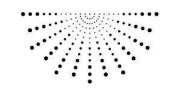
COURT OF THE LAST DRAGON BOOK ONE.

BOKEN

COUREN !

LIDIYA FOXGLOVE

THE BROKEN QUEEN



LIDIYA FOXGLOVE

OCEANOFPDF. COM

Copyright © 2023 by Lidiya Foxglove

Cover by Moonchild Ljilja

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

* Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

I. The Queen

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25

II. The Shadow

- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28

- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39
- Chapter 40
- Chapter 41
- Chapter 42
- Chapter 43
- Chapter 44
- Chapter 45
- Chapter 46
- Chapter 47
- Chapter 48
- Chapter 49
- Chapter 50

III. The Visitor

- Chapter 51
- Chapter 52
- Chapter 53
- Chapter 54
- Chapter 55
- Chapter 56
- Chapter 57
- Chapter 58
- Chapter 59
- Chapter 60
- Chapter 61
- Chapter 62
- Chapter 63
- Chapter 64
- Chapter 65
- Chapter 66
- Chapter 67
- Chapter 68
- Chapter 69
- Chapter 70
- Chapter 71
- Chapter 72

Chapter 73

Chapter 74

Chapter 75

Chapter 76

Chapter 77

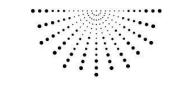
Chapter 78

Chapter 79

More Romantic Fantasy from Lidiya!

About the Author

PART I THE QUEEN



OCEANOFPDF.COM

CHAPTER ONE



Harrai

THE FIRST EDGE of dawn broke over the eastern mountain range, turning the soft clouds to pink, and waking the dragon king before the morning bells.

Harrai never slept well, not since he was a child and the weight of the throne fell unexpectedly on his shoulders. For years he had refused to sleep in this bedroom, despite the striking view, because he could not think of it is as his, could not accept that his parents were gone. But twenty years had gone by, and he had fully embraced the role: the crown, the duties, the rooms.

This moment of pristine morning beauty, when the first light grazed the snow-capped peaks to the west, was the only moment of the day he was alone.

So very alone.

The morning bells rang.

He threw off the covers and took off his linen sleep shirt, folding it loosely and leaving it on the bed for the maids. Jarlan had always teased him about this, a king trying to make things easier for the maids. But Harrai had never grown quite comfortable with being served. It felt like the mark of a kingdom gone soft. If he couldn't keep his chambers clean and dress himself, how could he be expected to take up a sword for his country either? What sort of man was that?

Not that it matters. We're failing, no matter what I do, and unless we find the queen...

Well, he had no control over that.

His agenda today was to tour the larger farms of Kota and speak to the farmers, assessing the state of the spring plantings. He could dress simply, thank the goddess, although there would be no time for a morning ride with Dirjet with such a full schedule. Too bad, but he'd still rather spend a day at the farms than in court.

He wore a shirt of dark blue silk, clasped to the side, with a belt of shining dragon scale, or else he knew Grandmother would take one look and deem him too plain to be seen. He tugged on sturdy boots and was brushing his hair back around his black horns--the true mark of royal blood, inherited from the blood of dragons in his veins--when he heard voices outside his door. A number of them. He was expecting his breakfast, but this was definitely not breakfast.

He opened the door, still holding a comb, and nearly groaned when he saw Grandmother, Master Peitir of the court telepaths, several of his disciples, and a few attendants tagging along for good measure. They all had a restless, pinched look about them.

"Curses," Harrai said. "One look at you all and I want to go back to bed. Something's happened."

"Yes, my lord."

"Well, spit it out." As the moment dragged on, Harrai's heart started pounding. This reminded him far too much of the morning he was told his parents had been *found*. That awful word, in that awful tone.

Grandmother's eyes darted to Master Peitir, and her lips pinched. This was his news to deliver, then.

"We have located your queen," Master Peitir said.

Harrai exhaled. "You're sure?" After so long... They had started to wonder if the queen might never be reincarnated, if her soul was simply lost.

"Yes. Quite sure. But...she is in the Daramon lands..."

Harrai almost laughed from sheer relief. "Well, I'm not afraid of them. Their sorcery is no match for mine. Tell me where she is and I'll make preparations to leave immediately. And once we have her here--finally, this era can begin properly..." He trailed off when their faces didn't share any of his excitement. "I don't care if she's a Halnari," he said. "She's our queen and she'll learn our ways."

The Halnari were the only Miralem who lived among the enemy, the Daramons, and had thrown their lot in with them for financial gain. So he assumed this had to be the source of their dismay. His queen was the enemy. That would cause trouble. The Halnari would fight them. If she was from a poor family, they might be paid off, but considering the Halnari wealth, they might not be easily bribed to give their daughter over to the Drai people. Plus, she would have that awful, ridiculous Halnari shape-shifting.

Yes, the more he thought about it, this could be bad. At worst, it could start a war between Halnari and Drai...

"It's worse than that," Grandmother snapped, as Master Peitir looked pale and fragile, like this discovery had aged him twenty years in one morning.

"Worse than a Halnari? I mean, she's not a Daramon, is she?"

"Worse," Grandmother said.

"Is she a *horse*?" Harrai finally snapped.

"She is a Fanarlem," Master Peitir said, in a whisper, as if he speaking it aloud was the only thing making it real, and he had to avoid it if he could. "Our queen...what have they done to her?"

Now, Harrai understood. Why they could hardly say the word. The horror of it. They had found her, after decades of searching...

A Fanarlem.

"She is still our queen," he said, trying to look stoic, and probably failing, but someone had to bear the weight, and he was the king. Master Peitir looked like he might start weeping, for goddess' sake.

"She is not far," Grandmother said, her own voice steeled now. *She* wouldn't weep, of course. "In Aiskan Nal, just a few days' ride south of our borders."

"Then I'll make preparations to leave tomorrow," Harrai said. "Any queen is better than no queen at all."

"Yes, indeed," Grandmother said.

But he had to wonder if that was true.

CHAPTER TWO



ATORRA

IT WAS the anniversary of Atorra's move to the front of the House. That move was the most consequential day of a concubine's life, the day their shelter ended. Until that day, they were girls, spending their days studying useful skills and enjoying free time to play, read, gossip. They didn't see men and knew very little of them.

Now Atorra knew plenty of men. For a year she had tried her best to amuse them as they assessed her, deciding if she was worth the expense.

No one had.

No concubine wanted to celebrate the anniversary of this day.

"Truly, I don't understand why you're still here. You're adorable," Hrada said, frowning at her paperwork, as if there was any quality that could be captured on paper to explain why no one wanted Atorra.

He would say that, of course. He took a hand in the design of all the Fanarlem concubines in his house.

"But, here you are," he continued. "And so...we have to discuss it."

Dread filled her and she dug her fingers into her knees as she sat in the little chair in his office.

"I never sing," Atorra assured him immediately. "Never. I swear it." She knew that would be his first thought. Atorra loved to sing as a child, but her singing clearly had some enchantment to it. If she quarreled with another girl, she could sing to them and put them to sleep. A Fanarlem girl was

forbidden from learning any spell work. Not that anyone had taught her that trick.

But when she kept doing it, and Hrada sewed her mouth shut for a day, she learned to stay quiet very quickly. That was eleven years ago and she hadn't forgotten the threads pulling tight at her lips all day.

"I know," Hrada said. "And you're sure you never talk about animals? Especially lizards and things of that nature. You must keep your focus on the men."

"I always do!" Atorra insisted. "I pour wine and smile mysteriously." *Well, at least I try.* "I ask them questions about themselves. Everything you've said." She twisted her hands. "Please." The word came out as a whisper. She hadn't even meant to say it.

Hrada rubbed his chin, pondering the papers in a silence that made her squirm.

They called Hrada the "House Mother", although he was in fact a male eunuch, having been punished for thievery in his homeland in the Balumi Islands as a young man. *Tyrants*, he always said about his own people, while seeming blissfully unaware of the tyrants he was still surrounded with. Hrada was, at least, kind to them more often than not. He was the only parent the Fanarlem in the House had known.

Like all the others in the house, Atorra had been created to be a concubine. Her body was constructed from wooden bones and wool stuffing, finely worked metal joints and cloth skin, real hair and nails and teeth made from bones and horn—then overlaid with so much magic that the original material drowned in it. By the time a Fanarlem's soul was called to the body, they looked nearly as real as a flesh and blood person.

But not entirely, because of course, the entire point of obtaining a Fanarlem concubine was to possess a slightly unreal creature. Decades ago, Fanarlem makers had figured out that their creations were more beautiful when they didn't look exactly like real people. Concubines had slightly larger eyes, smaller noses and mouths, skin that looked too perfect, delicate bodies.

Flesh and blood people bought them for many reasons. To have a consort who could never pass diseases or get pregnant, a woman to bring along to stave off loneliness in harsh conditions where food and water were scarce. Often, a concubine was purchased by a man or woman in a loveless or sexless marriage as an acceptable compromise. Some were just kept as

status pets for rich men, adorned in finery to entertain his guests. Others just had a fetish for Fanarlem girls that they tried their best to cloak in excuses.

Atorra and the other girls entertained evening visitors every day, who paid a coin just to be surrounded by Fanarlem girls for an hour or two. Every day, she was terrified of being purchased.

But the alternative was worse.

The brothels. Different men every night, and no rules, besides that any broken parts must be paid for. The unfathomable horror of *that*.

Or—the work house. Better, to be sure, just to work quietly than to go to a brothel, but her fine and lovely body would be replaced with something cheap and sturdy, that could work harder and longer. Her own familiar face, gone—not that work house Fanarlem were likely to have mirrors. Even her delicate hands would be replaced by larger, sturdier ones without fingernails. Atorra shuddered at the thought of it. No one would ever want to look at her again. Fanarlem servants were shoved into the shadows, ugly and ignored.

"I'll give you another six months," Hrada said. "What the hell. I know they always say men don't come back if the girls don't circulate, but you don't cost me anything. I'm not sending you to a brothel, child."

Atorra felt all the tightness inside her loosen back up, at least for the time being. *Six months. All right. I have to win someone over. I have to try harder.* She bowed to Hrada's desk. "Thank you, sir. I'll try to be more appealing..."

"Don't hide too much," Hrada said. "You have to put some effort in, and I'm not sure you really do. I understand that you try to ask questions, but perhaps you should stop doing that."

"What's wrong with my questions?"

"You just sound too...curious."

"Isn't that good? That I'm interested to know?"

"You don't sound interested in them. You sound interested in the world. No one wants a worldly concubine, or a nosy one who wants to know all their business. Keep it light. Flirtatious. Men want an easy companion who is always up for anything and won't judge them."

"I don't judge them!" Atorra protested, but of course she did. All the girls despised their clients; they were troubled and lonely, or too rich for their own good, or perverts. Hrada himself once referred to them as 'sad little men'.

"Of course you do," he said, smirking. "But try to just look up at them through your eyelashes, give a brief smile, and then, say something shy but interested. Compliment them. You can do that, at least. You aren't nearly as disgusted by flesh as some of the other girls."

Atorra wanted to argue that point. Just because she would poke at the mummified body of a mouse they found under the cupboard didn't mean she wanted to get up close and personal with a sweaty, hairy man. *But I must show Hrada I'm trying...* "I'll do my very best," she vowed.

"How did it go? Are you staying?" asked Lorsen, her best friend—her only family, as far as Atorra felt.

"Six months, he said."

"Oh! Phew! That's plenty of time to reform you. Not that I want you going anywhere, really." Lorsen sighed and petted Atorra's head. "I still think your fair hair is the problem," she mused. "You remind men of a Miralem."

Atorra shrugged. It seemed so hard to care whether men wanted her or not when her mind preferred to be somewhere else, doing some real work. Unlike many concubines who considered leisure to be the best part of the job, Atorra was always searching for any way to keep busy. She tidied up the rooms, mended anything that needed mending, and tried to spend as much time as possible outside in the small flower garden looking for things to do. Hrada was always scolding her for getting her hands dirty. Atorra's hands had been replaced four times as often as the other girls in the house, so often that Hrada didn't give her pin money.

"How is my little pet tonight?" Jirra came in that evening, heading straight for Atorra's room. "My little sunshine doll." He petted her head and she petted the bird on his shoulder.

Jirra was her favorite client, not because she cared one bit about him, but because he always brought a bird with him. He was the captain of a merchant ship and had a small flock of illa-illa birds that carried messages from ship to shore.

The little birds were white with a frill of feathers behind their bright rounded faces. Their frills, tails and wings all had a black stripe that made it seem as if they were wearing a little uniform. They all liked it when Atorra ran a finger down their backs and smoothed their cheeks. This one leaned into her touch.

"What's his name?" she asked Jirra.

"I can't hardly tell 'em apart. You name him."

"How about...Hanara?" she suggested, naming him after an adventurer in a story she read once.

"He's a bird," Jirra said, shaking his head. "Let's name him Buttons," he said, plucking at the button on her collar.

Atorra thought this name had no dignity, but she nodded.

"Master Jirra, please have a seat," Lorsen said, elbowing Atorra. "*Atorra*, here, will pour you some wine."

Oh, right. She was doing it again. She hadn't offered Jirra any personal attention but was just nuzzling his bird. *Although*, *it's just Jirra...he's not here to buy one of us, just to be entertained for a night*. "Yes! Master Jirra! I'm here to serve! Do you want wine or spirits?"

"Wine," he said. "And perhaps a moment alone with you."

"Oh, uh—" She paused, startled. *It's just Jirra*. *He's just here to be entertained*. *He never buys*. *He said he can't*. *Travels too much*. "Oh. Yes, yes..." She glanced at Isira and Vatta, who were all staring back with a mixture of hope and nervousness.

"We'll just step out to the main hall, won't we, girls?" Isira said, with a smile at Jirra. "Call us back when you're ready, Master Jirra, and I'll tell Hrada not to send any other men up to this room."

"But he's not supposed to be alone with us," Atorra said, suppressing a quiver of panic, and then she knew she shouldn't have said that either. Who was going to care about the rules? Jirra wouldn't do anything half as bad as she'd experience in one day at a brothel. "I mean--I'm sorry, Master Jirra. That was so rude. I was just surprised; I--I've never been alone with a man in my life..." The door shut behind them as the other girls left.

"Can you pour me my wine?" Jirra asked, gently.

What does he want?

Hrada's message might have suggested she might be had for a bargain.

He...he isn't bad as masters go, she thought. Jirra definitely liked to be waited on. It always made her feel strange when he called her his 'sunshine doll'--but she thought he meant it with affection, and he didn't seem cruel. He always looked greasy, so she didn't relish the idea of having to give her body to him, but it could be much worse. She might get *used* to him, at least.

"Here you are, sir." Her hands were shaking a little as she gave him the wine.

"Hrada told me your situation. So you've been here a year already. Time flies... I know you must be having a bad day, sunshine. Never mind. I know. You ain't much of a flirt but you also look like if I wanted to abuse you, you'd take it with dignity, and the lowlifes don't like that. They like screaming and pleading."

"I'd like to think...I have dignity," Atorra said darkly. It was one thing a Fanarlem could keep for herself. Pride. She wanted to think she could keep her pride, no matter what happened, but it had never been tested.

"I'd never hurt you. If nothing else, being rough on a woman sounds like too much work."

Is he trying to be romantic? Atorra's innards twisted with every moment. *But he's leading up to something.*

"Still, they say Fanarlem were created to serve, tainted souls and all that karmic business," Jirra continued. "So I know you'll be serving some master somewhere, if it ain't me. So what if it was me? Would that ease your mind?"

"Ease my mind?" The way flesh and blood men thought was so strange. She could tell Jirra had never considered that this was the most consequential day of her life. She had been created nineteen years ago for a buyer and raised up all this time, awaiting this moment.

Nineteen years, and it would end with her being sold to a grubby merchant who mostly seemed to think about money and having a little harmless fun where he could. He was sipping his wine and casually lighting his long-stemmed pipe, although it was against the rules of the House and he knew it. But he knew which rules could be broken, and for him she imagined there were many.

"I know, I ain't much," he said. "Which is why I never made an offer on any of you girls before. I didn't really feel worthy of owning a concubine, but if you're going off to a brothel instead...well, I can promise I'll do you better'n that. I'm not a bad fellow once you get used to me. I'm not demanding. If you keep my clothes mended and my quarters clean...and we have a little fuck before bed... Mutual, you know; I'd like to see you smile. I'll treat you like a wife." He winked.

He meant that kindly enough, too. She didn't doubt that. He was a crude man, but he didn't know any other way to be. Daramon men were always taught they must treat their wives very well to have healthy babies, but a Fanarlem was supposed to work hard and suffer to earn good karma for her next existence. When he said this, he meant it as an act of great generosity to her.

To her, his sunshine doll.

She wanted to recoil. To run out the doors. To find Lorsen and jump into a fire with her.

But she wouldn't do any of that. She had to deal with the reality of this moment.

She straightened up. Jirra was better than the brothel. Jirra was probably better than many fates. She bowed her head to him. "Thank you. It's a kind offer and I...I will gratefully accept." Her voice didn't sound like her own. She felt dull and angry and her voice held no gratitude. But he didn't seem to notice.

"I can't blame you one bit for being wary of men, animals that we are," he chuckled. "All right, then, I'll tell Hrada you're mine and go get the money. I'll be back at the end of the month for you, for my run down to the Kaalsons."

"Thank you." She tried to tamp down the queasy feeling of having her fate set. Of course, it must happen, and it would never be the stuff of one's wildest dreams. Every girl dreamed of belonging to a man who was kind and handsome, but none of her friends at the House had that experience. Yora was bought by a wealthy man who acted like they were shiny toys, while Loa went with an awkward young fellow who seemed way too eager.

No, Jirra isn't that bad. At least I'll get to see foreign ports. He won't hurt me, and I'll bet he'll allow me to have my own interests. I suppose I'll get used to the smell of his sweat and his pipe, and sharing a bed with him...

Well, that would be the case with any man...

And I think he would understand if I wanted to send Lorsen letters. He liked her too.

That was a reason worth accepting his offer.

Not that she could say no anyway.

"He left a deposit for you," Hrada told her, with clear relief. "So we'll move you to the back of the House until the end of the month. I know there isn't much romance in old Jirra, but...you'll have some adventures. Don't worry. It's a happy occasion."

"At least I'll get to play with his illa-illa," Atorra said, brightening a little at the thought of a whole flock of birds that she could visit any time she liked.

It probably was the best fate she could ever hope for.

CHAPTER THREE



ATORRA

"I'VE BEEN HERE A WHILE TOO," Lorsen said, clutching her hand and whispering in the darkness.

"It's the buying season," Atorra said. "When the ships come in."

"I just wish someone would buy us together... I know it's rare, but...I think I can stand most things if I could talk to you about it."

Atorra battled another wave of fear when she thought about trading her bed companion. Whispering, teasing Lorsen would be traded for Jirra, sweating, grunting, reaching for her. She wanted to scream. *But I can't think that way. All women do this. Even flesh and blood women.* "Jirra will let me send letters to you. I'm sure of that. And I know you. Wherever you go, you'll find a way to get those letters and write back."

"Letters," Lorsen scoffed, loudly enough that Elsora hissed for them to be quiet across the room. "Letters aren't you. And letters definitely aren't me. I'm not a good writer."

"Well. Maybe...Jirra will let me visit you when he docks."

"Right." Lorsen clutched her hand tight.

No, it was not likely.

"Lor! You have a hole in your stocking!" The next evening, Atorra fussed over the other girls as they got dressed. They would proceed to their rooms, waiting for clients. Atorra was stuck back here in the shadows, waiting for Jirra.

Lorsen twisted to follow Atorra's sight line to the back of her leg. "Oh, my tunic will cover that anyway."

"But it'll turn into a run if I don't mend it. It'll be fast. The rest of you can run ahead."

"Since when did you become so conscientious?" Lorsen teased as

Atorra unfastened her stockings. All the concubines had a button sewn to the back of their legs to keep their stockings up. Silk ribbons were tied over the stockings and fastened with little bows over their thighs, and then all this was hidden under a tunic and short robe that fell to their knees. The beribboned stockings were always featured in erotic Fanarlem art, along with the visible stitches at their thighs. It was easy enough to hide all the stitches with magic, but they were left quite visible at the thighs and ankles, shoulders and wrists. Hrada was very blunt in telling them what men would want to see.

"What if a beautiful sorcerer comes in looking for an apprentice? They see you. They're charmed. Then they notice this hole. Too bad. A sorcerer's apprentice needs to be detail-oriented," Atorra said, taking out a needle she kept tucked behind her ear, poked into her skin.

Lorsen groaned when she saw it. "You're keeping needles behind your ears again?"

"Jirra won't care if I do. I feel pretty sure of that."

"I know." Lorsen frowned deeply. "Jirra ought to adore you. No, you're too good for all the Jirras in the world."

Atorra scoffed. "I appreciate the confidence, Lor, but it could be so much worse."

Lorsen crossed her arms. "Well, I doubt I'll be purchased by a sorcerer's apprentice either."

"You never know."

"I don't want to go away."

"I don't either."

"I don't want you to go away."

Atorra needed to be brave. Lorsen, for all the sauciness of her exterior, was more fragile deep down. Atorra knew the best parting gift to leave

Lorsen with was her smile, her courage. "It'll be all right," she said huskily. "Just promise me you'll stop sleeping in your fancy stockings. They get all rumpled and torn. I wonder who you'll be kicking and jabbing in the night once I leave."

"I'm not that bad. And you're the one who does that weird murmursinging in her sleep!" They both laughed. They'd always been together. They had made sense of the world together, as much as they could—which truly, wasn't much.

"Save some funny stories for me while I sit back here."

"Why don't you just come to the front tonight? You're obviously bored," Lorsen said.

"Jirra already gave Hrada some coin. I'm *reserved*. It could cause trouble."

