have time for this!

"No time like the present," Salveer quipped as he did something in the space between their souls.

Sam felt an odd tugging sensation on his spirit, and then, the floodgates opened, and he was bathed in the purest sparkling light of Salveer as their souls met and intertwined, then broke apart, both forever changed.

Sam stumbled back, glad of the wall at his back. He placed his hands against the solid wall, accepting its support for a moment as he came back to himself. It was all done in the blink of an eye that had felt like an eternity. Sam would have to study the new bond between himself and the ice dragon who was his brother at length. Later. Right now, they had assassins to fight and the King to protect.

"Thank you, brother," Sam took a moment to say as he reined in his wits. *"I will never take this bond for granted, and you will forevermore be a part of my family. It'll be nice to have family again. I've been alone in the world for far too long."*

Accepting the bond must have made him maudlin. Sam shook himself, got back on his feet and away from the support of the wall and prepared himself for what came next.

“Where is Isolde?” he asked, looking for her in the stands and not seeing her in the place she had been before.

“On her way here,” Salveer said shortly. He was still playing the game. They would keep up the pretense of a game until the very last moment. *“You know, you could probably communicate directly with her now that we are joined. She’s been speaking with Shera,”* Salveer told Sam quickly. *“She sees what is happening and is willing to help, but is unarmed except for a few small hidden blades.”*

“Can she get to the box? She can have the scythe. I have my sword and other weapons,” Sam said quickly, his gaze sizing up the opposition that still thought it was unseen.

“I’m almost to you,” Isolde’s voice came into his mind, surprising him. *“I’m coming up from behind. I’ll be at the back door to the box in another moment. Slide the scythe out to me, if you can. They still don’t seem to realize they’ve been spotted.”*

“How many do you see?” Sam asked her directly.

“Two that we need to worry about in the rear. One on either side. The dragons will block the front of the box and keep those three in front at bay while the teams deal with them, but the two back here are ours. I’ll take the one on this side—the side my apprentices are sitting on. The older ones will back me up. Can you handle the one on the other side?”

“Lady Zallra will shield the King,” Shera spoke in all their minds. *“She will shapeshift and protect her mate. Blades cannot pierce our scales unless they are made from diamond.”*

With the dragons holding the front of the box and Isolde’s capable help, they just might be able to prevent a tragedy here today. Especially with the compact black dragon also on the lookout to protect the man she loved.

“It’s a good plan,” Sam told them all. *“Just...be careful, Isolde. Remember your ankle isn’t at full strength yet. It will break my heart if anything happens to you.”*

Isolde gasped. Did he mean to imply that she had a place in his heart? Did he mean that he loved her? Even just a little?

If they all survived the next few minutes, she was going to have to tell him to work on his timing. This was not the kind of thing to tell her moments before a deadly fight.

She wanted to explore the meaning of his words more, but there wasn’t time, because the next moment, the Eyes attacked. The dragons went into action, blocking the front of the royal box with their nearly impenetrable bodies while the teams of warriors did their best to fight the assassins.

Isolde was at the back of the royal box, and the scythe came sliding rapidly in her direction as Sam gave it a hard shove across the floor. She grabbed it and came up swinging as the assassin on her side of the box came running toward her, his hand outstretched, holding a wickedly curved sword. The blade gleamed in the light as she swept the scythe around and down, slicing the man in two before he could get any closer.

She might not be as tall as Sam, or have as long a reach, but the scythe extended what reach she did have so that she was never in any danger from the curved sword of the assassin. The *dead* assassin. One down, four to go.

The older apprentices had followed her and stood around, facing outward, looking for more signs of trouble. She looked at them with satisfaction. She'd trained them well.

"Kurt," she said in a low voice to the young man at her side. "Don't touch anything of his. It might be poisoned. Especially the blades. Leave that for later. He's not going anywhere. But keep the perimeter clear. We don't want anyone else stumbling across him or his weapons. Guard this flank."

"Yes, ma'am," Kurt said immediately, taking charge as the eldest and most skilled among the apprentices.

"I'm going to help the others," she told him. "If we need you to assist elsewhere, I'll have Shera contact you. Otherwise, hold this line and don't let anyone pass."

Kurt nodded again, but she was already in motion. Opening the door to the box, Isolde took stock of what she could see before entering. Alric was standing with the black dragon that was his mate. He didn't look scared. In fact, he looked angry, and he had a sword in his hand, but Sam was acquitting himself well in a rapid-fire sword fight with the other assassin on the far side of the box.

The assassin was amazingly fast, but Sam... Isolde felt a whole new respect for the way Sam fought and moved. His reflexes were faster than lightning, and his sword strokes held

true power. Skilled as he was, the assassin was going to lose this battle, even though he didn't fight fair.

Sam, it seemed, knew every dirty trick in the book and then some. He had a counter to each of the sneaky moves the assassin tried, and within a minute, the second assassin was on the floor, his head separated from his body. Two down.

"That was a thing of beauty," Alric said, still holding his sword but looking at Sam with true appreciation. "I knew you were good, but..." Alric shook his head. "I underestimated exactly *how* good."

"Sire," Isolde reminded the King as she stepped farther into the box, "the battle is not yet over. Do not lower your guard."

"Wise words, mistress," Alric agreed with her. "I will take heed." He looked from her face to the bloody edge of the scythe and shook his head as he grinned. "I think I underestimated you, as well, my dear. Forgive me. And thank you both."

"It's not over yet, Majesty," Sam said, grinning at them all and sending her a wink. "Lady Zallra, if you can hold here, we will just go see how the others are doing in front of the box."

"*No need,*" Salveer's voice came to them all. "*The last of the assassins is dead. The warriors overwhelmed them, and though a few are injured, the assassins are no more.*"

The dragons parted, allowing those in the box to see what was happening on the field. The warriors who had been playing on the two teams had united in defense of their King,

and there were three discreet circles where they'd fought the three assassins who had attacked from the front. Three dead men with Eyes tattooed on their faces were in the circles, and to the side of the field, several of the warriors were sitting or lying on the field, their wounds being tended.

Alric walked down from the box and onto the field. He stood there with the ice dragon on his left and the snow dragon on his right. The black dragon stood just behind him as he surveyed the shocked crowd. Many had fled—especially families with young children—but others had remained and were milling around in the stands and on the sidelines, as if wondering what they could do to help. Some just looked stunned by everything they had seen. The King spoke in a loud voice that carried over the stunned silence.

“Citizens of Valdis, I’m very sorry that what was to be an innocent game has been interrupted by this carnage. We will try to hold the game on another day, but for now, I beg your indulgence as we care for the injured and remove the fallen.”

There was some muttering among the remaining crowd, but they began to slowly disperse. A few came closer to offer help and several made comments of support for King Alric.

In fact, a chant of “Long live the King” started at one end of the field, and those who remained in the stands picked it up and amplified it. Before long, the field rang with cheers of support for Alric as everyone joined in. He looked a bit embarrassed by the praise and bowed his head humbly.

After a long, long moment, the chant turned to an outright cheer, and Alric nodded, raising his hands in acknowledgement. Then he lowered them, making a motion for calm. When the crowd quieted, he spoke further.

“Thank you, good citizens. I’m only sorry that my enemies have soured this day for you all, but you give me heart, and I thank you for your support. If you will return here in three days’ time, we will reenact the game that should have been played. Hopefully, this time, without any aggressive interruptions.” His smile invited the onlookers to join in his amusement, and there were chuckles heard throughout the crowd as Alric went on. “Thank you, one and all. I am grateful for your support.”

He turned then, perhaps realizing that the crowd wouldn’t leave until he did. The black dragon moved with him, back into the royal box and then out the back door. Isolde followed behind, as did Sam. Her apprentices were back there, guarding the rear as she had instructed. The King stopped when he saw them, and she moved beside him.

“Your Majesty, these are my apprentices,” she told him. “You may recognize some of them from the castle. Many of them have been helping with the installation of the windows we have been crafting for you.”

Alric looked at her, one eyebrow raised. “I see they learn more than just glasswork in your shop,” he said softly to her, then turned back to the apprentices, speaking louder so they

could hear him. “Thank you for your service here today, my young friends. I am grateful for your able assistance.”

The apprentices bowed their heads to the King but did not lower their eyes, as was the custom among warriors to show respect. They all remained alert while the King was still among them. After all, there could have been more than five assassins. That thought galvanized Isolde into action.

“Sire, the safest place for you is back at the castle right now.” Sam spoke before Isolde could, apparently thinking along the same lines.

“I know, General. My lady and I are going back right now. The dragons will see to our safety while you deal with this situation.”

“For what it’s worth,” Shera put in, speaking to all of them, *“I believe you are safe for now, Majesty. I saw only five Eyes and the single skith. The next part of my vision is all political.”*

Alric tried to get Shera to tell him more, but that’s all she would say aside from the fact that he would know all shortly.

The King got on the black dragon’s back, and Zallra launched into the sky, taking him to safety. Salveer followed them, but Shera stayed behind. Salveer must have alerted the other ice dragons because everyone could see the swarm of iridescent silver dragons surrounding the black one in the sky as it flew toward the castle on the other side of the city. It was quite a sight to behold.

When they were gone, Isolde shook her head, leaning once more on the staff of the scythe for support. Her ankle still hurt, and the action just now hadn't really helped. She looked at the blood-stained blade.

"I guess we're going to have to wash and polish this thing again," she observed, and Sam broke into laughter. Her apprentices followed suit, and it was clear they all felt buoyed by the fact that they'd helped, in some small way, to save the life of their beloved King.

"Come on, sweetheart, let's get you off that foot," Sam said gently, coming to her side and sliding his arm around her waist.

Chapter Twenty-Two

One of the apprentices brought a stool from somewhere and set it next to Isolde. Not too proud to admit that her foot hurt, Isolde sat down gratefully. She kept the scythe, for now. She'd wash it this time and polish it up again before returning it to the King.

What followed was a couple of hours of cleanup where the bodies of the assassins were examined in great detail, once it was confirmed by one of the healers that had been summoned that any poisons were still in their vials and not contaminating anything. The healers tried to take possession of the vials of poison, but Sam prevented them from doing so. Lilly and her healers would examine those things first, and then, the vials would either be destroyed or put under lock and key in the royal vaults.

Isolde watched over the body she was responsible for with her apprentices, and they learned a great deal about investigating after the fact. It was a learning experience, though some of the younger ones were excused and sent home.

They hadn't seen death up close before, and it understandably bothered them. Isolde sent them back to the shop with one of the older girls with strict instructions that they were to be watched over by Mr. Everest and Mrs. Cooper until Isolde got back.

Sam oversaw everything, including the disposition of all the bodies and evidence. Not one of the assassins had carried anything that might implicate their employer. At least nothing that they'd found on the first pass. The bodies were taken to a nearby temple and put in the cellar for later examination before burial, just in case the first search had missed something.

Their weapons and other possessions were sent to the castle under guard. Healers saw to the injured men, and they were also sent back to the barracks or the healers' halls for rest or further treatment. The rest of the warriors who had made up the teams helped in the cleanup and then went back to the castle, having been granted a day off from work for their contributions.

Eventually, only Shera, Sam and Isolde were left. She'd sent the rest of the apprentices back once the bodies were gone and the cleaning crew had come to put the area to rights. The blood was being washed away, and the torn-up grass was being replaced by the groundman and his helpers. The field would be ready for the make-up game in a few days' time.

Sam had thought of everything, having sent for a carriage to carry Isolde home. He escorted her to the carriage and then

surprised her yet again when he climbed in to sit beside her. He placed the scythe on the floor and turned to her as the carriage began to move. Without words, he put his arms around her and sat her across his lap with her bad ankle up on the bench seat. He buried his face in her neck and held her close for a long moment.

“I hate it when you’re in danger,” he finally said, moving back just enough to look into her eyes. “But you’re so damned capable, it’s hard to ask you to stay away from it. I’m so damned proud of you, Isolde. And so impressed every time you do something like what you did today. I wish I’d seen the move, but the results speak volumes of your abilities. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever known.”

Touched deeply by his words, she found it hard to speak for a moment before she found her voice. “I could say something similar. Sam, I’ve never seen such sword-work. You were faster than lightning, smoother than silk. I don’t like seeing you in danger either, but it helps to know that you are well able to protect yourself.” She leaned her forehead against his. “But I’d just as soon live a quiet life without fights to the death every other day, if at all possible.”

He chuckled. “I could wish for that as well, but we both have our duties to this land and our King. Until the threat against him is neutralized, we will have to be on our guard.”

“And even after that,” she said sadly. “For there is always the possibility of more threats to the kingdom and Alric. But

you're right. For right now, we just need to find out who hired those assassins and neutralize that threat once and for all."

"We can hope for a time of peace," Sam said after a short silence where all they heard was the creak of the carriage as it trundled along. It was well-sprung, so it didn't bounce too much. Isolde's ankle was painful, but not as bad as when it had first been injured.

"Peace would be nice," she agreed, laying her head against his shoulder.

"Peace would mean some time off where we could just be Sam and Isolde, not General and Spymaster. We could spend that time together." His voice dipped low, the darkness inside the carriage feeling intimate as he tightened his hold on her just the tiniest bit.

"I'd really like that," she whispered back. "I like being with you, Sam. I wish we could spend a lot more time together. Just being us and enjoying life."

"I heartily agree," Sam replied at once, kissing her hair. "I truly enjoy being with you whether it's just having dinner with your tribe of apprentices or just us. I especially enjoy being alone with you in that sumptuous bedchamber of yours." He chuckled low, sending a little zing of excitement through her.

She would have turned and straddled him right then and there, but her ankle would not allow it. It was better than it had been, but the jarring it had just gotten in the fight was going to set her full recovery back a bit. Isolde settled for reaching up and kissing him.

She lost track of time. Kissing him was the center of her universe...until the carriage stopped. Sam seemed to come to his senses first, and he drew away slowly—as if he was having the same trouble stopping that she was. Eventually, though, they disentangled themselves, and she realized they had reached her shop.

“Looks like we’re here,” Isolde said unnecessarily and with a decided lack of enthusiasm.

