

THE DRAGON KING

(FIRST FIVE CHAPTERS)



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CHAPTER 1



Divine's flaming fire, it had worked. It had actually worked. The lifebond.

Rielle covered her mouth, holding her breath, while Jon stared at the massive four-poster bed's canopy and shifted slightly beneath the red-and-gold silk coverlet. His chest rose and fell with ragged breaths, and he blinked sluggishly beneath a creased dark brow.

But he was alive. Praise the Divine, he was *alive*.

"Jon," she whispered. She took his hand in hers and pressed his palm to her cheek. "You're awake."

He turned his head to her and narrowed his eyes, studying her for a long moment before he reached for her, pulling her into an embrace. A warm, close embrace, a thing she might've never had with him again but for the rare turn of good fortune that woke him.

Wrapped in his arms, her face against his bare shoulder, her eyes watered and her lower lip trembled. She bit it, some futile

attempt to keep the tears in. For three days, she hadn't left his side, waiting for him to wake up, praying for it. She'd sat in a bedside chair until her legs had numbed, these quarters her home and he, her everything, while the sun had risen and set, risen and set, risen and set...

He was *alive*. Divine, after three days, he was finally back. Finally.

"Rielle," he said, slowly, carefully, his voice a low rasp.

Water. He needed water.

Hastily, she grabbed the silver goblet and carafe on the nightstand and poured, then held it out to him encouragingly. "Let me help you."

Although she offered him a hand, he shook his head. Bracing an elbow on the mattress, he sat up, frowning.

His fingers rubbed against the sheets, a fine linen, brushing it languidly. His nostrils flared as he breathed deep, closing his eyes for a long while before opening them anew. His gaze lingered on a sheer curtain swaying, a golden drawer pull, a bedpost carved with roses, as if seeing the world for the first time. She swallowed. As if coming back from the dead.

He took the offered goblet, peering down at the unsettled surface of the water reflecting his countenance, and with a shake of his head, proceeded to drain its contents. As he did, he looked out the window toward the city's crimson roofs and squinted. After three days of fever, he had to be exhausted.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and licked her lip. "How do you feel?"

His fingers curled tighter around the silver goblet, and he took a deep breath. In and out.

"I feel strong," he replied solemnly, then handed her the

empty goblet. “Stronger than I have ever felt.” With wide eyes, he scrutinized his arm, flexing and turning over his hand.

It was the lifebond—it had to be—but she didn’t feel any weaker herself. Yet she’d managed to supplement his life force with hers? Somehow it was even more miraculous than she and Olivia had hoped for, then.

Her eyes didn’t lie, but she could still scarcely believe them... He was awake. Alive. Back. And this fullness inside of her responded, somehow bigger than her body, reaching out to him. Everything she had in her heart... and somehow more.

She climbed into bed and knelt next to him, following his line of sight to the gray autumn skies above Courdeval. “It’s been quiet ever since the battle. But everyone’s been on edge, nervous. Now that you’ve awoken, things will settle down.”

The entire coast was rebuilding after being decimated by Vazzana, including—disproportionately—so many homes. No thanks to Kieran’s choice to abandon the city in favor of defending the palace.

Doubtless Jon would make that right, but in this moment, the last thing she wanted to do was pile on.

She took his hand again, and the warmth of it... had changed. Before the fever had broken, his skin had been hot, but now... maybe not as much, but the fever’s heat still remained. “Your temperature,” she breathed. “Are you sure you’re—”

“Do you love me, Rielle?” he asked, turning abruptly to her and holding her gaze with a steely intensity.

He’d asked so boldly once before, the night of Spiritseve, when he’d confessed his royal lineage and reaffirmed his feelings for her. Her heart had swelled at it then, and it did again at the thought now.

She huffed, drawing in her chin. “With all my heart. What kind of question is that?”

Those steely eyes sparked, his palm stroking roughly against hers, and his gaze lowered to her lips and lingered. A corner of his mouth curled up, and it was all she could do to stay in her own skin as he leaned in and kissed her.

His kiss was gentle at first, soft, and he shifted closer, smoothing his hands over her hair and down its length with a dimpled smile. “Have you been here all this time?”

Her cheeks warmed. “I—of course—”

He rubbed his thumb across her lower lip, watching it with a glimmer of amusement. “I have great plans for this kingdom. Radical plans, even, to ensure its strength and security. Will you help me achieve them, Rielle?”

Eyes barely open after three days, and he was already thinking about work. Yes, that was Jon all right.

“Of course,” she breathed with a laugh, “but you’ve only just awoken. You should be resting. Don’t you want—”

He held a finger to her lips, halting her words. “Of course I want,” he said with a mischievous smile. “But there’s work to be done, and it won’t wait.” With a last grin, he pulled aside the coverlet and climbed out of bed, heading straight to the washbasin.

Frowning, she rose hesitantly. “And this work needs to be done right this minute?” she asked, while he washed up. “Aren’t you hungry? Or tired at all? And what about your heart? Shouldn’t we check with Olivia to see—”

“I can feel it. My heart is fine,” he said over his shoulder with a laugh. “I don’t need a healer to confirm that. And we’ll

have dinner together later. Anything else?” he challenged playfully, holding her gaze as he raised an eyebrow.

Her mouth fell open, but she shook her head, and he returned to washing and dressing.

She pressed her lips together and poured herself a goblet of water. Nothing about the lifebond? They hadn’t even discussed it yet, but didn’t he feel it? And what about the Dragon King? What had happened in those last moments of his consciousness?

She sipped her water slowly. Maybe now wasn’t the best time to ask him to relive his near-death experience. He’d tell her in his own time.

But this *work* he referred to—he’d called it radical. What exactly did he have in mind?

Booted footsteps approached her from behind, and Jon’s palms grasped her shoulders before sliding down her upper arms, imparting his warmth.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said softly, then lightly kissed her cheek.

As she turned to him, he stepped away, fastening the last of the toggles on an intricate black-and-gold doublet.

She followed a few steps after him. “Are you going to meet with Olivia and let her know you’re all right at least? Or the Grands?”

He laughed under his breath. “I’m going to call a meeting of Parliament. It’s time we declared war on the Divinity of Magic.”

War? They were still smarting from the attack on Courdeval.

She left the bedchamber, but the door to the hallway closed. He’d just woken up and was already decided on this? Had

something happened before he'd lost consciousness to convince him of this course?

Emaurria wasn't ready for all-out war. Not even slightly. The Crown's control over the Tower and the Order was still so new, barely tested. Kieran, now Lord Sage of Emaurria, seemed to defy anything he believed she supported.

And while Jon had centralized the kingdom's power domestically, Emaurria's lack of alliances was still a problem. Should the balance of power tilt—or, Divine forbid, topple—there would be no one else to turn to. Samanta Vota would win.

Never.

Jon wouldn't let that happen, and neither would she. One of the Grands would convince him.

And if not, then when he returned tonight, she would.

CHAPTER 2



Brennan set the message down, closed his eyes, and leaned in his chair, resting his head against the velvet tufted high back. Barely a few days out from battling the Divinity, and now the Morwenian Tower's mages were camped at the border, ready to fight over the establishment of the Order of Sages.