"Oof. When you've already been here a whole year? He worries you'd suddenly have two suitors?"

"True..."

"If you stay back here you won't even have a fire. Come on. Maybe we'll get a better offer." Lorsen pulled her along.

It was, indeed, the time of year when a good number of ships came home with their freight, and money flowed from the ports all up and down the roads and rivers, to rich and poor alike—but especially to the great families of Atlantis, and on this evening, after a few ordinary merchant-types stopped in, a man stooped to enter the room. He was seven feet tall and wore all black with tall boots and a sword at his waist. A *sanarune*—one of the bodyguards of *the* families.

All of the girls went rather speechless at his appearance, and Hrada was right behind him, trying to look calm.

Most men who came to see the concubines were of the merchant or scholar class, men who had a nice home in which to keep a concubine, and money to adorn them. They were not warriors; they dressed in well-cut coats and tunics with decorative buttons and clasps, earrings of precious stone and their eyes delicately lined in a little black kohl.

Getting sent to one of the great families of Atlantis was almost as bad as being sent to a brothel. In the capital, men with money tended to have more deviant tastes. One could end up the most pampered of concubines, but there were also rumors of the most horrific treatment, being presented naked on a table to an entire banquet or passed around in party games.

But they would pay. They would pay amounts that Hrada could never turn down.

The sanarune gave them a polite smile and faint bow, but his eyes were hard and a little hungry. "Good evening, girls. I'm here representing Mr. Ankon Wode. He needs another girl for his events." He was speaking more to Hrada now. "He prefers she be on the less obedient side."

Atorra and Lorsen were clutching hands again. Lorsen shook her head a little, perhaps involuntarily.

This was bad. Very, very bad.

Hrada was eyeing them already. He didn't like it either, but you could hear coins shifting when the man moved. "Of course, all my girls are obedient," he said. "But perhaps Lorsen here is a little more...strong-willed than the others?" Hrada moved behind them, clamping a hand on Lorsen's shoulder to move her in front of Atorra. Atorra could guess what he was thinking. Atorra was spoken for and shouldn't even be there; Lorsen had also been in the House too long. Someone would have to be sacrificed to this man, and a week ago it would have been Atorra.

The sanarune's eyes skimmed Lorsen. "I'll take a better look at her." He reached for Lorsen, clamping his hands on her upper arm.

"You're not supposed to touch her until you buy!" Atorra snapped, and Hrada yanked her back. Atorra immediately recoiled, realizing she had just advertised herself as especially strong-willed. But then, if Lorsen went, she should go with her.

No matter how terrible it would be.

If you're with me...

"I'm sorry, sir. It's fine," Hrada said.

"And maybe this one." The man waved a hand at Atorra. "Let me get a look at them, clothes off, and if it all looks good I'll take them." He still had a huge hand around Lorsen's arm and now he reached for Atorra.

"She's spoken for," Hrada said. "Her buyer has already paid. Go to the back where you belong, Atorra."

"No, please!" Atorra cried.

Hrada's face was utterly dead of emotion, and he slapped her. "I apologize, sir," he said, bowing to the sanarune.

The sanarune smiled a little. He had a tanned, brutish face with a crooked nose and pocked skin. Sanarune were not shape-shifted to be handsome like other wealthy Daramon. If they were ugly, then it was all the

more unnerving when they pulled their weapons, like some mythical beast. "Mr. Wode likes it better that way."

Atorra's head burned hot, and she wanted to do terrible things. She imagined seizing his sword and running him through. Her temples were pounding so hard that she almost felt dizzy. A strange song tugged at her lips, her small taste of power. To have been born into this world a Fanarlem with any trace of magical power was a cruel joke. She couldn't use it. Fanarlem girls couldn't fight anything, or anyone. She would only make things worse.

"Please," she growled. Her voice came out vicious. The sanarune snapped a look at her over his shoulder.

"It's too bad you're blonde," he said, still grinning. "That would never do in Atlantis. We could change your hair, but we're in a hurry this time. The party is this week." He dragged Lorsen across the threshold. "Come on, eunuch, I don't have all day."

"Can I at least say goodbye?" Atorra cried to Hrada.

"Do you want him to change his fate-cursed mind about you, little one?" Hrada snapped in a whisper. "Jirra wants you and you'll be spending your days playing dice and petting birds and visiting island ports, so just shut up and stay back here!" His eyes flashed, and he turned to the hall. She heard him simpering, "I'm terribly sorry, sir; it's that door, yes, to the right."

Atorra was shaking all over while the other girls in the room were letting out weird little choked cries of fear and relief.

There were a few sorts of men you never ever wanted to see.

CHAPTER FOUR



ATORRA

THEY HAD TRIED to prepare for their separation. Any day in the past year, a man could have come in and bought one of them. Goodbye would come, as sure and final as sunset, or winter, or death.

She didn't know how to prepare for death. Or for this.

Isira petted Atorra's head, trying to comfort her.

But Lorsen was gone. Her best friend. Lorsen was her sister.

"I'm so sorry, Atorra... Maybe they won't keep her long, and she'll find her way back here. I hear they get bored of the girls fast."

"I shouldn't have fixed her stocking," Atorra said, as if that would have mattered. The sanarune never even looked at her clothes. She was haunted, thinking of that man inspecting Lorsen as she stripped off her clothes, and taking her away. *Girls for his events. He likes them less obedient. We're in a hurry.*

It was always her and Lorsen. Teasing each other, making little games of their chores, imagining different endings to the moral tales in the House library, gossiping out back by the gardens together while Atorra watched the birds and insects.

Atorra couldn't sleep anymore. She woke up trembling every time she finally passed out. She tortured herself, trying to imagine all manner of horrors, as if she must share Lorsen's fate in spirit.

Now the other girls went to the front of the House and Atorra was all alone in the dark and cold. Hrada wouldn't let them waste firewood or

candles unless they were with clients.

I've never been so alone.

She tried to imagine what it would be like to be Jirra's concubine.

He seems pretty stingy. I bet if my limb broke or my skin tore at sea, he wouldn't keep a good repair kit around.

I do wonder what it'll be like to...have sex. For all I've been told about it, it's hard to imagine it's something I'd ever actually enjoy. I wonder if any Fanarlem girls like having sex with flesh and blood people?

Then she was suddenly struck by a much worse thought.

Jirra likes to drink and gamble. It's not like he's committed to me for life. Will he lose me in a bet someday?

She simply didn't know him well enough to guess if he was the type. If he was, she could end up anywhere. She could end up in a brothel anyway. Jirra might pass out drunk and she'd be at the mercy of other men on the ship.

But none of it is as bad as what happened to Lorsen.

She stared at the darkness outside the window, appreciating the quiet more when she considered all the ways it could end.

Suddenly there was a patter of slippers dashing down the hall, and Vatta opened the door.

"Is Jirra here?" Atorra asked. "What's wrong?" It was very unusual for the girls to leave their specific rooms during the evening visiting hours. "Is —is *he* back?"

"No...not that brute, thank the stars. But there's a very strange man asking for you."

"For me? A friend of Jirra's?"

"Nooo..." Vatta said the word like the syllable was falling into an abyss as she tried to reach for it. "Not a friend of Jirra's. A *Miralem* man."

"A Miralem!? How?"

"He must be someone powerful. He's terrifying. He asked for 'the girl in the back room'. Like...he senses you."

Miralem. They were the enemy of Daramons, occupying all the northern lands. It was well known that they shunned slavery and would never purchase a Fanarlem concubine, although sometimes they offered freedom.

But this man wanted her specifically. Why could that be? He didn't even know her name. *The girl in the back*.

Even if Miralem didn't believe in slavery, she was afraid of them too.

Miralem could read minds. Sometimes, they could even control them. They could move things with their minds, too. They could make you do *anything*, if they had enough skill. Just because their race shunned slavery didn't mean that all men were good. In fact, the stories about them weren't good at all. Perhaps this man had some twisted desire. And why her? Had Jirra spoken to this stranger?

Atorra couldn't imagine why this was happening, but none of her guesses were comforting.

"Hrada told him I'm already sold, right?"

"This man has money," Vatta said. "Not just ilan, but pure gold. He told Hrada to test it. If it's a telepathic trick, it is at least a good one. Maybe--"

"I should try to escape. I'm not going to Miralem lands! I need to...to... stay near Lorsen."

Vatta bit her lip. "Atorra...he could find you anyway. He already knew you were back here without seeing you."

"Right..." There was no escaping a Miralem. If he wanted her, he would have her.

The 'buying season' was turning out far worse than she could have guessed.

Still, she already had a potential master, so she didn't have to make herself an appealing prospect. "If he wants me, he'll have to take me at my worst."

Atorra hurried down the back stairs as fast as her delicate wooden bones would carry her. She was barefoot, wearing nothing but an old work dress.

She reached the small garden, which had been cultivated by several generations of concubines-in-training. Hrada would get understandably angry if they got too dirty, but he did think it important that they know how to manage a garden or tend houseplants, depending on client tastes.

Under the moonlight, the garden slept, the flower petals shut, vines and leaves swaying gently in the soft breeze that came from the sea. The soft grass felt wonderful on her bare toes; she was not allowed outside without shoes.

Atorra dropped onto the grass and rolled around in the dew. *My hair can be washed later, but I'll be a sight. He won't want a Fanarlem covered in grass and looking half-crazy.*

She dug her hands in the dirt, feeling it grind under her nails. She would not be taken away by a Miralem man who could get into her head and make her his puppet.

The back door opened.

"Atorra!" Hrada's voice was sharp with tension. "Get up! There is a change of plans."

There was Hrada, almost invisible in the night with his dark skin, long dark blue tunic, and black boots. He was familiar. Safe, she would have said in the past.

But he had let Lorsen go to Atlantis. In the end, she and Lorsen were just coins.

Behind him...a Miralem stranger.

Atorra had always heard that Miralem were barbarians. This man was well-dressed, but he did look fierce. Something untamed lurked in his eyes.

His hair was as black as a Daramon, and he also had the eyes of Daramon men from the east, slanted slightly upward at the corners, but his features were quite different. She couldn't decide if he looked feral or royal, but somehow it was both. His eyes gleamed gold and his cheekbones were sharp. He looked extremely strong, and radiated power, and was altogether like no man she had ever seen come into the house.

He wore a tall fur hat and a long black cloak, a lightly padded leather tunic, and tall leather boots that protected his knees as well. She was sure there would be a sword hiding under his cloak.

But he was nothing like the sanarune.

There was no hunger in his eyes. There was almost...sadness.

And he can read my mind, so he knows what I'm thinking of him at this very moment.

The stranger looked at her, unsmiling, and nodded to Hrada.

"He wishes to see you," Hrada said.

"What about Jirra?" Atorra asked.

"Jirra will be handled."

CHAPTER FIVE



ATORRA

Atorra already knew that Hrada couldn't protect her.

He led Atorra into the private room where men looked the concubines over before purchase. Atorra had been inspected here a few times, before being passed over. The soft lanterns made the girls seem even more beautiful and lifelike. A stick of incense with aphrodisiac properties burned in the corner.

"A Fanarlem girl," said the stranger. "We don't have any Fanarlem in my city. Atorra, it was?"

Her name sounded so strange in his foreign accent, with its harsh edges and odd tones. Of course, he spoke her dialect perfectly, because telepaths could easily adapt to differences of language. The Miralem and Daramons of the continent shared the same language in theory, but people from remote regions could be nearly incomprehensible.

"I'm—I'm sure that doesn't matter," Hrada said. "She can repair herself, as far as she is able to do so--or instruct someone else to do it. Of course, Fanarlem parts are very specialized. They must be infused with the proper magic, so if you don't have anyone who knows how to make new parts, that would be a consideration."

"We have skilled craftspeople and sorcerers in my region, so I'm sure something can be arranged," the man said, his eyes gleaming the color of bronze in the candlelight as he took in the sight of her, covered in grass and dew, her hands dirty and stained. He clearly noticed, but didn't comment. He didn't seem to care how dirty she was. "And she has never manifested any powers?"

"Powers? No," Hrada said. "No powers." Of course he would never mention Atorra's enchanted singing. He arched a brow. He seemed terrified. "Atorra, maybe you should take off those filthy clothes and let him get a better look--"

The stranger held up a hand. "*No*." He spoke like it was a royal command. "I have no wish to see her body. I don't want her for anything like that." He sounded disgusted by the very idea that Fanarlem concubines existed. "I have need of this Fanarlem girl to help me with something. You will not be ill-treated, Atorra. You will be provided with anything you need, never harmed, never touched against your will."

He didn't seem afraid of her, but he did seem unaccustomed to her. He looked at her like she was strange to him. She could certainly believe this man had no interest in ever touching her.

"What do you need me for? Why me?" she asked. "There are work houses with Fanarlem for purchase. They cost less and they're sturdier. If you need someone to work with fumes or in extreme weather..."

He shook his head. "You are the one I want. You are not who I would choose, but Eskamir has chosen you for me."

That must be a god of his lands, one she hadn't even heard of. She knew nothing about this man--his customs, his morals. She only knew that he also knew nothing of her.

"I don't understand, sir. Why would you want me in particular? I'm--" *I'm already promised to another.*

But she held the words back. Somewhere deep inside, she was intrigued by the unknown. Although he was strange, he had no interest in making a concubine of her.

"What do you want me for?" she asked, insistent now.

He leaned close. *My senses tell me that you are my queen.*

He spoke in her mind.

She felt as if it was a cruel secret to him, one that filled him with dread.

Hrada couldn't hear him, of course.

My queen.

Queen of what? Queen of where?

The man said nothing more, and her mind burned from the touch of his voice in her head.

Then he took a silk bag from inside his leather tunic and pushed it into Hrada's hands. "Test them if you like," he said. "But I am not here for tricks. Only this girl. The sooner I take her and return home, the happier we all shall be."

Hrada spilled jewels and gold into his hand. There must have been a dozen, and each worth at least half of her. If they were real...

"Home?" Atorra asked. "Where is home? And are you implying that you are a king of your homeland, sir?"

He smiled grimly. "Yes," he said. *I am the King of Drai, and I will bring you back to our capital city of Kota.* The voice was in her head. Telepathy, meant for her and not Hrada. As if to prove it, he lifted off his fur hat to reveal the two black horns that grew straight from his head.

Sorcerers sometimes wore headdresses that mimicked the shape of the horns, but only the Drai royal family had them naturally. Of course, it would be an easy trick to make horns, but judging by the weary, haggard look on his face, and the battle-tested strength radiating off of him, she had a hard time believing he was a liar.

Hrada didn't even seem to see the horns. The Miralem's telepathic tricks blinded him to something right in front of him.

By some unbelievable circumstance, some dream or nightmare too strange to fathom, she had just been purchased by the King of Dragons.

CHAPTER SIX



ATORRA

HRADA WAS USUALLY SO TALKATIVE, which made it all the more nervewracking when he tested the jewels and gold in dead silence, while the King of Drai stood by patiently. He didn't say a word and barely looked at her.

She did look at him, very thoroughly. Even if he made her nervous, she would look and keep on looking. After all, he was her master now, and she needed to know what she was in for.

It was hard to say how old he was, since a king would have the best of healers, but she had a feeling he was young. No more than thirty or forty, just entering the prime age to have children.

He said I would be his queen? Does that word mean the same thing to him? Do the Drai do things very differently? How could I possibly be a queen? A king needs heirs, and no matter what his 'senses' say, I can't be the right person for him.

What does he want me to do? He asked about magic...so did his senses tell him I have magic? But it's such a small bit of magic, almost useless...

As she studied his clothing more carefully, she could tell that although it was simple compared to a wealthy Daramon, the workmanship was exquisite, with many fine details, like the patterned stitching on the tunic he wore under the leathers, and how perfectly fitted and soft his boots were. When he moved an arm to sign a few papers, his cloak fell back and she

saw the sword, with a gleaming dragon scale adorning the pommel and a row of them on the scabbard.

Hrada handed the king a small leather valise. "This goes with all concubines," he said. "It contains a change of clothes and a repair kit, as well as a house blend of musk oil that you would want to apply before sex. But, I know that is of no interest..." Hrada trailed off at the dark look on the king's face.

"I will give you no words detailing my disgust that you enslave souls from birth with the intention of using them not only to do your dirty work but also for you to take pleasure in their abuse. All of this is unnatural, and I can't fathom having an attraction to these mannikins you make to play god with. In this case, you have taken one of mine, and I will *protect* her now." He opened the case, took out the oil, and slammed it on the table next to the ownership papers. "Are we done here?"

"Y-yes." Hrada was scared for her, as much as he had been for Lorsen. This was too unknown for him; he liked sending her with Jirra because he was a familiar face. Daramons hated the Miralem, and they feared the dragons more than anything.

"It's...it's all right," she said, as if it really mattered. Why should she care what Hrada felt anymore?

'These mannikins you make to play god with.'

That was how the king saw her. Her existence disgusted him, and perhaps provoked his pity, but would he really let her be a queen? She couldn't imagine why he would seek her out.

At least he wouldn't force himself on her.

Suddenly, they heard a commotion, and the door lock rattled. Someone pounded angrily. "Don't you dare, Hrada!" Jirra yelled. "We had a deal, you cursed 'nabad!"

"Jirra, it's worth your while!" Hrada yelled, storming to the door and throwing it open. "He came in and wanted her. You'll get double back your deposit. I know you only took her in because you felt bad for her anyway."

"No..." Jirra sounded a little drunk. "I've wanted her a while. I just couldn't afford her 'til you gave me a discount." He shot Atorra a lopsided smile. "But now I can't get you out of my head, sunshine. Oh, to spread those legs of yours wide and know what pleasure lies between 'em..."

Now he talks like this. Atorra recoiled. Of course he does.

The king had replaced his hat, crossed the room with his long stride, and touched a hand to his sword. "I am taking the girl home with me," he said coolly. "She is worth far more than a 'discount'." He took out another gold coin, on top of what he'd already given Hrada. "Here. Take that and your perversions elsewhere."

"*My* perversions? What are you wanting a concubine for?"

"I don't want a concubine. I want this girl's soul."

Atorra shivered. When he puts it like that...

"Are you...a Miralem?" Jirra bristled, realizing that he was dealing with a very different world view in this intimidating, rather formal man with the strange accent. Atorra imagined Jirra had met all sorts of people on his travels, but his drunken mind wasn't that quick to put it together.

"Yes," the king said, fearlessly. He was in enemy lands but he didn't seem worried.

"Call the guards," Jirra shouted behind him. He must have brought a few friends.

Jirra's friends rushed into the street, shouting for the guard, and Atorra knew the king would soon be overwhelmed and outnumbered. He seemed to have come alone.

Why didn't he bring his own guards? she wondered.

The king pushed her behind him. "Stay back," he said. "But stay with me. We'll leave quickly."

CHAPTER SEVEN



ATORRA

Atorra looked at Hrada, who didn't seem to want anything to do with this situation anymore. He moved back into the House as the king headed outside.

I belong to him now, so...I have to follow. They won't hurt me, at least. I suppose if this Miralem man is killed, Jirra will take me after all.

But somehow this idea, which had been barely tolerable before, was outright horrific and she realized suddenly that she wanted to see Drai and the dragons and what it would be like to live in a world where Fanarlem weren't slaves, no matter how dangerous and odd it might be.

Only it is taking me so far from you, Lorsen... Guilt stabbed at her. But of course, Jirra would never have access to the families of Atlantis. Lorsen was lost to her either way.

Six guards were hurrying toward them; they were always close in the red light district, where general crime also ran high.

"He's Miralem!" Jirra and his friends were all pointing at the king. Jirra added, "I bought that doll and he came in and plucked her out from under me!"

One of the guards glanced sideways at Jirra, clearly not approving of any man who bedded Fanarlem girls, but the rest were immediately in a rage at the Miralem interloper.

"Watch out, men, he can get in your head!" the lead guard said. "You can't trust any of 'em. Sir, you need to get out of our town. Leave the girl.

What do you want with a Fanarlem anyway?"

"She is a reincarnation of one of my people. I paid for her in accordance with the laws of your slave trade, and then I'm taking her home."

Reincarnation?

Atorra couldn't ask him about it before blades were drawn, and the guards moved swiftly to attack the dragon king--but his speed was blinding. He dodged the first two swords that seemed to Atorra's eyes like they surely would have struck him, and then his own single blade cut the two guards down where they stood, like he was in two places at once. Atorra barely saw the flash of it whipping from one to the next before their blood pooled on the dirt.

"Call for the captain!"

"He uses his telepathy to read our moves; we can't lay a finger on him!" The other four guards were panicking, while Jirra and his friends started running away as soon as the king killed the first two. The remaining guards backed off into the shadows of the nearest alley.

A distress horn sounded moments later.

The king swept Atorra up onto his shoulder, looking unfazed, not even hurrying as much as Atorra felt he should as he took her to the black horse that waited nearby. He climbed on with her still on his shoulder and before she knew it, she was flipped around and sitting in front of him, facing out at the world again.

"I apologize for carrying you in such an undignified manner," he said curtly, as he spurred the horse onward. "I didn't give you time to say goodbye."

"I--I don't expect it, sir," she said, bewildered by everything. "Anyway...I have no one to say goodbye to anymore." She looked around him to see if anyone was in pursuit.

"They won't follow," he said. "They're overwhelmed by their fear of Miralem, and I expect you don't mean much to them, do you? Just pride and drink running their mouths."

"What did you mean when you said I was a reincarnation of someone?"

"You're the reincarnation of the Queen of Drai," he said. "Which means you will know the songs of our magic. They live in every queen's memory and you will sing them to strengthen the future hatchlings."

"Songs of your magic?" Atorra said. "I don't know any songs...like *that*. Sometimes I do feel...something, but I've rarely used any magic at all. And

of course, I was punished for it."