Sam chuckled and carried her down from the carriage and put her on her feet. They were close to the front door, but she didn’t want the moment to end just yet.

Sam desperately wanted to stay with Isolde, but he couldn’t. He had to attend the King. They still had to track down whoever had hired those Eyes. Just because those assassins were dead didn’t mean the one who had hired them had been neutralized.

“I know you have to go. I’d go with you, but my ankle isn’t happy with me right now,” Isolde told him at the doorway to her shop. “Tell the King I’ll have the scythe back to him once I clean it up and polish it.” She shook her head and looked up at the massive blade. “I never imagined while I was making this thing that I would actually be using it. Not just once, but twice. I thought it would just be a ceremonial weapon that looked pretty but never got used.”

“It has saved the King’s life twice now,” Sam said, looking at the blade then down at her. “*You* have saved the King’s life twice now.”

He detected the faint reddening of her cheeks. Was she blushing? His beloved, strong warrior woman? The spymaster of Valdis Maj? Blushing?

He found her reaction charming in the extreme.

“You’re an amazing woman, Isolde.” He drew closer to her, unable to stay away, even if they were on the public street and might be seen.

As far as he was concerned, he was going to stake a claim on this woman and make her part of the rest of his life. It was more than past time for people to get used to seeing them together.

“You’re quite something yourself, General,” she whispered back.

He leaned down and kissed her. He couldn’t help himself. She was just too delectable.

He didn’t rightly know how much time had passed when a wolf whistle broke through his concentration on Isolde. He drew back to find several of her apprentices watching them from inside the shop.

She was blushing yet again when she realized they’d been caught in the act of kissing, and he almost kissed her again. But she drew away and lowered her face.

“You’d better get back to the King,” she murmured.

“I will try to come to you tonight, if possible. I may need your help to uncover the fiend behind the assassins.” He almost growled. “Somebody had to hire them.”

“Of course. I’ll do anything I can to help,” she promised immediately.

He knew she wouldn’t let him—or her country—down. She was a patriot, and he knew he would need her sharp mind and extensive knowledge if he was going to solve this mystery.

She turned to go into the shop, and he turned his attention to the kids behind her. They ranged in age, but most of them were in their teens, he thought. He raised his voice to address them.

“Apprentices.” They turned their gazes to him. “Take care of your mistress. Her ankle needs attention.”

He almost chuckled at the way the kids jumped to help her. They might not be his soldiers, but they responded to command voice just as easily. He left her to their tender care and went back to the carriage. He would ride in it back to the castle then attend to his duties to the King.

Alric and Zallra were in the great hall, surrounded by dragons when Sam arrived. Salveer was there, as was Esselyn and Shilayla and a few others. As many as would fit in the great hall. A few of the specially-chosen warriors who were still in the gear they’d been wearing to play in that exhibition game were guarding the door. They saluted Sam when they saw him and let him right in.

“Good work today,” he said to the men as opened the great doors for him.

“Thank you, sir,” the men replied as he passed.

Sam didn't feel odd at all being the only other human present in the room besides Alric. Oh, Lady Zallra was in her human form, but Sam understood she had more in common with the dragons than either he or the King did. Salveer had prepared Sam, keeping him informed about what they'd been discussing in real time, so Sam was able to jump right in as if he'd been at the meeting all along.

"Ah, General," the King said. "We'll need your input, and that of Mistress Isolde, of course. We're trying to figure out who hired those very expensive outland assassins."

"I'm up to speed, Sire. Lord Salveer has been keeping me apprised of your discussions," Sam said quickly.

Alric's eyebrows rose, and all the heads in the room—human and dragon alike—turned to stare at Salveer. Salveer executed a dragonish shrug.

"I thought it was about time one of us ice dragons tried bonding with a warrior. I chose the General, and we opened the bond completely right before the assassins struck. He is now, as the snow dragons call it, my heartmate." Salveer's tone grew increasingly fierce. *"We're going to be working together for a very long time, so you all had better get used to it."*

"It's just such a great step to take," Lady Esselynn, the leader of the ice dragons stated, seeming to have been caught off guard by Salveer's actions. *"You are so young to do this. I thought one of the older dragons would be better suited to try as a test case."*

“Bathshera is younger than me, and she bonded to Isolde at the same time,” Salveer revealed, stunning them all. *“We may be young in years, but we know our hearts. And in our case, the General had a prophecy from the virkin in Elderland saying he would join his life to a dragon. We’ve just fulfilled it.”*

Now, every eye in the room turned to stare at Sam. *“Did you tell anyone of this prophecy, General?”* Esselynn’s voice was accusatory.

“Since signing on in service to Valdis, I have not spoken of it. In fact, today was the first time I spoke of it since parting from my virkin friends in Elderland. They insisted my destiny was in Valdis, but I didn’t see how until your folk started arriving. Then, I started to hope, but I didn’t say anything. I only told Salveer after he proposed the bond because I thought he deserved to have full disclosure.”

Esselynn narrowed her icy eyes. *“I see. Hmm. Well, what’s done is done, and perhaps this will afford us some advantage in the coming investigations.”*

She didn’t seem exactly happy, but she did turn her attention away from Sam and Salveer. She spoke to Shilayla, who was there, though neither Luc nor Lilly were in attendance. They’d been conspicuously absent from the exhibition game too, now that Sam stopped to think about it. He wondered what had kept them away.

“What do the snow dragons have to say about the little one’s actions?” Esselynn asked Shilayla.

The white dragon shrugged. *“It is not uncommon for heartmates to bond even before the dragon hatches from the shell. We are used to Fate playing a hand in our lives and that of the folk we choose to bond with. From the snow dragon point of view, this is nothing alarming.”*

“I see,” Esselynn said, her mouth tightening. *“We will wait and see how this turns out for you, Salveer. It is not as I would have planned it, but perhaps Fate had other ideas. And you, General, I should like to hear more about your prophecy from Elderland when we have more time to consider it. For now, we have more important matters to settle.”*

Sam bowed respectfully to the ice dragon leader, accepting his fate. He was going to have to face down mama bear at some point, but happily, not today.

“She’s not a bear,” Salveer said in Sam’s mind, clearly amused at the thought.

“Have you ever seen a mama bear when her cubs are threatened? They are one of the fiercest creatures in the world. No smart person messes with mama bear,” Sam told his dragon partner privately. *“It’s a compliment.”*

“If you say so,” Salveer answered.

The King was talking, so Sam quickly refocused his attention on the matter at hand. Alric was speaking directly to Shilayla.

“Have Luc and Lilly anything to report?” Alric asked the white dragon.

“Sadly, they have had little luck tracking down the leads we thought were most promising,” Shilayla reported. “As you know, we settled on two noblemen we thought most likely to be involved in hiring the assassins. Lord Calderon and Lady Pia, who rules over her lands in the name of her son, Lord Paison of Sunny Isle. They’ve been following them for days now, with no result. They especially had no luck today, during the action at the festival grounds because Lady Pia stayed in with her son, who had taken ill last night, and Lord Calderon has no stomach for festivals. He stayed at home, reading in his library all day. Luc and Lilly watched all day, but not a single messenger came or left, though Lord Paison was seen to be sitting in the garden later in the day, looking a little better.”

“I could have told them it was neither of those.” Isolde’s voice came into Sam’s mind, shocking him a bit at first. This was going to take some getting used to.

“How are you hearing this?” Sam had to ask.

“Salveer is letting Shera listen in, and she’s sharing it with me. I suppose I can contact you because we’re linked through them, though I don’t know for certain. Just tell them that those two are dead ends. I’ve had my network watching all the nobles since the threat became apparent, and those two are clean. They could have saved a lot of time and effort if they’d just asked me in the first place.” Sam heard the annoyance in her tone but didn’t comment on that.

“I’ll tell them,” he promised. “Sire,” he said aloud to get their attention, “I need to say that Mistress Isolde has

information regarding the nobles of your court that may be of great value to our inquiries. Her network already cleared both Lord Calderon and Lady Pia.”

“And how do you know this?” Zallra asked, a crafty look in her eyes. “Have you been holding out on us, General?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sam felt the scrutiny once again turned on him, but he was made of stern stuff. He could handle a few stares, uncomfortable as it made him.

“You also need to know that Mistress Isolde is listening in to our conference via Lord Salveer and Lady Shera.” Sam looked at them all, making his point. “Indeed, if she were not injured, she properly should have been included in these discussions. Her information is vital and valuable. She has the best information network anywhere, and we are foolish if we don’t use it when it’s offered so freely. She wants to find the criminal behind these assassination attempts as much as we do, and frankly, she has a better chance of actually gathering the information we need to do so. It is her specialty, after all.”

“She was not excluded due to her injury,” the King said, and Sam’s heart dropped. What was he saying? Did he not trust Isolde? Why? “I am merely sticking to the agreement we made when she and I first met. I did not want to draw attention to her by summoning her to the castle. I agree that her

information could be of great importance to us, and I've been foolish not to ask for her counsel before this." Sam's heart rose again. The King did trust Isolde. All was well. "As it happens," Alric went on, "we now have a very easy route for the passing of information since Lilly's new healing hall is right next door to Isolde's glass shop." The King smiled, and Sam had to wonder if the placement of Lilly and Luc in that neighborhood hadn't been a well-conceived plan from the beginning. "Lady Shilayla, please tell Luc and Lilly to go home to the healing hall and get some rest. We need to restart our investigation where it should have started all along. With help from our friend, Isolde."

"Now they're talking," Isolde's comment nearly made Sam laugh, but he controlled his expression by force of will.

"If the dragons don't mind continuing to act as go-betweens, I can relay Isolde's thoughts to you right now," Sam offered. "We need not delay further."

The King looked at Salveer. "Is it any strain to you, Lord Salveer?"

"No, my liege. Since our bond is wide open, the energy flows are easy to manage, and it is no strain to act as a bridge between Shera and Isolde to Samnir."

Sam didn't know how it all worked, but he was glad it wasn't a strain for his new dragon partner. He'd never do anything to endanger or take unfair advantage of Salveer if he could help it.

“Which is why I chose you, Sam,” Salveer reminded him privately. *“You care about people...and dragons. You don’t see me as some kind of creature. You see me as a friend, as I see you. A brother. A comrade in arms. You’d be surprised how rare that is. Now, let’s get this meeting started. Isolde has a lot to say.”*

For the next quarter hour, Sam relayed what Isolde told him about her observations as reported to her by her spy network and apprentices, of the court nobles. She gave detailed information on just about every candidate rich enough to be able to hire such costly assassins, as well as the source of their riches and any recent upsets in their families, lands, or habits.

Sam was amazed by the detail Isolde had been able to glean and the organized way in which she made her report. She really was something else and his admiration for her only grew. She was so much more than just a pretty face with a talent for glassmaking. She was a force to be reckoned with, if only people realized it.

But to this point, she’d kept her other abilities under wraps. That might be changing now though. Since she had acted so very openly today and on a few other notable occasions, and the dragons had singled out her shop for play, she was becoming something of a celebrity. They’d have to come up with a strategy to deal with that while still keeping her secret role as spymaster safe.

Of course, she’d probably already thought about that. Sam would have to talk with her privately in order to find out what

she'd decided to do.

“Much better,” Salveer advised Sam quietly, during a lull. *“I don't know much about females yet, but all the older males seem to think consulting them on what they want to do is paramount to a happy relationship.”*

Sam almost laughed but kept his amusement to himself. “I'll take that under consideration,” he assured Salveer in a dry tone that was probably lost on the young dragon.

“Sam, are you listening?” Isolde's voice came to him, somewhat impatiently.

“Sorry. Salveer was just making an observation. What do you wish me to relate to the group?” He carefully didn't say what the observation had been, and she let it go.

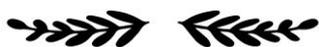
“Tell them that we've narrowed down the suspects to five. Lord Bayern, Lord Moreline, Lady Habitha, Lord Orthan, and Lady Iretnia. I've had my sources keep a special eye on all of those, but so far, we haven't been able to narrow it any further than that. Perhaps the dragons could help. It might be good to know if there have been any recent changes to their lands or holdings. Maybe the dragons could scout from the air?”

“I'll ask,” Sam promised, relaying faithfully everything she'd just told him.

The dragons agree that they would conduct aerial reconnaissance as soon as possible. That led to a discussion of each candidate and where their lands were. Maps were retrieved and spread out on the floor where the dragons could

study them. Tasks were assigned by Lady Esselynn and dragons dispatched to various parts of the country.

Finally, it seemed the investigation was heading in the right direction.



Sam went to Isolde's shop that evening, with the King's blessing, to work with Isolde and the dragons. Salveer and Shera could act as relays to the other dragons who had flown out under cover of darkness to investigate the five suspects on Isolde's list. They would see what could be seen of the manor houses and mansions from the air. Sam wasn't sure exactly what that could tell them, but the dragons seemed to think it was a great idea.

Dinner with the children was an eye-opener. He'd dined with them once before, but he was starting to learn more about the inner workings of Isolde's household, and he was impressed all over again when she made some announcements before they ate.

He'd actually carried her up the stairs to the second floor because her ankle was giving her trouble again. Rather than eat alone in the downstairs workshop she'd turned into her bedroom for the duration of her injury, she wanted to be with the kids tonight, and Sam had made that possible. Plus, any excuse to have Isolde in his arms was fine by him.

"And finally, the King was very grateful for your help on the playing field," Isolde told them all as she stood on one foot

and knelt with her bad leg on the seat of her chair. “He has added a gold sovereign to every one of your accounts in thanks.” A cheer went up from the apprentices, and Isolde sat down, the announcements over.

“The children have accounts?” he asked, because this was a strange development.

He didn’t know how all guilds worked, but in the Mercenary Guild, one had to be an active member for a certain number of years before the Guild would allow a merc to open an account. For mercs, the Guild would hold their money safe in their vaults until the merc was ready to retire or was injured too badly to go on, then he could withdraw the funds to live on either all at once or a bit at a time for the rest of his life, or as long as the money lasted.