If the spies were to be believed, the mages had no support from the Morwenian king, and the Tower wasn't out in full force. Just the Divinity loyalists, then.

Still more than enough to leave a crater where southeastern Emaurria now was.

He raised his snifter of brandy and took a drink.

This is what Jonathan Dominic Armel Faralle had left him with. Named him heir to a throne he didn't want, dealing with problems he didn't care for. Last he'd checked, Jon was still alive, just barely, but it wouldn't be long before it was all official,

and a Marcel would be saddled with the damn crown once more.

Father would get his wish, in the way he least desired it. With no direct power.

And *he* would get the thing he wanted least in this world. The Marcellan banner would hang at the center of Parliament Hall, bringing permanence to this nightmare, and with it, more problems for him, and for Ranth.

A softness brushed its way across his skin. The pack's comforting harmony filled him up, wrapped him in warmth, easing away his dissatisfaction. They still considered it a boon, a werewolf on a human throne, but if the world discovered who he truly was, he and Ranth wouldn't be long for this world.

They'd dismember you and bury the pieces in the four corners of the earth, Karla murmured in his head.

Dismemberment, another voice said matter-of-factly. The werebear, Kaia Jorunsdottir. *Is that the only way we can be killed?*

Several voices chattered all at once, a commotion in his head that made him snarl.

Our alpha doesn't have full control yet, Karla chided the lot. *Don't make it worse.*

The voices settled.

He raised a brow. He didn't have full control yet, but she certainly seemed to.

That she does, Naran's wise voice whispered to him.

Ever since he'd been told the alpha needed an alpha female, it had been clear who the pack's choice was. A woman he barely knew, and a question to answer another time, when the burden of ruling Emaurria wasn't so particularly heavy.

And whether he enjoyed ruling or not, there was no other option but to continue, and pray to Merciful Nox that Jon would wake up already and reclaim his tangled knot of royal problems. Then this whole thing would be over, and there'd be nothing but Ranth, the pack, his duties as Lord Constable, and living his life in Tanière.

The door creaked open—Liliane's quiet footsteps—and she entered, flowing in among swaths of blush-pink linen, Ranth slumbering in one arm and a message in the other. Perhaps the Morwenian mages had done him a favor and incinerated themselves.

With a soft smile of her full lips and sparkling ocean-blue eyes, she handed him the message, and he took her arm, pulling her into his lap. Yvonne cared for Ranth, and Liliane didn't have to, but that didn't seem to stop her from taking him everywhere. She sat, sweeping aside Ranth's fine dark hair, while he turned over the message.

The king's seal? This had come from Jon's office. "He's awake?" he whispered to her, careful not to disturb Ranth.

She shrugged happily. "Seems so."

Odd. Wouldn't Jon have summoned him, Olivia, the Grands? Spoken to them personally?

Leaning back in his chair once more, Brennan cracked open the wax seal and unfolded the paper. "A meeting of Parliament? Now?" Did Jon already know about the Morwenian Tower? He wasted no time, it seemed.

"I'll lay out your robes, Bren," she said softly, as he leaned in to kiss Ranth's head. He nodded to Liliane, and she swept out of his study.

With Jon awake, their royal troubles would be over, and he

could focus on raising Ranth and fulfilling his duties as Lord Constable and Alpha of the Amara pack. And deterring Father from his seditious course. Father would never rest until the crown was upon his head and Ranth was culled from the Marcel line.

Father had to be stopped, and a meeting of Parliament would be the perfect opportunity to work toward that—rallying the lords to Jon’s side. And then making a coup d’etat hopeless in every way he could.

He rolled up the message about the Morwenian mages and tucked it into his overcoat, then made his way to the antechamber.

A fresh burst of air blew in, and a woman’s scent mingled with almond oil and ale. Nicolette Masson. So she was back from Magehold.

With a crooked grin, he entered his bedchamber, where she silently shut a window. Hooded, she glanced over a slender shoulder, her eyes widening, and bowed.

Crossing his arms, he leaned against the doorjamb. “How much will this infiltration cost me?”

“This one’s free. It was easier than the front door.” She approached, pulled out a vial, and held it out to him. “Your blood.”

He accepted it, popped the cork, and let the scent rise.

His scent. His blood.

She’d succeeded. She’d actually succeeded.

“How do you know this is mine?” he asked, re-corking the vial.

Pacing the room, Nicolette plucked at her black gloves. “She said it was yours.”

He frowned. "She said?"

Gaze exploring the room, Nicolette nodded. "In fact, she said a number of interesting things."

Of that, he had no doubt. People often said interesting things when death was nigh.

But something told him this little assassin hadn't completed *both* of her objectives. Still, he simply waited, unmoving. She'd speak the rest of her piece soon enough.

"She said you two were allies," Nicolette continued, studying him, "and that she'd expect your allegiance once you're the crown prince."

Thumbing his jawline, he laughed. "Oh, really? What other nonsense did she spout?"

She paused, arms at her sides, yet despite her mask of calm, she was ready. "Nonsense... and yet the king is nowhere to be found, and you're in control of the Crown."

The little assassin had been emboldened by misinformation.

"The king just called a meeting of Parliament," he replied loftily and nodded to the robes Liliane had laid out on their bed. "And use your head—I wouldn't send you to assassinate an ally."

Her brow furrowed. "'Crown prince,' she said to me..." She raised her eyebrows. "You're only a *part* of the plan. It's your father, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "You've done half a job and have already been paid half a fee. So we're square. Now I have somewhere I need to—"

"Wait." She pulled down her hood and bit her lip. "While carrying out your job, I ran into trouble with the Contarini. They want to pledge their support to the king and aid him in any way they can..."

In exchange for...? He wound his fingers, pushing her to go on already.

“They... they want control of Magehold.”

He laughed. Oh, they did, did they? Control of Magehold? Why not all of Silen, if they were dividing up the world map.

He strode past her and grabbed his robe, donning it with a sweep of black samite.

“I know you have the king’s ear,” Nicolette said, sidling up to him. “It’s no secret that Emaurria and the Divinity are enemies. The Grand Divinus may control the castle in Magehold, but the Contarini control all else. There’s wisdom in having an ally close.”

There was, but... in exchange for Magehold? Unseating a cabal of mages in exchange for a cabal of witches? It was a big ask.

Nicolette straightened. “And in exchange, I will offer up my services. Anyone, anytime, no questions asked.”

He paused. Now *that* was an interesting offer. Father’s allies. Enemies to Farallan rule. And... Father himself if need be. “How many?”

“Five.” She held out an arm to him, and he clasped it.

“You will hear from me soon.” With that, he swept out of the bedchamber and his quarters.

It was time to hear what the newly awakened king had to say.



LORDS SCRAMBLED toward Parliament Hall across the white marble, but Brennan looked past them to the two armored royal

guards posted outside the Signet Library's enormous doorway. If they were there, it could only mean one thing: their king was.

It hadn't been so long since Jon had summoned him there, to tell him about the marriage to Rielle somewhere private instead of letting him hear that detail before all of Parliament, unprepared. They'd been allies before, trading favors, but that—that had been a gesture of friendship. One he would repay.