"You'll remember them when you need to," he said. "No one else will know them. They are kept only by the Queens of Drai and no one else. The songs give great power to the hatchlings, and the next king will share that power. If we don't find the queen's spirit, a generation of dragons will be weak and sickly. Considering how things stand, it would be the end of us."

"That sounds like a grave responsibility," Atorra said, very conscious of his body against hers. He smelled like leather and some unfamiliar spice. She had been groped and clutched and pulled onto the lap of many visitors to the House, but they were still only supposed to examine the wares "like a ripening peach" as Hrada would say. He was holding her firmly against him, closer than any man had ever held her for so long—but not like he wanted to touch her.

Like he needed to protect her.

"It is," he said.

They were leaving the boundaries of the town. At first she was overwhelmed into silence, but her curiosity got the better of her quickly, especially as the night closed in around them. The horse carried them past the outskirts of town, through the moonlit farm lands beyond. The stars and moon were clear in a broad sky, fields of wheat whispering in the night wind, with dark stands of trees and occasional farm houses dotting the flat land. In town, magical lights glowed all night, but out here all beacons were gone.

"What happened to the last queen?" Atorra asked. "Did she do something wrong?"

"She died of old age many years ago," he said.

"But--"

He cut her off. "Her soul wasn't damaged. That's what you were going to ask, isn't it?"

"Well...yes. Are you really sure I'm the same soul as your queen? I heard Miralem don't believe souls become Fanarlem to be punished for wickedness... Is that really true?"

"Of course not," he growled. "Because it's a damned lie."

"But why else would I be a Fanarlem?"

"You're a Fanarlem because Fanarlem are forced into existence," he said. "It's not that different from other slave trades where people are taken from their homes and forced to work, only you were taken from the spirit

world--an even crueler injustice. All the Daramons get richer and more idle because you can do so much for them."

"But--that--" Atorra was struck with silence. "Why would my soul have been weak enough to be forced into this body, though? I mean, when a soul is called to become a Fanarlem, why would mine show up if I wasn't a weaker soul?"

"Are you actually arguing in favor of your own mistreatment?"

She had never spoken to any flesh and blood person in this way, and his tone was so sharp, that she thought he must be getting angry at her. "Everyone says that if we don't serve our masters we'll keep being slaves again every time we're reborn, and I'd rather not be a slave next time, of course."

"Everyone doesn't say that. Daramon shit-piles say that."

Her eyes widened. She didn't expect a king to have a foul mouth, but... *Lorsen and I have secretly felt we might be dealing with shit-piles this whole time.*

"You won't be a slave *this* time," he said. "You'll be my queen. Even if I don't know how I'm going to explain any of this to the people."

He doesn't consider me a slave, but it sounds like I'll still have to serve and do whatever is asked of me, except that what's demanded of me will change.

"I know you didn't do anything wrong in your past life worthy of punishment," he added decisively, "because we know everything about your past existence. You will be revered. People will humbly serve you. Any idea that you're inferior should be banished from your mind as quickly as possible. It's incredibly unfortunate that you were born a Fanarlem, but this is the state of things and we will have to bear it." He sounded like he was speaking as much for himself as anyone.

"Do I look strange to you?" she asked, wondering what it would be like to live in a land without any Fanarlem.

"Yes," he said, "but the king and queen are not under any obligation to have a romantic relationship in Drai, so it doesn't matter."

"I see." *Maybe it does matter to me*, she thought, but she wasn't sure why. Men couldn't be trusted, so it was for the best that he didn't like looking at her. She could hardly imagine having Miralem serve her as royalty, but if it meant music and gardens and seeing new places, well...that sounded pretty wonderful.

"What about heirs?" she asked.

"No use asking about heirs," he grunted.

Soon even the farms were behind them, and the road cut through the forest. The moon vanished behind the spring foliage and Atorra couldn't see more than a vague outline of the road ahead between the fringes of darkness all around them.

Well, the guards certainly won't chase him out here, Atorra thought. Bandits and wolves were said to lurk on the road after dark.

She had a feeling the King of Drai wasn't afraid of either. He rode along with utter confidence, not hurrying, not searching the darkness with worried eyes...in fact, he seemed quite casual.

"Are you using second sight, sir?" she asked. "Is that why you're not afraid of the dark?"

"Don't call me sir," he said gruffly. "My name is Harrai."

"Oh, is it all right to call a king by name in Drai? Well, I guess it must be or you wouldn't have told me to do it."

"In formal settings, we are addressed formally, but we're not formal here."

"Harrai it is, then. But you wouldn't prefer Master Harrai, or My Lord Harrai, or...something to indicate your importance?"

"Daramons are so funny," he said dismissively. "I don't think anyone will need to be reminded of my importance."

"Good point, when you put it that way."

He grunted agreement and went silent again. He hadn't answered her question about second sight, and Atorra was so interested to know about all his powers. She had grown up with stories of the fearsome, almost godlike powers Miralem could possess.

He doesn't want to talk to me.

She started brooding on Lorsen again. If their souls were not even required to do penance, then Lorsen was suffering for no reason at all. And now it was too late. Every time the horse's hooves struck the road, she was getting farther away from her sister, never to turn back.

Maybe I can become so powerful a queen that one day I can storm Atlantis, ride up to Mr. Wode's estate, and shake my own bag of coins, throwing it at his feet and demanding to have her back.

"What should I do to be a good Queen of Drai?" she asked. "If there's anything I can do to start learning about it, I'd certainly try. Maybe there's

something to trigger my memory? Or...I could practice your court manners or languages or dances..."

"You ask a lot of questions, considering the shock of me tearing you from your home."

"Home? No...there was nothing there for me anymore. My sister was the only home I had, and she was sent away. I just want to know what's next."

"You don't have to worry about any of that. When you meet my grandmother Lady Kirska, the elder priestess of Eskamir, she will help you remember your abilities. I don't think much else will be expected of you."

"Is it because I'm a Fanarlem or is nothing ever expected of any queen?"

"It's because you're a Fanarlem, of course," he said. "I can't imagine you sitting in on the council."

Was it her imagination or was he somewhat rude? Maybe all kings were rude. They were kings, after all.

"But if I *am* the reincarnation of your queen, isn't it natural that I'd want to resume my duties?"

"I think you're only saying that because you were trained to please," he said. "So I'd much rather you figure out what you actually like doing and just...do that."

"Okay. I can easily entertain myself."

"Good. That's all I ask of you."

"But there must be a court, and court manners and dances...?"

"I guess Fanarlem girls still hear stories of kings and queens even if your land doesn't have them anymore. There are dances. Sure."

That last word was another crack in his formality, revealing the ordinary young man that must lurk behind every crown. But it wasn't comforting. She sensed he was uninviting her from the dances.

If the king doesn't even have to sleep with the queen, then he probably has favored consorts already. Plenty of them.

She really didn't want to sleep with a flesh and blood man. But a royal dance did sound romantic and interesting.

"I see. Can I have a garden?" she said.

"You can have as many gardens as you can dream up," he said.

"Could I have a flute and a harp?"

"You already have a harp, I know that for a fact. I'll get you ten flutes if you want them. That should keep you busy."

Was he actually embarrassed by her? She was used to being thought of as a status symbol, but... he was trying to think of ways to keep her busy and out of the way, wasn't he?

So if I want to please him, I just have to leave him alone, she thought. And it sounds like he'll give me any gift I want if it keeps me away from him. He really must think I'll put him in a bad light.

But in that case, I could have a garden...and maybe a pet or two...and books and paper and musical instruments...and all that will be asked of me is to sing a song that his grandmother will help me remember?

The wildest dream of all Fanarlem concubines, to have a wealthy master that actually loved her, quickly went out the window. It would be an even wilder dream to be left alone to do anything she wanted.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT



Harrai

THEY TRAVELED DAY AND NIGHT, stopping for short rests rather than a good night's sleep. Harrai never betrayed any fear when they passed other travelers. It was unlikely he would meet his match in some tiny Daramon town, but the sooner they were back in Kota, the better.

However unfortunate this situation was, he had the Queen of Songs and he struggled to sleep for long. He kept wanting to make sure she was still there. Her form seemed so small and fragile, and Daramons treated her like she was less than alive, invisible, or worst of all in this situation—subtly sizing her up like a coin purse. Something to pilfer when his back was turned.

Atorra barely seemed to notice how other travelers looked at her. She had never known anything better, that was obvious.

At least she was not too beaten down. In fact, she took in the world as wide-eyed and excited as a puppy. The changing landscape fascinated her as they drew closer to the southern edge of the mountain ranges. Everything made her gasp and exclaim.

"The air smells so good!" "The mountains are even more beautiful than I imagined!" "Look at those trees!" she cried, at one point, as if she couldn't contain herself.

"What about them?" Harrai asked.

"They're so tall, so...upright. Their greens are so dark and...stately? They make our trees look so scraggly. Not that I don't like all trees, but I do

like these trees especially."

Harrai felt his brow furrowing. She sounded so naive and excited. He couldn't imagine dropping this energy in the midst of the court.

But he couldn't bring himself to discourage her either. Any attempt to mold her personality to fit the court left a bad taste in his mouth when she had been raised as a slave. He never wanted to remind her of *them*.

Wild berries grew all along the sides of the road and she pointed at them.

"Now I know why they call this the berry month!" she exclaimed. When they stopped to rest again, she said, "Should I pick some for you while you rest so you could eat them?"

"They're too delicate for eating on the road," he said. "And they'll stain my fingers."

"I won't touch them, then. I'm sure I should try not to stain my fingers so often now."

"I don't care," he said. "You can eat some if you like. I'm going to sleep." He was so tired he could hardly think straight. He dropped his head on his rolled blanket and his eyes shut involuntarily. *Can't sleep long*, he told himself, doing a quick telepathic sweep of the area. They were alone. Hopefully.

"I can't eat," she murmured softly.

"I thought you could," he murmured back. "I heard that Fanarlem concubines could eat."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were asleep already. No, that's a special spell that one's master would buy separately."

"That wouldn't do at all. Food is pleasure on the worst of days. I'll get the spell in Kurui. And...please stop referring to a 'master'. Far too polite a term for brutes and fiends." He sighed, shutting the eye again.

He lost himself to exhaustion.

Then shot awake in a panic.

Where is she?

He had not told her to stay within sight. He'd assumed she would have enough sense, paired with his reluctance to give her orders, and now he didn't see or hear her.

He searched for her with his mind instead, his heart racing so fast that concentration eluded him for a few painful seconds.

There. Just out of sight, through the thicker brambles.

He scrambled through them, ripping his clothes on a few thorns, and saw her popping a vivid red berry in her mouth. Not a blackberry, but—

"Atorra! That's poison!" he cried.

"I can't be poisoned," she said, before spitting the berry back into her mouth. "Tastes bad, though." Her hands were utterly blotched with red and purple.

"...right. I forgot." He came closer and grabbed one of her hands. "What have you done to yourself?"

"You...you said it didn't matter. I'm sorry! They tasted so good...except for the poison one. I can't eat but I was licking them and it was getting me pretty excited about being able to eat things. Fates! I wasn't even paying attention to my hands. They're awful."

"I...I should have given you more thorough...recommendations," he said. He didn't want to say 'instructions'; that sounded masterly. "But your face looks all right."

"I have better spells on my face," she said. "My hands are waterproofed but not dye proofed, but my face is both."

He grimaced and took out a handkerchief. He tried to wipe off one of her hands but this was pointless. Then he feared he had been too brusque, like he was cleaning up a child. But she *was* rather like a child. He shuddered to think what would have happened to her, if he hadn't come along.

"I'm very sorry, Harrai," she said. "I—I thought—"

Now the handkerchief was also tinged pink but her hands looked no better. "I shouldn't have sounded mad. You've never been out in the world at all, have you?"

"Of course not. No one wants to buy a worldly concubine..."

"Don't they?"

"Well, no. The world makes us willful. And...most people don't want a willful concubine, although a few do want them particularly..."

"I suppose the world does make one willful. No wonder I rarely get to leave either," he said, a bit sardonically. "Hands are surely cheap to replace. I'll get you gloves in Kurui too."

When they reached Kurui, a cold wind was blowing from the north and Harrai squinted against it as he rode down a narrow street to his great-aunt's house. Kurui was tucked into a tight valley where the mountains spread both east and west in low green peaks before swelling higher into one

continuous range that had always cut off Drai from the rest of the world. By now he knew that Atorra would be charmed by the northern horses, shaggy with brown fur and decorated with red tassels and bells, the music trickling from doorways, so loud and merry and prevalent, and the buildings all made of stone, as sturdy as small fortresses on a wide boulevard.

Kurui was still a Daramon city, but it was an isolated border town full of bustling trade, somewhat removed from the larger hostilities of the world. In the fertile western regions, the borders were tense, but in the harshness of the mountains, survival brought solidarity.

"Kurui is such a cheerful city!" she marveled. "I thought it would be cold and harsh!"

"The Daramons here respect the dragons as much as they fear them," Harrai said. "It does feel a little more like home." He stopped and hopped down to pound on the door of Auntie Ritan's house.

She would like Atorra, at least. He wasn't so sure about the court, but there was a reason Ritan had run off years ago.

"Maybe I'll like Drai if it's like this," Atorra said.

The door swung open and his grandmother's sister answered the door. They had never looked much alike, and now Ritan was shape-shifted to retain her youth, her long white hair framing smooth, delicate features and copper eyes. She gave Harrai a low bow. "You've made it safely. Thank the goddess," she whispered.

"None of this formality." He waved a hand irritably and pulled her into a one-armed hug. "It's good to see you, Auntie."

"You've found her..." Now the woman looked at Atorra and then she turned away quickly as her large eyes filled with tears. "Oh, no...my queen. Oh, my dear grandmother!"

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE



ATORRA

"None of that," Harrai said curtly. "What's done is done. This is my Great-Aunt Ritan. She is the sister of High Priestess Kirska, my grandmother, and your prior incarnation was their grandmother."

"What!" Atorra usually could always find something to say. Right now, she could only sputter anxiously, "What? Me!?"

"Not you. Just your prior incarnation," Harrai said, with semi-patience. "You are a new person now. Auntie, you shouldn't say things like that."

"You didn't give her this information beforehand?" Ritan asked.

"I don't see how it matters much. Look, it's quite obvious that her only duty will be the songs. And since when has it ever mattered about prior incarnations? I thought it was downright taboo to talk to someone about a life they have already given up, and now you're weeping over it."

"I wouldn't think of it if she was allowed a natural life, but you know what she'll have been told about prior incarnations! She must *know* that she comes from the most honored and respected of soul-lines!" Ritan gave Atorra a look like she was sharing something with her. "And the next dragon king..."

"Queens have been barren in other nations before. We'll just have to figure it out."

"You have blonde hair," Ritan said, curling a lock around her finger. "Like a queen of the northwest."

"The House Mother thought it would be a selling point; exotic..." Atorra tried to explain but Ritan just looked pitying.

"You are very lovely, dear," Ritan said. "My nephew is right. You are not my grandmother and I shouldn't have referred to you as such. I'm just very sad over what was done to you."

"It doesn't matter whether she's lovely or not," Harrai said, taking off his coat.

"Of course it does, and you're just being obstinate. It's always convenient to be lovely."

Harrai flashed Atorra an apologetic expression.

"Ahh, let's get you settled in," Ritan said. "I've had potato and sausage stew cooking low all day."

Ritan was very beautiful, although she was obviously older. She was a Miralem but she lived in Daramon lands, so Atorra guessed she had married a Daramon man. He must have died--the house didn't show much evidence of a male occupant. Daramon women had their wrinkles smoothed away all their lives, and if they were wealthy, even as they faced death, they still looked pristine. But their skin would change, growing thinner and more fragile, and they would slow down on the inside. They usually let their hair grow its natural color of white or gray, especially if their faces were still shape-shifted well. It was fashionable to be a stunningly beautiful woman at the end of her life, one whom even a young man would treasure.

"I need to get her a spell for eating tomorrow," Harrai was saying as she doled out some stew for him. "And several replacement sets of hands. I think she'll go through them fast. She seems to like playing outside."

"Well, every dragon queen does," Ritan said, smiling at her. "If you can't eat, I know you can smoke a little tiralem nef..." She took out a pipe with a long stem and a tin of the tiny dried leaves that produced nutty, caramel-scented smoke.

"We aren't supposed to smoke," Atorra said, nervous. "We'll smell like it later."

"You already smell like woodsmoke, so no matter," Harrai said.

"Mm...at my age...or in your situation...there is no need to deny life's pleasures," Ritan said, lighting the pipe and taking a long drag of it before passing it to Atorra. "Draw the smoke in your mouth and hold it there as long as you can; that's how the Fanarlem do it."

"This seems like a bad example," Harrai said, but he didn't seem like he really cared.

Well, she already knew he didn't really care what she did. She tried to inhale the smoke, and sputtered.

"Slowly," Ritan said. "Savor it."

Atorra wasn't sure she cared for it, but she managed not to sputter. The smoke left a lingering taste and a slightly mellowing effect.

Harrai sat near the fire, relaxing more than she'd ever seen him, taking off his hat so that his horns showed, and he gave his hair a little ruffle around them. Then he unfastened his leather surcoat and the embroidered tunic underneath, leaving just a thin cotton shirt that hung loosely off his broad shoulders, tucked into trousers that were not quite as loose. She felt his strength riding with him, but hadn't seen his body under the layers of traveling clothes until just now.

She dragged her eyes away, unsure why she bothered to study him, as Ritan asked, "What has he told you?"

"Auntie, you know the normal duties of a queen won't even be discussed," Harrai said. "Not once they see her."

"I know the queen is expected to have heirs," Atorra said. "I know I'm not what anyone wanted..."

"Yes, it's true that a surrogate will have to be chosen," Ritan said. "If you remember the songs, that's really all that matters."

"And King Harrai will have a proper consort," Atorra guessed. "If he doesn't already."

Harrai's look turned dark. "I don't have a *consort*. I'm not a Daramon with undisciplined britches."

Ritan laughed and smacked his knee. "Watch your mouth, boy. Some of us were quite fond of a Daramon man and his undisciplined britches. No, it isn't quite like that, dear. The King of Drai is half-dragon, and the queen will only bear children on the night of the festival of Eskamir when the Queen's Wing inhabits the king's body."

"The Queen's Wing? Inhabits?"

"He will be your dragon mount, and give his magic to the heir by joining his spirit with the king's body, for one night. Only one mating is usually necessary. Two or three children at once are common. Thanks to this ritual, they will be half-dragon."

Atorra's mouth opened. "You're saying...if I was flesh and blood I'd have children with a *dragon*? Not Harrai?"

"Yes. Outside of that mating, you will be Harrai's wife. In the past, the king has always been quite satisfied with the Queen of Songs."

Harrai's cheeks reddened as he grimaced.

"Harrai, you really didn't tell her about the mating?"

"You tell me why it would matter," he said.

"I'm so sorry; he has always been brusque," Ritan said, bemused. "Well, of course all of that won't be expected of you but there's no reason you shouldn't *know*. You might not be what was hoped for but nevertheless, you *are* our Queen of Songs and the Daramons did this to you. You can lend urgency to any wars that may come. Ask our people to avenge you."

"Avenge me," Atorra breathed. Maybe it was the tiralem nef talking, but this was the headiest thing she'd ever heard. "You really see it that way?"

"Of course. You are a Miralem now, dear. Not that the Daramons are all bad; I married one, after all, and I rather liked him, but we did have many philosophical arguments!" Ritan's smile was both fond and smug, like she missed her husband but felt she had won the final argument.

She loved him very much, as different as they must have been...I can see it in her eyes.

After just a short while, the tiralem nef made her feel sleepy and strange, and suddenly Harrai was carrying her into a dim room.

"I fell asleep?" she asked, with drowsy alarm.

"I'm sure you need it. I need to talk to my aunt, so just rest." He put her on the bed and hesitated. She was still wearing shoes and he looked unsure about what to do. He grunted and tossed a blanket halfway over her. "Just sleep," he said, like he wanted her out of the way.

She pretended to return to sleep, but as soon as she heard him go back downstairs, she sat up, pulled her shoes off, and crept to the door.

"You are upset," she heard Ritan saying.

"A Fanarlem!" he hissed. "Of course I'm upset! How dare they steal the soul of our queen...and what a mess. She's the queen but...I can't have her for my bride."

Atorra recoiled. He sounded so horrified by her, so adamant. *He really must hate the sight of me. Miralem don't take Fanarlem as lovers at all.*

"I'm not sure you should dismiss it so quickly," Ritan said. "The kingdom is already fragile; the king and queen should be close in such

times. The queen has always been the source of the king's strength and wisdom, Harri, and even if a surrogate will be needed for the children, well..."

"I have no interest in her. It isn't natural. Maybe she'll remember the songs, but there will be no child, no future ruler, nothing to give the people any hope at all...and these are already terrible times. I needed this. Damn it all..." His voice muffled.

"Give her a chance."

"Why?" he growled. "We're on the brink of war, I don't have time to deal with this."

Atorra felt an unfamiliar clench deep inside her that built with every word he spoke. It was a hot emotion that made her tempted to rush down the stairs and smack him.

Like I asked for this! Well, don't worry, Harrai, you won't need to make any time for me. I won't bother with you a minute more than I have to.

"Life is like that. We have to make time for things. Just...be gentle with her," Ritan said. "Attraction is a funny thing. You might not feel it now, but tomorrow could be different."

"Do you *want* me to be attracted to her, Auntie? No one else in Drai is going to agree. She isn't what anyone thinks of as a queen. It's going to be difficult for everyone to accept what's happened."

"Including my sister, yes...," Ritan sighed. "I know. I'm used to Fanarlem here in Kurui, and I remember that I was scared of them at first, and I felt quite badly toward them... It was so long ago when I came here, but...I sense Atorra does have a strong spirit, like all our queens."