“They’re not Guild accounts yet,” Isolde explained. “I start each apprentice with their own household account. They get paid wages for their work here. The younger ones especially are not allowed all of their pay at once because you know how children are. They’ll spend it all on sweets or get victimized by someone with no scruples. I hold all their accounts until they are of age to become journeymen, at which point, the money is transferred to their Guild account, so they already start off with something to show for themselves. If they don’t want to continue in the glassmaker’s profession, they can have all their money when they leave. Most stay, though. It’s a good-paying trade, even if you never make Master Craftsman.”

Sam was touched by the care she gave to her orphans. She made sure they had a nest egg, which was more than he ever had when he'd been a parentless child. He reached over and covered her hand with his, drawing her gaze.

“You’re a treasure, Isolde. These kids don’t know how blessed they are to have been apprenticed to you.” For a moment, it was as if only they two existed in the whole world, but then, Kurt spoke up from Sam’s other side.

“Oh, we know, General,” Kurt assured him. “Some of us had to experience life on the streets for a while before we found our way to this shop and the safety within.”

Sam turned to see the stark reality of his past written on the young man’s face. Sam felt a kinship with the boy on the edge of adulthood and felt his throat tighten with emotion. He decided to share a bit of his story with Kurt, in hopes that it would prove once and for all that an orphan could rise to do important things.

“I have been where you were,” Sam said in a low voice to Kurt. “I was not so blessed to find a haven like this, but eventually, I did find a gruff old merc who took a few of us under his wing and protected us from the worst life has to offer.”

“You were an orphan too?” Kurt looked shocked.

Sam nodded. “At a very young age, war came through and destroyed my family and home. I was the only survivor.” Sam paused, then cleared his throat and went on. “I tell you this to prove that you can do anything. Be anything. Your past does

not determine your future. You are already on a good path, and I suspect you will bring honor to whatever you try your hand at, whether it be the glass arts or the more clandestine things you have learned here.”

Kurt looked nonplussed, and Sam was glad he'd unbent enough to share that little bit of his past. It was important that these children know they could achieve whatever they set out to do. He was living proof of that.

“Thank you, sir,” Kurt said finally, having to clear his throat several times to make the words come out. He was as touched by Sam's words as Sam had been by Isolde's actions.

Sam patted the young man on the shoulder. They had an understanding. It was enough.

Isolde was deeply moved by the way Sam opened up to Kurt. She had a feeling he did not usually share that part of his past with just anyone. He'd told her, but for him to say it to Kurt, where the others at the table could probably hear, meant something significant. Or so she believed.

His hand still covered hers, even as he spoke with Kurt. She turned her hand over and twined her fingers with his, squeezing lightly in support. He was such a good man. Such a good example for her apprentices. She didn't care if they knew that she and Sam were keeping company, though she was a bit concerned about what would happen in the future when he left.

Isolde resolved to not think about that now. There would be time enough to worry about the future later. Tonight was for living. And being with the man she loved.

As dinner ended and the apprentices began leaving the room for their various chores, one of the youngest and newest of the apprentices came over to Isolde and Sam as they sat by the fireplace. She was a little thing. Only six winters old and newly orphaned. One of the temples had taken her in, and when she'd shown skill at drawing and a fascination with the stained-glass windows, the kindly priestess had contacted Isolde.

She'd only come to the shop about a week ago, and in all the tumult, Isolde hadn't had a lot of time to spare for the child. Mrs. Cooper was taking good care of her, Isolde knew, but she prided herself on making every child feel special. And loved.

Her name was Agnes, and she was a shy little thing, which was why Isolde held her breath when the little girl stopped in front of Sam's chair. Sam looked at her with very serious eyes as the girl gazed up at him, her big blue eyes holding a sort of plea in them. Isolde hoped Sam knew what to do.

"Can I help you, little one?" Sam asked in a gentle voice that held no censure. So far, so good.

"I'm Agnes," the child whispered, lowering her eyes as if afraid of being rebuked.

"Agnes," Sam repeated. "That is a lovely name. My name is Samnir, but you can call me Sam. All of my good friends call me that."

"Sam?" Agnes looked up with hope in her eyes, moving a step closer.

“That’s right,” he praised her for getting his name right. “Would you like to sit by the fire with us for a little while?” he asked, looking over at Isolde. “If it’s all right with your mistress, that is.”

“Of course, it’s all right,” Isolde said at once, trying to hold her own emotions at bay. Sam was so good with the little girl. She had not expected that.

“Would you like to sit up here with me?” he asked softly. “Or with Mistress Isolde? Or do you want your own little chair. Perhaps we can find one for you.” He looked around at the big room that was emptying out rapidly now as if searching for a child-sized wing chair.

In answer, Agnes stepped closer to Sam and held up her arms tentatively. He didn’t make her wait. He lifted her easily and seated her next to him in the wide chair. She was so small she barely took up any room. He kept his arm around her shoulders, holding her close to his side, and she burrowed into him like a tiny kitten seeking warmth.

“How’s that, sweetheart? Are you comfortable?” he asked quietly, keeping his voice mellow so as not to frighten her.

She nodded against him, her face buried in his shirt as she cried silent tears. Sam looked up at Isolde then, and there were tears in his own eyes. He put his arm a little tighter around the girl’s shaking shoulders and just held her until she cried herself out. It didn’t take long. It was late, and she was so little and scared and tired.

Agnes fell asleep in Sam's arms, but he didn't make a move. He just held her while the firelight played over them and the night deepened.

"The first of the dragons should be reaching their marks soon," Isolde said in a low voice. Agnes didn't stir. "Perhaps you could carry her up to her bed and tuck her in, then we could go back down to the workshop and process the reports as they come in."

They'd already worked out with Shera and Salveer that they would stay up tonight to go through the reports as they came in. There was no time to waste in identifying the culprit who'd gone to such great lengths to try to kill Alric. If they weren't stopped, there was no doubt they would try again.

"How do I find her room?" Sam asked, gathering the little girl into his arms.

"Oh." Isolde looked around as Sam stood, Agnes in his arms. As he walked slowly toward the door, it opened, and Mrs. Cooper stepped through.

"I was just coming to look for Agnes," she said kindly. "I didn't realize she was with you, but I can take her up to her bed now. Poor little mite. She lived with her father after her mother died birthing her, and her father died in a runaway cart accident just a few months ago. I expect she sees you as a father figure."

The chatty cook took the small girl from Sam without waking her and turned to leave. Sam stood there, watching them, clearly moved by the older woman's revelations.

Isolde stood and began making her way painfully toward him. He turned and saw her moving and came right over, lifting her off her feet.

“Let’s get you downstairs, and I’ll tell you all about the ice dragons and how they can tune their scales so they just disappear in the sky,” he told her, changing the tone. She let it go.

It was clear to Isolde that being thought of as a father figure by that tiny girl had touched him deeply. She put her arms around his neck and rested her head against his shoulder. Agnes was right. It was nice to rest against Sam’s strong body.

He got her down the stairs with little difficulty. He carried her as if she was as light as a feather, which made her feel small and delicate. He placed her on the chair she’d been using that had an ottoman in front of it piled with pillows so she could put her foot up. They had spread a map on the worktable and placed her chair next to it before they’d gone up for dinner. She would sleep down here again, until her ankle was good enough to take her up the stairs on her own. It was just easier.

But tonight, they might not get much sleep. Shera was sitting outside in the yard. Sam went over and opened the window.

“Hello, Lady Shera,” he said conversationally. “Any news to report yet?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Nothing yet, though the first dragon is getting really close to the target. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything,” the young snow dragon promised, speaking in both their minds.

Suddenly, another dragonish head appeared alongside Shera’s by the window. Salveer was there.

“Lord Salveer! I didn’t realize you were here. Where have you been hiding?” Isolde asked, laughing after his sudden appearance had made her jump.

“I’ve been here all along,” the ice dragon said, smoke rising from his nostrils in amusement. *“Sam wanted me to show you why only ice dragons went on the reconnaissance flights.”*

“You can disappear?” Isolde asked skeptically.

“In a manner of speaking,” Salveer replied a bit cagily, then relented. *“We have the ability to move our bodies and scales in such a way as to reflect what is around us. We practice*

stealthing from a young age because it's an art that takes a long time to master."

"You should show her," Sam suggested with a wink.

"All right. Ready?" Salveer waited for her to nod. *"Watch closely now. Here I am and..."* The dragon seemed to shake slightly and then winked out of sight. Isolde gasped. *"...here I'm not."*

"That's amazing!" Isolde almost squealed, leaning forward in her seat.

Salveer's eyes blinked open and glimmered at her. They were the only part of him she could see. He winked one large eye at her, then shimmered back into view.

"I'm still learning, but I'm getting better at adjusting as I go. As I said, it takes decades to master the skill, and some of us take longer than others to get it right. The dragons that went on the missions tonight are all experts. They will not be seen."

"Thank you so much for showing me this, Lord Salveer. I had no idea!" Isolde could already see the possibilities of such an ability for gathering information. She really needed to recruit some of the ice dragons into her network, if at all possible.

"You needed to know, so I was given permission to let you in on our little secret," Salveer surprised her by saying. *"The elders wish me to impress upon you the need to keep this quiet."*

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about me. I can easily see how this ability can be used—but only if others aren’t aware of it. I won’t tell anyone,” Isolde promised.

“First report coming in. Zalrazz is at Lord Moreline’s home. He’s already circled but sees nothing amiss. He’s now hiding on the battlements listening to a few gabby soldiers who are supposed to be guarding the walls but are chatting about how their Lord has been so worried lately about his wife, who has been ill. Apparently, he’s been so distracted by caring for her, he hasn’t been paying much attention to anything else. If that’s true...” Shera trailed off.

“If that’s true—and it probably is because I have heard some corroborating rumors about his wife’s health in decline—then he probably isn’t our man,” Isolde finished the thought.

“My friend, Valoxian, reports strange happenings at Lord Orthan’s home,” Salveer spoke next, a note of urgency in his tone. *“A build-up of soldiers. More than any other country estate we have flown over while traveling here. And there’s something about the manor house, itself. It rings hollow. As if many of the treasures that had been within are now gone. The stone walls echo empty.”*

“Hiring Eyes is an expensive business,” Sam muttered.

“He could have sold off his family’s treasures,” Isolde replied, thinking hard. “He is distantly related to the King. Perhaps he thought if he eliminated Alric, he would have the nation’s treasury at his disposal somehow.”

“We need to determine how close he is in line for the throne. Someone at the castle must know,” Sam said quickly.

“The Crown Chronicler,” Isolde replied at once. “I can send one of my apprentices with a message to someone you trust to get the information out of the man.”

“Sergeant Goodfellow,” Sam said decisively. “Let me just write him a note.”

Isolde pointed him toward pen and paper on a side table while she rang a bell. They’d devised this system since she’d been hurt so someone could come help if she ran into trouble. A few minutes later, Malea stuck her head in the door after tapping lightly to announce her arrival.

“Please get Kurt. I need him to go up to the castle. This is urgent,” Isolde told the girl. Malea’s eyes had widened when she’d seen the two dragons at the window and the General penning his note, but she hadn’t said a word, just scampered away quickly to get Kurt.

Sam finished his note and folded it a moment before Kurt arrived. Sam walked to the door and handed him the note.

“Do you know my aide, Sergeant Goodfellow, on sight?” Sam asked before handing over the note.

Kurt nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Go up to the castle and give this to him as quickly as possible. Wait for a reply. He’ll have to get in touch with someone else to get it, so you might have to wait a bit,” Sam warned, handing the note over.

“You can take Nightstar if you think she’ll get you there and back faster,” Isolde volunteered.

Kurt nodded respectfully and headed right out.

As they waited for the news that Kurt would bring back, they were kept busy by the reports of the other dragons. The other three dragons didn’t see anything untoward at any of the other noble country homes. While they couldn’t really eliminate the other three, none had such suspicious circumstances as Lord Orthan.

About the time the dragon who’d had to fly the farthest distance finished her report, Isolde heard Nightstar’s hooves through the open window. Kurt had returned. He didn’t bother coming inside. He merely tethered Nightstar to a post and came to the window himself, handing over the return note to the General.

Isolde thanked Kurt for his speed and service, and he went back to Nightstar. He’d have to get her back into her stable and settle her for the night. Sam read the note, and his expression grew grim.

“Somehow, from tenth in line for the throne, Lord Orthan has worked his way up to a much closer number. If Alric dies before marrying, it wouldn’t take much for Orthan to take over. The next in line is a child who could easily become a pawn or be killed. Then Orthan could take it all.”

“Did all the others die in suspicious circumstances?” Isolde asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Some, certainly. Others could be explained away, but the Chronicler has been watching all of this unfold with some concern. He apparently told Alric about this a few months ago, but no one else.”

“The King knows?” Isolde shook her head. “Why didn’t he tell anyone who could have kept watch?”

“The Chronicler, woken from his slumbers and in a foul mood, according to Goodfellow, claimed the King is so besotted with his lady love, he didn’t seem to be listening when the Chronicler had made his report.” Sam crumpled the paper in his hand. “This isn’t good. Orthan could have been behind any number of things that have been happening at the castle. He is well placed to be a menace we would never suspect.”

“We have to flush him out, somehow,” Isolde murmured, thinking out loud and reaching behind her for a large book. She opened it, paging through the handwritten notes and skimming them for particular names.

“I agree.” Sam’s expression was grim. “We need to set a trap of some kind.”

“They’re all here at court right now, except for Lord Moreline, which makes sense since he is preoccupied with his wife. But the other four are here and have been attending each court session, according to my notes.”

“You keep notes?” Sam sounded intrigued.

“I’ve had to start doing so since gathering so many apprentices,” she told him, showing him one of the pages of the book.

“It is some kind of code?” Sam frowned, trying to make sense of the symbols on the pages.

“My own little language that nobody else can decipher,” she agreed, nodding. “This way, if anybody ever gets their hands on this book, it will be meaningless to them.”

Sam grinned at her. “You are a remarkable woman.”

She felt a blush heat her cheeks at his praise. “Thank you,” she replied demurely, then sobered. “But the fact is, my apprentices have been keeping tabs on the comings and goings of the King’s court since we gained access to the castle. Alric and Zallra know about this, by the way. In case you were wondering.”