He pushed past the mob and approached the guards, who didn't move an inch. "He'll want to hear what I have to say," Brennan bit out firmly.

The two guards exchanged a glance, no more, and then one knocked on the door.

"Let him in," a low voice rumbled. Jon's.

The guards let him through into the dusty old library, where a fire crackled in the hearth between statues of Justice and Mercy.

At the far end, the drapes were wide open, revealing a dark sky, vast and clouded, with white-hot bolts of lightning walking the violent waves of the distant bay. Facing away from him stood Jon, arms clasped behind his back, staring up at the storm.

"For a man who was on the verge of death this morning," Brennan called out good-naturedly, "you look well."

Jon bowed his head, and a quiet laugh interrupted the library's silence. "Surprised to see me?"

With a grin, Brennan approached him. "Yes, 'surprised.' Let's go with that."

Turning smoothly, Jon nodded to him and casually adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves. "To what do I owe the pleasure, my friend?" he asked, without looking up.

Brennan opened his mouth, but then—something didn't smell right. A scent, Jon's, but not quite—

"Something the matter?" Jon raised an eyebrow.

Not quite *human*.

Frowning, Brennan shook his head. "You're..."

"Me," Jon answered, a gleaming gaze meeting his. "More or less."

Nox's black breath, *more*. Jon had survived the fever after being bitten. And a werewolf hadn't bitten him—a *dragon* had.

That meant—

He blinked, exhaling sharply, then looked Jon over, who seemed much the same except for a maybe a more confident bearing. "Do you feel any different?"

Jon sighed, then ran a hand through his hair. "Hotter. Hungrier. Lucky to be alive, by Terra's grace."

That wasn't all. It couldn't be. "And the Change?"

His eyes contemplative, Jon rubbed his jaw. "I assume I won't have to worry about that until the full moon?"

"Are you asking me?" Brennan hissed, leaning in. "Do I look like a dragon to you?"

"But you're—" With a frustrated huff, Jon looked away, back toward the storm. "What brings you here?"

"Repaying a favor. Mages from the Morwenian Tower are positioned at the border, claiming we've broken the Magehold Convention and must be held to account. King Odhrán doesn't appear to be supporting them, but they want war."

Lightning flashed, reflecting fiery rings behind Jon's eyes, only for a moment. "We anticipated retribution when we expanded the Order of Sages. We're prepared," he said, clasping

his hands behind his back once more and raising his chin as he looked out over the city.

There was something icy and unforgiving about that stance, about that look. Near-death had changed him, hardened him, and that was for the good of Emaurria. The kingdom needed a firm hand now more than ever. “Prepared for what?”

A half-laugh and an amused glance faded as quickly as it had appeared. “You will soon find out.” A mischievous smile.

It was as clear a disinclination as could be issued without the exact words. Taking the cue, Brennan inclined his head and then turned to leave.

“I’m calling the Grands together after Parliament,” Jon called to him as he was leaving. “I’ll expect to hear your ideas on Morwen then.”

It wouldn’t be simple, but it was one of his duties as Lord Constable. At least he wouldn’t be handling Jon’s duties on top of it all. “And so you shall, Your Majesty,” he replied, before leaving the library, nodding to Justice and Mercy on his way out.

ONE OF THE last to arrive, Brennan stared at the enormous Farallan banner hanging at the center of Parliament Hall as he took his seat in the front row, next to Father. Deep blue in color, it was embroidered with the Farallan coat-of-arms, a massive winged dragon with a laurel leaf and a rose in its claws, wrapped around a four-paneled shield, with each panel containing an ivy leaf.

He suppressed a grin. Nox’s black breath, the irony. The

last Faralle was a dragon himself, and with any luck, he wouldn't Change right here in the hall.

"You seem pleased," Father murmured, not a single graying coal-black hair out of place.

Brennan eyed him nonchalantly. "You don't."

Father narrowed his eyes but flashed a close-lipped smile. "It's the conditions. Utterly dreadful evening."

Oh, how the old man enjoyed playing with words. "Better for the elderly to stay home on 'utterly dreadful' evenings, isn't it?"

Father's lips twitched as he rolled his hazel eyes. "If you see any elderly, be sure to tell them."

The doors to the hall opened, and everyone stood.

Jon strode in with wide steps and a steady gait, head held high, his bold footsteps echoing through the chamber. He wore no crown, but in a black samite doublet trimmed in fine brocade, it was unmistakable who he was. And for having lain in a sickbed for days, he didn't appear any worse for wear; there was power in his movements, power that begged the question of what a were-dragon was capable of.

Last time Jon had met with Parliament, he'd stood at the center of this hall, met every lord face to face. Today, he passed by all the lords and headed straight for the king's seat, a throne on a dais at the far end of the hall, in its own section, and took his place. All the lords seated themselves.

"Terra's blessings upon you, Your Majesty!" A voice called, and several joined him.

"And upon you," Jon answered, with a gleam in his eye and an easy nod. The storm rumbled outside, but he simply leaned back in his chair, unperturbed. "Lords and ladies of Parlia-

ment,” he called out, meeting some curious gazes directly, “with our capital in shambles and the testimony of Ariana Orsa and several mages freed from the Vault, it should come as no surprise that I’ve called you here.”

Many of the lords exchanged looks, some whispering amongst each other. Brennan didn’t move but to cross his legs. The kingdom’s next step had been the talk of the palace for days, but he had held off on bold decisions, waiting for Jon to awaken. Better the king face repercussions for those bold decisions than the Marcells.

Jon raised a hand, and the lords quieted. “For too long, the Divinity of Magic has been moving against us, attacking us, in darkness. That darkness has protected it from reprisal. But we won’t sit here waiting for the next attack. It is time to drag the Divinity into the light. And deliver a long-overdue reprisal,” he said, squinting out at the gathered lords with a hard smile.

“But we lack alliances,” Father called out next to him. “How do you propose going to war with no allies?”

Jon, that hard smile unwavering, slouched in his throne, arms loose on the armrests, legs spread wide. “We don’t need them. We have the Tower, the Order, and the largest fleet on the Shining Sea. Vervewood and Stonehaven are our partners. My soon-to-be queen has already rebuffed the Divinity’s attacks, and she is here, in Courdeval, and ready to fight again, along with her own very powerful friends. We are strong, and with the Divinity’s actions brought into the light, other nations will hesitate to wage an unjust war.”

“Morwen isn’t hesitating,” Father replied calmly. “Their forces are camped at the border.”

Brennan suppressed a frown. Father knew about that

already, when the Constable of Emaurria—and the kingdom’s then-regent—had only just found out.

Languidly, Jon rested his chin on his fist. “You’re misinformed, Maerleth Tainn. It’s a separatist group of loyalists from the Morwenian Tower.” He casually splayed his fingers and eyed the portion of his sigil tattoos peeking out from his sleeve’s cuff. “I’ve faced mages before with the Order of Terra at my back. I’ll face them again, with the Covens and our sages to bolster our forces.”