"I don't think it would help the kingdom for us to be a proper husband and wife when there's nothing proper about what has happened." His voice was low and soft with anger.

"While the situation is not ideal, the kingdom needs a strong king and queen. You two are all they have. You need to put the best face on this."

"I know," he said, with a huff. "I always do. I suppose I'm just voicing my true feelings now because soon I'll be back home, and I don't dare feel anything."

```
"You can feel—"
He cut her off. "No. I can't. Not since..."

Since what?
```

He had trailed off into silence. Whatever it was, they both understood it, wordlessly.

Atorra wrapped her arms around herself and crept back into bed, but she could only sit, wagging her knees restlessly. *He pities me. He's angry on my behalf. But he thinks I'm hopeless*.

I'll show him, she thought.

Days ago, if she had entertained a thought like this, she would have shut it down right away and reminded herself of her place in the world. Fanarlem girls learned early on to quell their ambitions.

If I was the dragon queen once, I can do it again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN



Harrai

HARRAI STILL COULDN'T SEEM to sleep, even in the relative safety of the border town and the comfort of his aunt's home.

Atorra had her own bed here, out of sight. He had an unsettled feeling. She was too important.

And...she is different from everyone else I've known, he thought.

As they traveled, she asked him a constant stream of questions. She had very little to say about herself, but everything she saw provoked wonder. Every town, every bend in the road. Berries. Farm animals. Rock formations. Snatches of music drifting from taverns.

She has never seen anything but that seedy place...

He woke abruptly, the bed bathed in sunshine, and threw on his traveling clothes.

Auntie was right. It was his job to put on the best possible face, no matter how strange this girl seemed to him. When the people of Kota saw her, they would feel shock, grief, rage...

He had to set the tone.

Easier said than done. She wasn't unattractive, exactly, but it was an uncanny beauty. The magic that made her was powerful, and the illusion of life was nearly complete, but she was a little too perfect. A little...off. Eyes too big, mouth and nose too small, skin too smooth, expressions too simple.

The Daramons liked it that way, he supposed. If they wanted real life, they would just have a real woman.

Downstairs, Auntie Ritan was preparing breakfast. He smelled his favorite sweet pickled radishes.

"Mm...my favorite part of visiting you. A good simple breakfast."

"You know I'd never leave you wanting. Such an easy lad to please! King of Drai and all it takes to make you happy are radishes."

"When Atorra wakes up I need to take her to the market to get an eating spell."

"I already took care of it," Ritan said, chopping some spring onions. "I sent her to the market with Arik."

"Alone?"

"With Arik, dear. I just said so."

"Auntie, she's the queen! You just sent her off with a *servant*? She needs a guard!"

"No one knows she's the queen, do they? And the market is five minutes from here. Arik goes there every day! They'll be fine."

Harrai launched for the front door. "Maybe no one knows she's the queen, but she's an expensive Fanarlem girl and she has no idea how to defend herself. They get snatched up all the damn time."

"Oh, not in Kurui, Harri. And Arik has a knife," Auntie was saying behind him, but Harrai was already out the door, barely hearing her.

His great-aunt and grandmother certainly had some things in common. Both of them loved to make plans right over his head, but Auntie's were as half-baked as her sister's were calculating.

Outside, the air was cool but scented of spring. Kurui generally seemed like a bundle-up-and-mind-your-own-business sort of place, with a few Miralem around the market. Here, the two races traded regularly, which wasn't to say tensions didn't flare now and then. The Miralem were telepathic, and the Daramons were not. Although the border towns generally maintained a necessary peace, Daramons were wary of their more powerful northern neighbors. Harrai didn't feel sorry for them in the least. They treated women badly, practiced slavery, and believed that misfortune was a deserved punishment for bad deeds in a past life.

Barbaric...

The sooner I get Atorra out of here, the sooner she can learn our ways.

The market hall was in a huge warehouse building. He couldn't see the end of it from the entrance. Two long rows of market booths were dimly lit by magical lights hanging from the thick beams supporting the ceiling, and

a haphazard assortment of signs attempted to guide shoppers to their destinations.

He cast his telepathic senses outward, trying to find her, but it was difficult in such a din of people. If they had a bond, it would be easy. He could find her across miles. But for now, he just had to protect her. He could envision her lost in this huge space, so small and fair and naive, as vulnerable as a kitten.

He followed signs marked 'Fanarlem', passing jewels and dragon scales, books, musical instruments, a few fine swords and a great deal of cheaper ones, and huge crystals that hummed with magic.

Then his eyes hit on three Fanarlem concubines clad only in chemises. Their arms were tied to a beam overhead, and a few men were looking them over.

Rage boiled in his chest.

He didn't have the time or resources to battle slavers, but he shot the man a look of hatred. The man stopped calling to passersby to look at his girls until Harrai was out of sight. Harrai's hand tightened on the hilt of the sword at his waist.

Once he turned the corner, he was at the booths of Fanarlem parts. One of them just sold replacement skin, already cut to form all the different parts of the body, and another sold replacement bones and joints. Another sold scalps already plugged with hair, from the lowly yarn hair to horsehair to red Miralem hair three feet long with a hefty price.

One vendor did repairs on the spot and another reshaped faces.

I know so little about all of this, Harrai thought. I don't even know what Atorra will need, or how often, or what would make her life better.

He didn't want to speak to these vendors either, to support an entire branch of the Daramon economy that revolved around forcing souls into these artificial bodies and shaping them to fashion, ignoring the rules of nature entirely.

Harrai spotted Arik's head among the bustle. He was perusing the spells that brought Fanarlem to life: illusions, waterproofing, and the vanishing spells that allowed them to eat food.

Arik was also a Fanarlem, the first Fanarlem Harrai ever met, a goodnatured fellow who had worked for his aunt since long before Harrai was born. Auntie Ritan named him a free man and would have let him leave any time, but he remained at her side. But he didn't see Atorra.

"Where is she?" he asked Arik.

"Atorra? She's right—" Arik looked. Then he looked wider. "Well, she was—"

"That demon selling girls as slaves is only a few feet away and you let her out of your sight?"

"She couldn't have gone far. She was just—"

"We have to find her, now," Harrai hissed, and then he stormed away, checking back at the slave stall. This time, he went right up to the man. "I'm looking for a Fanarlem girl with blonde hair."

"How much you willing to pay?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about."

"I saw her..."

"I'm sure you did, with your hog's eyes. Where is she? If you or any of your associates so much as speak to her..."

"We're professional here," the man said, in a nervous voice. Everyone cowed when Harrai was angry, even with his horns tucked under his hat. This man had no clue he held the power of a dragon inside him, but even the densest of men could sense the forces Harrai had inherited. "She—she went that way," he said, pointing.

Harrai rushed that direction.

For just a moment, the clouds around his soul parted. It hit him just what she was. Ancient magic incarnate. In all the world, few nations possessed even a scrap of it. She was as precious as the great crystals. Maybe even more rare.

He'd started to think she would never return. That her soul was lost, and all the ancient magic with her.

The Queen of Songs.

Then he saw her, nose in a book at one of the vendor booths across the way, an expression on her face like she'd never seen a book in her life, utterly oblivious to his frantic search.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ATORRA

Atorra grew wiggly and restless when she read for too long, despite loving books in theory, as her only gateway to the rest of the world. She had never seen books like this. While Arik was purchasing the eating spell, the colored bindings—some with gilt—had drawn her in.

A whole book on beetles! With pictures!

And butterflies!

Oh—and here's one on salamanders— Does every sort of creature have its own book?

No sooner had she started to take this in than she noticed a book on hats. And then another on gowns and ladies' formal robes. And one on musical instruments.

"There's a book for everything!" she exclaimed aloud. "I had no idea!"

"Yes, dear, there is," said the older woman running the book stall. "Aren't we living in fortunate times? When I was a girl all we had were the book of the Wodrenarune and a history of dead kings."

"Pick one and we'll go," a much lower voice came behind her.

Harrai was standing between the shelves, his black brows furrowed into sharp lines.

"Don't run off like that," he added. She could tell he was mad. His eyes were narrowed, his face flushed.

"No, sir," she said, her throat tight.

"No, no, don't 'sir' me either. Damn my sweet, naive aunt," he growled. "This place is dangerous." He pulled her away from the bookseller.

"Your aunt said it would be all right. I'm sorry."

"Grah!" He sounded beyond frustration. "I don't want you to apologize. I was just worried to death. You're too important. There are Daramons who see Fanarlem as ripe for the taking, especially without a flesh-and-blood person to protect you. As long as we're at the border, you need to stay by my side. I wouldn't forgive myself--if the queen--" He broke off, letting go of her, and just went to pay for the books, taking her entire stack from her arms.

So that was it. He was worried for me...

No, she corrected herself. *He was worried for the* queen, *not me*.

But having seen the Fanarlem girls for sale in the market, he wasn't wrong, and whatever his reasons, at least he had rushed out to find her this morning. She could tell. He was sweating under his fur hat, looking frantic even now as he bargained a lower price for the books.

"Let's go," he said, taking her arm and pulling her along. "Too many Daramons all clumped together; I don't like it."

He is still my master, she thought. Whether he thinks of himself that way or not, he certainly tells me what to do.

He looked over the books. "Nature guides," he said. "Music... fashion..."

"I never knew such books existed, although we did have a guide to herbs at the House... I just didn't think anyone would care to know so much about beetles! I always *knew* there were different kinds, but Hrada said they're all just beetles. And here are hundreds of them. Thousands even. And someone took the time to name them all. Is that someone's job? The pictures are so detailed...! You didn't have to buy them all, though."

"A queen should have fine things. I just *can't* lose you." He gripped her arm. "Once we're in Kota, you'll be safe and you can go anywhere, but not here."

He is, at least, a very different kind of master.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE



ATORRA

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Ritan was finishing up the lunch.

"And you found some books, I see?" Ritan asked Atorra.

"Yes!"

Harrai shrugged. "Daramons do have very nice books. I'll give them that."

"It was a big reason I came here, to be sure." Ritan smiled. "I thought Fanarlem were terrified of insects!"

"Oh...because they can nest inside you, probably," Atorra said. "But concubines have repellent spells. Anyway, it's usually just wool beetles and moths. They're so small and they don't really like living inside things that move around and get plenty of sun. It's more of a paranoia than a concern, I think."

"She's not supposed to remind me of my grandmother, but she does," Ritan said, smiling.

"Hrm." Harrai didn't seem like he wanted to hear more of that.

Ritan put a few dishes on the table. "Omelette with green onions, bread, and your pickled radishes. I know you have to leave soon. Nothing extravagant." They gathered at the table, Arik included.

Harrai speared a very strong smelling sliver of white vegetable covered in little wilted bits of flavoring and put it on Atorra's plate. "Try that for your first taste." "Just have bread, dear," Ritan said. "Pickled radishes for a first food! What are you thinking, boy?"

Now Harrai growled low like a cat made to wear a bonnet. "Just try it." Atorra sniffed it and it almost seemed to burn. "What is...pickled?"

"We have a very short growing season in Kota," he said. "It's how we preserve much of our vegetables, and some other food as well."

She tried it, because she didn't want to disappoint him, but then the flavor was not what she expected. The taste was quite different than the smell, and it seemed to keep changing. "It's rather good!" she marveled. "Although strong."

"Try it with the egg." He composed another bite and lifted it to her mouth.

This was about the most real attention he had given her.

"Good, right?"

"It is! So this is egg? From a bird?"

"From the chickens out back," Ritan said. "Now try my bread. That's the best part of the meal." They all seemed to be enjoying giving her her first foods.

Atorra nibbled the bread. "This is like honey flowers!"

"Yes! I put a touch of honey in the batter," Ritan said. "And sesame seeds."

"I love it! Eating is like smelling, but more."

"Yep, that's about it exactly. Take the rest with you for the road."

Atorra finished the egg and radishes at the table and slowly nibbled the buns all day. She wanted them to last forever so she bit off tiny pieces and sucked on them until the flavor was gone. Finally, Harrai said, "That isn't how you eat. Just chew and swallow or everyone's going to wonder what's wrong with you."

"It seems like a waste to rush it. I like tasting but swallowing is a little strange."

He looked at her like she was from another universe. "You'll get used to it. But at court dinners, try your best to do exactly what everyone else is doing."

Everything changed as soon as they were across the border. In Daramon lands, Fanarlem were mostly hidden away, but in the Miralem lands they worked in the open, alongside the Miralem. Although they still seemed to

be doing the dirty jobs, they had better quality faces, even the ones who were laying bricks out in the hot sun or shoveling horse dung off the street.

Miralem houses were constructed in a different style as well, with steep roofs and ornate overhanging balconies. The white walls were painted with weathered emblems of good luck or welcome. The people looked more rugged and diverse. Some of them appeared quite old or ugly even though they were well-dressed.

"They don't shape-shift their faces here!" she marveled. "Does that mean your face is just your real face?"

Harrai gave her a very strange look, although what else was new? "Of course it's my real face!"

He has a handsome face, she thought, *for it being untouched*, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

The terrain was as rugged as the people themselves. The path was cut through a narrow valley but rocky peaks surrounded them on both sides, and when she looked to the western sunset, soon all she could see was progressively higher and more distant mountains. The road followed a thin river that traveled down from the mountains, and towns were carved out wherever space could be found. The wind blew constantly, and colder by the day.

"This wind!" She was enchanted by it. "It's so invigorating!" Whenever they stopped she liked to lean into it and feel it holding her up.

"Don't blow away," he said. "I guess cold doesn't bother you either."

"I didn't like the damp cold in Aiskan Nal, but I love this wind. It feels wonderful when it blows all through me."

He looked approving. Apparently this befit a dragon queen. "We settled here a long time ago to keep away from everyone else. No one can or will live in these mountains except the Drai."

"Did the dragons come with you, or did you find them here?"

"The dragons *are* the Drai. We've lived together as long as anyone remembers. Our stories say we once lived in a warm, fertile land, but we came here to protect ourselves during a long era of war—probably the conflict that established the hard border between our lands and the Daramons."

"How long ago was that?"

"Ten thousand years," he said. "Give or take a few. Since then, we have tried to stay out of wars, but occasionally the times are too dire. In the War

of the Crystals, we held our own, but if conflict escalates again, the Daramons have gotten much better at killing our dragons. The population still hasn't recovered from the last wars, because dragons have very few children."

Harrai sounded so serious when he spoke of his people. "You sound like a very good king," she observed. "At least, I've heard a lot of stories about bad kings who are greedy and neglectful, but you aren't like that at all, are you?"

He glanced at her and sighed faintly. "I'll be devastated if I'm the last king of Drai. I'll do anything to preserve our way of life, and everything else seems secondary. Of course, sometimes I think it would be nice to be a frivolous king, but these aren't frivolous times."

To admire a flesh and blood person was a foreign emotion to her, but Harrai seemed like he truly cared—about his people, about dragons, about the way she had been treated. He certainly wasn't the dashing, warmhearted figure of her wildest dreams, when she imagined the best sort of man who could rescue her. *He does seem...principled*.

Not a romantic word, but a...comforting one.

She could also tell the Miralem lands were a haven for Fanarlem. They still didn't seem a part of Miralem society, but sometimes she saw two Fanarlem hanging out together, just talking, sharing a smoke or a sweet bun. They never looked over their shoulders or tensed up when Harrai rode by. They weren't afraid.

As they moved farther north, she saw fewer of them, and during the last two days of riding, she seemed to be the only Fanarlem. Now people would stare at her, then nod nervously.

"We'll reach Drai by tomorrow afternoon," Harrai said, before falling into a hard sleep. The long days of travel were tiring to both of them. As usual, they shared a bed but Harrai slept in half his clothes and turned away from her, like he might as well be traveling with a male friend.

She didn't like sleeping tangled up in her clothes, and she wasn't cold, so she always stripped to her chemise and stockings and folded her clothes in a neat pile. By now, she knew she didn't have to fear him being enticed by her underclothes. He was usually out by the time she climbed into bed.

On this last night on the road, she paused to study him by the firelight.

He's the king, she thought. I haven't seen him truly be a king yet, but tomorrow...everything will be different, won't it?

He had a disciplined character, controlled and somewhat distant, but when he slept, his black hair flopped awkwardly around his horns and he looked young and tired, drooling a little on the pillow.

He would be furious if he knew I noticed that, she thought.

She turned over to sleep back to back. His body was so warm even through his clothes.

I bet he won't sleep with me again when we're in Kota, she thought, a little sadly. *I think I'll miss him a little*.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



ATORRA

Atorra wasn't prepared for her first sight of Kota. It came into view around a mountain pass, still at a distance, but the city could be seen clearly, in tiers of rooftops on the hillsides, bright with spring green and framed in soft cotton clouds.

Kota Castle was the obvious landmark. It perched atop its own slope, and multiple towers rose up from stone fortifications. The rooftops were made from shimmering scalloped tiles with tips of gold at the corners, while the walls gleamed white with gilded windows. It was a fanciful, beautiful building, with one large round tower and a number of smaller squarish ones.

The other dominating feature was a pair of huge iron doors set into the mountain opposite the castle. The doors were almost as tall as the castle towers.

"The Dragon's Gate," Harrai said. "It's the entrance to a network of caves where the dragons live and keep their eggs. You might not be able to see yet from this angle, but several small openings in the mountain allow the dragons to blow out fire if the mountain is under attack. There is also the Queen's Window, where Norgai the Dragon King watched his human bride because he could only be with her one day a year when the King of Drai surrendered his body to the dragon's spirit."

"That's what Ritan was talking about, isn't it? When the dragon queen mates with a dragon?"

"Yes, they say the custom began with Norgai thousands of years ago because he and the first Queen of Songs were in love, and she would come and sing to the dragons before a battle and give them strength."

"What did the Miralem king think of that?" Atorra asked. "Did he mind his wife being in love with a dragon?"

"I suppose not, since he gave his body over to Norgai..."

"So if I'd been a flesh and blood woman, you would have to let the dragon king use your body to mate with me one night a year?"

"Yes. And it's important to our power. Obviously a woman could not actually mate with a dragon, but when the Miralem king allows the Queen's Wing to possess his body, it also gives dragon blood to the resulting royal offspring. Every three or four generations we need the fresh influx of dragon blood, and this gives us power beyond our peers. When I took the horns, it enhanced that power, allowing me to turn fully into a dragon if needed."

"You can turn into a dragon!? Will I learn to do that?"

"No, only the king receives that privilege. It's a strain on the body and not to be used unless necessary."

"I had no idea magic could go that far...," Atorra murmured. "So what happens now? If I can't..." She trailed off. She hadn't even done anything yet, but just by existing she had failed.

"A proxy will be found, I imagine. I just don't know who could be up to the task."

He spoke matter-of-factly, but... "That sounds very awkward for you."

"I'll do whatever's needed. And you're one to talk," he said wryly. "What could be more awkward than the position I've put you in?"

"I'll take awkward over the alternatives any day. But...I guess I never considered how many obligations a king could have."

"We Miralem pride ourselves on freedom," Harrai said. "But I have very little myself. I shouldn't complain of it." He frowned, like he regretted even saying that much.

"It's okay," she assured him. "I won't tell. I know you take your duty *very* seriously."

He arched a brow at her. "And how do you know that?"

"Because you...well, you wouldn't be bringing me back to Kota if you didn't."

"Ah." He shifted his hand on the reins.

"But it's okay. I will endeavor to live up to all your expectations."

"You will, eh? Good thing I haven't set them too high."

It was often hard to tell if he was insulting her or teasing her. *All my time spent entertaining men has done nothing to prepare me for this one...*

As the path switchbacked down the mountains, she saw small farms clinging to the hillsides along the road, growing a prized tea leaf in the higher elevations and then a variety of vegetables and grains. Steeper ledges were given over to sheep and goats. Harrai acted as tour guide, telling her about the difficulties of scratching a living from the mountainous land, what regions grew the most staple grain, how milk must be turned into cheese according to religious law, and other things she knew she wouldn't remember.

The wind blew so steadily and windmills covered the hillsides to grind the city's grain and pump water. The houses were charming with their painted walls, packed close together on winding streets. The streets were perpetually shaded by all the houses, paved and clean.

The residents of Kota were finely dressed compared to the villagers along the way to the capital. Ladies and gentlemen wore headdresses carved from discarded dragon scale, that looked like small horns attached to circlets and headbands. The dragon scale shimmered in the light with a dark, multicolored gleam. Some of them had tunics made from a shimmering fabric embedded with a dragon scale pattern. They had fine furs and soft leathers, and jewelry of gold and precious stones.

"The people look a lot fancier than you do!"

"I've been incognito," he said. "You'll have all the fuss you could ever want at court."

"I don't need fuss," she said.

Atorra knew happiness didn't come from fuss. Some of the cruelest masters kept their concubines well-adorned in jewels. But she already knew Harrai wouldn't be cruel. She couldn't help wondering what fine clothes the queen might have. Lorsen and I could have had so much fun dressing up... and instead...

They are probably giving her fine clothes in Atlantis. If they give her clothes at all...

Dread twisted her innards as she thought of the worst stories of Atlantis, and she couldn't shake it until they reached the castle. The gate was already

open, and Harrai straightened up a little, becoming *King* Harrai the moment he entered the inner courtyard.

People were gathering to meet them, bright as jewels, dozens of them. Their attention turned to her all at once.

"The Queen of Songs," Harrai said. He spoke heavily, and as he continued, he held up a hand. "I know this is unprecedented, but I don't want any fuss made over it. She is the one, and that means she knows the songs. We need to have strong hatchlings. We'll discuss the matter of the heirs at a meeting of advisors--properly. For now, I want you to welcome her and not make too much of it."

"Er...hello," Atorra said, meeting so many staring eyes. What an introduction... I'm causing all kinds of trouble.