“Right now, any help to our King is fine by me. I wouldn’t like it if someone with malicious intent was keeping tabs on the doings of the castle, but you’re on the right side. And judging by your notes, nobody else can gain access to this information.” He nodded one, in seeming satisfaction. “You’ve done very well, Isolde. I have no cause for complaint. Especially not when your observations might be the key to helping us catch this fiend.”

She tilted her head and smiled a little. “I’m glad you see it that way. Now, as I was saying, they’re all here. The four we still have questions about. If we could somehow keep those

four under close surveillance, perhaps I could force the issue with each one and see what happens.”

“The dragons will assist,” Salveer said, putting his two pennies in. *“You should arrange to question them each in a place we can access so we are able to back you up if things turn violent. And if they try to run, we can help block them.”*

“Thank you, my friend. I will endeavor to arrange it that way. Perhaps you and your apprentices can keep tabs on the four, and I will then find a spot to ambush them each separately and ask my questions,” Sam seemed to be thinking through the scenarios.

“You can’t interrogate them openly.” Isolde frowned. “Not without creating a diplomatic incident. These are powerful people. The King would have to listen to them if you caused insult or upset. They outrank you to a considerable degree.”

“I know.” Sam’s lips thinned to a grim line. “I will be delicate in my questioning, but I have to find a way to get to the truth.”

“It may take more than one session. And more than one questioner,” Shera advised.

“You’re right, but I can hope one of them will show their hand either during my questioning or after. I think we need to make certain they are followed and observed directly after my pointed questions. Their reactions might tell us something important,” Sam said, his gaze turning cunning.

Isolde was impressed all over again with him. He wasn't just a big, dumb soldier. This was a General who always had strategy in mind and well-thought-out reasons for his actions. She felt privileged to be working with him, and she thought, perhaps, she could learn a thing or two from the way he went about his business. She might be a spymaster, but she was always eager to learn better ways to perform her tasks. Strategic thinking was something she'd had to work on and still found it helpful to step back and analyze her actions before taking them—which she had to admit wasn't something she always did as a matter of course. It was one of the areas she still needed to work on.

“I will have my apprentices out in full force at the next court session. We can bring over one of the larger parts of the window that is ready and make a show of preparing for installation. It's a good excuse to keep most of my older and more skilled apprentices, and myself, at the castle for most of the day,” Isolde said, as Sam nodded.

“You have three who can speak to us,” Salveer put in. *“Perhaps you can arrange to have all three of them at the castle so that if we dragons need to get them to do something we can ask one of your apprentices directly without having to relay through you. I suspect you both will have your hands full enough already.”*

“I can have them there, but please remember the youngest, Hunter, is just a child. He is a brave child, but if there is danger, we need to protect him,” Isolde cautioned.

“We will do our best to protect them all,” Salveer replied immediately.

“And we will shield Hunter and Malea with our own bodies, if need be,” Shera added.

Isolde smiled at the dragoness’s fierce tone. “What about Kurt? I thought you liked him too?” Isolde teased the dragon who was quickly becoming her best friend.

“I do, but he wouldn’t want that. He’s old enough to want to be in on any fight, and I’ve been watching him train with Mr. Everest. He has excellent fighting skills. He can take care of himself, and he’d be really mad if I thought otherwise,” Shera surprised Isolde by saying.

“I hadn’t realized you were watching their training,” Isolde said, cocking her head toward the dragon by the window.

“There’s not much else to do all day next door. I don’t want to interrupt your working schedule, so I stay over there most of the time, but it does get boring,” Shera admitted. *“So, I watch over the wall sometimes.”*

“Oh, sweetheart, I didn’t realize,” Isolde was immediately contrite. “We’re going to figure out a way to fix that. I’ll talk to Lilly and Luc as soon as we have a chance and see if there’s something we can do. If you want to spend your days here, we can arrange that. I don’t want you to be lonely.”

Isolde could have kicked herself. She kept forgetting that despite her size and abilities, Shera was still very young to be away from her family and home. In a way, she was a bit of an

orphan, too. Isolde should have taken that into consideration long before now. Shera needed love and friendship and community, just like Isolde's apprentices.

Sam reached out to cover Isolde's hand on top of the table. She looked up to meet his eyes and she read understanding there. He squeezed her hand once, then let go. She understood. He was offering comfort. He was such an amazing man. Sensitive, yet fierce. He was digging his way deeper into her heart with every moment.

"We'll put this plan into motion at tomorrow's court session. Salveer, would you please tell everyone of our plans, including Lady Zallra and the King?" Sam asked. "I want them all to have time to prepare, just in case something unforeseen happens."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next day, they put their plan into motion. Sam had gone back to the castle in the wee hours of the morning after the marathon planning session. There hadn't been time or energy for him to make love to Isolde, much as he'd wanted to. She was clearly in pain again from her ankle, and although he kissed her sweetly before leaving, that was all he could do.

He'd been able to grab a few hours of sleep before the planned action, and that had to be enough. The apprentices had arrived before the court session was to begin. The window they were working on was in an adjoining chamber to the great hall, so it made sense that they would be moving about nearby. The apprentices were well-trained in stealth and making themselves seem unobtrusive and insignificant. One or two of the courtiers might have sniffed in their direction in disdain, but most simply ignored the industrious youngsters who were clearly busy with their task.

He dressed to attend court. It was one of the things he liked least about being a General. He had a duty to occasionally

hob-knob with the nobles of the realm. It was important to keep them friendly for the times when his troopers might need their support in the field. He had the court finery but seldom wore it. Still, his costume had been specially tailored so that he could still move freely enough to fight well, even in the fine linen and silk brocade that appearance at the King's Court required.

When he arrived at the great hall, Sam was pleased to see a number of dragons in attendance. There had also been a conspicuous presence of dragons along his path here and elsewhere in the castle. Anywhere they could fit, it seemed, the dragons had stationed themselves like sentries.

The King and his lady were well aware of Sam's plans and had sent back their approval via Salveer. Luc and Lilly were keeping watch over the King and his lady, as was Shilayla. Nobody would get past those three, and even if they did, there was still Zallra to reckon with. The King was as well protected as they could make him. Which freed Sam for what he needed to do.

One by one, Sam tracked down his victims, maneuvering to get them off by themselves for a few minutes, so he could ask his questions. The questions bordered on rude and were rather pointed, but nobody besides Lady Habitha showed any outward signs of annoyance. She swept away rather majestically as if insulted, but Sam wasn't sure if that indicated her guilt or just his rudeness. She had a reputation for being a bit of a stickler.

No matter. He hadn't learned much from his questions about their situations, though Lord Orthan had been very cagey when asked about the large number of soldiers gathered at his country home. Sam had pushed Orthan as far as he could without being rude beyond the level he could get away with—which was very far indeed. Sam watched Orthan storm away from their conversation with a small sense of satisfaction. He'd managed to get under the older man's skin.

“Tell the everyone to keep a close watch on Orthan. I just angered him, and if he's going to make a mistake, now would be the perfect time,” Sam warned Salveer, who passed along his message to everyone else who could hear dragonish thoughts.

Sam saw Hunter and a few of his fellow apprentices carrying bits of glass and tools out the door after Orthan with satisfaction. Hunter may be young in years, but the others would take care of him if things got dangerous, and he could pass any information they gathered directly to the dragons. Frankly, Sam didn't expect the apprentices would be in any danger. All they had to do was listen and observe. The odds of things getting violent were very slim, in his estimation.

He had talked to three of the others, and there was only one suspect left on his list, but Lady Iretnia was proving hard to get alone. She liked to show off her stylish gown and dazzling jewelry, and she kept a coterie of sycophants around her at all times. Sam would have discounted her as a suspect completely if not for the rumors about her recently becoming very

involved with the training of the guardsmen at her country estate.

Isolde thought there might be a more—*ahem*—pleasurable reason for the lady's new interest, but Sam wanted to talk to her to make sure. He was about to join the group that had formed around the lady when he caught sight of Isolde walking quietly into the chamber, the scythe held gently in both hands. And she wasn't limping at all.

Sam changed direction and went to Isolde's side. She greeted him with a smile meant only for him. Or so he felt.

"What's this? No limp?" he asked, glancing pointedly down at her foot.

"Lilly came by this morning and did her healing thing. It was amazing!" Isolde enthused. "I'm almost good as new. And now I know a lot more about the kind of healing hall she is creating next door. Real magical healing, Sam. Not just herbs and potions, though she says that will be taught as well, once they get up to full speed. And they're going to help everyone. From these nobles to the poorest of the poor."

Sam was sidetracked by the way her eyes lit up as she spoke of Lilly's plans. Sam already knew, having talked to Luc and Shilayla a bit about what they were creating. He'd found Luc to be a most excellent fellow, and they were forming a friendship, which suited Sam. He still didn't know all that many people outside the army, and he was trying to change that.

“I’m glad Lilly found the energy to help you. And the scythe is back to polished perfection, I see.” He glanced at the deadly weapon held so lightly in her hands.

“I wanted to return it to the King, now that it’s clean again,” she said.

Sam read between the lines of what she’d said and knew she had used the return of the scythe as an excuse to be here at this moment, when things were happening. She wouldn’t ask her apprentices to do anything she wouldn’t do herself. He liked that about her, and he had the same rule about his own army.

“Hunter says you better come quick. Something is wrong with Lord Orthan,” Shera’s voice broke into both their minds. *“He’s in the antechamber, and he’s got a weapon.”*

The antechamber was a small room just off the dais where the King sat that he used to come and go from the great hall without having to walk among the gathered throng. It made it easier for him to arrive after the nobles were assembled and leave before they departed without getting waylaid by each person that wanted to seek his favor or a private word. But that antechamber was off limits to everyone but the King’s personal guard because of the ease of access it posed to the dais.

“I’m going to give this back to the King and keep myself near the dais,” Isolde said immediately.

“Good. I’m going around the back way,” he told her, already on the move.

“Where is the guard?” Sam demanded of the dragon as he left the great hall.

“Hunter says Orthan did something to them,” Salveer replied. *“They are on the floor, and Orthan is lying in wait for the King to leave the dais. We can’t fit into the antechamber, but I am in the corridor outside with Hunter and the other apprentices.”*

“Get them behind you,” Sam advised.

“They already are. I would not let harm come to these children if I can help it,” Salveer replied immediately.

“Thank you, my friend,” Sam sent as he rounded the corner and saw the dragon standing just to the side of the doorway to the antechamber.

The door was open, and a booted foot lay across the threshold. Apparently, one of the guards had dropped right where he’d stood in the doorway, and Orthan had left him where he’d fallen. There had been two guards. One at either door.

Sam peered carefully into the antechamber, keeping as far back out of sight as possible, but Orthan was focused on the other end of the room and the door through which the King would step. Sam could see the other guard, also on the ground, out cold near the other door.

Sam wasn’t sure what Orthan had done to them, but Orthan had to be more skilled than anybody realized to have knocked out two of the King’s finest Guardsmen without getting a

scratch on himself. Sam wondered how he hadn't known Orthan had such skills. Or did he? Could there be magic aiding him in some way?

“Salveer, could you tell if Lord Orthan used magic to fell those guards? Is there a way to know?” Sam asked before taking action. If Orthan had done something magical, he could well use it again, and then, Sam would be unable to help protect his liege lord.

The dragon leaned his head closer and took a long sniff. *“Now that you mention it...”* Salveer seemed to think for a moment. *“There is a trace of magic, but there is also a chemical smell that lingers just under the surface. I think he sprayed something potent into their faces, but I cannot say what it is. I have never encountered this scent before.”*

Sam tugged a square of dark cloth out of his pocket. His court garb had come equipped with all sorts of things, including a dark handkerchief in case he needed to obscure his face. Sam tied the cloth around his face, just under his eyes, hoping the fabric would offer some protection should Orthan try to dose Sam with whatever he'd used to fell the guards. Of course, Sam didn't plan to get close enough for Orthan to use that trick if he could help it. Sam stepped into the antechamber, his sword drawn.

“Lord Orthan, what are you doing here?” Sam used his best command voice, though he kept it low enough that nobody in the great hall could hear.

“None of your business, boy. Go away,” Orthan spat, seeming not to recognize Sam. He returned his attention to the door through which the King would enter the antechamber.

“I think not, milord. You should not be in this antechamber. It is forbidden except by the King’s express invitation.” Sam stepped a little closer, but the man’s attention was focused out the tiny window in the door through which he could see the dais.

“And do I not have the King’s invitation?” Orthan screeched, sounding affronted. “How would you know? You’re only a servant. Now, get out and leave me to my business.”

That might have worked with an apprentice, but not with a General.

“Try again.”

Sam was edging forward, ready to take action as soon as he saw the right opening, but then, the door to the dais opened, and Alric stood there, Zallra at his side. *Damn.*

“Sire, please go back into the hall,” Sam said in a clear voice.

But Alric had a frown on his face, and he advanced into the anteroom, Zallra beside him. She closed the door behind them, preventing those in the great hall from knowing what was happening in the much smaller chamber.

“No. Though I thank you, General. I am through letting others fight my battles, and I want to know why Lord Orthan

felt it necessary to betray not only me, but the kingdom,” Alric enunciated clearly.

“Why didn’t you just die yesterday, like you were supposed to?” Orthan cried out, spittle flying from his lips in his agitation. “Or all the other times I tried to have you killed? That damned Osmian wanted to play with you too much. I told him that a hundred times, but he insisted it would be better his way, and I let him do as he liked. At least while you were blind, I could do what I liked. But now that you can see again...” Orthan shook with rage. “And this...this...harlot you plan to wed.” He gestured rudely toward Zallra, who was watching with quiet judgment at his side. “I’m through waiting. I’ve spent my entire fortune trying to kill you, and every hireling has failed me. So I’m going to have to do this myself.”

Sam moved ever closer, waiting for Orthan to spring so he could stop him, but Orthan didn’t spring at the King. In fact, he tossed his sword aside, reaching instead for his pocket. He moved quickly, uncorking a wide-mouthed vial with his teeth before Sam could get close enough to stop the splash of fluid out of the dark bottle toward the King.