“If the recent dragon attack proved anything, it is that the sages are needed here, at the palace,” Father replied. “Praise Nox that Lord Sage Atterley raised a proper defense.” Murmurs of agreement rippled through the hall.

It seemed the *Lord Sage* had been playing courtier and making some alliances independently. The snake was insulating himself.

Jon waved his hand dismissively. “Now, more than ever, we have plenty of magical support. Courdeval isn’t the only well from which we can draw it—there are the Durands, the Forgerons, the Beaufoys, the Marchals. We’re well equipped, Maerleth Tainn.”

Father narrowed his eyes but remained silent.

“I will leave you to deliberate,” Jon said, rising from the throne, and all the lords rose with him. “The Grands and I will await your answer as we put together our plans.” Meeting a few key gazes, Jon headed for the door and out, leaving the lords to retake their seats, whisper about themselves, and the leader to call order.

“Something’s changed,” Father murmured to him. “He’s

always been deliberate, confident, but controlled.” Father shook his head. “This bordered on flippant.”

Brennan canted his head, eyeing the empty throne. Naturally, Father didn’t appreciate being contradicted, even by the most restrained “flippancy” he’d ever seen.

But something *had* changed. There had always been a foundation of unease grounding Jon, something he’d tried to bury with plans, action, faith, and sheer determination to solve any problems plaguing the kingdom. But today, that unease had been nowhere in attendance. Something had swept it away. The power that came with being a were-dragon.

Voices argued all around Brennan, but instead of the cacophony in the hall, it was the quiet symphony of the evening woods that claimed his thoughts. The memory of that first time... Past the fear, panic, and chaos of his first Change, there had also been strength. Stronger senses, new abilities, *power*. At first, it had presented as detecting new scents, and with it, new information. A small advantage that had made him confident. But later... it hadn’t been long before he’d ripped throats out and buried claws between ribs.

Today, perhaps Jon had experienced that small, new advantage—power, new information. But later... whose throat would he be ripping out?

CHAPTER 3



In the ceaseless rain, Rielle anchored her magic in the wreckage washed up on the debris-strewn shore, using her geomancy to straighten the wood to planks, wringing out the excess moisture. They crashed down next to the seaweed-laden rocks, and laborers calmed their horses as they positioned carts for loading and hauling.

The day had been long, but as she looked along the coast into the distance, it would take many more long days to rebuild the city to its former glory. Not far from her, Ariana Orsa stood just clear of the surf, staring out into the bay blankly while she rubbed her hand. She'd been here all day, too, clearing building lots with her white-hot lucency. Once they were clean, new homes could be constructed—and many people still needed them. Many more than could be helped today.

Lightning split the gray skies, a crack that threaded down toward the waves. It had been stormy all day and showed no signs of abating.

“You should get some rest,” she called to Ariana, and dissipated a mass of seaweed into blades of grass.

With a shake of her head, Ariana gave her a thin smile, then looked back out onto the water. She unbuttoned her black master mage coat, leaving it hanging open, flapping in the wind. Ariana huffed a self-deprecating half-laugh. “I don’t even know why I wear it anymore.”

“Because it used to mean something.” Dusting off her hands, she approached Ariana and then stood beside her, turning to the bay, too, and its storm-stirred waves. “It still should, but it’s been corrupted into something truly ugly.”

Ariana crossed her arms and lowered her gaze to the surf. “I was part of that corruption. Deep down, I... I knew something wasn’t right. I was lying to myself, ignoring the lines crossed until... until some were uncrossable.”

Very few lines were uncrossable when loved ones were at stake—and Ariana’s family had long been imprisoned. Princess Alessandra, still at Trèstellan with her husband and his father, was in talks with Silen to free Ariana’s family.

But if it had been Liam, or Gran, or Jon, Olivia, Samara, Leigh, Brennan... There were few things she wouldn’t do. Ariana had been prepared to sacrifice one person, to become part of an unjust war, but as the realities of that war had struck, as the pile of innocent bodies had threatened to grow steep, ultimately she hadn’t been prepared for complicity in that.

“You’re making amends now,” she said quietly, resting a hand on Ariana’s shoulder, meeting a fleeting glance with a reassuring smile. “You turned on the Divinity of Magic, provided evidence and testimony that was sorely needed to unmask Samanta Vota’s agenda, despite the dangers to yourself. And

you're out there, helping rebuild. Don't ignore the good you're doing."

With a deep breath, Ariana squinted, staring at the shifting seawater. "I can't forget what I've done either. Someone died out there because of... because of what I got him into. A friend. I'd give anything to change what happened"—she swallowed, and blinked over watery eyes—"but that can't be undone. I've lost him."

That loss, that grief, was familiar. Painfully familiar. "I don't think we ever really lose anyone. Because we remember them, they're always with us, in our lives, in everything we do. In the love we have for others." She wanted to believe it, wanted to believe that in her continuing life, in everything she did and the love she had for Jon and for everyone else in her life, Sylvie was there. Mama was there. Papa was there. Dominique, Vivian, Dorian.

Earlier today, when Jon had awoken, she'd felt it. More than herself, an overflowing feeling. Them.

Ariana opened her mouth, but someone called out before she could reply.

Behind them, Olivia approached from the healers' tent, white robes battered by the wind. "The meeting is over, and the Grands have been called. I'm heading back to the palace," Olivia said, tipping her head toward a waiting carriage. "Are you coming?"

"I am." There was still much to be done here, and she would be back tomorrow, but she and Jon were meeting for dinner, and she wouldn't miss it. Besides, he'd been adamant about moving Parliament toward a formal declaration of war, but maybe he'd cooled and she could convince him otherwise. "Let's go."

As she made for the carriage with Olivia, Ariana didn't move but for her restless hands. "Why don't you come get some rest? Courdeval won't be rebuilt in a day."

"Thank you, but, um..." With a sad smile, Ariana shrugged. "I think I'll stay here a little longer. I have some thoughts to sort out." In the rain, she lowered to the muddy beach and sat facing the water.

Those thoughts would take time.

Olivia nodded toward the carriage impatiently, and they crossed the bustle of the beach. A group of sages helped with building, including Jacqui, who waved before being scolded by an older master.

Exhaling sharply, Olivia turned away. "Now he sends sages? Divine forbid they be allowed to *prevent* this destruction, but—"

"At least they're here now." Rielle heaved a sigh. "You're defending that poor excuse for a human being?" Olivia asked as she boarded the carriage, and Rielle followed.

"You know I'm not." She'd been there that day, *after* Kieran had left with his empty victory, and she'd faced the oncoming tidal wave, certain she and Jon and the witches wouldn't be enough. And they hadn't been. Not by a long shot. "I'm glad the sages are helping, but if we're burning Kieran to cinders, I'll be the first to light a torch."

Olivia laughed bitterly at that, then stewed quietly as raindrops patterned onto the top of the carriage above them. As a Grand, she'd had to deal with Kieran constantly, and for days, he'd been insufferable; after leaving the city to be destroyed and flooded, he'd strutted around like a puffed-up peacock because the one man who could rebuke him had been unconscious.