And the gathered crowd was so silent, for much too long. They looked aggrieved and horrified and they couldn't hide it. Atorra wanted to shy back from all those eyes, but if nothing else, her training to be a concubine had included showing no fear, no emotion at all.

Harrai gave her the briefest look, hooded and unreadable, before whisking her off the horse and putting her on the ground.

An older woman spoke decisively, as she walked forward to meet them. "She is just as Master Peitir sensed. She is our queen and we welcome her to the court."

The gathered crowd all bowed to her at this cue, gold and dragon scale glinting in the sun as they moved.

Just then, with a swoop and a shadow that briefly shaded her from the sun, a dragon flew over the castle. It happened so fast, and the rest of the court gave it a passing glance, but Atorra's entire body weakened with awe.

It should have been fear, maybe. I've been told to fear them.

But the sight of the dragon felt more like a thunderstorm rolling in after a drought. More gift than danger, though a bit of both. The dragon veered toward the Gate, its scales sparkling purple-black.

"Jarlan is back from his trade visit with the Sreyelans," the old woman said.

"Hm. Hopefully with good news," Harrai said, with skepticism.

"It's good to have *you* back," the old woman said, giving Harrai a pat on the cheek that he endured. "Well, I suppose a surprise is a good thing in a kingdom now and then. You can stagnate in old ways in a place like this. Queen of Songs, I am Lady Kirska, and you may have met my sister."

"Oh, yes! You're Harrai's grandmother?" Atorra was shocked at the sight of the old woman. She was dressed beautifully in her headdress made from layers of shimmering scales and red robes. But she looked old, like the poorest of Daramon peasants. In the Daramon lands no one would allow their faces to wrinkle without rushing to a shape-shifter. Lady Kirska's face was carved with thin lines everywhere, and black hair streaked heavily with white trailed down her back. Jewels dangled from her drooping earlobes.

"I must look as strange to you as you do to me, but we'll get used to each other quickly enough. What is your name, dear?"

"Atorra."

"So I will call you Queen Atorra, and you may call me Lady Kirska, and eventually I'll help you remember and understand the songs for which you are named. Much fuss will be made over you, but if anyone gives you trouble, tell me and I'll zap them." She tapped her temple. "Unless you'd like to do it yourself."

"I—I don't have any telepathic abilities."

A few of the courtiers behind Lady Kirska murmured but Harrai silenced them with one look.

"Of course she has telepathy," he said. "Fanarlem have their powers bound from birth if they show any ability. If she knew what was good for her, she would have suppressed her skills until they atrophied."

"I'm sure we will tease them out," Lady Kirska said.

"Should we have her choosing tonight?" Harrai asked.

"I think it can wait until tomorrow. You've had a long journey," Lady Kirska said.

Harrai gave Atorra a quick little bow, and the same to his grandmother, which was as quickly returned, and then he went to speak to the advisors about what a terrible predicament they were all in because of her, or so she presumed by the immediate hushed conversation.

Lady Kirska led her slowly into the castle's interiors. "This is the castle," she said. "It is constructed around three courtyards; the outer is the one you first saw, with the servant's quarters and stables. The inner contains the palace's gardens and is surrounded by the public rooms like the grand hall and the banquet hall, as well as the bedrooms of high-ranking staff." Atorra gazed at all the people roaming the courtyard garden even in the cold. Pairs of friends and associates whispered to each other, probably about her. She ached for Lorsen, for a friend of her own.

"Come, dear. And all of the royal family have their chambers around the royal courtyard and the royal gardens." Atorra would have loved to linger in the royal garden, with its small bridges and pools and evergreen bushes with a few songbirds flitting among the branches. But Lady Kirska was not one for lingering. "Let me show you your chambers. Downstairs you have a private salon..."

Lady Kirska opened a door to a room of generous size. Atorra had no idea what one woman could do with this much space, but of course a queen would have lavish rooms. Her eyes alighted on the stringed instrument in the corner, the game board, the carved fireplace mantle with green tiles, the walls painted with a motif of berries and birds, and curtains of rich green silk.

"You may take your leisure here, but just now I'm sure you would like to rest." She took the stairs which were tucked behind the door. "And here we are...hmph. It needs airing out. Now, I thought Harrai told the staff as much... I do apologize, my queen."

"Oh, no, no!" Atorra flapped her hands. "You don't need to apologize; it's beautiful! It's almost *too* beautiful!"

Three tall windows faced the courtyard and three more looked to the mountains across the river. The castle was perched high so all the views were magnificent and gave the room a feeling like a bird nested high in a tree looking over everything below. She could see the Queen's Window on the mountain.

"So this is where the first Queen of Songs looked out at Norgai?" she asked.

"I see Harrai's already been filling you up with legends," Lady Kirska said. "We don't have hard evidence that actually happened."

"But you don't know that it *didn't* happen?"

Lady Kirska pursed her lips. "Well, no. If it suits you to believe it, you might as well. I suppose it can't hurt. Harri always liked those stories too."

The room's interior was covered over in wool tapestries of dragons with gold thread and gemstones mounted in the designs, so the very walls would glitter by lantern light at night.

The bed, meanwhile, was a big carved wooden canopy with an outer layer of gold curtains and an inner gauzy white layer. There was a dressing table with a mirror and a massive wardrobe for storing clothes, a writing desk and a small table for sitting by the fire. The room was both grand and cozy, and so lovely, that Atorra knew it wouldn't feel like her own for a very long time. A Fanarlem girl might only be *kept* in such an opulent room, as if the room possessed her, but never the other way around.

"Get that starry-eyed look out of your eyes," Lady Kirska said. "It's just your room, and it's stuffy." She gave the air a haughty sniff and frowned. "My mother occupied these chambers once, and she had many pets. I'm afraid the room was entirely redone after her death, in anticipation of the next queen, but then we had to wait for you to come of age, and it has just been sitting here."

"She liked pets? Can I have a pet!? We had a cat once at the House, when we had a mouse problem, and she used to sleep with me and Lorsen sometimes. She liked kneading her paws in our hair. I always slept better when she was purring next to me."

"First things first, dear. Get some sleep," Lady Kirska told her, utterly uninterested in purring. Atorra could already tell this was not a woman who slept with pets either. "You will be woken early for the choosing and the banquet. You are the most venerable woman at court now. You should never expect to be treated as anything less ever again. Never forget that. Now, I do know that a Fanarlem queen will be treated with some alarm by certain members of the court so I expect you to be tough right away."

"Tough..." Atorra was dubious. "I've always been taught to be the very opposite of tough. Should I be rude?"

"Tough and rude aren't the same. The former is dignified and the latter is not, and that's how you know the difference. Never rude. But always tough."

"All right." Atorra swallowed. "I'll be tough, then."

"Much will be demanded of you," Lady Kirska said. "All of Drai is depending on you, child."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ATORRA

LADY KIRSKA LEFT HER ALONE, and the fire crackled gently, while a mountain wind beat at the windows, but inside it was warm and bright, and it was all hers.

Despite having a dizzying number of things to think about, Atorra fell asleep almost immediately, and Lady Kirska was right—she needed as much sleep as she could get. Morning came all too soon.

A man entered her room in the morning, with hair as golden as her own, spilling loose over his shoulders. Atorra had seen few other people with golden hair. He still had the light brown eyes of the Drai and a tall, slender frame dressed in a fitted tunic that brushed the tops of tight over-the-knee boots. Atorra didn't expect to see a strange, beautiful man in her room just after dawn.

"You really are a Fanarlem!" he said, quite enthusiastically. She sensed he might just be enthused about everything. His face had that quality, lighting up like a lantern--the same as Lorsen's. "And you're adorable! You have hair like mine! Just like a little sis--" He cut off. "Or not," he said smoothly. "Well, we'll just see how it shakes out."

"How what shakes out?"

"No one told you any gossip about me?" he said lightly, opening the curtains to let in more light.

"No..."

"If you're in need of pleasing, well, I'm your man."

"I'm not in need of any pleasing!"

"Then sister it is." He grinned. "As long as you wish it."

"I'm sure I'll never need any pleasing," Atorra said. A male consort? Sent to please *her*? No, she didn't like that any better than the reverse. "Did—the king send you for that reason?"

"He suggested that I attend to any needs you may have," the man said, now putting another log on the fire and stirring up the embers.

Atorra didn't like hearing this at all, but she tried not think of it. Well, no surprise, really. Harrai wanted her to have a handsome consort so she'd never bother him.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm so easy to please that I'm almost embarrassed for myself. Whatever pleases you will be enough to please me. I'm a born servant, I suppose. My name is Soran."

"I was a born servant myself," she said. "I'm Atorra, although you probably know that already."

"You are no born servant!" he said. "I can just tell you will love being pampered and petted like the queen you are, my golden lady. What am I dressing you in for this occasion?"

"I haven't even seen any of my clothes yet," she said. "But my favorite color is green. Once, out the window, I saw a lady in a bright green velvet dress with bell sleeves and I coveted it so badly."

"Once, out the window! You sound like a shut-in."

"I wasn't a shut-in, exactly. We were allowed in the garden. But it's true I didn't get to see much."

"And here you will fly!" Soran was already swinging open the doors of her wardrobe dramatically, and it was so full that a rainbow of sleeves sprung out with the motion. Shelves on the side held folded sashes. Drai royal clothes featured long trailing sleeves and a wide, embroidered sash.

"Green," he mused. "An excellent choice. It'll go well with your hair and eyes. And I would suggest a red sash over and white—no, cream, cream, what was I thinking? Cream underskirts, but if you have other ideas..."

"I'm hardly thinking about clothes right now, so just do anything you want."

"Well, it's true that Drai is a bit formal, compared to some other kingdoms...but mostly you need to look queenly and that'll do. Everyone just wants to see you."

"No one has ever once said I look 'queenly'," Atorra said, despairing. "They're usually asking why I'm so disheveled and have dirty hands."

"But you're fine to look at," he said. He glanced at her hands. "Oh my. Well, maybe gloves would not go amiss."

Atorra dressed herself behind a screen in the corner, but she needed Soran to tie the sash. He already had it ready and waiting, the fabric heavy and ornately embroidered down the entire length, which must have taken countless hours of work. Atorra already felt transformed and strange just wearing the gossamer green robes of the Dragon Queen, made from fabric with a dragon scale pattern woven into it, soft and thin so that it fluttered and rippled as she moved.

"You'll get cold--" Soran began, but then he said, "No, I guess you won't. You'll never need the heavier underdress or a cloak, so you'll look like a flower in the dead of winter. Ah, that makes me happy!"

He wrapped the sash around her waist. It was more complex than a simple length of fabric. One end had some straps and ties, and when he fitted the sash around her, he gave them a good hard yank around her waist.

Atorra, who had been admiring herself in the mirror, basking in her queenly dignity, now cried, "Gyah!" as she heard something inside her body snap.

Her waist shrunk and her stuffing went into her hips, more the right one than the left.

Soran jumped back and she also jumped back from him. He looked at her, standing on one foot with his hands at his cheeks like he'd seen a herd of roaches, and screamed, "*I broke you*!"

"What the hells was that?" she screamed back. "Why did you put on a sash like you were strapping down cargo?"

"The ladies of the court want slender waists!" he said. "They expect the 'Soran yank' to get their sashes good and tight!"

"The 'Soran yank'!?"

"Well..." He turned pink. "That's what they call it."

"Oh, they do, do they." Atorra went back to the mirror to survey the situation. The sash was pinching her waist unnaturally small, maybe fourteen or fifteen inches, and it wasn't an attractive figure at all. Women might want slender waists, but they didn't want to look like broken dolls. It would remind Harrai that she wasn't a real person. Worse yet, it shoved her stuffing into her hips, and not evenly.

"Oh...fates," she whispered.

"Well, it can be fixed, right?" Soran said. "Fanarlem can just be repaired?"

"They...they can, but..." She was in agonies. Telling Harrai that she already needed repairs on day one, and for such a stupid reason that her wardrobe attendant *broke* her! "Well, if you take the sash off maybe I can push some of it back where it's supposed to be..."

Soran took off the sash and they both tried to massage her stuffing back up into her waist.

It didn't work. At all.

"We broke a pocket," Atorra said glumly. "The stuffing is supposed to be all held in certain shapes in certain places...and now it just doesn't want to defy gravity."

"You're very fragile," he said, sounding nervous.

"I'm not fragile! I just...have to be careful." She imagined hearty Miralem ladies relishing the 'Soran yank'.

She wondered how many times she would disappoint the court of Drai in the days, months, and years to come.

How high can I count?

"It's all right," Soran said, comforting now. "I'll speak to Lady Kirska about it and we'll get a Fanarlem craftsperson here from the south, and no one has to know about it, not even Harrai. And tonight, we'll just put a robe over you. Perfectly normal court wear, and we have one here with gorgeous embroidery of a lucky fish."

"Okay," she huffed. Soran understood the situation, at least. Unlike Harrai, he didn't seem bothered by her nature.

He retied the sash and bow, but now he draped over it a lightly quilted robe with embroidered twin fish on the back. The wide sleeves and three little ties down the front hid all but a glimpse of her sash and necklace. He put a dragon scale headband over her head like a crown just as Lady Kirska came to the door.

"Good morning, Soran." She raked her eyes over Atorra. Atorra stiffened, terrified that the woman would sense Atorra's misshapen body under the clothes. "That will do nicely," she said. "I'm to introduce you to the dragons this morning, dear. They are all waiting eagerly to meet you and you will choose the Queen's Wing."

"Dragons," Atorra breathed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ATORRA

Atorra could hardly believe she was about to see the dragons.

I should probably be worried they'll be appalled at the sight of me like everyone else.

But for some reason, the thought of meeting dragons instead of people brought relief.

Lady Kirska showed Atorra to a passageway that led from the castle courtyard out to the narrow bridge suspended between the sturdy castle walls and the iron doors of the mountain. Lady Kirska walked right out onto the bridge like there was nothing to it, but Atorra hung back, paralyzed.

"Are you afraid of heights!?" Lady Kirska asked, as if this was a fear she'd heard of but never known anyone to actually have.

Well, Atorra guessed children were shaken of that fear early in life around here. From here, she could see the city laid out below and across, with many narrow roads on the edge of a slope. Some of the finest buildings in the city were built like they could tumble down upon their neighbors at the slightest rebellion of geology.

"Not normally!" she exclaimed. "But that bridge...!"

"We cross it all the time," Lady Kirska said. "If the worst were to happen, I would use my telekinesis to catch you so you'd land gently. And if for some reason I wasn't able to do so, one of the guards would. They watch the bridge from below. However, I'll be surprised if it's your luck to be here the day the bridge fails, when it never has. Stay close, and don't worry."

Atorra grit her teeth. She was determined not to be defeated by a bridge on her very first day as a Royal Personage.

The bridge was made of wire cables mounted tight on the mountain and the castle and lifted up at the ends with a support wire, but despite the best attempts of the engineers of Kota, the bridge sagged considerably in the middle. Ropes were looped up and down along the wires to make handholds and wooden boards were mounted across to make the path, which looked about a mile long to her eyes, although it was surely much less.

There was a gap of about two inches between each board, so she could see the ground far below her, and gaps between the ropes almost big enough to put her head though. The bridge swayed in the wind.

It's fine. It's absolutely fine. I'm safe.

One foot in front of the other.

How is that old woman so quick!?

Atorra tried to keep her eyes fixed on the mountain and nothing else, and the gaps weren't enough for her foot to slip through, so she adopted a bouncing run, trying not to feel the rickety boards as she slid her hands along the ropes. She caught up to Lady Kirska near the end.

"I'm sure you'll feel better about the bridge once your own telepathic powers bloom," Lady Kirska said briskly.

Atorra glanced back, amazed at herself. "Do Miralem ever just fly across?"

"Fly?" Lady Kirska asked. "We can't fly."

"I've heard that Miralem can fly."

"Miralem can levitate for short distances, some of them. But lifting a person is difficult. Lifting a person for that span, nearly impossible. We'll leave flying to the dragons." Her voice was echoing now, as they walked into the shadows of a passageway. The temperature changed to a damp cool instead of the wild brisk cold of outside. The older woman stopped to light a torch.

I'm going to meet dragons. Atorra forgot the bridge, and even the fact of having to walk back across it. As she smelled the ancient, mineral aroma of the cave, it felt familiar. Maybe that was only wishful thinking, but it was *right* somehow.

She could hear how the passage was about to open up before she saw it in the shallow light of the torch in Lady Kirska's hand. But Lady Kirska stopped her here and slid the torch into a niche in the wall. "I'm going to cover your eyes, dear," she said. "Just for the choosing."

"What—is the choosing?"

"It's extremely simple. All the male dragons will gather in a circle for your arrival, and you must follow your senses to the one that will be your Wing. Your telepathy will lead you true. I know you think you don't have telepathy, but this is just the first step to awakening your great power."

"What if I choose the wrong one?"

"You can't. This is not some fated match upon which destiny lies or kingdoms fall. This will just be the dragon you ride, and he would normally be the father of your children." Lady Kirska tied a thick black cloth over her eyes, tugging it down over her nose.

"Follow me," she said.

"Can I have your hand?"

"No," Lady Kirska said. "Use your other senses. Or go slowly."

Atorra shuffled forward, following Kirska's voice. The sound of their footsteps flung out into a vast unknown, and the air moved past them gently, as if the inside air wanted to head out and explore. Then, she heard the snorts and low breaths and movements of huge animals, like a stable of giant horses.

She could feel them.

Whether it was the first stirring of telepathy, or just the sheer size of them penetrating the very air that brushed her skin, she wasn't sure—but she knew they were there. Dragons, all around her, in a giant cavern.

"Take a moment and get your bearings. Another step forward...," Lady Kirska said. "And then, reach for your dragon."

They were breathing, deep and slow. Drops of water fell slowly from the cave walls into a pool somewhere. Otherwise, it was silent. Atorra held up her hands, trying to feel some sign.

She expected to find her dragon at random, like drawing a card in a game. She paused, as much to show she was trying than anything else.

But, no. Her skin tingled. *Something* tugged her attention to the left.

This was a distinct sense. All around her was an undefined presence of dragon. To the left, there was one dragon in particular. She could feel his beauty and strength, as clearly as her eyes could tell her.

My dragon.

Now, she couldn't wait to seal the bond and make him hers. She turned and reached her hand for him, her fingers meeting scales. His skin was hard but in a supple, sleek way, like the glossiest rock.

My queen. He spoke to her mind. It's my greatest pleasure to meet you again, and my greatest honor that you would choose me. I'm Dosskarja.

Behind and above her, she heard a sharp intake of breath. Male. Another dragon? No, it sounded too human.

Lady Kirska pulled off the blindfold. "The Queen of Songs has chosen," she said sharply.

Atorra looked up and saw the unfamiliar man on a balcony overlooking a vast room filled with twenty or so dragons. He was dressed finely, in dark blue and gold, with a half-cloak and soft gloves. He resembled Harrai, but he didn't have horns, so even at a quick glance she couldn't mistake him.

"Prince Jarlan," Lady Kirska said, flicking her eyes to him. "Of course you may choose a new mount."

Atorra looked back at her dragon. Of course. He was the purple-black dragon from yesterday.

"If Dosskarja is already spoken for, then—" Atorra cut herself off, not really wanting to give him up. Nothing had ever been hers before, certainly not that she had chosen, and was there anything more wonderful in the entire world than to choose a *dragon*?

"The choosing supersedes all other bonds," Lady Kirska said. "The Queen of Songs can ride the dragons of any member of the royal family, even the king. She is the only one who has to bear a child—"

"Not this queen." Jarlan spoke above them, in a voice of pure hatred that echoed through the cave. "A doll queen is useless. We might as well put her out of her misery and try again. And this girl can take *my* dragon?"

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



ATORRA

"JARLAN—"

"I should have *known*," he spat. "Twenty years, Dosskarja has been the Prince's Wing, and now I have to surrender him to her with...let me guess. There will be a celebratory banquet tonight, and you'll want me to clap Harrai on the back and congratulate *her* for taking the only thing I have away from me."

"I would be fine if you just stayed in your rooms tonight, to be perfectly honest, since you can't be mature about it," Lady Kirska said tartly.

"Oh, would that I could. If only I could abandon my last scrap of pride and concern for this place and never come to dinner again. I think all the time of becoming a wandering sword-for-hire, but I know the moment I left you would commission songs about 'Coward Jarlan, the Runaway Prince' just to assure my shame spread across the land, and then Harrai would show up one day with his sober frown and force me home. For my own good, eh?"

"You're embarrassing yourself just fine without me commissioning songs about you," Lady Kirska said. "This matter is finished. Dosskarja abides by it, and so shall you."

The prince looked at his dragon. Briefly he showed the desperation of utter grief before it twisted back into anger, and he glared down at Atorra.

"I—I didn't know," Atorra said.

He stormed off the balcony.

"He can be quite dramatic," Lady Kirska said. "Don't pay him any attention."

"Dosskarja has been his mount for twenty years? And only his?"

"We all understand that the Queen of Songs chooses her mount," Lady Kirska said. "And every dragon here is the mount of a noble. Someone would have to give theirs up. You shouldn't feel sorry for even a moment."

Atorra wondered how the dragon himself felt.

I've known generations of royals. I will survive the change, Dosskarja said, and his thoughts came right to her mind.

It was an ancient mind, like the cave itself, and everything about this place felt eerie and timeless.

The dragons looked at her, and she looked at them. She wasn't afraid of them at all, only awed. How could she be? They were too wonderful.

Thank you, young queen, Dosskarja replied. It certainly makes things easier if you think so.

"You're...reading my mind."

Only when you think at me.

"This is Queen Atorra," Lady Kirska said. "Our Queen of Songs. But... there has been a complication. She is a Fanarlem."

A Fanarlem? Now Dosskarja's head swept down to her level. Apparently he hadn't gotten a good look at her from above. Maybe he didn't pay much attention to people normally. They were all quite literally beneath him.