Sam acted, his sword running through the traitorous lord’s heart from behind while an instant swirl of magic occurred at Alric’s side, and Zallra’s wing blocked the fluid from getting anywhere near the King. It dripped off her wing and landed on the carpet, turning the bright red wool weave to a sickly tan color almost instantaneously.

“Zallra!” the King shouted from behind her. “Are you all right, my love?”

“I’m fine,” Zallra stated for all those who could hear her. She lowered her wing, obviously mindful of where the rest of the fluid landed. *“It can’t penetrate my tough hide, but I should wash this off somewhere safe as soon as possible. Anything the potion has touched will need to be burned, and the utmost care needs to be taken in removing anything that could be contaminated. This stuff kills on contact.”*

“Zallra!” The King’s voice sounded agonized.

“It won’t kill me, my love. Not in this form. But it will kill anybody who comes into direct contact with it. Safest thing to do is put the rug and anything else into the big fireplace and have one of our dragon friends incinerate it down to ash. Let the smoke float out from the highest chimney to dissipate harmlessly in the air. As for me, I’m going to the river to soak my insulted wing for a good long time.”

Smallest of all the dragons he’d seen, Lady Zallra’s black form walked carefully closer in the small room. It was just large enough to fit them all. She looked down at Lord Orthan’s dead body. Sam had run him through cleanly.

“Good work, General,” Zallra said in his mind. *“Perhaps Salveer can use his flame to incinerate the refuse.”*

Sam looked back to where Zallra was looking and saw Salveer’s head inside the room, his large body crowding the doorway. It looked somewhat absurd, but Sam wasn’t going to quibble. Salveer backed out of the way as Zallra walked

toward the door to the hallway. She could just about squeeze through it in her dragon form, and the hallway was the quickest way to get out of the castle without running into too many people. The dragons would run interference for her, he was sure.

Alric stood where she'd left him, shaking his head. "I never would have suspected Orthan. He's a distant cousin and was boyhood friends with my father."

There was a tap on the door behind Alric. The one leading to the great hall. Sam could see Isolde looking in through the small window set in the door.

"Isolde says the courtiers have all left, and the great hall is empty but for the dragons," Salveer told Sam and the King.

Alric turned and opened the door, letting Isolde in. She still held the scythe in one hand.

"What can I do to help?" she asked, ready for action.

"You've already done it," Alric replied. "I had not suspected Orthan of anything until you gathered the evidence with the help of our new ice dragon friends. I owe you all a great deal," the King said, gazing from Sam, to Salveer, to Isolde. "I am both gladdened to have your loyalty and trust, and saddened that Lord Orthan chose to betray his land and me, personally."

"He was in league with the Alchemist Osmian, Sire. It appears Lord Orthan has been your secret enemy for a lot longer than any of us suspected," Sam said, wiping his sword on a clean section of the ruined rug that was destined to be

burned shortly. He then stood and bowed to his King. “If you will go with the dragons, Sire, I will arrange help cleaning this up. We dare not leave something so deadly out in the open any longer than necessary, but there could still be danger to you. Perhaps Mistress Isolde can accompany you as well?” A smile lifted one corner of the General’s mouth. “She keeps trying to return the scythe to you, but something always happens.”

Alric smiled wryly at that and gestured to Isolde. “Yes, my dear. Let’s go raid the kitchens with some of your clever apprentices. A special treat for them after all their hard work on my behalf.”

“I think they’d love that, Your Majesty,” Isolde replied immediately. “Thank you.”

The King gestured for Isolde to precede him to the door and stopped at Sam’s side. “We must talk later. Come to my private office tonight, after dinner.”

“Yes, Sire,” Sam replied immediately. He wondered what the King had in mind but couldn’t ask. He’d find out tonight.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sam knew the King was safe enough with Isolde at his side, along with a bunch of her apprentices and a few dragons for good measure. He'd be all right until Lady Zallra returned. Especially since the courtiers had left. Sam felt that Orthan had been the only conspirator, but he would continue the investigation into the others until they'd all been cleared. Or not. Either way, he would not let down his vigilance regarding the King's safety.

Sam summoned help in removing the ruined rug and watched over the few who came to do the work carefully. If this substance was as deadly as Zallra had warned—and he believed it was—they had to move with extreme caution.

They used the grand fireplace in the great hall because it was large enough to hold the rolled and folded rug and also had the highest chimney of all the fireplaces in the castle. Salveer did, indeed, assist with the burning. The strength of his flame directed all the smoke right up the chimney and out into the air where it could dissipate harmlessly.

It took a few hours, but they managed to do the work without anyone coming to harm. It would be up to the housekeeping staff to redecorate the antechamber. Perhaps the King would take this opportunity to make it more comfortable for his lady and allow her to choose some new furniture and perhaps change the color scheme. Whatever he chose to do, it was in the King's hands now. The danger had been eradicated, and the General's work was done for the moment.

As for Lord Orthan, his body was taken away by the King's staff and would be returned to his lands for burial. The King would also have to send one of his stewards out to that estate to take stock of what was left, if anything. The King would have to decide if Orthan's family was entitled to inherit whatever might remain, or if Orthan's treason had forfeited his lands to the crown. If that was the case—and Sam expected it to work out that way—then the King could award those lands to some other deserving soul who would not betray him as Orthan had.

Sam found Isolde in the royal kitchens with a few of her younger apprentices. The King had gone, but the children were still being spoiled by one of the cooks whose specialty was confections. Each of the children had a happy expression and the purple tongue that indicated they'd eaten berries of some kind.

Isolde turned and their eyes met, and he realized once more how much he loved her. So much so that he didn't think he could live without her. He didn't know how that was going to work when he had to go back to running his army in the field,

but he had to hope that there might be some way they could be together. For now, though, he had to be practical and keep his thoughts of forever to himself until he could find a way to make it happen.

Isolde saw Sam across the length of the kitchen, and her heart skipped a beat. He had that effect on her. Almost from the moment she'd first seen him, he'd affected her that way. He made time stand still and her heart and soul...yearn. For him. For what they could be together.

But she had no idea if he was thinking along those lines. They hadn't talked about any sort of long-term commitment. He'd been in the city longer than she'd expected frankly, and she wasn't sure if he would be here much longer. When she thought about his imminent departure, she got so sad she couldn't function, so she'd resolved not to think about it. She wanted to enjoy every moment she had with him because she'd realized somewhere along the way that Sammir Brighton was the love of her life.

He came over, smiling for the round-faced cook who had been spoiling the youngest apprentices with all sorts of yummy confections. The older apprentices had already left, attending to their duties, but the younger children needed a little more time to recover from the excitement, and Isolde knew they deserved a little spoiling by the good-natured cook.

The older lady had already taken Isolde aside to tell her to expect a delivery from the royal kitchens in two days' time. The King had sent word to the cook that she was to create a

large cake and send it down to the glass shop, with his thanks and compliments. The other cooks would be working on the rest of the feast, so Isolde should prepare her house to receive a wagon filled with food and set aside time for the celebration. The King wanted them all to know how much he appreciated their good work on his behalf.

Isolde was touched and astounded by the King's generosity, but she should have realized that Alric would not take anyone for granted. He was a kind and noble King who saw to the comfort of his people in ways they might never suspect. This special feast for a gaggle of orphans was just one case in point.

"Are you about ready to go?" Sam asked, coming up beside Isolde. He smiled at the children, acknowledging them with a friendly nod.

"I think we'd better," Isolde said, groaning theatrically as she got to her feet. "Otherwise, there will be no berries left for the King's supper."

The children giggled, licking their plates before picking them up and taking them to the sink in one corner. The cook smiled warmly at their good manners and gave each child a warm hug before they left. Isolde thanked the woman again and followed behind her charges with Sam.

They walked back to the shop as a group, Isolde having told the children that there would be no more work today. They could have free time until dinner, to do with as they wished. Three of the older girls decided to go shopping for hair ribbons, and Isolde allowed it, giving them each a few coppers

from her own purse. The youngest were starting to come down off the sugar high, and Sam ended up carrying the littlest the rest of the way home.

Hunter and some of the others decided to play quietly in the yard while the youngest went down for naps. Some of the more studious children decided to spend their free time reading, and one especially talented apprentice took his drawing paper and started sketching by the light of the window in the dining hall.

Some of the older apprentices were gathered there as well, sipping from steaming mugs and chatting quietly. They all waved to Isolde when she walked in with Sam, and Mrs. Cooper came over, bringing them both mugs of hot spiced cider, which was the woman's remedy for almost every upset.

"Young Malea sent a message back to me," Mrs. Cooper explained quietly, "that there'd been some upset at the castle and that work was cancelled for the day."

Isolde put her hand to her forehead and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I should have done that. There was another assassination attempt on the King, and we unmasked a traitor. The children played a big part, and the King's cook spoiled the little ones with dishes of berries and sweet cream, so they may not be as hungry at dinner," Isolde explained. "Oh, and the King's kitchens will be sending a feast in two days' time along with a very large cake. It is his way of thanking the children for their service. So, we'll be having a little holiday and celebration amongst ourselves."

“Oh, that is good of him. I will be sure to send our thanks to the kitchen staff and the cooks up at the castle as well,” Mrs. Cooper said, smiling brightly. “Is everyone well after the commotion?”

“Lord Orthan is dead,” Isolde said bluntly. “Everyone else is fine. But I suspect what’s left of Orthan’s estate is forfeit to the crown due to his betrayal. It seems he’s been trying to kill King Alric for many years.”

“That’s terrible.” Mrs. Cooper shook her head, then brightened. “But I’m glad you got to the bottom of it.”

“So am I,” Isolde agreed tiredly.

Mrs. Cooper nodded. “Dinner will be out in an hour,” she said, then turned away to go on about her business.

“Thank you, Mrs. Cooper,” Isolde said to the older woman’s back as she walked briskly away.

Sam and Isolde took the seats by the fireplace and sipped their cider for a few minutes before conversing. So much had happened in just a few hours.

“Do you think that’s the end of it?” Isolde asked quietly, wondering if the most recent threat to the kingdom had truly been neutralized.

“Orthan’s part, at least,” Sam agreed. “I think the immediate threat is over, but as you know, there will always be people who want to try to seize power. We must still be vigilant where the safety of the kingdom is concerned, but I think Orthan was probably the driving force behind the recent unpleasantness.

He is not one to share power, and I doubt he had any co-conspirators in this long-standing madness.”

“He said he’d allied with the Alchemist Osmian,” Isolde reminded him gently.

Sam nodded. “He did, but it sounded like an unpleasant episode. From his tone, I took it that he no longer worked with anybody else because they were too unreliable. We will continue the investigation, of course, and King Alric will remain under tight security, but my gut feeling is that we stopped the main driver behind the recent attempts on Alric’s life.”

“You stopped him, you mean,” Isolde said softly. “You were really great, Sam. I mean that.” She hoped he heard the true admiration in her voice. He looked over at her, his eyes gentle and his expression just the tiniest bit embarrassed.

“It was a joint effort,” he reminded her. “Lady Zallra really saved the day.”

“But you ended the threat. You didn’t hesitate, and you did it right.”

He took a long swallow of his cider. “You’ve done the same,” he reminded her. “I’d say we all did our part to save the King and the peace of our kingdom. And your apprentices have proven a very effective group in so many ways.”

She smiled. “They did do well, didn’t they?” She looked at the various groups sitting quietly in the large room. “I’m so proud of them.”

“As you should be. You’ve set them a great example. They are fine people, one and all.”

Her heart was full with the love and pride she had for her apprentices. To hear Sam—an experienced General who was used to guiding younger soldiers—speak of her charges in such glowing terms made her feel warm inside. She was also hopeful for her apprentices’ futures. They were growing into people who would have a secure place in their world.

They chatted lightly while the apprentices helped set up the hall for dinner. A few came over to talk with them, and the hour passed pleasantly. When dinner was served, everyone was a little subdued at first. Then Sam stood up and held his glass aloft.

“I salute you all for your fine work this day. The King is well pleased with you, as you know, but I wanted to add my own thanks for your diligence and steadfast loyalty to your King and country. I am proud to know you all.” He raised his glass in the traditional way, and the children followed suit, as Isolde did. She stood as he sat and addressed the group.

“Thank you, General Brighton. Your words mean a great deal to me and to all of us. I just want to say that I could not be prouder of you all than I am right now. You have proven yourselves time and again.” She felt her throat threaten to tighten with emotion but fought through it. “We will be back to normal operation tomorrow, but the lessons we have learned and the things we have seen over the past few days will continue to mold and shape us. If any of you need to talk

through anything, you know I am always here for you. As is Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Everest.”

“And me,” Sam put in from her side, drawing a smile.

“And our dear friend, General Brighton,” she added, feeling so much love for him in that moment. He, more than anyone, could commiserate with what these young orphans had been through in their lives. He was the perfect person to help them with any residual traumas. That he was willing to help melted her heart a little bit more. “However, in two days’ time, the King has granted us our own little holiday. We will not work, and there will be no lessons. We will have games and fun and a feast provided by the crown in thanks for our service.”

A cheer went up at that announcement. She waited for it to quiet down before she went on. “And the King has added to all of your accounts once more. I’m also throwing in a bit of pin money for you all to spend as you wish, and the older apprentices are permitted trade privileges on any piece they complete by the end of the month.”

The older apprentices cheered loudest at that. Trade privileges meant that some of what they created from now until the end of the month was theirs to do with as they wished. The goods wouldn’t go into the communal storefront, but rather, they could make something to trade with other artisans for specific items they wanted. Some would trade for better tools. Some might trade for small furnishings or clothing. Whatever they liked.

They all ate, the mood boisterous. The children had bounced back from the fright of earlier. Isolde would keep an eye on them all. Today had been scary. They were training as spies, not warriors, though a spy could sometimes find himself in dangerous circumstances. Today had proved that point quite well. But they'd all acquitted themselves very well. She just wanted to make sure it hadn't been too frightening for some of the younger kids.

Isolde was disappointed when Sam left right after dinner. She went with him down the stairs and kissed him goodbye on the doorstep. The King had asked to meet with him, and they both knew it was not wise to keep royalty waiting. He left reluctantly, it seemed, after kissing the breath from her, as was his usual effect.

She sighed and was about to go back inside when she saw Shera hop over the wall. Isolde went over to see her dragon friend.