Well, this morning, his luck had run out. Jon wouldn't let

this atrocity slide—Kieran would have to face the consequences for what he'd done.

“Maybe while you're at the meeting, you can discuss Kieran's fate. I'm sure Pons would be willing to take over the sages until a new lord can be chosen.”

Olivia scoffed. “Kieran's going to be at the meeting! The messenger told me he'd been called as well.”

“Th-that's—” There was no way Jon would just let it go. He'd been on the shore that day too, with her, with the Tremblays, hoping against all odds that they'd be enough without the sages. And by now, he had to have seen the destruction, learned of the death toll. “Maybe he's not fully well yet—”

“Rielle,” Olivia said with a slow, deep breath. “It's not illness, it's politics.”

She shook her head. “But he didn't even come see you. How can—”

“He should have!” Olivia agreed, tugging on her immaculate sleeves. “And he won't get away with not being examined. It's not every day ailing kings spring from their deathbeds. I want to understand how the *kryzi* and lifebonds work. Did he say anything about it? Mention feeling any different?”

“He said he felt stronger than ever before, although he was running a fever. Which he disregarded.” He'd said it with such confidence, and he'd looked like it. There had been a fresh vitality to him.

A pensive frown creased Olivia's face for a moment. “I'm sure he's all right. Just eager to get back to work. He doesn't know the meaning of rest.”

Hopefully that was all. Otherwise, she might have to feel

guilty about dinner tonight. Where she'd demand he dismiss Kieran, and hope he'd listen to reason about declaring war.



THE STORM CONTINUED throughout the entire meeting with the Grands, but the thunder rumbling through the palace's walls and the lightning flashing through its windows were the least of Olivia's concerns. As Brennan had laid out his strategy for dealing with the Morwenian loyalists, his ideas had been severe. Lay waste to the battlefield with geomancers, shoot the enemy mages with arcanir arrows, charge them with heavy paladin cavalry under the cover of magical shields—none of which seemed radical for Brennan, but... Jon, too, agreed.

He stood tall, firm, seemingly unfazed by three days spent in bed unconscious with fever. It was just as Rielle had said—he was showing no symptoms. Other than a drive to handle threats, thoroughly, with little or no desire to compromise, even to mitigate loss of life. Something had affected him, and whatever it was, he'd been tight lipped about it.

But she'd get the truth out of him.

After what he'd gone through, seeing the city devastated and so many dead or suffering, perhaps that was all he had needed to rethink mercy for the enemy. It wasn't so long ago that he had set aside his personal values to do what he'd believed were his duties as king, but he had learned from that and grown. Yet, as the meeting concluded and the Grands began to file out, she lingered. Even if Jon had left behind that poisonous thinking, it couldn't hurt to check.

Jon spoke to Eloï in hushed tones while Brennan, the last of

the Grands, looked between her and Jon, and with a final sympathetic raise of his eyebrows, exited.

At last, Jon dismissed Eloi and turned to her, his features relaxing as he cracked a smile. “Overdue for my exam, am I?”

She stood, hands on her hips. “You wake up after three days of fever, and you don’t have a spare minute to drop by and let me make sure you’re well?”

With a laugh under his breath, he strolled past her, and she followed. “I didn’t need you to examine me to know I’m well, Olivia. I feel it,” he said, curling his fists and watching them contemplatively as he headed upstairs, “in every inch of my body.”

“Then at least tell me that.” She glanced back at his guards in the stairwell, and no one else was nearby. “The lifebond went exceedingly well then, didn’t it?”

He paused, leaning in. “The what?” he asked, his voice deepening.

She blinked. She and Rielle had lifebonded them together while he’d been unconscious. If Rielle hadn’t told him, perhaps he didn’t feel it? Didn’t know? “The lifebond... When you took a turn for the worse, we decided it was the only option left, if you were to survive the fever.”

Cocking his head, he fixed her with a probing gaze. “Lifebond like... the dark-elves? To Rielle?” When she nodded, he pressed his lips into a fine line. “How can you be sure it worked? I don’t feel it.”

“For that, we’ll need to speak with Aless and Veron, and see how we can confirm the lifebond without putting you or Rielle in mortal danger.” She nudged him, but he didn’t smile as she

hoped he would. “She had to make a tough choice, Jon. And you’re still here, so she made the right one.”

Brow furrowed, he rubbed the back of his neck while thunder rolled through the palace’s stone, then continued up the stairs. “I never would’ve wanted her to risk her life like that.”

That was between him and Rielle. But if he didn’t feel the lifebond, perhaps something else was responsible for his recovery.

“How is it that you’re well, Jon?”

They arrived at a door, and as he pushed it open with his back, he locked eyes with her. “The Dragon King bit me,” he said, his voice low.

The door revealed the stormy skies and a subdued rain, the gray clouds no longer able to hold the line against the black, casting a darkness over the city. He gazed up at it and breathed in, breathed deep, eyes closed.

The Dragon King had bit him.

He’d taken fever for days.

He’d awoken.

Her mouth fell open, and she covered it, then went completely still. He was...? “You’re...”

“I wasn’t certain, but after talking to Brennan, it seems so.”

It had been a possibility, of course. They’d discussed the option of Brennan biting him, to turn him into a werewolf. They’d anticipated that somehow in the battle with the Dragon King, he might’ve been infected.

They’d discussed all these things, but hearing it from him, seeing him raise his face toward the sky like some sort of worship—it was another thing entirely.

With slow steps, she approached him, caught his arm,

whether to comfort him or steady herself, she didn't know. "How do you feel different? Tell me everything."

Another deep breath. "It... calls me. The sky. I need to look at it, to feel it." A shiver wove through him. "There's this strength. It's like... It's like my best day, magnified a thousand times over. I feel like I could move a mountain without breaking a sweat." A corner of his mouth turned up at that. "And then there's the fire." He tilted his head toward her and opened his eyes.

Fiery red rings burned behind them.

With a gasp, she pulled away.

"There's a fire burning inside me, Olivia. When I'm awake, when I'm asleep, at all times. It's there." He slowed his breathing, relaxed, and his eyes faded to their familiar sea blue. "But it's fighting to burn its way out. And when it does, I don't know what will happen."

He'd—he'd become a dragon.

A knot formed in the pit of her stomach, but she ignored it. "I'll find the answer. Everything you need to know. But until then—"

"I stayed away from Rielle. All day." He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "Whenever we try to have a normal life, things always... complicate. For once, I'd like us to just have each other, without a sea of problems between us." He lowered his head. "Maybe after dinner tonight. I think I'm under control? Or at least there will be some warning before—"

Before he'd become a massive, winged, scaled creature?

He crossed his arms and gazed down at her with a faint grimace. "Answers would be good."

No one wanted them more than she did. What had once

been myth now stood before her in flesh and bone. In her friend's body. "And we shall have them. But you've been in control all day. You seem to have the situation well in hand."

A quiet huff. "I'm still me. Sort of."

Sort of. With a faint smile, she looked up at the sky with him.

A call from the guards, and a messenger rushed in, sweat—or rain—beading on his forehead. "Your Majesty, from King Odhrán."

Morwen. She and Jon exchanged a glance before he cracked open the royal seal.