I see... The dragon spoke with grief and let out a brief, hot snort.

The pain in the dragon's voice hurt her like nothing else. She felt the injustice of her own self in a deeper way than ever before.

You are made only of magic!

"I...I suppose so..." The word Fanarlem no longer quite sounded right, like it didn't match her self, but all the travels and everything that happened had not touched her artificial skin.

A Fanarlem can still sing the songs just as well, a female dragon said. She was a golden dragon with a faint green undertone in her scales, and she was now close enough to look Atorra right in the eye and give her a gentle sniff from chest to hair. She made a little huff of surprise and spoke to her fellow dragons, in low squawks and sounds that almost reminded Atorra of huge birds.

Kirska translated, "She is surprised you smell like wool and dust, and have no living scent."

That isn't what I said! the dragon retorted. I simply said she smells like cloth and wood and travels.

"If you don't like how I translate, then make sure to include the queen in your conversation," Kirska said with a hint of mischievous smile. "Atorra, these are the royal mounts, and the guardians of our precious eggs. The eggs are kept in the innermost chambers of the caverns. Of course, we hope that when the little ones are born, the wars will have subsided and all the hatchlings can be raised by their own parents."

Although we have already lost some of our sisters and brothers, the gold dragon said sadly.

"Do they take a long time to hatch?" Atorra asked, as her eyes took in the details of the dragons. Each of them had unique coloring.

"Two hundred years," Lady Kirska said. "They will hatch in forty-five years."

"Two...hundred? Normal years?"
"Yos."

Dragons need all that time to absorb magic from the earth, Dosskarja said. Much like you, we are magical beings. Our skin is tougher than any creature on earth because we absorb the power of the very rocks. We breathe fire because we draw the fire beneath the planet's skin into our bodies. Our telepathy is stronger than the Miralem, because all of the connections of the universe infuse themselves into us. But there is a price. Our females only lay one set of eggs, all at once within a generation, and then they rest for two centuries.

"That's amazing," Atorra breathed. "But...very inconvenient."

As the Daramons have grown stronger, it has put us at the greatest risk, Dosskarja said.

"DIRJET IS THE KING'S WING," Lady Kirska said, introducing her to the golden dragon. "She is the king's mount. Ebel and Dirjet are also a mated pair and have two eggs in the nursery." She gestured to a silver-black male dragon beside Dirjet.

"And the king never mates with his dragon," Atorra said.

"No, no, that wouldn't work," Lady Kirska said.

"What are you going to do about me? Harrai said you'd find a proxy..."

"A proxy, yes...perhaps," Lady Kirska said. "The council will have to discuss it."

"But normally..." She looked at Dosskarja, overwhelmed by his sheer size and air of ancient wisdom. "Your mind occupies Harrai's body so we can mate? Does that work out all right? Do the Miralem and the dragons always end up falling in love?"

Dosskarja grinned slyly—or at least, that was the best she could interpret his expression. I think it would make for a frustrating relationship, for I can't possess Harrai's body very often or I don't think he'd like me very much. It happened once upon a time, but it will be very unfortunate if it ever happens again.

"I—I was only curious!" Atorra said, feeling heartily embarrassed that she had implied she might fall in love with a dragon. "It's just—not an arrangement I'm used to, and I am sorry I can't fulfill it."

You will be spared, Dosskarja said. I'm still more than happy to teach you to ride.

We're so glad to have found you! Dirjet said. Would you like to see the nursery?

"We'd love to visit the eggs, and maybe it will stir some memories in our queen," Kirska said.

Wonderful! We never get to show off our eggs to new eyes! Dirjet said glowingly.

If you can climb on, I'll carry you, Dosskarja offered, lowering himself to the ground.

"Do you mind if I step on you?" Atorra asked, puzzling over how to get up.

You can't hurt my tough skin.

She clambered up, stepping on his foot, gripping his knee, and then climbing along his folded wing to his back. She was able to tuck herself between his wing and the ridge along his spine.

Atorra could feel Dirjet's youthful excitement and Ebel's pride in showing her the eggs, and Dosskarja introduced her to other dragons. "Krau and Angals--" These were a dark bronze male and a light blue, almost white, female-- "and Sheglin and Het." In this case, the male Sheglin was greenish-gray and Het was a dark dusky red. Their lovely colors were similar to the Miralem in the Drai court.

Their names gave her no clue of their gender, but it was easy to tell the males from the females. The female dragons were slightly smaller and had shorter, more nubbish horns. They had a feline prettiness to them, sleek and prancing with angled golden eyes and slender snouts. The males were bigger and blunter and more muscular.

"Are you comfortable enough, my queen?" Dosskarja asked.

"Very! I could get used to this."

Dirjet was leading the way, with an excited gait that made Atorra think of a puppy. "And you are so lucky," she said. "They'll be hatching so soon that you won't even be very old yet!" Their telepathic speech was starting to feel more natural to Atorra, and she almost forgot that she only heard it in her head.

"Forty-five years is still such a long time! I don't know how you can wait two hundred years to see your babies!"

"It's all relative, isn't it? We can live for up to five hundred years," Ebel said.

"But we never actually do," Dosskarja said, in a more cynical tone. "Indeed, many of us never do see our babies."

"Oh, watch your tongue!" Dirjet said.

"My mate hates talking war around the eggs," Ebel said, as Dirjet bristled.

"I want them to feel only nice energy," Dirjet said.

Atorra could practically feel the love and pride for the eggs quivering off of the dragons as they came into the dimly lit chamber. The cavern wall was ringed by soft magical lights, bathing the room in a muted warm glow. Another balcony overlooked the eggs from above, and Dirjet told her, "You can come any time to sing to them there, my queen."

The eggs were squat ovals, massive in size and textured like they were made of colored rock. The colors were similar to the dragon's scales, tones like unpolished gemstones, green and purple and red and gold.

The room was full of them, hundreds of them. They seemed to go on and on, even tucked around corners in the cavern, packed close. Dirjet licked a few affectionately.

"Here they are," Ebel said grandly. "Our next generation."

"Oh wow!" Atorra exclaimed. "So many!"

"Yes, it does look like a lot, but this is the entire next generation of dragons," Dirjet said anxiously. "My mother told me when I was a hatchling

that this room was full."

It was true, there was still room for twice as many eggs—at least.

"Is it really safe to keep them all in one place?" Atorra asked.

"We don't have any better place than this," Lady Kirska said. "They are protected by everyone in Kota, and the mountain ranges guard us from Daramon attacks. Plus, they'll have to get through all of our other settlements first, and we'd have plenty of warning."

Dosskarja lowered his back so Atorra could hop down and get a closer look.

"These are ours," Dirjet said, sticking close to the two eggs she had licked. "I can hardly wait for the hatching moon. It's the most wonderful day in the world! I've never seen a hatching day!"

"I'm afraid she might explode with joy when our babies are born," Ebel said.

"To think of little ones, so new, so full of happiness," Dirjet said, nuzzling other eggs that were not her own. "My queen, I can hardly wait another moment. Please...can I beg you to sing for us, even if you can't recall the dragon songs yet? Just to hear you sing anything will bring such hope."

"Um..." They were all looking at her now. Waiting with such expectation.

And I'm so rusty since Hrada never let me sing at all. But I get the feeling these songs are nothing like the ones I know.

"Just try," Lady Kirska prompted.

"I'm sure you can do it," Ebel said. "You have sung for us countless times over the millennia--and once you begin, you will remember our songs."

Millennia? Have I really been doing this every three or four generations for thousands of years? I wonder if I became a Fanarlem just to escape it! "I'm glad you're so confident in me," Atorra said.

"Of course we are!" Dirjet said, lowering her great lithe body, settling on the path around the eggs.

Atorra tried to think of something to sing. Some magical song she had never known before. Some melody that came, as if in a dream, or from the depths of her mind. Right now she could hardly think of any song at all. "Hmm...," Atorra half-spoke, half-sang.

She hummed a little of "Farewell to Sailors", which was so eternally popular that she could sing it half-asleep, hoping it would turn into something else.

"That is just 'Farewell to Sailors', the most mundane song that was ever written, I am sure!" Lady Kirska said sharply. "My queen, you have never been trained in meditation, have you?"

"Of course not," Atorra said. "Why would anyone train a concubine in meditation? Didn't you just ask me for any song?"

"Never mind. Go on. You will learn," Lady Kirska said.

When she looked at Dirjet, she wanted so badly to remember. For the sake of the dragons, she had to prove something. She wasn't going to leave it here, just being scolded for singing "the most mundane song ever written".

And then she saw him on the balcony, looking down at her—shimmering and powerful.

Not her traveling companion, but...Harrai as she had never seen him. The King of Dragons.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



ATORRA

SHE KNEW HARRAI AS A QUIET, somewhat irritable, relatively humble man, who got overly enthusiastic for pickled radishes and drooled in his sleep.

The man who watched her from the balcony was a stranger, imposing and dripping with royal splendor, flanked by his advisors.

He wore a red cloak and a multi-layered tunic, the outer layer of which was patterned like shimmering dark green dragon scale, and the under-layer like molten gold. His boots and gloves were trimmed in gold and he wore spirals of gold on his horns. She had already noticed that he was a handsome man; she couldn't help but notice. Now he was stunning and terrifying, as iconic and perfect as a statue.

It was like encountering a god. How could this be the young man who held her against him on a horse for days upon days? He had one glove on the balcony and he looked down at their group from a height.

Several courtiers trailed him, but he outshone them. It was so clear that he was the king that she wanted to bow to him, even though she'd watched him wake up in the morning with tousled hair, a ragged voice, and stubble.

"So you have met the dragons, my lady?" he asked her, his voice carrying down from the balcony. "Does it go well?"

"She does not remember any of the songs, my king," Lady Kirska said. "We will immediately begin a rigorous training regimen."

"I see," Harrai said, his low voice measured.

Atorra felt crushed by the pressure of his eyes, and the courtiers looking solemn and disappointed. She opened her mouth to apologize, but she didn't even know where to begin. She had never asked for this. She had certainly never guessed, during her whole life preparing to be sold into concubinage, that she was actually a magical queen. Yet, she felt as if everyone expected her to know, to appear with hidden powers just waiting to go.

Lady Kirska put a hand to her back. "You are the queen. Our queen, who has been with us for centuries. You will hold your head high and do what you can, even if it takes you time, never crying or complaining, but with patience and dignity. I will be instructing you in the use of your magic to be sure your progress is swift, and you will be as great as you have always been."

"Yes, of course," Atorra said, not so much comforted as more terrified of Lady Kirska. It was clear that the old woman had very high expectations for her behavior.

Ignore them, Dosskarja said, his voice soft in her mind and she knew he wasn't allowing Lady Kirska to hear him. Too much has been placed on the shoulders of one woman anyway. The doskma worry too much over everything. 'Doskma' was a word she had only heard as an insult to Daramons; it meant 'short-lived people', but to the dragons she sensed it was just matter-of-fact. The Miralem did not live past one hundred and fifty years without strong magical intervention. Do what you can and don't fret over the rest. He snorted definitively, his breath hot steam.

Dirjet's whiskers were a little drooped, and she looked at Atorra with shining soft reptilian eyes. "I'm just glad you're here. Please come visit the eggs often. Sing anything you like to them. I think 'Farewell to Sailors' is a lovely melody."

Atorra fisted her hands, determined beyond reason.

If I've really known these songs for thousands of years, there must be a way.

"Please...give me a moment of silence," she said.

The dragons waited without breathing. Harrai was watching her from his annoyingly lofty perch.

The hatchlings need me, she thought, bringing her thoughts back to something simple, something she understood.

These were the last magical beasts in the world, and they were beautiful. They were telling her she belonged here.

She put a hand on Dirjet's two eggs, faintly warm even though the shells looked like they were carved from cold rock.

For a long pause, she was still, digging as deep as she could into her soul. What was I, before I was Atorra? Before I was formed from wooden bones and magic that dragged me from the mystery of death?

Is it possible to remember any of that time?

A sharp grief shuddered through her, making her skin tingle, and she opened her mouth to cry out. She felt a noise come out of her, a chant perhaps, but she wouldn't call it a song.

The words were like fires lit on her tongue. Holy words, words forbidden to be spoken anywhere but here.

The language was nothing like anything she knew in the present day, but somehow she knew this was the language that dragons once taught to the Miralem, before they were really people at all, before they knew how to express abstract thoughts and tell stories.

"Inika rasom hara," she chanted. *I give you the strength of the sky*. "Inika rasom hara..."

As she repeated the words, her voice grew beyond her; it was louder than anything she could produce and it seemed to be coming from the walls of the cave. It was low like the rocks were singing, a thousand echoes of generations of dragon queens, and it was...

It was almost terrible, because of its power. Because of how old it was, how lost the entire world was from which these words had come. All the people who had once chanted these words were gone from memory, their bones long since turned to soil. The dragons that taught the words were gone too, and they knew things that no one living knew.

Except me...if I choose it.

Now these songs were the cry of a dying world, of which she was the final thread, her entire being fraying at the tension.

Atorra's entire body went hot, searing hot, and she broke off in a scream. She fell without even being aware that she had fallen, she was just on the ground, crumpled gracelessly. She felt dirt packed under her fingernails and realized she had clawed at the ground without knowing it.

She wanted to sob. The grief of that lost world was too immense, and the knowledge was too much for her.

And then she saw a flash of something—a dark presence.

This was different.

Not grief.

Darkness. Anger.

Massive and shadowed. She couldn't name it.

In a voice low and alluring, it spoke to her mind.

Stand up, young queen.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



ATORRA

GET up and taste your strength. Don't be afraid of your power. Think of all those people who thought you were nothing, thought they could control you from birth to death. You lost your best friend. You were almost handed off to a man who thought so little of you.

But does this man think any better of you? And doesn't Lady Kirska want to control you just like Hrada?

You are more powerful than any of them.

"Atorra?" Harrai called down.

Her throat felt tight and she couldn't even seem to say anything.

"Is she all right?" Harrai asked, sounding genuinely worried.

Dosskarja's claws slid beneath her body and lifted her to her feet, holding her in his scaled palm so she could lean on him. "Did you sense something, little queen?"

The voice retreated, her vision clearing.

What had she heard? It couldn't be her own voice...could it? She did feel so angry sometimes, but that voice was dripping with venom. It was seductive. It was a dangerous other, whispering in her ear.

She couldn't explain this to any of them.

"I'm fine," she said, clutching one of Ebel's talons, trying to steady her shaking knees. "I—I didn't think it would be like that. That wasn't a song, that was...a cry. I sensed some ancient sadness. It was so painful!"

Atorra's entire body ached, and her joints were still burning when she tried to move. She couldn't have stayed standing if Dosskarja wasn't supporting her.

Fanarlem never felt pain for more than a few seconds. If they were damaged, that moment of pain informed them that something was wrong, but then it was gone, and they could sew up their own skin or pull a broken joint from its socket without feeling more than a tiny prick or quick flash of discomfort.

Atorra had never felt pain that wouldn't go away, but just kept filling her up. She could hardly listen to Lady Kirska when she said,

"Good. You are our queen, indeed, for that is exactly what the song is the song of our ancient ancestors, lost to all but you. The training will help you to manage the feeling and tap into it more deeply."

The very thought of tapping into this magic more deeply made Atorra lean heavily against her dragon—and it was easy to think of him as her mount when he supported her like this.

"Well, get some rest now," Harrai said, sounding as distant as his regal appearance implied, like an actor on a stage. "It will come to you in time. I shall see you at the banquet tonight."

Atorra thought the walk back across the swaying bridge was enough to do her in, but somehow she put one foot in front of the other.

It was early when they entered the dragon's cave, and now it was nearly midday. The sun was shining above the steep mountains. Their snowy crests were pale blue and majestic, a wall against the world.

She had a little time to putter around her room, feeling restless and alone, poking at her hips. She lingered over every single item in the chambers, testing the strings of the unfamiliar instrument—which clearly needed tuning. She opened drawers and cabinets to look over a set of tiny cups for serving tea or alcohol—she was not sure which—and a little golden bird that would sing with the winding of a key. They probably once belonged to Harrai's mother, and grandmother, and then...to her own previous incarnation.

I was Lady Kirska's and Lady Ritan's grandmother. I've lived here many times before, but I don't remember it. How strange it is! She ended up in a heavy nap, woken gently by Soran, who straightened out her clothes and hair and showed her to the dining hall. Long tables formed a square, and magical lights hung from the ceiling in prisms of glass, casting enough light to reach the room's corners. A fire burned behind the royal table, with its shimmering green tablecloth, and fat candles flickered in bowls carved from glossy, reflective dragon scale. Everything in Kota shimmered and shone in vivid colors, a dazzling contrast to the humble world of Aiskan Nal.

"You will sit here," Soran said, pulling out a chair for her. Two particularly fine chairs with gold lattice backs were at the center.

But Harrai wasn't there yet. Another seat mate, to her right, was taking a long drink from a goblet. He slapped the cup down, looked at her, and his golden-brown eyes regarded her with utter disgust.

"Here you are. Our queen and savior. A Daramon doll..." He started laughing dryly, rubbing his forehead. "We've lost the war that hasn't even started."

Soran looked quietly horrified, but maintained his composure. "Our queen, Atorra," he said, addressing everyone at the table, but the young man most of all. "Queen Atorra, this is Prince Jarlan."

"We...met," Atorra said.

She heard that dark voice in her head again. Think of all those people who thought you were nothing, thought they could control you from birth to death.

"Just Jarl, please. I am, after all, just a mere spare of a prince in the presence of someone so impressive." Jarlan gave her a sarcastic, off-kilter bow of the head. "Nice to meet you, *my queen*."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ATORRA

Atorra immediately stiffened and her first instinct was to calm her temper, but then she just as quickly remembered that things were different now. Harrai and Lady Kirska expected the queen to be proud and powerful.

"Yes, I am your queen," she said, before turning her head away from him, as if he wasn't even worth engaging with.

A few girls at the table snickered.

"She's already above us, I suppose," said one girl with a pinched little face. "She thinks she can take somebody's dragon and then act like an empress before she's even been formally made queen."

"Can you formally be queen when you're barren?" another girl mused. She had a snobbish air, with long wavy locks.

"I don't know about you, but I'm not deferring to a Fanarlem," a slouching young man at the table said, receiving grins from the snickering ladies.

"She is the queen we've been looking for and outranks us all, so maybe we shouldn't chase her off!" one pale, plump young woman said, before she paused to cough into her handkerchief.

"If we're going to play who-outranks-who, Tash, I outrank you, so I see no reason you should advise me, how's that?" Jarlan said. "I swear, I should just stay with the Sreyelans."

The woman—Tash—glared at her plate, still coughing, before she looked at Atorra again, with wry eyes. They shared a mood, and Atorra felt

much better. Even if she only had one ally, that was enough to bolster her, the same way the girls at the House would comfort each other with a glance in the presence of leering men.

"I didn't know Harrai had a younger brother," Atorra said. "He never mentioned you once during our travels. But honestly, your manners don't seem worth mentioning."

Jarlan grinned, like he was hoping she'd provoke him. "They made the doll with a tongue. Is it true that when your masters don't like your tongues, they just sew your mouths shut?"

Atorra certainly didn't like *that* memory. "No one will be sewing shut the mouth of a queen, would they?" she said. "I thought the Miralem were above that kind of behavior."

"I'm not above much. I'll get down in the gutter. But this is embarrassing. Our kingdom will be known as the home of the Doll Queen far and wide. Of course, you must be thanking your lucky stars to get handed a crown and a fortune."

"More than anything, I thank my lucky stars that I do outrank you," Atorra growled back.

She knew she had made an enemy of the young prince, and rank probably didn't mean anything without earning respect, but it felt surprisingly good to just let loose.

"You might have rank, but you will need allies," Jarlan said. "And that will be impossible. We can't afford to put a doll on a pedestal. Don't think you can just tack onto my brother's, either. He's too up his own arse for friends."

Most of the table was looking quietly bemused or nervous. Atorra desperately wanted to look to the doors for Harrai, but she resisted. Tash was poking at her plate, cheeks flushed.

I might not be prepared to be a queen, but at least I've had experience with horrible men, she thought. I can ignore him.

"If you *truly* are the Queen of Songs, we can't get rid of you," Jarlan said. "All the worse for you, because you can't go anywhere. You will be our Queen of Disappointments, until you have the decency to be reborn as someone a little more useful."

"Maybe we ought to send her to battle," a taller boy added. By now Atorra could tell that Jarlan's circle was mostly two young men and two young women. "Stop it!" Tash said. "You're implying you want to *murder* the Queen of Songs? We need her!"

"Murder? We're just saying that a lot of people die in battle, dear cousin," Jarlan said. "And she can't bear the next dragon king. No way around that. There's talk of a proxy but we've never used a proxy. We don't even know if anyone else can *handle* the dragon blood or the dragon runts. We're in trouble."

"I have your dragon on my side," Atorra replied, knowing this would cut.

And it did. Jarlan's face reddened, but he finally shut up.

"So you're Harrai's cousin?" Atorra asked the young woman, praying she could steer the conversation away from sending her into a battlefield demise.

"Yes, I'm Tashaya of the House of Vindar. Lady Ritan is my grandmother."

"You're Ritan's granddaughter?" Atorra asked. "Do you have Daramon blood?"

"That was her second husband," Tashaya said, flushing a little.

"I apologize. I should have introduced you. The Lady Tashaya," Jarlan said. "The only surviving descendant of Great-Aunt Ritan. Her hobbies are pining, sleeping, eating too many sweets, and reading in her sickbed."

"Thank you for that lovely introduction," Tashaya said, low and sarcastic. "I'm not reading in my 'sickbed' now."

"Hey Tash, maybe this concubine can teach you what to do with a cock as well," Jarlan said.