“I’m going to have to enlarge the doors and make it so you can join us inside, Lady Shera. I hate that you have to be out here while we’re all indoors. You’re part of our little family now, and we should all be together,” Isolde said, thinking aloud. She looked at the back of her building and tried to envision how she could accommodate a dragon, but she shook her head. “I’m not sure how it can be done, but I promise you, tomorrow, I will send for a Master Builder and see if changes can be made to this building.”

“That’s very kind of you, Isolde. I confess, I do miss you all when you go inside to eat and sleep each night. I’m not used to being all by myself so much, but I go back over the wall, and Shilayla is there. I stay with her most nights,” Shera said, reminding Isolde once again how young this magnificent dragon really was.

Reaching out, Isolde put her hand on Shera’s long neck, stroking in a comforting motion. She was ready to move back if she’d overstepped, but Shera moved closer, leaning into the caress.

“We’ll figure this out,” Isolde promised the dragon in a soft voice. “You are my dear friend, Shera. The apprentices love you, as do I.”

Shera seemed to sparkle in the moonlight. *“I love you too, Issy. You are my heartmate. Like the fair folk say.”*

Isolde felt it then, the shining bond that had connected them since that fateful day at the festival. It had formed then, but it had taken time to...mature...she thought. It had strengthened day by day and was now a firm, unbreakable thing tying their two souls together on some level Isolde could just barely comprehend.

“We are, aren’t we?” Isolde marveled, putting her other hand on the dragon’s neck, hugging her gently. “Does this really mean we’re going to be friends forever?”

“Of course, silly,” Shera chided like the child she was. *“We’re going to be best friends for your whole life, and I’m going to live here with you, though we will fly back and see my*

family from time to time, and they'll come visit here too. Once you have the facilities set up for them. Don't worry, it's all going to work out great."

Isolde stepped back to look up at the dragon's face. "You've foreseen this, haven't you?"

Shera nodded, her large head moving up and down in the air feet above Isolde's head. Isolde would have laughed, but she caught sight of some of the apprentices at the back door. Looking for her, she thought. She made an impromptu decision and waved them outside.

"We weren't sure where you were," Malea said, moving closer.

"Let me guess. After all the excitement today, you're not tired enough to sleep just yet. Am I right?" Isolde asked with a smile. Malea nodded, a little shy. "All right. Let's get a few lanterns, and we can set up the firepit. We can sit with Lady Shera and keep each other company. How's that?"

The children loved the idea, and within a few minutes, the firepit had been stocked with lumber, and Shera had done the honors of lighting the fire. There were several lanterns hung around it and on the path to the back door of the shop, and the apprentices were bringing out thick wool blankets and rugs to sit on. Shera sat around the fire with the others, and Isolde felt a lump of emotion rise in her throat.

This was her family. Only one thing—or *man*, rather—was missing. But she didn't know if Sam could ever be a permanent part of her life. Even if he couldn't, then this was

certainly enough. The love of her heartmate. The love of her adopted tribe of children. The simple joy of being a family by choice, rather than by chance. It had to be enough.

Though, a little part of her heart stubbornly refused to give up on the idea of adding Sam to this picture. Then...only then...would it be perfect.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sam met with the King and Lady Zallra after dinner. They were in the King's office, which was a room Alric hadn't had a great deal of use for until his sight had come back. Now, he was rumored to start and end his days in that chamber, reading reports and studying maps, and generally seeing to the health and prosperity of his land.

There was a desk, piled high with books and ledgers, but there was also a large conference table off to one side. Alric waved Sam over, and he greeted Lady Zallra, who was already seated at the table, a map spread before her.

"I have a proposal for you, General," Alric said without preamble. "Guard Captain Jimnel has been sending me reports from the old border, and it has become clear that with the addition of not only the wasteland to the north and the ice dragon caves even farther north, the old way of doing business with our armies is no longer adequate. I know I asked you to formulate your thoughts on this topic, and I read your report

with great interest. It mirrors what Jimnel has reported from the field, and it's clear something needs to change.”

Sam wasn't sure what the King was about to propose, but he knew for certain his life and livelihood were about to change in a major way. He could only hope it would be for the better.

“What we propose is this. I want you to stay in the city and create a new headquarters for all the nation's forces here. The dragons will work with you, so you'll never be completely out of touch with the forces in the field.” Alric gestured toward the map on the table. Only, it wasn't a map of the countryside, as Sam had assumed. It was a very detailed map of the city. “There is a building here,” Alric pointed to a very familiar area of the city, not too far from the castle. “It is currently empty and built almost entirely of stone.”

“It was once a temple,” Zallra said, joining the conversation, “but the order died out, and nobody has wanted to refurbish the building because of all that stone. It's perfect for dragons. It has very wide hallways and cavernous rooms originally intended for worshipers to gather in great numbers. It also has a very large yard where we can build on, if necessary.” Zallra looked up at him and grinned. “That yard shares its back wall with a certain glass shop.”

Sam met her gaze and read mischief there. She knew. Lady Zallra knew Sam was carrying on with Isolde, and judging by her teasing expression, she approved. Then, the King picked up the thread of the conversation, looking enthusiastic.

“It will be perfect for the new headquarters of the army, and you, General Brighton, will be in charge of everything. You’ll need to come up with a new hierarchy because I think we’re going to need at least a couple of new Generals to oversee the forces in the field, including someone to be our point of contact with the former mercenary groups now settling in the wasteland. Part of their agreement with me is that they will fight for Valdis, if necessary, in return for the annexation of those lands and all of them being recognized as citizens of Valdis, among other considerations.” Alric looked up at him. “With the newly expanded borders, the responsibilities of the army are expanding and changing. I need you to take on that leadership role and find men you can promote to oversee the outlying battalions and patrols. And you’re also going to be coordinating with our new dragon allies.”

“Dragons will be part of our fighting forces?” Sam was excited by this idea, though he wasn’t sure he had enough experience to run such a daring operation.

“Some of them, yes,” Alric replied. “Salveer has spoken with his elders on your behalf, and with some additional training and consultation for both you and the dragons, I think you’ll make an excellent point of contact for them.”

“You’ve already got the most important requirement,” Zallra put in. “You can hear them when they speak and speak back in the same way. That is a rare gift. As is the bond you have formed with Salveer. It will grow and expand as you spend more time together. You will share your lives and your families with each other. It’s a wondrous thing, General, and I

believe you will need to see it firsthand, before you understand the full import of what you have with Salveer.”

“Which is why you and he will be part of the delegation that will fly across the Dragon’s Teeth to visit the land of Draconia,” Alric announced. Sam was almost dumbfounded.

“Uh...when, Sire?” That sounded rude. Sam tried to fix it. “If I am to be away from my responsibilities for a length of time, I will need to set things in motion and prepare my subordinates for my absence.”

“The ice dragons are conferring,” Alric replied. “They are trying to find the female who had an egg stolen from her by the North Witch and the barbarian who once ruled over the Northlands. Once they have that information, they plan to fly to Draconia. I want you to go with them.”

“Yes, Sire,” Sam answered, his mind racing to catch up with all the changes.

“The shape of the nation and the nation’s army is changing, Sam,” the King said, using Sam’s first name for the first time. “I want you to lead the change. You and your dragon friend, Salveer. Your partnership will enable you both to fly to the outlying battalions and regiments, then fly home for dinner. You can be based in the capital but still have relatively easy contact with your troops in the field.”

Sam could just about picture it, though it still seemed incredible. “You have already spoken to Salveer about this, yes?” Sam had to ask. He needed to know if this was all just a possible plan or a definite reality.

“We’ve talked with him and the others at length,” Zallra assured Sam. “Your mission in Draconia will be to observe and learn how the dragons and knights work together in that land. I don’t know if we can ever replicate that here, but we can at least take the best practices from their Lairs and apply them to our situation.”

“Yes, milady. I understand.” Sam smiled. “I’ve long wanted to visit Draconia. I just never envisioned going there on the back of a dragon.”

The next day, Sam was walking through the abandoned temple with the King’s Master Builder and Salveer. This place was easily big enough for dragons to roam freely and had plenty of space for Sam and his staff, not to mention a good-sized barracks and warehouse. It was just about perfect.

He’d had a lot of time to think about the changes to his life, his career and his workplace after meeting with the King last night, and he’d come to some major decisions. If he was going to be based in the capital, suddenly new avenues were open to him that he’d thought might be more difficult to traverse.

Sam had already decided he was going to marry Isolde. Somehow. He hadn’t really figured out how that would work when he was still expecting to go back to his men in the field, but Fate had stepped in. Alric’s decree that Sam should lead the army from the capital with Salveer’s help and partnership had suddenly made things workable in the extreme. There was no further barrier to making Isolde his very own...except her answer.

He'd visited a Master Jeweler's shop days before and had purchased the perfect ring for his lady love. He just hadn't known how he was going to propose under the old circumstances. Now, he couldn't wait to hear what she might say. He had it all planned and had asked Salveer to assist.

They were in the giant backyard of the temple and were nearing the back wall. The glass shop's yard was just on the other side. Sam had told the Master Builder that they'd need to put in a gate in the back wall, but that could be put off for a bit. Better to do the indoor changes first so he could move in. Sam would have to get Isolde's agreement to make changes in the back wall they shared, but if she agreed to be his wife, he didn't think she'd object.

First, he had to get her to say yes.

Sam took a deep breath and looked at Salveer. He'd talked his plans over with the dragon, and Salveer was going to help by giving Sam a boost over the wall.

"Is she there?" Sam asked the dragon, who was already looking over the wall.

"She is," Salveer answered. *"She is facing away and doesn't see me, but some of the apprentices have noticed me and are waving. It's now or never."*

Sam climbed up on the dragon's knee and then balanced his way up the dragon's neck until he was at the top of the wall. He sat on the top of the wall for a moment before jumping down to the ground on the other side. Salveer hopped over the

wall as soon as Sam cleared the area, and all activity in the yard came to a stop as everyone turned to watch.

Including Isolde.

Sam saw only her. The woman he loved. He walked toward her, as if in a trance, stopping before her to fall on one knee. She gasped, her lovely eyes going wide as he reached into his pocket and brought out the small velvet-lined box.

Opening it, he held it up to her.

“Isolde, my heart, will you marry me? I love you more than life itself. Please say you’ll be mine.” He’d spent an hour last night working out exactly what he would say, and this wasn’t it. He’d just said what was in his heart, and it seemed to be the right thing because her expression softened, her lips smiled, and her eyes shone with happy tears.

“You love me?” she asked, as if she didn’t believe him.

Sam stood and moved closer to her. “Of course I love you,” he replied at once. “How could you not know?”

“Um...maybe because you’ve never said it before?” she challenged, tears in her eyes and a smile on her face that belied the harsh tone of her words.

“Forgive me. I’m a fool,” he told her, smiling back at her. His heart was so light. She wasn’t saying no. She was playing with him. It had to be a good sign. “I love you, Isolde. Until last night, I wasn’t sure how things would work out, but the King interceded, and my circumstances have changed. That building over there...” He pointed to the temple just visible

over the back wall. “That’s going to be my new headquarters. I’m going to be working and living here, in the capital. Which means, I am finally able to settle down and have more than a nomadic life to offer the woman I love. I would never have asked you to leave the home and family you’ve built here, which was why I’ve been hesitating about declaring myself. Salveer kept saying things would work out, but until I spoke with the King last night, I really didn’t see how. Now...” He paused to clear his throat, which had tightened with emotion as he spoke. “Now, I can hardly believe how well this is working out. All I need to know is if you’ll consent to be my wife. My lady love. My partner for the rest of our lives.” He went down on one knee again, beseeching her. “Please?”

Isolde reached for his hand, then joined him on her knees on the ground. He wrapped his arms around her as she reached up to cup his cheek and draw him close for the sweetest kiss he had ever experienced. There was noise around them, but he didn’t really hear it. There was only the two of them in the world.

And two nosy dragons.

“Did she say yes?” Salveer asked quietly in all their minds.

“Not in words,” Shera replied. *“But I think the kissing means yes.”*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A week later, there was a new gate in the back wall, and the Master Builders had started work on both buildings. The King's builder was leading a team that would turn the old temple into a headquarters fit for both humans and dragons. The builder Isolde had hired was already hard at work changing what could be changed about her building, but they'd decided the best way to add a dragon or two into the mix would be to add on to the back of the building. They'd decided to move the dining hall and kitchens to the new addition and turn the second floor into a combination of rooms for the older apprentices, smaller workshops for specialty glass cutting and faceting, and dedicated classrooms for more formal instruction. With the changes, Isolde might even be able to take in quite a few more orphans as apprentices, if there was need.

The big thing, though, was that they would all be able to spend more time with the dragons at meals and other events held in the new greatly-expanded dining hall. It would take a

few months to get everything finished, but by the time the first snow came to the city, everyone should be settled into their new places.

Isolde and Sam were also planning their wedding. They'd decided that Sam would move in to her shop and walk across the backyards each day to commute to work. He rather liked the idea of being part of the family she had made for herself with her band of apprentices, and once the addition was ready, there would be plenty of room for Salveer and Shera as well.

Sam had talked it over with Isolde, and they'd both admitted that the bonds they shared with their dragon partners were growing stronger each day. The dragons were as much a part of their family now as the children were. Even more so, because of the soul-deep bond.

Sam looked forward to the trip they would be taking to Draconia to learn more about how the dragons and knights worked together in that land. Once he'd told Isolde about the King's request that he accompany the ice dragons when they went, Shera had piped up and said that she and Isolde would be going too.

It turned out that Luc and Shilayla were also to be included in the trip, and Shilayla had vouched for Shera's ability to make the long journey, even at her young age. Luc would be going to represent the enclave of fair folk while it seemed Lilly was going to be staying in Valdis to continue the work of setting up her healing hall. The newlyweds weren't exactly happy about the prospect of separation, but as they became

better friends, Isolde was glad Lilly would be around to keep an eye on the apprentices.

The trip would not last too long. A fortnight, at most, she'd been told, but she still worried about being away from her shop, and her apprentices, that long. Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Everest would ensure things kept moving along, and the older apprentices could still teach the younger ones more about glass work, but Isolde would miss them. Still, she'd be with Shera. And Sam. It would be almost like taking a honeymoon trip, since the journey would likely occur after their wedding.