CHAPTER 4



The chilly autumn breeze disturbed the sheer curtains as Rielle sat alone in the candlelit dining room, sipping her third glass of wine and drying her sweaty palm on her linen dress. Dinnertime had come and gone, suppertime had come and gone, and she, too, would have been gone, especially since no note had arrived.

But here she was, furtively watching the door. Jon had only just awoken today and this was unlike him, so maybe he wasn't feeling like himself just yet. Eyes barely open, and he'd immediately plunged into work, ignoring the fact that he'd been sick for days. Someone needed to remind him to take some time for himself, and that someone was her.

That, and Trèstellan Palace was brimming with whispers of war, everyone from the Grands to the household speaking in hushed tones about the meeting in Parliament. No decision had yet been made, as far as rumor went, so there was still time to right the ship if she could convince him.

She set down the wine goblet and turned it on the table's shining purple heartwood surface, crossing her legs yet again and shifting in her dress. A deep burgundy, it was a fitting color for this time of year, side-laced linen with gently puffed sleeves cuffed high and little buttons descending to her wrists. Thick, ornate gold embroidery trimmed the neckline, cuffs, and hem, something cheery to mark this meal, celebrating Jon's recovery.

The door creaked open in the hallway, and she sat up. It had to be him at last.

An army of servants entered, bearing trays of steaming hot food, and she settled back into her chair, offered her thanks, and evaded the most piteous glances. They meant well, but this was important. In truth, she wasn't even hungry, and although the work on the shore called to her, she hardly would've left before seeing Jon again the very day he'd awoken.

With a sigh, she replenished her wine, staring at the bountiful spread of food. If the household's timing was right, then he was on his way.

Right on cue, a set of booted footsteps traversed the antechamber, and she'd know that deliberate gait anywhere.

Jon strode in and was already halfway across the dining room when he came to a stop. He glanced her way, and then his shoulders dropped as he lowered his gaze. Inhaling a deep breath, he scrubbed a hand over his face. "Terra have mercy. I completely forgot."

That he had. She clasped her hands in her lap.

Tight-lipped, he came to her, turned her chair, and descended to a crouch, taking her hands in his. "I'm sorry. There's no excuse for this," he said, his voice low, rumbling, as if he were angry with himself.

He wore a fine midnight-blue overcoat trimmed in silver brocade, flashes of silk lining showing as he moved... She hadn't spent much time with him in the palace. From an outsider's perspective, he'd been constantly busy, and maybe this was what that meant. Missed dinners and forgotten promises.

"Have you been waiting here all evening?" he asked, softly stroking her hand with a thumb. His touch was so warm—hot, even.

"I was worried." She met his eyes, their usual Shining Sea blue darkened against the midnight color of his overcoat. "You were sick for days, and you've plunged back into work as if nothing ever happened."

A ghost of a smile wisped along his mouth. "I'm fine. Promise." Holding her hands, he rose, and she stood with him.

"Your hands feel really warm, Jon." She touched his forehead, and it was practically burning.

He laughed under his breath and shook his head. "Whatever saved me has made me warmer, but that's a small price to pay for survival, isn't it?"

"Have you been to see Olivia yet?"

"I have." He pulled away, unbuttoning his overcoat and grabbing a dinner roll on the way to the bedchamber. "I feel fine, other than having the appetite of a beast."

Well, that was nothing new. In the time she'd known him, he hadn't yet encountered a plate of food he couldn't clear. It was a wonder he wasn't twice as wide as he was tall.

She followed him as he stuffed the dinner roll into his mouth, removed his overcoat, and then sat on the blackwood chest at the foot of their bed, pulling off a boot. She'd once burned most of this

chamber to embers in her mission to defeat Shadow. But it was furnished much like it had been, as if that fiery night had been a mere hallucination. “If you feel well, then I’m glad—you know I am. Just... we should keep an eye out for changes, shouldn’t we? It’s not often a man rises from his deathbed as if he were never ill.”

“Something we should certainly discuss. Perhaps later tonight.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And now?”

With a half-smile, Jon eyed her, barking a soft laugh before setting his boots by the door. Soft firelight from the hearth reflected off the high-gloss black leather. As he looked her way, gently at first, mirth fading, his gaze trailed from her eyes, down the line of her dress, and to her feet. That mirth renewed. “You look lovely.”

Her cheeks warmed as she turned aside. He was charming, as usual.

“In just a few months, we’ll be married, Rielle. Can you believe it?” he asked, with a boyish smile.

He was charming all right, but he was also changing the subject.

He bridged the distance between them and stood with her in the silence, as if it didn’t bother him at all. No, judging by that curl of his lips, it pleased him even.

He swept one of her curls through his fingers, watching it with a playful smile and eyes that glimmered with more than reflected firelight. His soft touch tingled, just the slightest bit, and as her curl slipped from his fingers, he stroked along her jawline, and she exhaled shakily. He drew a path down the neckline of her gown and along the side laces.

A shiver rippled across her skin, but she swallowed, hard. “You really think Emaurria is ready for all-out war?”

He huffed a quick breath, but it didn’t deter his smile at all. “You’d really rather talk about that?”

Rolling her eyes, she laughed and shook her head. “No, it’s not that—”

“Aren’t you tired of fighting in the shadows?” he asked her quietly. “Where Vota has all the advantages, and we lose a little more with each of their attacks?”

Of course she was. “Couldn’t this desperation be a part of her strategy? Force us into a declaration so she can crush us with the full weight of the Divinity, instead of ‘pirate fleets’?”

“Even if it *is* part of her strategy, that doesn’t preclude it from being part of ours,” he replied, taking her hand and leading her to the dining room with him. “We have to consider all the options available to us in our position, even ones the enemy might predict, and choose the best of them on the merits,” he added, pulling out a chair for her, and she sat.

“But the merits aren’t solid.” She unfolded a serviette in her lap as he joined her. “There’s been so much change recently, and so much destruction. We don’t know what the Houses think or what the people think, because they’ve hardly had a chance to make up their minds. And your control over the Order, the Tower, and the Covens hasn’t yet been fully tested. It needs to start small, where mishaps can be addressed without heavy losses, and then scaled—”

“Tests don’t mobilize armies like necessity does,” he said, pouring himself a goblet of water from the carafe.

So he’d *force* the necessity?

“The paladins, the sages, and the witches all have a stake in

our success. They have homes here, families. With the Divinity coming for Emaurria, they won't just let their homeland fall. Nothing raises nationalism like a war. And we can use that to strengthen our forces."

He was making this move because he believed it was their best chance... She could understand that, but it was a dangerous gamble—one she wouldn't yet take if the choice were hers.

Quiet settled through the meal, but none of it sat right. The paladins, the sages, and the witches all had something to fight for, but they also had much to lose. Jon could join them on the front lines, but it wasn't the same as worrying about a family back home and debating whether they were safer here, reliant on the outcome of a war, or fleeing the country.

"You believe it's better to send everyone into a war you aren't certain we can win," she said softly, "rather than waiting until you *are* certain?"

He met her gaze evenly. "If wars had certain outcomes, few would ever fight them."