Tashaya looked like she wanted to shrink into her chair. She seemed extremely sweet, not especially hot-blooded, and Atorra was already feeling ready to do battle for her.

"Excuse me?" Harrai said, coming up behind them, his voice a hot whisper. "What is this, Jarlan?"

"Please," Jarlan said. "Order me to my room. See what happens."

Harrai quietly motioned for Atorra to switch places with him, so he could put himself between her and his brother. As he gave Jarlan and his friends a cold stare, they all stopped grinning eagerly at Atorra like she was prey they were toying with. Something in Harrai's eyes cowed even his brother.

"You always say you want respect, Jarl. But it's not owed you. You have to earn it. She is our Queen of Songs," Harrai said.

"And your future wife," Jarlan prodded. "But in the end you might as well fuck a hole in the sofa."

Harrai lifted a hand to his brother and pulled his fingers together, as Jarl winced and coughed. His fingers gripped the table. Sweat broke on his brow. His eyes, bulging slightly with pain, locked on Harrai like he wanted to kill him. Harrai kept his fingers pinched together.

"Stop it, please!" one of the girls cried, but Jarl desperately motioned for her to shut up. He was fighting it.

Atorra realized that Harrai was using his telepathic ability to strangle Jarlan. The younger man's hand finally flew to his throat, and the hatred in his eyes turned to pleading.

Harrai let go and Jarlan was forced to drag up a loud breath and then cough. He looked at Harrai sideways, and gave him a twisted smile.

"She is still my wife," Harrai said, in a low voice. "If I ever hear another word out of you with these implications, I will punish you like I would punish any person in this court."

"At least..." Jarl coughed, trying to clear his throat. "At least I give you someone to test your deadliest powers on."

Harrai stood up and clapped his hands, signaling for the feast to begin. He picked up his spoon, looking more eager to eat than anything.

"Thank you," Atorra said to him softly.

"You are my queen," Harrai replied. "I will not let this talk stand."

She would feel better about if she thought he actually cared about her at all, and not just what she was. Lady Kirska expected so much of her, and she could tell Jarlan would never forgive her for claiming his dragon.

"Jarlan, how was the visit to the Sreyelans?" Lady Kirska took her seat at the table just after Harrai, and she got right to business with the prince. "I'm afraid I haven't heard any good news, so I can guess, but was there even a hint of future cooperation?"

"They think we're soft. Of course, I had a good long drink with Sairi. I gave him everything I had on the Daramons and their new weapons, and my only real hope with them is that he does the work for me to convince them. But a young man has no pull with those old women. It's incomprehensible to me. He's one of the smartest guys I know. However—they will be here in

May with the trade contingent and should give them a respectful welcome, showing our strength—what little we have of it, these days."

Jarlan sounded frustrated as he spoke to Lady Kirska, who had a placid expression. "While we have our own selfish aims for trying to secure a solid alliance with them, I can't blame 'the old women'. They protect their people, and I protect mine. It's probably not a good look that you keep drinking with one of their young men and having private conversations, chumming around with him like a school friend."

"If there's another war, we don't need some backwards tribe anyway," the snooty girl said to Jarlan, patting his arm.

Jarlan looked annoyed at her too. "Every single Sreyelan is a midranked telepath at least. They have to be about the most powerful telepaths in the world if you averaged them out. We could certainly use them, and they're worth courting, if it takes me a lifetime. I really think if I offered Sairi—"

"No, Jarlan," Lady Kirska said. "That would only anger the Sreyelan elders, plucking away one of their young men and giving him a position."

"We're only encouraging them to stick to their own ways," Jarlan said. "Maybe it would shake them up."

"It would make them feel we had disrespected them," Lady Kirska said.

"Who are the Sreyelans?" Atorra asked Harrai.

"The winged tribe," he said.

"They have wings!?"

"Yes, they shape-shift their bodies into winged forms in childhood. They live in an isolated valley; we're the only ones who can reach them at all. They are a matriarchal warrior society, and they prefer to be left alone. You'll never see them."

"Oh, and they are coming here in May? I can't wait to see them!" Atorra had never heard of winged people in her whole life and now she wanted to see one more than anything.

Jarlan huffed. "Showing off that the Queen of Songs is a doll is about the worst thing we could do."

"Hush," Lady Kirska said. "It isn't as if hiding her away would help matters."

The conversation veered into more dull and confusing matters. Dinner was so early, which meant there must be countless hours of festivities to

come. Harrai sat straight, regal and finely dressed, but his mind was clearly on the feast. He loaded his plate with bits of everything.

"Maybe you need a drink," Harrai said, watching her pick at a little spiced grain.

"Drinks don't relax me," Atorra said. "I can't get drunk."

"Oh," he said. "Is there a spell that would let you get drunk?"

"You want me to be able to get drunk?"

"I want you to be able to relax," he said.

"I wish," she said softly. "But no."

"Try this...with this." He gave her a chunk of lamb and then had someone pass him down a jar of chunky yellow mush, which he stirred into the millet already on her plate.

"What is all this?"

"These are but beans, fermented all winter, flavored with a little turmeric. Savory but not very strong because it's a buttery, almost sweet bean. And then you shred the lamb a little, mix that in..." He finished preparing her plate. "Try that. Here in Drai, we have a lot of condiments and small dishes that are meant to be combined to enhance the food to one's own taste, so there's an art to getting the most flavor out of it."

She tried a bite now. "That is good!"

"You'll probably enjoy the berry tart we'll have for dessert best of all."

That was as much as he said to her through the entire meal. He was generally a solitary figure, impressive to look at, offering his opinion when needed but no casual conversation. She sensed that he felt untouchable to the entire court.

So he's not just cold to me.

I wonder if I look half as impressive myself, in such fine clothes. It was hard not to feel her elevated status in the lavish silks and gold trims.

But I would rather have my dinner with the dragons.

She nibbled at her food, trying to look occupied, as the long feast stretched on for what seemed like hours, with some breaks for musicians and drinks. Finally the delicious berry tart came, and then louder music started up, pounding with drum beats.

The court was tapping their feet and itching to move, and Harrai looked to her. "It's the custom that the king begins the dance—and the queen, if there is one."

"I don't know how to do the dances of this place!" Really, dancing in front of everyone without even a lick of practice?

If he touched her waist, he might realize that Soran broke her.

"We don't have set dances," he said.

"You mean there aren't any steps?"

"No. You just follow the music and there are a few steps I'll teach you, but you can do them in any order. Come on. Take your fan." He handed her the little bag she had hung on her chair as she saw other ladies do, and she fished the paper fan out. It was painted with a dragon, of course. It was hard to find anything in Kota not adorned with a dragon.

The drum beats were quick but the flute played in a melancholy minor key. A string instrument with a ragged, sharp sound kept an insistent rhythm with the drums. Atorra never thought music could be both sad and bouncy.

"The basic steps are just a little side to side, like this...or forward and backward, like this. Lift your fan and wave it up, wave it down..." He demonstrated, shoving his thick black hair back around his horns when it fell into his eyes. She thought he might enjoy himself if it wasn't for the court watching them with such curiosity. It was impossible to block out all those eyes. She followed his lead, more carefully, conscious of her busted stuffing.

"Then, your dance partner may lead you by holding out a hand, and you would step closer to me, and I'd put my hand at your waist and--"

She shied back as he started to slip a hand past her clasped robe. "Oh, no, not yet," she said.

He looked offended. "I was hardly going to touch you." He added, "I hardly *wish* to touch you."

Now she felt offended right back. "Well, you've already made that clear."

"But every single person in this court just watched you jerk away from me," he said through gritted teeth. He reached for her again.

"Why didn't Soran warn me we'd be dancing in front of everyone? I didn't want to tell you, but he broke me," she hissed.

"Broke you?"

"Yes. With the Soran yank. He burst one of my stuffing pockets..."

"What is the 'Soran yank'?"

"When he ties the ladies' sashes tight! I didn't *ask* for the Soran yank, of course." She was getting panicked, as the court was witnessing them having

a tense conversation instead of dancing, while the music played on.

"Soran yank," he muttered, almost like he wanted to laugh. "Well, you seem to be able to dance just fine, so ignore that before every tongue in Kota is saying we argued in front of everyone, and follow my lead. You've already made a mess of things."

"Me?"

"Yes. You should have informed me right away that you were broken; you're the queen."

"Well--" she began, but then he put his arm to her waist. The robe crumpled around her misshapen body. Hopefully the court couldn't see it, but he would feel it.

Harrai continued the dance, turning her in a circle. He showed no sign of noticing her odd shape, his chin regal and his golden-brown eyes cool. In moments like this, she noticed how beautiful he was, and how he radiated power and composure. She knew he didn't feel up to the task of being king sometimes, but he could certainly hide it. Even his hand at her waist was so strong and sure.

The song ended and other members of the court came to the floor, quickly filling it with young couples in their glittering court finery. Although the dance might not have specific steps, there was a language to it that everyone else knew. They moved gracefully, couples mirroring each other's steps, dancing patterns across the floor.

Jarlan was dancing with the snooty young woman, but whispering in her ear just as much, and shooting a grin to Harrai. Under the music was a din of conversation and it felt like everyone was sneaking looks at Atorra. But what else was new?

Harrai gripped her arm. "Come with me."

"What? Why?" she said crossly. "The gossip will only get worse if you drag me off."

"Then follow me so I don't have to drag you."

Reluctantly, she did, and as soon as he had her alone in an empty corridor, his long fingers started unfastening the ties that held her robe shut. He pushed the robe off her shoulders and looked at her waist.

"Well, the Soran yank must be quite something," Harrai said.

"It was! Please don't laugh. I already wish I could disappear. I'm well aware that it's just as Jarlan said. I am the Queen of Disappointments. I didn't ask for any of this, but I feel like I've ruined everything. But if it

helps the dragons...I will try my best. I want to help them. I *don't* want to spend time having dinner with your brother."

He laughed, although it was brief. It was nice to see him laugh at all. "That's fair. If you really prefer, you can eat in your room. Or not eat at all. You can choose what kind of queen you want to be. If you can push through and learn the ways of court, you will have more influence here, but you could also choose to be reclusive and spend more time with the dragons."

"I don't know if anyone else agrees that I should have any freedom. Even you, when it comes down to it. You need a powerful queen. And your grandmother has made it clear I will live up to expectations."

He frowned. "My grandmother ruled the kingdom for ten years when my parents died. Sometimes she forgets that she is no longer the regent."

"I still need to train with her and learn the songs." She twisted her hands. "She's...a little scary."

"You don't need to say it like a confession," he said. "Of course she's scary. We're all a little scared of her." His laugh had changed to a wry smile. But then he looked solemn. "I'm glad you feel for the dragons. Everything I do is to protect them the way they protect us. Through the history of Drai, they risk their lives. They are stronger than us, but...also much fewer. As you can see, there are less than three hundred dragons left, and five hundred eggs. The past generation was nearly a thousand eggs. This...is life or death."

"That few!?"

"Yes. We're losing them faster than we welcome new hatchlings. We *need* this generation to be strong, and the next one, even stronger. *They* need your magic."

"I can't bear thinking of a world without dragons..." She fisted her hands. "I'll learn the songs."

"Good. Let me know if there is anything I can do to make you more comfortable here," Harrai said. "If you'd like a different attendant, I could arrange for that.

"If you're referring to consorts, I don't want one."

"Well, you might later. I just want you to know that you are free to love whoever you choose."

She tried not to feel anything when he said that. He didn't feel for her, so she didn't dare feel for him.

He added, "And I am sorry about my brother's conduct. The secondary heir is the head of diplomatic affairs, a powerful position, but he chafes at it. He's always angry at me, and he took it out on you, but I won't stand for that. This might be an alliance of magic and unfortunate fate, but you are still my queen. It reflects poorly on me if you are damaged or slandered."

"I wouldn't want to reflect poorly on you with my damage, certainly," she snapped back.

"I phrased that wrong," he said, grimacing. "Of course I don't want you hurt." He briskly retied her robe. "Let's return to our duties, then. You can just watch the dance and look as bored as you please."

He started walking back down the corridor, his cape stirring with the movement of his body, his hair loose and black between his broad shoulders. Something stirred inside her, not for the first time, that felt dangerous.

"Harrai?" she called.

"Yes?" He stopped and turned back at her voice.

"You said I could have a different attendant if I wished," she said.

"Of course. Is there someone you prefer?"

"As the queen, I must have some money of my own, don't I?"

"You do, yes. We'll discuss that soon."

"And you would like to help me feel more comfortable here?"

"Just tell me what you want already."

"More than anything in the world, I want to send for my dearest friend Lorsen. Just before you came for me, she was bought by a wealthy family in Atlantis. He was horrible—a sanarune."

"A what?"

"A bodyguard to a powerful man named Ankon Wode. And he said his master wanted a girl who would fight. They're doing terrible things to her. I know it." As Atorra spoke, she thought she was prepared for him to say no, but the more she dared to think of Lorsen, the more determined she was. She could have easily cried in front of Harrai, thinking of it, but instead she maintained her firmest voice. *Tough*, *not rude*. "If I could have Lorsen here, I would never ask for anything ever again."

"You want me to send one of our people back to that place? To bargain with a wealthy Atlantean?"

"We grew up together. Like sisters. She's my only family. The Atlanteans will always take money."

The sternness in his brow eased slightly. "I'll see what I can do, but...no promises."

"And I don't mind giving up anything for it, if I have any queenly jewels or anything that are allowed to be sold, old gowns, anything, I don't care what--"

"I'll see what I can do," he repeated. "But try not to get your hopes too high. Money is not the problem. It's finding someone who can and will venture to Atlantis. I could travel safely because of my power. Few others are that skilled at deflection, but...perhaps."

A dangerous wave of hope swept over her. It would be agonizing to wait and see, but that he would even try meant the world. And she believed he would. Harrai might be cold and distant, but she felt he was a man of his word. "Thank you--so much. I think I can go back to the feast and look queenly now."

He almost smiled. "Good."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY



Harrai

Now that they were back at the castle, Harrai woke alone, just briefly remembering the way Atorra slept so still and small beside him on the road. He had never slept beside another person before that trip. Could she sleep in this castle? Her face wasn't quick to show exhaustion.

Her face is just...a facsimile of life.

Maybe the strangeness of her is why she haunts my thoughts.

Being alone suited him. It was much less lonely to choose solitude than to be surrounded by people who expected so much of him, who needed him to be a symbol of the kingdom.

Harrai understood it would unsettle people if he showed them his true self. When it all felt too much, he remembered his own father, and how the last king had always been a model of dignity and strength. Even in the quiet of the family chambers, when their mother would get out paper and colored chalks or board games to delight Harrai and Jarl after a day of grueling lessons, their father never lost his air of unearthly power. He "carried his horns", as they said, the greatest compliment for a king.

But he had Mother. I think...she was the only person who saw his vulnerabilities and made him laugh. And I suppose the bedchambers must have brought him some release.

He was able to choose a wife, who chose him in return. He wasn't the generation to marry the Queen of Songs.

But there was no one else on his mind either.

And in the middle of night, once or twice, he reached for her to make sure she was safe with him. Only to realize, of course she was not there.

Atorra cared about the dragons. He felt she would take on the burden of protecting the eggs, just as he did. That was one thing they clearly shared.

If having her friend here would help her, then he would find Lorsen. But he hated to think of what everyone would say if a second Fanarlem girl showed up.

Especially Jarlan...

Jarl already hates me. And now she's taken his dragon. Of all the damn things.

He's enjoying this. Watching me try to square having a Fanarlem girl as my destined wife...

If the Daramons had never made Fanarlem, we wouldn't have these problems, Harrai thought sourly.

Harrai had grown up with a hatred of the Daramons and had never expected his queen to be found among them. A Miralem girl would have been much more excited and easily prepared for her role. He would have brought her whole family to live in Kota with her, if they were willing.

Instead, there was a soul caught in a strange half-life. No wonder Jarl mocked. He must be enjoying this change of fortune, Harrai thought grumpily. He knows I'm not much for flirting and seeking out women of the court, that I have been waiting for my queen.

"We may as well move forward with the coronation," Master Peitir decided, scratching his unshaven chin. Just the ragged appearance of the court sorcerer reminded Harrai that nothing was normal, nor would be again. After breakfast, he was summoned to another tense meeting of the advisors dealing with The Matter of Atorra.

"There is just no way around it," Peitir said. "Atorra's soul rings utterly true, but her body is without life. For any other woman to bear the dragon heirs might kill her, and the only one who might have tapped into any of this power is Lady Tashaya, but in her condition, well... It is, as we know, hard enough on the Queen of Songs. We are simply not going to have heirs this time around."

"The sooner we move on from this unfortunate truth, the better," Harrai said. "We can't change it. And Atorra is feeling the blame that should fall on the Daramon slave trade."

His grandmother, at least, looked more thoughtful than worried, even though she knew how devastating this was. No dragon heirs meant they would have to wait at least another three generations before renewing their dragon blood. Their rulers would grow weaker. And some day, Harrai would have to decide if he should take a consort, or appoint some future child of Jarlan's as heir instead.

Neither seemed particularly appealing.

But it could wait.

"All right," he said. "Plan the coronation. All the usual pomp, no more, no less."

"We can set the date for the next full moon," Master Peitir said, and Grandmother nodded. The next hour was spent discussing particulars, and then Harrai had a free moment before his next meeting, which was supposed to be about the city budget, but he had a feeling every meeting would end up being about Atorra for at least the next week or two.

Harrai worried over it as he left the castle in plain black clothes, to get some fresh air. He strode down the hill to the riverside, and then to the royal trade district, where all the finest pottery was made, where discarded dragon scales were carved into decorative headdresses and platters, where sheep milk was turned into wheels and stored in the shadows, and where vegetables were preserved for the court table in Kota's long winter.

Everyone knew there was one thing to bring a smile to Harrai's serious face, and that was a good ferment. Some people preferred wine, but Harrai took comfort in his native cuisine. Pickled cabbage, the good old standby. Pickled cucumber, excellent with a smoked meat. Pickled hot peppers, a personal favorite. Pickled fruits, better than any ordinary confection. Pickled grain aged into a dark brown, savory soup base. The mountains of Kota had incredibly fertile soil, but the shortest of growing seasons—and as a result, they had the world's best pickled foods.

Sometimes Harrai dreamed of being a commoner and having a shop on the main street of Kota, with vats and crocks filling the cellar, experimenting with different pickles. What a gloriously simple life that would be. He would marry anyone he wanted, raise their children underfoot, chop and shred the summer's bounty, read legends by the fire on the longest nights of the year when the world was lit by candle flame and moonlight on snow. While he had always liked pickles, his obsession with them probably had something to do with Umina and Nora, the royal picklers. When his parents died unexpectedly and his days were packed with terrifying responsibility, Umina found him crying alone. Umina's partner Nora was a friend to his Aunt Imra, who shared his love of pickles, and he had a few memories of playing at their house and the thrill of having a day out with his aunt.

On that day, in the depths of his grief, Umina told the nearest guard that she was taking him home to feed him some noodles. Ever since then, he could slip off to their house to leave his burdens at the castle, if even for a mere hour.

He relaxed at the smell of soup wafting out their doors. They were always making soup and tea—cheap tea, at that, but he didn't mind.

"There's our boy!" Umina called when she saw him. Umina was tall, tanned and as strong as a soldier. Her hair had a wild curl, hinting at some foreign ancestor, but her family had run the fermentation shop for several generations. "Haven't you had a week? How is she?"

"Atorra?"

"Of course Atorra! Who else is every single person talking about nonstop? What is she like?"

"It could be worse," Harrai said.

Nora brought over a plate with a white pepper on it and offered it silently as a sample. "Oh no," she said softly. Nora had initially studied to become a priestess of Eskamir before deciding she would rather give in to the advances of a brash young Umina and settle into a secular life.

"Could be worse? Well, how bad is it?" Umina asked.

"The facts are as they are. She was a Fanarlem slave. Although it's different here, I can't help but feel that she's still just trading one sort of captivity for another. And of course, she can't have the heir, but I'm sick of even discussing that already. And even if she could..."

"It's a terrible old custom!" Nora said, in a quick little burst, like she'd been holding this in for years. "When I was a novice at the temple, we were told over and over how a woman's womb is a sacred space... Isn't that why we're better than the Daramons? And yet we force our queen to bear the children of a dragon!? And it's a hard birth, too. It would kill her without the best healers in attendance. I can't believe we ever allowed it."

"Indeed," Harrai said sharply. He was intimately familiar with the writings of all the prior kings and queens. The Queen of Songs usually had twins and triplets after mating with the Queen's Wing, and these dragon-born children were always robust. Every single day of the pregnancy was carefully watched, and the babies were often induced prematurely before they grew too big. The dragon-born generation was always the strongest; tall people with strong magical gifts. Harrai's magic was already quite powerful, but for the dragon-born kings it was almost terrifying how much power they carried in their relatively weak Miralem bodies.

"But we all accept it," he continued. "She's been told that we're better than that, that Fanarlem are *free* here, and at the same time—that she's worthless because she can't have children according to our rules. I'm almost relieved it's not possible. I've never liked the idea, but if I dare say so, everyone acts as if I'm just being jealous."

"You've never been the jealous type!" Nora said. "Goodness, you go above and beyond to follow duties, if you ask me."

"Does she have some spunk to her? Or did they beat that out of her?" Umina asked.

"She definitely has a personality," Harrai said, and he almost smiled when he thought of Atorra thoroughly staining her hands with berries, or loading her arms with insect guides. "At first I was worried. She frequently tries to catch herself and act the way she's been taught, but that's fading. She's bolder by the day."

"Does she suit you at all?" Nora asked, worrying, while he took a moment to let the pickled pepper set his tongue on fire. Eyes watering, he gave her a signal of approval.