It was late, and Sam was resting beside Isolde in her bed after a frenetic joining, both their hearts beating fast...and as one. She loved him so much. She couldn't wait to be his wife. But she also couldn't quite wrap her head around how quickly her life had changed...and by how much.

He rolled toward her, leaning up on one elbow to look at her. "Are you all right? You seem very quiet."

His voice was a rumble that rippled across her skin. "Just thinking about flying to Draconia," she replied, rolling her head to look at him. "I'm more than a little scared about flying all that way."

"It won't be like that first flight on Shera's back. She's been practicing her landings, but even so, you'll be on one of the older snow dragons. They won't let you fall or hurt you when you land. They've been out drilling with the ice dragons every day, teaching them the skills to carry passengers without endangering them," he told her. "They've been diligent

students, and Salveer and I have been practicing together as well.”

“You have?” She was surprised. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“We didn’t want anyone to know until we had gained a bit of skill,” he confessed. “The first few landings weren’t anything to be proud of, but we’ve gotten better the past few days. Shera’s been watching too. I think she’s picking up the basics, but I still wouldn’t try it with her until she’s grown a bit more. Those landings are no joke. You could do a lot worse than just turn your ankle if you try it again before you’re both ready.”

“Don’t worry. I have no wish to repeat my first graceless tumble off Shera’s back. But how did you manage? Did you get hurt?” She suddenly wanted to check his body over from head to toe, just to make sure she hadn’t missed some grievous injury he’d been hiding.

“Bumps and bruises at first, but we’ve figured it out now, I think. We may not be as graceful as Luc and Shilayla, but we’ll get better with time and practice. Or so Luc and Shilayla assure us.” He reached out to stroke one finger down her cheek, then dropped his hand to capture hers, twining their fingers together. “You don’t have to come on the trip to Draconia, you know. Especially not if you’re scared about flying.”

Isolde shook her head. “If Shera’s going, I am too. Where she goes, I go,” she said resolutely.

“I respect that,” he assured her. “And I love the idea of sharing this journey with you. I have always wanted to see

Draconia and how they live there. I think we can learn a great deal that we can bring back to Valdis and implement here.”

“I think so, too” she agreed. “I’ve heard so many stories about the people there and the dragons. My cousins have traveled there and brought back treasures and even better stories. And you’ve heard Thaniel’s songs. The ones he learned there and brought back with him. I believe I can get us a meeting with Drake of the Five Lands. He is a knight now, but he lived among the Jinn for decades and was a spymaster in his own right. I would like to learn from him.”

“And add him to your network, I have no doubt,” Sam said playfully.

“Oh, absolutely,” she agreed. “This trip could expand my network a great deal. The better my network and my sources, the better I can serve our King and kingdom.”

He leaned over and kissed her. “I love your devotion to duty,” he whispered against her lips.

When he drew back, she reached for him, dragging him back down. “And I love you, my General. Command me, General, sir. Tell me to come for you again.”

“Right now?” he asked, a broad smile on his face as he drew back the merest inches to meet her gaze.

“Well, maybe after a little more...um...encouragement,” she teased, reaching for him.

“I’d be very happy to offer all the encouragement you need, my love,” he answered at once, rolling them so that he was on

top, his hard body covering hers.

She spread her legs, allowing him access, and he moved between. There was no need for preliminaries. They had done all of that before the first round and now were primed and ready for just about anything. He teased her cleft, rubbing and sliding, making sure she was ready before he pushed within.

And then, he was there. Filling her. Completing her. Joining them together physically as they were beginning to meld spiritually.

They rolled on the large bed, and she ended up riding him as he held her hips, encouraging her to greater heights than they had achieved before.

“Come for me now, Isolde,” he choked out as passion rode him. She loved the way he sounded when their desires took them both to the edges of sanity. They were so well matched.

She also loved the way he commanded her pleasure. They shared so much, including a tempestuous attraction that brought her levels of ecstasy she hadn't known existed.

Isolde called out his name as she came, glad that the building was solid with a great deal of flame-proof insulation in the walls. They could not be heard by the children, so she was free to let loose with her emotions.

“You are my heart,” he whispered raggedly against her throat as she collapsed over him.

“Mine,” she whispered back, unable to form sentences but knowing that he understood. He was her heart too.

In the backyard, two dragons lay side-by-side, dozing in the dark night. One shone the bright white of snow while the other reflected the sliver moonlight showing through the clouds.

“They really are a well-matched pair,” Salveer observed sleepily to his fellow dragon.

Though Shera was a snow dragon, and younger than him, she was still a dragon and had a few surprising gifts of her own. The fact that she could see the future had flown through the dragons like wildfire. It was such a rare gift among their kind. Dragons had so many other attributes, they seldom manifested even more magical abilities like foresight.

Shera was special, he had decided. For that, and for other reasons he just couldn't put a talon on yet. But he liked her. He liked her a lot. Even if she was still a child.

Which was a good thing, he decided, since he had chosen to spend a couple of centuries with Sam, allowing his magic to extend the General's normal lifespan. Sam just didn't know about that part yet. And Shera had bonded with Isolde, which would have the same effect. Since Isolde and Sam were a mated pair, Salveer would find himself working with Shera for a good long time.

Once she was grown enough to really contribute. Though, he had to be fair. Shera had more than pulled her weight so far, even as a very young dragon. She was exceptional.

“Yes, they are,” Shera said back to him after a slight delay. She was on the edge of consciousness, he could tell. About to fall asleep at any moment. *“And so are we.”*

She fell asleep between one eyeblink and the next, leaving Salveer questioning her words. Had she foreseen something? Or was she merely commenting on the fact that they would be working together for the foreseeable future?

Damnably female! Now, he was going to be awake half the night, wondering.

But he didn't have the heart to wake Shera and demand answers. Even frustrated, he found he cared for her. She was like an annoying little sister to him right now, but her words made him wonder if, in time, she might grow to be something more...

Epilogue

“**A** Jinn wagon train is expected to arrive in the city today,” Isolde told Sam over an early breakfast. Most of the children were still asleep, but both of them had duties to attend to this morning and were getting an early start.

“Are you riding out to meet them?” Sam asked. He knew Nightstar hadn’t gotten much exercise lately, and Isolde liked to take her out when the opportunity arose.

They’d been taking the long ride to her family’s home a few times each week to share a meal with her father and for her little brother to spend some time training Wolfsbane. Tamlin had been doing wonders for the horse’s manners, without dulling his fighting spirit. Sam was convinced Tam was a genius with horses and was thinking of how he could get the boy a side job training horses for the cavalry, if at all possible, once he was a bit older and finished his apprenticeship.

“I think I will,” Isolde said, munching on a last crust of toast. “They’re coming from Elderland, and I haven’t had any recent reports from there. Especially not since we redirected all those

mercenaries from the wasteland to the Elderland border. It's possible they're peeved with us, and we need to know that as soon as possible so the King can take steps to preserve the peace."

Sam frowned a bit. "You'll let me know if there's anything urgent, I hope."

"Of course." She smiled at him. "What do you have on your agenda for the day?"

"More meetings with the Master Builder. He's taking me on an inspection tour of the work they've just completed. Then I hope to talk to the King about beefing up our cavalry units. I have an idea about bringing them in for training every year or so, which will give them the experience of moving long distances cross-country, as well as a chance for us to have some experts assess their horses and training level. It would help us ensure that they're all being trained and maintained to the same standards."

"They can't do that in the city, surely," she said, grabbing another piece of toast off the platter.

"No. I had in mind that place out near your father's home. The widow is trying to sell, right? Tragic for her, of course, but the place would be perfect for drilling cavalry. We might even persuade her to stay on in her house and work for the crown overseeing the place, I thought. If that's not too much change for her."

Sam had heard the tale over last week's dinner with Isolde's father. A farm accident had killed the woman's husband, and

the upkeep of the acreage was just too much for her on her own. She'd decided to sell the land and move into the city but hadn't found a buyer yet for such a large place.

"I think that's a splendid idea," Isolde told him. "And I think she would prefer staying on the land, even if it does belong to the crown and not her husband. Though you could also talk to her about leasing possibly. I know she really wanted to keep the land for her children, but they are much too young to work it now. She might look more favorably on the endeavor if she still came out of the deal with at least some of the land and her home for her children."

"I'll talk to the King about it," Sam promised. "It's a very good idea, my love." Rising, he leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Now, I really should be on my way, or I'll be late for my meeting with the builder. Have a good day."

"You too," she replied with a smile.

He lived for her smiles these days. She was everything to him.

Sam was whistling happily as he left the building and strode across the yard to the new back gate that led into the backyard of his new headquarters building. Life was, indeed, good.

An hour later, Isolde rode out on Nightstar's back, enjoying the freedom riding her beloved mare always gave her. Flying with Shera was great, though they still weren't very good at landings, but Nightstar had always given Isolde a sense of freedom that couldn't be beat. In time—especially as Shera grew to her full size and skill—Isolde was sure she'd come to

feel the same about being on a dragon's back, but for now, there was still a bit too much fear and anxiety about being aloft to make it truly enjoyable.

She met up with the Jinn caravan before they broke camp, spending time with the wagon master as the rest of his group finished their breakfast. She received his report from Elderland with great interest and learned that the mercenaries had been mostly sent on their way with no harm done. She was about to take her leave to return to the city on Nightstar when the wagon master pulled her aside.

“There's just one other thing, mistress,” the wizened old wagon master said, a little smile lifting the corner of his mouth. “We brought along a few passengers, I guess you could call them, who demanded passage to where their *Sammy* was located. I came to understand that Sammy referred to General Samnir Brighton, and I understand he is in the city.”

Isolde frowned. She had no idea what the wagon master was talking about, unless Sam somehow had children? Disrespectful children if they called him that. Whatever it was, she needed to find out.

“Can you introduce me to these passengers?” she asked carefully, still puzzled.

“Oh, aye.” The wagon master grinned outright now and stood, beckoning for Isolde to follow. He walked over to a covered wagon and knocked politely on the wagon frame before opening the canvas flap to reveal...

Tiny...dragons?

“Um...hello?” Isolde tried, hoping these little creatures were sentient.

“The leaders of this clutch are Tippy and Quinn,” the wagon master said when nothing happened. Over a dozen reptile eyes just blinked at Isolde in question, and she had no answers.

At the names, two of the larger creatures stepped forward. One was a dark blue and the other a sort of orangey pink. Their wings were gossamer, their gazes seemed intelligent, and their coloration was spectacular.

“Quinn is the blue one, and he is the father of the others. Tippy is peach and the mother of this clutch, though we have two more wagons with other clutches belonging to other couples,” the wagon master supplied helpfully, clearly amused by Isolde’s continuing astonishment.

Then, it all clicked. “You are virkin?” she asked. “From Elderland.”

Two little heads nodded agreement, and Isolde relaxed somewhat.

“Welcome to Valdis,” she said formally, bowing her head slightly. “I am Isolde van Aidel, glass artisan of the Glass Maker’s Guild, and I am betrothed to General Samnir Brighton. Would you like me to summon him here? He has spoken very fondly of his virkin friends.”

“*Yes, yes, get Sammy!*” came a little piping voice in Isolde’s mind.

She started. "You talk just like my dragon friends," she revealed.

"You have dragon friends?" Quinn asked, stepping closer to her and peering at her quizzically. *"We did not know there were dragons in Valdis."*

"Oh, yes," she explained. "It's a new thing, but our King has formed alliances with the snow dragons and ice dragons. In fact, the ice dragon caves are now part of the extended kingdom."

"We should ally with the King, if he is worthy," Tippy said to Quinn, nodding to her partner. Then, she turned to look at Isolde. *"Can you help us meet the King?"*

Isolde wanted to laugh but refrained. "Yes, I believe I can, but Sam would probably be better placed to make the connection. I am just an artisan." The wagon master chuckled beside her.

"It's no good trying to keep secrets from them, Mistress," the old wagon master said. "Virkin have a way of getting every last bit of information out of someone. They are highly magical, but thankfully, their hearts and aims are pure. The kingdom and you, yourself, will come to no harm from them. Else, I would never have agreed to bring them here."

"Are you sure?" Isolde asked the wagon master. He was an elder with a lifetime of experience. If she couldn't trust his judgment...

He nodded. “I am certain, Mistress. Virkin are revered for their honesty and goodness all over Elderland. That they wanted to come with me was odd in the extreme, but they go where they wish and are their own beings. Nobody in Elderland could stop them from leaving, if they wished, and they most desperately wanted to go where their Sammy was. I could do no other than take them, and I am certain that they pose no danger to this land or its people. In fact, they can help in unexpected ways, which you will likely discover, now that they are here.”

Isolde still wasn't sure, but she nodded. “If you are certain.” She turned back to the virkin leaders. The rest of the *clutch*—as the wagon master had called them—were watching all with wide, interested eyes. “Give me a moment, and I will contact Sam,” she told them.

Focusing her attention on Shera, Isolde tried to send the message back to the dragon in the city. Shera had stayed home this morning to work with Shilayla on her flying. The distance from the camp to the city wasn't far as the dragon flew, but it was farther than Isolde had tried to send her thoughts before. She was a little surprised at how easy it was to make contact when it happened.

“Is aught amiss?” Shera's voice came to her, clear as a bell.

“Not really. Shera, could you tell Sam I need him to come out to the wagon train? There are...beings here that came expressly to see him. You might want to tell him to fly out with Salveer, if possible. And I'd love your opinion on this as well.”

Isolde was thinking fast. She needed her dragon sister's backup.

"We will come straight away," Shera promised.

"They're on their way," Isolde reported to the virkin, who were watching her strangely.

"You speak to him in your mind?" Tippy asked, moving a little closer.

"Not with Sam. Not directly," Isolde told the curious little virkin. "Not over this great a distance. But I can reach Shera. She is my dragon friend. Her full name is Lady Bathshera, and she is very young to have traveled from her homeland to come here. She is my heartmate, as the fair folk call it. We are bonded." Tippy exchanged looks with her partner that Isolde could not decipher. "Shera is a snow dragon. But Sam has bonded with an ice dragon named Salveer. I contacted Shera, and Shera told Salveer and Sam that they need to come out here. I didn't say why. I thought it would be a nice surprise."