"You know what I mean."

He sighed and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms. "You'd really have us wait and allow the Divinity to keep chipping away at us, while we can't fight back?"

"We can defend until the odds are better, until we can test the strength of the bonds you've made."

His gaze lowered, he took a deep breath and released it slowly, eyeing his cleared plate with a frown. "In a way, you might get your wish. News has reached the Morwenian Tower about our new Order of Sages, and they're camped at the border."

Her mouth dropped open.

Battling an entire Tower could be nothing short of an apocalypse. If this was true, she'd have to write to Daturian Trey. While Leigh was out on his own quest, Daturian—a wild mage himself—was their best bet at maintaining the balance of power for the time being.

“Some mages have already defected and King Odhrán isn't sending additional troops in support, but judging by the camp, the Tower still has a sizable force.”

They had to resolve it peacefully. Long, long ago, there had been great magical wars to the east, past the Soutien Mountains in the Cursed Plains, and where it wasn't a vast horizon of barrenness, it was a maze saturated with magic that had seeped into the anima threads of the earth. Its desolation acted as a bulwark to Emaurria's east.

Emaurria couldn't become like the Cursed Plains. And it wouldn't, not while she drew breath. “There hasn't been a mage war in centuries. There's a reason the Coven and the Divinity don't fully engage one another. You know what it can do.”

Nodding, he rested one foot on his opposite knee. “I also know the Tower doesn't have any infantry, and that we'll have paladins to cut through them, while our witches and sages cover our infantry.”

“But so many will die—”

He gently rapped his knuckles on the table. “Necessary sacrifices.”

Shaking her head, she dropped her fork with a clang against the plate. All those paladins, witches, and sages—how many of them would be lost before the battle was won? A battle that could be avoided, no less? “But we can talk to them. Ariana was convinced. If we had success with her, then

there's a chance the Morwenian Tower will see things our way, too."

He exhaled lengthily. "Now that they've positioned themselves at the border, it's too late. If we shy away from battle, it'll be seen as weakness." Despite the unyielding rationale of his words, his voice was gentle, sympathetic. "If you want more time, a decisive victory against them will stave off the Divinity, give it pause before descending upon us. Samanta Vota will be watching, and we can't appear ripe for conquest. The road to peace will have to be paved with blood, Rielle."

She knew that. Her magic had awakened in blood and flame, and she'd been fighting ever since. She very well knew the exact hue of that road.

And if she had to show him personally what hastening a war like this would do, she would. "I'm going."

He straightened. "What?"

"I'm going to the front lines. I'll be fighting the Morwenian Tower." At least she'd see with her own eyes what the situation was on the ground, whether the people supported this, whether their lords did—Jon's points were sound, but so were hers. They both wanted the best for the kingdom, and maybe together, they'd find a way to account for any problems. Hopefully.

Jon held her gaze. "This can't change anything, Rielle. If you really want to go, I won't try to stop you. But I will go with you."

"I'd expect nothing less," she said, and slowly, he relaxed.

Once he was there, there might be a real chance of resolving things peacefully with the Morwenian Tower. If Daturian arrived in time, he could help ease the negotiations.

With a rustle of brocade, Jon rested an elbow on the purple

heartwood table, his chin on his fist, and a faint smile tugged at his lips, curling mischievously, his dark sea-blue eyes intent on her.

She canted her head. “What?”

For a moment, he lowered his gaze thoughtfully, but that mischief never left his mouth. When he locked eyes with her once more, it stretched to a grin. “That night in the Lunar Chamber, when I said all our dreams could still come true, this is what I imagined. Us, here, finding solutions. Strengthening the kingdom. Together.”

She laughed under her breath as her cheeks warmed. “Arguing?”

That grin widened. “Collaborating.”

Mm-hmm. “As opponents?”

“Partners,” he said, alighting upon the word with gleaming, amused eyes. “If we both always had the exact same thoughts, they’d never be challenged, tested, and bolstered. Different perspectives forge an idea in fire.”

“Hmm,” she agreed musingly. “A fan of fire, are you?”

He dipped his head and laughed, and his figure blurred for a moment.

She frowned. No—became hazy? An aura of... of smoke wreathing him?

With a start, she bolted out of her chair. “Jon,” she breathed, nodding to his shirt.

His brow furrowed, he peered at his chest, where faint tendrils of gray snaked from between his buttons, and rose. He pulled open his shirt, buttons flying and clattering against the table and floor.

His sigil tattoos *burned*.

Glowing a molten red, they smoked—dust like ash swept from his skin and to the floor.

“Are you—does it hurt?” she blurted, darting to him.

He held up a hand to stop her and shook his head. “No...” he murmured, his voice low, hesitant. “It doesn’t hurt, but I... I don’t understand.”

Dust littered the floor around him, and she crouched, dragging her fingers through it like sand. Sigil tattoos contained ink and recondite. As she looked up at him, the patterns were still there, which meant this dust, shimmering and metallic, had to be... recondite. “We need to go to Olivia. Now.”

“Wait—“

She shook her head. “No, this is insane. There’s something wrong—you’re sick. Your temperature, this fire, it’s—”

“Rielle.” He stroked from the top of her head, along her hair and jawline, and to her chin, then raised it to meet her eyes.

His burned like embers.

He crouched to her level, holding her gaze. “I’m not sick, Rielle. I think I... I think I may be a dragon.”

Her breath bottled in her chest as Jon’s gaze held hers. *A dragon.*

He’d been attacked that day, taken by the Dragon King, and then so sick... the infamous fever of the Change. Just like for werewolves, and werebears, it seems dragons were no exception.

Remembering to breathe, she exhaled, and Jon cupped her face with one warm hand. No, *hot*. He’d been through so much—his ailing heart, near death, and now this.

“What does it mean?” she asked quietly, covering his hand with hers. “Will you be all right? Do you need help?”

“I don’t know. But we’ll find out together.” His gaze softened, and he urged her to rise with him.

The golden glow of the candlelight danced across his bare chest, over the scrolling sigil tattoos that had once protected him from magic. And now no longer did. She traced her fingertips over their winding designs. “Is that why you couldn’t get out of here fast enough earlier?”

He grinned sheepishly, and she prodded him with a finger.

Divine’s flaming fire. “I thought we were done hiding things from each other.”

Lowering his gaze, he nodded. “I wasn’t sure until Brennan told me, but I did... I did feel different. I wanted to be sure you were safe around me before I returned.”

“You won’t hurt me.”

“I won’t,” he agreed, taking her hand and brushing his thumb over the sapphire stone of her engagement ring. He leaned in. “I would die before letting that happen.”

She smiled up at him playfully. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

An arm pulled her in, and he raised her chin to his and swayed with her. “You never know. It could happen tomorrow. We might not have much time,” he teased, whispering against her lips.

“Best not waste it then,” she breathed, before his mouth met hers.

His kiss was slow, sensual, renewing the caress of his lips against hers again and again, as the rough warmth of his fingers stroked up her cheekbone and into her hair. With her body flush against his, the sultry heat of him permeated her skin, and

she leaned into it, into him, his firm hold on her back, where his hand splayed between her shoulder blades and explored lower.