"Oh, yes," Quinn bobbed up and down, his wings flapping joyfully. *"It will be a great surprise. Good thinking."*

"Sammy is bonded to an ice dragon?" Tippy seemed a bit surprised by the news, and Isolde couldn't tell if the virkin was pleased or upset by it.

"He is," Isolde told the female virkin gently. "Ever since our King regained his ability to see, great changes have been happening in our land."

Isolde went on to tell the virkin about how the Jinn mercenaries had been granted leave to settle in the wasteland to the north and how that land had been annexed to the kingdom. She also described the ice caves she had never seen, but where the ice dragons lived and how they had also asked to come under the banner of the King of Valdis and formed an alliance. Isolde told them stories about the changes to her homeland until she sighted the dragons flying in from the direction of the city.

“Here they come,” she told the virkin. “See the two dragons in the sky over there?”

“*Three,*” Quinn corrected her in his chirpy voice. “*Two white and one made of mirrors.*”

“Shilayla must have come along. The mirror-like dragon is Salveer, the ice dragon. The two snow dragons are most likely my dearest Shera, who is the smaller of the two, and her friend Shilayla, who is a bit older and larger. You have very good eyesight, sir, if you can see them so easily. I confess, I cannot see much detail at this distance. Though I do now see there are two specs of white.” Isolde smiled as she shaded her eyes and watched the dragons fly ever closer.

“*Where do you and Sammy live now?*” Tippy asked, sidling a little closer.

“I have a glass shop in the city, and Sam is renovating an old temple that shares a back wall with my shop’s yard. It will be his headquarters when it’s done, and for now, we are living at my shop, and he walks across the backyards to work each

morning. I believe we will continue that arrangement even after the wedding because I have a number of young apprentices that I look after. They are my family, of a sort, and Sam enjoys them as much as I do.”

“Do your young apprentices not have homes to go to each night?” Quinn asked shrewdly.

“No, sir. I’m sorry to say, all of my apprentices are orphans. I take them in if they want to learn the glass arts and teach them my trade,” she confessed. The virkin exchanged looks, almost as if they knew that Sam had also been an orphan and what helping her kids meant to him.

“What about when he goes off with his army?” Tippy asked.

“Oh, he won’t be doing that anymore. Not unless something big happens. The King gave Sam a promotion. He will be based out of the capital now, and he has field Generals who will oversee the troops in the countryside. Plus, with Salveer’s help, Sam can fly out to assess the troops and be back in the city by nightfall in most instances,” Isolde told them. The virkin nodded to each other as if in confirmation of something.

The dragons drew nearer but had to land outside the encampment. Sam walked in from the periphery, and the dragons did the same where there was enough room for them between the wagons. It took them longer, of course, so Sam was the first to arrive.

“I got your message,” he said, then stopped as the two virkin flew out to greet him.

Isolde watched as his face split with a huge grin, and the virkin landed on him, Tippy clinging to his chest with her little claws in his vest and Quinn taking up a place on Sam's shoulder as if he belonged there. Sam reached out to touch them, petting them and scratching behind their ears and the little horns on their heads, like they were housecats.

"Tippy! Quinn! Oh, my brave darlings! You came all this way just to see me?" Sam's voice was filled with joy. The two little creatures were wiggling in happiness to see their chosen human.

"*Came to stay,*" Quinn said gruffly through his purrs of contentment. "*We will live in Valdis now. With you. Help you,*" he said.

Sam met Isolde's eyes across the few feet separating them, and he looked as stunned by the virkin's pronouncement as she felt. He opened his mouth to speak but had to try a few times before words would come out.

"But what about your family? Your friends?" he protested. He'd explained to Isolde how social the virkin were among themselves.

"*No problem,*" Tippy said. "*They all came with us. We are starting a colony here. With you.*"

At that, a flutter of little wings filled the central part of the campsite as all the virkin from the wagons flew out and circled in the air above Sam. There had to be more than two dozen, though it was hard to count with all the little wings and bright

colors. Isolde was enchanted by them. So too were the wagon train drivers. The entire camp paused to watch.

Just then, the dragons arrived, having had to pick their way through the parked wagons with great care. The little virkin fled to perch on any available spot all around the clearing. All except the two who stayed with Sam. Tippy was still clutched in his arms against his broad chest, and Quinn looked out on everyone from his perch on Sam's left shoulder. Sam turned to face the dragons as Isolde watched.

"Lady Tippy, Sir Quinn, may I introduce Lord Salveer, my ice dragon bond-mate, and the Ladies Shilayla and Bathshera from the snow dragons." Sam was very formal in his introductions, and all the winged folk seemed to appreciate it. Dragons did love their etiquette, Isolde thought.

"Hello, Lady Tippy and Sir Quinn," Salveer said in a friendly tone. *"Sam has told me a lot about you and your adventures together in Elderland."*

He had? That was news to Isolde. But, she supposed, there were things Sam and Salveer talked about that he either hadn't had a chance to speak of with her or wouldn't, lest it distress her. He was a good mate, but he needed to learn to trust her not to be a hysterical female. Isolde sighed. He should know better by now.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance," Shera said, stepping forward a little and bowing her head respectfully. *"My mama told me about virkin, but I never thought I'd get a*

chance to meet any. We are going to do great things here in Valdis...and beyond."

"*You have the sight?*" Tippy asked, a bit of awe in her tone as she crawled up Sam's chest to perch on his other shoulder.

"*I do,*" Shera agreed a little bashfully. "*It's what led me here to Issy, and away from home so young.*"

Tippy nodded. "*Then we definitely did the right thing in making this journey. Sammy, you need to make arrangements for us to meet with your King. We need to check him out.*"

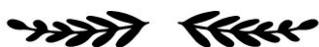
Isolde almost laughed at the little virkin and the way she was ordering around the greatest General in the land, but she refrained. Her eyes met Sam's, and they shared a moment of unspoken humor, but she could see he was delighted his little friends had come so far just to be with him.

"It will be as you wish, my dear," Sam told the peach-colored virkin. "And I can promise you will love and respect our King as much as I do."

"*And they will come to love you and your apprentices, just the same, my heart,*" Sam sent directly to her mind.

"*I love you, Sam,*" she replied back, keeping it simple in this momentous moment.

"*I love you too, Isolde. Always.*"



Thank you for reading *Spymaster* by Bianca D’Arc. The next book in the series is *Return of the Ice Dragon*. Read on for a short excerpt. Or, if you’d like to read the *Bonus Epilogue* to this book, which is about Sam and Isolde’s wedding, you can gain access to it by visiting [my website](#) and signing up for my twice-monthly newsletter. Thank you again for reading *Spymaster*. If you enjoyed it, I hope you’ll consider leaving a review. And now, for a quick excerpt...

Return of the Ice Dragon Excerpt

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All in all, her existence wasn’t bad, but it was kind of lonely. Essie’s visits had been a godsend for that little time while she was here. But Joleyn knew she couldn’t keep the dragon. Essie was not only a free spirit, but she was one of the leaders of her kind. She spoke for all the ice dragons, and she had important work to do for her people. Still, Joleyn missed her wise voice in her mind.

But Captain Jimnel was also good company. He came by every week or so to *see how she was doing*, he said. She knew he was a conscientious sort of man who wasn’t really comfortable with the idea of a woman living out here on an isolated farm, all by herself. He was a city dweller. He didn’t really understand how things were in the country, but he was learning. Their little chats were helping him come to understand the way things worked out here. At least, that’s

what he claimed. And he kept coming. So, there must be some value in his little visits.

He climbed off his horse and tied the beast to the rail just outside the house. She watched through the open doorway as he reached into one of his saddlebags and took a wrapped bundle out. He often brought little gifts when he visited. Today it looked like he had brought a small wheel of cheese. Her mouth watered. She didn't often get cheese from her neighbors. The nearest dairy farm was quite a distance away.

She took down plates from the cupboard and fetched the bread she had baked that morning. When he brought things like that with him, they often shared lunch together, and it was about that time.

“Mistress Joleyn,” he greeted her. “How goes your day?”

“Much better, Captain, now that you are here,” she answered honestly, smiling at him.

“Now that's what I like to hear.” He grinned back at her and walked closer, offering the wrapped bundle that had to be a wheel of cheese. “I hope you will share this with me,” he said jovially.

“It would be my pleasure to do so. Thank you for bringing it.” She accepted the parcel and unwrapped it quickly, her smile widening when her guess proved true. “Oh, this will be lovely for lunch. Thank you so much.”

“Think nothing of it,” he said, kindness in his tone.

They sat at her small table and shared the cheese and the bread she had made. There was even a bit of butter left over from the last time she had been to the market and was able to buy some. They ate quietly, sharing easy conversation. Jimnel told her of the news he had received from the capital. The ice dragon, Lady Esselyn, had worked out a formal alliance with the King, bringing all the ice dragons who lived in the ice caves to the north under the banner of Valdis.

“I know that’s what she hoped for,” Joleyn revealed. “We talked about it a few times, but I wasn’t sure the King would be ready to add yet another group to his kingdom. The mercenaries north of us aren’t even fully settled in yet.”

“This is true,” Jimnel agreed, “but King Alric knows a good thing when he sees it. An alliance with dragons. That’s a tremendous thing for the kingdom.” Jimnel took a breath before speaking again, as if he was preparing to say something he wasn’t sure about. “There was more information in the message I received from the King, and a request involving you.”

“Me?” What in the world could the King want with her? She was nobody. Just a spinster country girl.

“It seems that Lady Esselyn received some distressing news when she reached the capital regarding a lost ice dragon child currently living in the royal household of Draconia. He was adopted, it seems, by the new Queen of Draconia while he was still in the shell. Somehow—and I don’t know all the details—the ice dragons lost one of their eggs and Lady Esselyn feels

very strongly about going to Draconia to find out what happened and acquaint the child with his own kind. There are no other ice dragons in Draconia, and they seem to think he will need the guidance of other ice dragons as he grows. The thing is," he paused to meet her gaze, "they want you to go with them. Both of us, actually." Jimnel seemed as surprised as she felt at his words.

"Why us?" she asked, dismayed by the entire proposal. What in heavens' name could she do in a foreign land? And to get there, she'd have to fly on a dragon's back! She'd done that on rare occasions with Essie, but never for very long. It would take days and days to get to that far off land.

"Lady Esselyn wishes to have someone along whom she knows and trusts. She asked for you by name. As for me? I have no idea. I suspect the King wishes to have me there as his representative, since the relations between our two kingdoms are not well established. The distances are so great...and the mountains are a huge barrier. Now that we have dragon allies, though, the mountains are not such a hinderance for communication between our lands any longer. I think the King wants me to scout out how easy or difficult it might be to make the traverse with the dragons' aid and report back to him." Jimnel shook his head. "I'm just guessing. I won't know for certain until I get my orders, but I've heard there is another ice dragon coming. A male named Lord Dagarath, who has not been among humans in centuries. He will be arriving here in the next few days, and we will discuss the plans with him, if we are both willing to go."

“We have a choice?” Joleyn asked.

“You do, of course. Our King does not compel citizens in cases like this. You can always refuse. In my case, I owe a duty to the crown and, personally, I would do just about anything King Alric asks. I respect him and know he always has the best interests of the kingdom in mind when he does anything.” Jimnel’s surety came through in his tone.

“So, you’re definitely going.”

Jimnel nodded. “I’ve already composed the letter I am sending back to the King. Can I add your acceptance of this task, as well?”

“Do you really think I can contribute anything? I’m just a farm girl.” She really wasn’t sure about any of this. Why did Essie ask for her? Surely, there had to be better people in the capital who could help the cause more than she could.

“You’re a very well-educated farm girl who can bespeak dragons,” he reminded her, smiling kindly. “More importantly, Lady Esselyn likes you and clearly respects your abilities.”

She felt a warm glow rise up her cheeks at his words. She wasn’t used to anybody saying such things about her, much less a man she found terribly attractive. He was far above her station, but they were friends. She dared not dream of more.

“If Essie really wants me along, then I suppose I will go. There is nothing keeping me here at this time of year. I can easily leave the cottage for a few weeks.” She thought fast. “We are talking about weeks, not months, right?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but the dragons claim it will only take a few days to cross the mountains and get to the capital city of Draconia. They say we will probably stop somewhere along the border to meet with other dragons and perhaps, their knights, so they can assess us before they let us travel farther into their kingdom. The knights and dragons of Draconia are careful with their King. The whole royal family has come under attack from enemies at one time or another.”

“Not unlike our King,” she agreed, a grim twist to her lips. “It must be difficult to hold such power and have so many people trying to seize it from you by devious means.”

“You can say that again.”

They both knew the terrible trials King Alric had been through. His enemies had blinded him as a child, and he’d only just gotten his sight back a short time ago. Then, another traitor had been revealed even more recently. A highly ranked noble of the realm had been behind several very serious assassination attempts.

“If you need time to think about this proposal, I can come back for your answer tomorrow, but I can’t wait any longer than that,” Jimnel said as their meal drew to a close.

“No,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I can answer now. Although I am frightened of the idea of flying for that long, there is nothing keeping me here right now. If Essie really wants me to go with her, I will. I’d do just about anything for her.”

*To read more, get your copy of **Return of the Ice Dragon**.*

About the Author

Bianca D’Arc has run a laboratory, climbed the corporate ladder in the shark-infested streets of lower Manhattan, studied and taught martial arts, and earned the right to put a whole bunch of letters after her name, but she’s always enjoyed writing more than any of her other pursuits. She grew up and still lives on Long Island, where she keeps busy with an extensive garden, several aquariums full of very demanding fish, and writing her favorite genres of paranormal, fantasy and sci-fi romance.

Bianca loves to hear from readers and can be reached through Facebook (BiancaDArcAuthor) or through the various links on her website.

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Bells Will Be Ringing

Wild Irish Rose

* RT Book Reviews Awards Nominee

** EPPIE Award Winner

*** CAPA Award Winner