A shiver rippled down her spine at his descending touch, a frisson of eagerness that begged him for more. More of his touch, more of him, *more*. For days, she'd feared she'd lose him, and now that he was here, back in her arms, her want was irrational and knew no bounds. All of him, and more of him, and more. Yes, and forever.

She looped a finger in the waistband of his trousers, just a finger, and drew it across, between his skin and the fabric, before reaching for his belt buckle.

As she unfastened it, he huffed a sharp breath, resting his forehead down against her hair. He was still, unnaturally still, but for his chest rising and falling with big, heavy breaths, and one word, one touch would unleash whatever he was caging.

She reached lower.

With a low rumble in his chest, he pulled her up into his arms, drew her mouth to his, his tongue seeking her own hungrily. Lips locked, he carried her to the bedchamber, steps crunching on buttons and sifting through recondite powder, and took her to bed.

CHAPTER 5



Even before Leigh cracked open his eyes, his throat burned. The soreness expanded outward, to the yawning ache of his stomach and the sandpaper dryness of his mouth. He reached for the bedside table, finding—

Floor.

The woven texture of tatami mats.

The familiar clack of the shishiodoshi's bamboo against stone outside. Kamerai? Was he—?

Quiet shifting, and an earthenware cup pressed into his palm. Moonlight danced in fair hair, and honey eyes brightened as Ambriel regarded him with a close-lipped smile from where he knelt in a blue yukata beside the futon. "Dreshan. You're finally awake."

He took the cup, but when he tried to rise, his body wouldn't cooperate. Resting an elbow on the floor, he pushed again, but he stayed down. "What is—"

The burning ache in his throat renewed, and he brought the

cup to his lips, gulping down the water. The shoji doors were open to the outside, where past the nightingale floors was water, stone, and the greenery of a promenade garden. His *mother's* promenade garden.

The water was cool, and should have been refreshing, and yet it grated against the rawness of his throat. He just barely avoided spitting it out.

As he frowned at Ambriel, a savory, salty scent reached his nostrils, and a warmth. Perhaps from the kitchen? In the silence, the shishiodoshi's water and clacking dominated, but beneath it was a steady thumping, a rhythm, lulling and beckoning, sweet and irresistible—

“Ambriel!” Ava's voice called, and his gaze cut toward her, over his shoulder. He'd turned almost entirely to Ambriel, even his feet.

Ava's dark-blue eyes watered, puffy as though she'd been crying, and her hands—they were fists. Glowing fists. Necromancy, but—

His gums hurt with impossible pressure.

Those creatures, those monsters on the ostrvo, in the mountain, they had... They...

“No,” he said to himself. “No, no, no.” The words rasped, slurred almost. He tried to reach up to his mouth, but his arm wouldn't budge.

His face lined, Ambriel raised something from the floor next to him, a hand mirror, and held it up, turning it outward to face him.

Sharp, pointed fangs spiked from his mouth in the mirror. He tongued them, pricking himself on the tip of one.

His stomach convulsed, but his arms stopped short as he

reached for it again. The hunger ached, burning throughout his body. Flames seared in the pit of his abdomen, scorching. A groan escaped his lips, and he shuddered violently, the irresistible thumping making its way into his ear once more.

His mouth watered, but he gulped it down, the long fangs clicking against his other teeth. Following the thump, his gaze meandered to Ambriel's neck, its faint pulse. The longer he looked at it, the louder it beat, like a drum. A drum playing only for him.

"Grandmother—" Ava called, out the open shoji doors. His gaze cut toward her again, but this time, he inhaled. Deep. The salt and sweet copper. The water to his scorching—

No—

Another shudder. Tears bursting from his eyes. He bit down on his tongue. Hard.

Not her. Not Ambriel. Not them. Anything but this.

Blood filled his mouth and ran down his throat like the elixir of life, even if it didn't soothe the ache in his stomach. A comfort, one he rejected.

A monster. He'd become a monster. Just like those *things* on Venetha Tramus, worse than beasts, revelers in carnage. A thing that would feast on the blood of a lover. On the blood of a child. *His* child.

An abomination.

Damn it all, what had his mission been for? Going in search of knowledge, how to create a dragon mage and perform the Sundering anew, and returning with *no* knowledge. Nothing at all.

This unwanted, bloody comfort was a short respite. One

he'd have to use well. He collapsed onto the futon and rolled his head toward Ambriel, toward his tear-streaked, stony face. "Kill... me..." he whispered.

Ambriel was a father, too; he'd understand.

But Ambriel only shook his head, sending teardrops plummeting to the tatami mat.

In the distance, the floorboards chirped, and before long, Mother appeared in the doorway, bearing a tray. Her hair was in its familiar *osuberakashi*, her bangs pulled back and up, tied with a red ribbon there, and a matching one to secure her long, voluminous hair behind her back.

It had been years since he'd seen her, but she hadn't aged at all. Her hair was still sleek and black, her skin firm and unlined—but for the worry creasing it now.

Bearing the tray, she folded down to a kneel opposite Ambriel with her perfect grace, exchanging a wary look with him before setting another cup down within arm's reach. She shifted backward in utter silence and waited.

"Take it," Ava said, and his right hand relaxed. She'd freed it from stasis.

Wordlessly, he did as she commanded, brought the red drink to his lips, and gulped it down. Whether it was medicine or poison, he would have taken her word and done as she'd bidden, and this draught tasted like stale bread turned liquid.

But it banked the fire. If only a measure.

"All of it," Mother added, and he drained the cup. "It's pig's blood," she said matter-of-factly.

Mother never had minced words.

"It's all right, Papa," Ava said, her voice encouraging despite

her teary gaze. “We’re going to find a way to change you back. But for now, you have to do this and remain in stasis until you can control it. It’s the only way you can stay alive without hurting people, so... I’m doing it.”

His Ava, kind and brave. Capable. He’d been gone nearly her entire life, and here she was, swearing she’d save him. That wasn’t the life he wanted for her. None of this was.

He wanted to touch her face, tell her how proud he was of her—for all that he had no right—but he couldn’t trust himself to touch her at all. No one here could.

Ava was right. If she took him out of stasis, that fire would return. He would kill. He’d either have to face death, or face control. One or the other. And his Ava had already chosen. He rested his head back on the futon, staring at the ceiling, letting his tears roll down the sides of his face into his ears and soak into the pillow. “It was all for nothing,” he said under his breath.

No, worse. He hadn’t returned empty handed; he’d returned with a death sentence.

“People are alive because of us,” Ava yelled, moving closer, but Mother held out an arm to stop her. “They’re safe thanks to us. That’s not nothing, Papa.”

Ambriel cleared his throat. “She’s right, dreshan”—some paper crinkled—“but we also have what we sought in Venetha Tramus.”

How to make a dragon mage... and the Sundering...?

He peered at Ambriel through blurred vision, at the papers he held. The rubbings, from the words etched on the door, and—

“Not only that, but the fae promised to send more. You’ll

have your answers, and we won't rest until you have your life back, too."



TO BE CONTINUED when The Dragon King is released...