"Well...she is certainly not what we expected," he said, once he could speak. "And I couldn't take a Fanarlem to the marriage bed."

"Why not?" Nora asked. "For pleasure? Maybe not this very week, but if you get along..."

"You could use some pussy," Umina said bluntly. Nora blushed and Umina laughed and gave Harrai's shoulder a slap.

He narrowed his eyes. "Do you really think I would? What would the court say if they knew? We don't do that here."

"Harrai...she still has the soul of a woman," Umina said. "And Fanarlem do feel pleasure...or do they?"

"I don't even know," Harrai said, tensing.

"You can't just live for your duties every waking moment. If you don't have feelings for her, then of course you should keep your distance, but don't worry what the court will say!"

"It's not like any of that," he said, grimacing. "I don't know what I think of her yet. And you haven't met her."

"Well, when can we?" Umina asked, hands on her hips.

"Eventually." He'd walked right into that one.

Nora was dishing out some mild radishes now. "Spring fresh," she added.

"I like them stronger," he said.

"Well, you should be open to different tastes," she said.

"Why do I feel like you want to remind me of a lesson?" He sampled the radishes. They were still, admittedly, very good—still crisp, earthy and warm.

"Oh, no, no lessons here," Umina said. "We want to make sure you always have a place to escape anything resembling a lesson or duty or obligation... But we hope that the queen is doing all right, that's all. People are talking about her in shameful ways. Like she's not the true queen or something! But there is no doubt, is there?"

"No," Harrai said. "I felt it as soon as I came close to her. Before I even laid eyes on her. Still, something is different since my parents died... I don't blame her, but I wonder if the Queen of Songs is the same. If maybe whatever killed them, marked them...did this to Atorra as well. When she tried to sing to the dragons, she collapsed in apparent pain. There was a horrible look in her eyes for a minute or two, until she came out of it."

"I do wonder...what that mark meant," Umina said, in a rough whisper. He told Umina and Nora the truth, knowing they could keep a secret, but few people knew about the black mark scratched on their chests when their bodies were found.

Twenty years later, they still had no grasp on what had happened that day in the mountains. A few scouting parties went missing or in one case, were found with the same marks. After that, they stopped flying that way, but something had changed.

It was hard not to think of the Fanarlem queen as just another symptom of the kingdom's plague.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



ATORRA

THE DAYS LEADING up to the coronation rushed by as Atorra struggled to adjust to her new life. Lady Kirska tested the strength of her telepathic powers, frowning all the while. It was obvious Atorra didn't live up to expectations.

She preferred the company of dragons. She sang all the ordinary songs of love and war to the eggs and the dragons regaled her with old legends and stories of the glory days of Drai, when thousands of dragons ruled the skies, spreading their power to all the Miralem kingdoms and winning wars against the Daramons. Dirjet was particularly excited, painting a splendid picture of her own father's exploits, some four or more centuries ago.

Back home, everyone talked about the War of the Crystals, Atorra thought. But no one mentions that here. The Daramons nearly won that one...

She knew many dragons had been killed in the War of the Crystals, because the history books she read boasted about it. She used to think it was thrilling to imagine sorcerers killing all those dragons, and now the thought of it made her sick. Why had she ever taken any pleasure in Daramons defeating an enemy?

They're my enemy too. They always were.

"No, we don't talk about that one," Dosskarja said, when he took her aside. "That war reduced our numbers drastically. Do you know the legend of the Drai people?"

"No..."

"Long ago, we were not the only magical beings to walk this earth. There were many other great beasts, with intelligence and power. But they are all gone now. Even in the memory of dragons, they are nearly lost. Why are we still here, in this time of men, when all others fell?"

"You're the strongest?" Atorra ventured.

"We helped the people, when they came to this world. We taught them language and telepathy and the powers they could draw from the earth. And in return, they killed all the other great beasts, except for us. As the last manticore drew his dying breath, he placed a curse upon King Norgai. Our fate would be ever tied to the Drai, to the men we had allowed to place their feet on our backs. We would only have children if the Queen of Drai allowed it. And that is why our eggs are strong only when the Queen of Songs blesses them, and why we give our most precious children over to flesh, to be born through the queen."

An unpleasant shiver raced down Atorra's back. "That's terrible. That makes it sound more like you are...bound to serve me. Harrai didn't tell me all that when he explained Norgai and the Queen's Window."

"It's only a legend," he said. "King Norgai, as far as we know, lived nearly four thousand years ago. We don't even know for sure if he was real, or when the first Queen of Songs lived. Nor have we ever hatched eggs without a Queen of Songs to lend them power at some point during their two hundred years."

And yet, there was a funny mood to Dosskarja's words. "But you think it's true."

"I know that this ancient magic is real," he said. "And that the Queen of Songs has power no one living understands. Including myself, and the other dragons. And so, I do not dare test it."

She looked up at his golden eye against the purple-black sleekness of his body, the length of four horses. He had lived long enough to see generations of people die. He was beautiful, and she had chosen him, but now she also saw that he was something alien.

"Don't take this burden too hard, little queen," he said. "I am...unusual, in that I see how I am captive to your people. I'm quite sure Dirjet never has thought of this a day in her life. Most dragons will happily devote their lives to protecting your people."

"But not you." Atorra bit her lip. "Dosskarja..."

"I will lay down my life for you," he said. "I swear this. We need each other, Atorra. I just...feel the grief of these days. Nothing will bring back the time when our numbers were many. And I hope I die before I am the only one left." He lowered his head closer to her. "I didn't expect you to choose me. It's curious."

"I was drawn to you," Atorra said. "Quite clearly. Maybe it's because I know what it's like to feel captive. And I have to accept it. I wasn't born free, and this isn't freedom either. I have to accept it because there is no other way, but to be really honest...sometimes I hate it, and I feel like I could strike someone. Back home—in the Daramon lands, I mean—my best friend, my sister was taken away from me, and I was *helpless*. I didn't even get to say goodbye. And it was like a fire inside me, burning me up, causing me endless pain, but I had to ignore it. If I let myself feel it..." She gazed past him, to the shadows of the caves. "I don't know."

Dosskarja softly nudged his snout against her body. Despite his size, he was able to brush her so softly that she hardly felt how hard his scales were, and he didn't throw her off balance. "I'm honored that you have chosen me, Queen of Songs. Perhaps we will both find some freedom together, when I can show you the skies."

"When will that be?"

"Very soon."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



ATORRA

ONE MORNING, a rap on the door awakened Atorra, and Soran announced, "The Fanarlem maker is here and waiting to mend you from yesterday. He will meet you in your room, as discrete as can be."

Atorra felt a pang of shame at these words, another reminder that her body was something secret; that no one was even supposed to know she needed mending. In Aiskan Nal, it wasn't shameful to need a repair. Fanarlem could break just like real people could be hurt—what was the difference?

At least it was an easy fix. The older man hardly said a word, just cut her open and replaced the broken stuffing pocket, quick and matter of fact as you please. Soran helped her dress for the day like she was made of glass, even as she told him she could dress herself.

"Oh, no, a queen should have her sashes tied by a professional," he said. "But very gently."

Atorra was slowly adjusting to her own impressive reflection. Her robes shimmered blue with a red lining inside that peeked out of sleeves and skirts, and the sash was a buttercream color. She couldn't help noticing her own beauty, her golden hair and large green eyes. She couldn't exactly be vain when everyone looked at her so strangely, but...

I am quite pretty! she thought defiantly. Even if the clothing was to thank as much as anything.

She chose jade earrings from the Dragon Queen's stash of jewelry. In the Daramon lands, only men wore earrings, and she felt powerful in them.

"My queen, the lady Tashaya mentioned that she is feeling well today and would love to make your closer acquaintance," Soran said. "She was impressed by your conduct at the banquet and is sorry she hasn't been up to having visitors the past few days."

"She did? She was?" Atorra asked hopefully.

"Yes, most assuredly. You can usually find her in her chambers."

"I'd be happy to keep Lady Tashaya company."

Tashaya had quarters in the castle, across the garden from the queen's chambers. Atorra glanced around nervously for Prince Jarlan before exposing herself to the open landscape of the royal courtyard. She was always dodging him. The way seemed clear, but after just a few steps, he suddenly walked out of a side door, speaking loudly, followed by Harrai.

Panicked, she dropped to the ground and crawled into the interior of an evergreen tree. The tree was tall and straight and had dense leaves on the exterior, but empty space around the large trunk and branches.

They were walking closer now. It was too late to back out without looking more ridiculous. But...could they sense her telepathically?

I should have thought of that. So far, Harrai hasn't mentioned reading my mind or anything, but he might just be tactful. Well, Jarlan isn't tactful at all.

Harrai glanced at the tree and nearly made eye contact with her.

She lowered herself to the ground, getting needles all over her fine robes.

Jarlan was speaking. "That's an insurmountable problem, Harri, and I can't believe you just want to brush it off. It absolutely matters and all of you know it. Without being able to have the dragon-born...she's almost useless."

"She isn't useless," Harrai snapped, clearly irritated at his brother, but she could also hear the pain in his voice. "Have we ever listened to ourselves? For thousands of years we have traced one soul to the ends of the earth and forced her to serve us, to have our kings and queens, never asking her if she even wants to do it."

"We don't have time for this. We don't have time for *anything*. The diplomats from Halnari will visit this summer and need I remind you, they

are not very inclined to be diplomatic? They're here to scope out our strength."

"Traitors," Harrai growled.

"We all know it, but we're not formally at war, and you're the one who said we shouldn't just refuse them."

"The council agreed they should come, and you know why. We have to protect the eggs and if it means we have to kiss up to a few Halnari along the way, well, once the next generation is hatched we can make them pay."

Atorra's head spun. At least it seemed like neither of them knew she was there. Traitorous diplomats were coming to visit? No one had even mentioned this. Back home, the Halnari were hailed as the most civilized and wonderful of all Miralem. Of course, they had always helped the Daramons and were the wealthiest people in the world as a result.

Naturally, they would be thought of as the enemy here, and if they were coming, they'd be assessing her and the strength of the dragon kingdom. Harrai was trying to protect the dragon eggs, and if the Halnari saw weakness, they might tell the Daramons it was a perfect time to attack Drai.

"Well, think about what I said." Jarlan leaned close to his older brother before breezing off.

"Thank you, Jarl, it never occurred to me to think until you recommended it," Harrai called back, before muttering, "Ass." He stalked off.

What if they went to war because of me?

Atorra slipped out of the tree, brushing needles off her clothes, trying to shake off the feelings of inadequacy that stalked her like her own shadow. She recalled the gentle nudge of Dosskarja's face against her body, his own sense of captivity and loss. If her dragon accepted her just as she was, everyone else could piss off.

She was still relieved when her knock was met with Tashaya's door flung open and a warm greeting. "Atorra! Come in, come in! I was hoping to visit you, but I'm so glad you beat me to it."

It was clear why Tashaya hadn't visited. She was bundled up in a thick quilted robe and her face had no color. She moved slowly to a tea set on the table, where a bench made of glossy dark wood was piled with pillows. Sunlight beamed in through the windows, which looked upon the garden.

"Save your strength!" Atorra said. "I can pour the tea."

"Nonsense! You're the guest. I must look pathetic, but at least allow me to struggle through some normal things," Tashaya said. "I don't know if you like tea. I also have some cakes. I know Fanarlem don't need food and I've noticed some of our dishes aren't quite to your liking, so I won't be offended if you'd rather not partake."

"I love sweets. This is perfect."

"I'm so glad to hear it. It's so nice to have treats with a friend. Although Jarlan makes fun of my weight."

"Oh, forget him," Atorra snapped. "The only queenly privilege I've ever dreamed of is to stop being polite to horrible men."

"Then you shall have it, and I'll cheer you on all the way," Tashaya said. "I struggle with standing up to him myself. I get tongue-tied and self conscious too easily."

"I'll protect you," Atorra said. "Back at the House, we girls always protected each other, as much as we could. We were punished if we offended the customers, but we had subtle ways."

"I'm so glad you're here now. I can't imagine how awful that must have been. Was it like a new Jarlan every day?"

"On a bad week. Sort of. They were more leering than rude, but either way, Lorsen and I would come up with ways to annoy or evade them."

Tashaya held up the tray. It was a beautiful plate of silver worked with floral designs, and each pale cake was stamped with a colored flower. Like everything in the Drai royal court, Tashaya's room was beautiful, from the deep pink silk of her robes to the sparkling ornaments in her hair, to the embroidered cushions and painted walls. But Tashaya herself was overwhelmed by it all. She was pale and soft, plumper than any Daramon lady would allow herself to be, with dark circles under her eyes. But there was a luminous quality to her; she was quite a pleasant sight even for all that prevented her from being considered a traditional beauty, with her thick hair, barely tied back with a plain ribbon, her kind brown eyes, and her gentle hands.

Tashaya was in bright spirits, too, happy to have company. "You survived your first courtly dinner, then," she said, settling back into the pillows.

"Did I?"

"Oh yes, well enough I'd say. Jarl was brutal! Serves him right that you took Dosskarja, really."

"Has he always been like that?"

"He's quite charming when we have foreign visitors, but...generally, yes. He's been a brat since childhood. Of course, one can make excuses for him...our parents died young, and Harrai got all the attention and power... feh! I still hate him like roaches."

"Oh, no...your parents also died?"

"I thought Harrai would have told you."

"No...Harrai doesn't tell me half of what I need to know, it seems."

"Harrai hates gossip. I don't know why I thought he would have told you anything." She poked at the cake. "But you know that his parents died."

"He mentioned it once."

"It was the king and queen and also my parents," Tashaya said. "Our fathers were brothers. They all went flying to have a picnic in the mountains, pick sky-berries, and generally have some fun. And I was with them. I was only a baby, still nursing, so my mother brought me along, but Harrai and Jarlan were old enough to be with a nanny. So I don't know what happened, but they found the bodies of my parents and their dragons on the peaks. I was some distance away, bundled up, very dehydrated and with a fever. The bodies had a black mark on their hearts." She looked out the window, clearly a little anxious. "I have it too."

A chill went through Atorra.

"And I never got well. No one else who went that way has survived."

"What way?"

"Northwest. Where the mountains reach their highest peaks and there are no foot paths. The dragons and royals have always had summer picnicking and hunting grounds on some of the ridges at the lower elevations. It was never considered dangerous, just a nice place to get away from court duties for a bit. But now...that land is cursed."

"And no one knows why?"

"No. There was a storm a month before their death that is now thought to be the 'awakening' of the curse. We get bad storms here sometimes anyway, but everyone says the sky turned black, and the wind was so strong that everything was banging and rattling for hours. It did some damage to the city and our east tower."

"Is that why everyone is so...particularly worried?"

"It certainly doesn't help," Tashaya said.

"A storm that awakens a curse...it sounds more like some ancient legend that anything that could really happen," Atorra said.

"Maybe...but something is out there," Tashaya murmured. Then she shook off the hazy look in her eyes when she saw how nervous Atorra was. "But we know not to fly over there. And at least now you have the story. It's such a conversation-killer, though. How are you enjoying the life of a queen-to-be?"

"Um...that might also be a conversation killer."

"The dragons like you, though! They've told me. I'm not healthy enough to fly, but we talk telepathically from here sometimes. As you start to remember the songs, that will shut everyone up. Everyone will defer to the opinions of dragons."

"I adore the dragons," Atorra said. "Though I still hate that bridge. But I'm managing it. It's worth it to visit."

Tashaya laughed. "Oh, no! Don't tell me you're afraid of heights?"

"I didn't think I was!"

"Can Fanarlem die if you're broken?" Tashaya asked.

"We only die if our eyes shatter, but who would fix me? It would be so humiliating! It's already been humiliating..." Atorra told her the story of the Soran yank and Tashaya was soon laughing so hard she sounded like a shrieking bird.

"The Soran yank! Oh no, I guess I haven't been privy to that bit of court knowledge! Soran doesn't visit me. And I don't need him for any...other things either. I hear he's quite the popular companion." Tashaya looked mischievous.

"Well, I am not using him for that!" Atorra waved her arms. "Even if he enjoys it, that hits too close to my old life."

"And you and Harrai aren't—"

"No. I'm enjoying the solitary life."

"It's not bad at all," Tashaya said. "You can join your infirm friend. I'm afraid a love affair would do me in."

"Physically or mentally?"

"Both!" Tashaya sighed. "I won't lie, it does aggrieve me. Maybe we're all cursed to want what we can't have, but I dream of having a sweet husband and even sweeter little ones. I've heard all the talk of needing a proxy to bear the dragon born, and I would be the first to volunteer if I could. I don't want to be queen at all, but I would love to mother the

dragon-born. Of course," she added, "they would still be your heirs, and Harrai's. I would just be happy to play with them and care for them when you're busy."

"I—I don't need heirs," Atorra said, overwhelmed by all of this. "I mean, the queen does, I guess. But I've never thought about children at all."

"Well, that's all to the good. Much better than to yearn for them. Of course, I don't mean to sound so..." Tashaya trailed off and perked herself up. It seemed forced. *She has to pretend*, Atorra thought. *I know what that's like*.

"What are the symptoms of your sickness?" Atorra asked. "Or curse, rather?"

"Mostly intense fatigue and pain everywhere. Sometimes my heart beats too fast. When it gets bad I have fevers." She forced a smile along with a shrug. "Luckily not too often."

"Can the healers help at all?" Atorra thought healers could fix nearly anything, if you could afford the best.

"They've certainly tried."

"I wonder if my magic could help. When I learn the songs. Was the queen able to heal?"

"Oh, Atorra, don't take that burden on too! You'll have enough of them."

"But I'd love it if I could help you. It's selfish, too. I'd love to show everyone that I'm not 'the Queen of Disappointments'."

"Certain people in particular, I'm sure." Tashaya smirked. "When does your training begin? Or has it already?"

"So far Lady Kirska has only been testing me to see what I can already do. Which is...not much. She said we'll begin in earnest after the coronation."

"You sound nervous. If the old lady is too hard on you..." Tashaya trailed off and laughed. "Well, don't tell me, because you're on your own. No one likes to cross Lady Kirska. Have you been to the Duet Theater?"

"No..."

Tashaya gasped. "Then we should have an outing. Once you get past the coronation. You have opera where you're from, don't you?"

"Well, not in Aiskan Nal, and I've never seen one, but I know that's very popular in Atlantis."

"This is sort of like an opera but it's just a series of love songs performed by two luminaries of the Drai theater. Or sometimes even traveling performers. But right now it's *Kenjo*. He's so handsome and his voice will melt you in your seat. Irisa Lan sings the female part, and she's a very strong performer. I love her too, not like everyone loves Kenjo, but you know. I've already seen the spring show, of course, but I would go again, and if you've never seen it at all that's even better."

"I'd love to! I've never been to any theater and I've always wanted to. It's so popular in Atlantis that sometimes we'd get picture cards of the actors and actresses as gifts, but I never knew what it was actually like."

"Wonder no more," Tashaya said, beaming. "It'll be wonderful to have someone to go out with besides Great-Auntie. That's Lady Kirska. You can imagine how much of a romantic *she* is. I'll just...warn you that sometimes I have to cancel things last minute if I'm not feeling well." She winced a little. Atorra could tell she may have lost friends over this in the past.

"I understand! Please, don't ever push yourself."

Tashaya sighed. "I envy the belles of the court. Even Jarl's nasty friends, though I don't want to be like them. Half the plans I make end in ruins, and I'm forced to be boring."

"You're not boring at all. You're the first person who has welcomed me and...I needed that."

As soon as Atorra said it, she thought of Lorsen, who would probably never be offered anything she needed. They had been taught that they should serve the Daramons—any and all of their demands, accepting it with gratitude to cleanse their souls.

But now Atorra knew this was not true.

Lorsen, however, was in the hands of people who believed it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Harrai

THE FIRST FULL moon of April arrived swiftly. The fruit trees were in full bloom, the sky a cloudless blue, offering a clear view of the snow-capped mountains all around Harrai's bedroom.

This is the morning when my queen is crowned.

Breakfast was brought in--pudding of black rice flavored with tea and pickled plum jam. A special meal, as rice did not grow well in Drai. Harrai finished the pudding while looking over some paperwork and then went to the temple to join in the court's prayer to Eskamir for the coronation. Atorra would not be there, since the prayers were for her. It was a superstition that you should never attend prayers for one's own self.

Afterward, Harrai returned to his rooms to dress for the coronation. Ceremonial dragon scale armor and an heirloom cloak made from the furs of white tigers clad his person. The centuries-old crown was shaped like a dragon perched on his head, with his horns supporting a structure of two great wings that spread out around his head. It felt like carrying a statue.

It also looked ridiculous, he thought, but he wouldn't question the design of his ancestors. Being king meant that his opinions were not worth much at all, as long as they made the people happy.

Jarlan has no idea how much he would hate being the king. As it is, he can have all the opinions he wants. And he certainly tosses them around like he has plenty to spare.

When the servants had finished helping him into all of this finery, he knocked back a glass of wine to calm a strange touch of nerves, and went down to the great hall.

The great hall was an eternally chilly room, huge and imposing, used for weddings, coronations and royal funerals. It could hold twelve hundred people at standing room capacity, and of course it was packed today. The courtiers were all here, and citizens had been gifted tickets for this theoretical queen's coronation for over a decade, a gift for good deeds or successful businesses. These precious tickets were tucked away until the day the queen was found.

Harrai sensed an extra restlessness. Everyone wanted to see the doll queen.

Atorra was not here yet as he entered the room, greeted the crowd with a lifted hand. The common people in the back cheered to see him.

Harrai felt his own self neatly detach from his body as he returned a regal smile and another wave, and he didn't show the heaviness of the crown and armor. In these shadowed times, they needed the sight of him so badly, the symbol of him.

Suddenly, their attention whipped to the other door behind the dais, the one that led to the queen's chambers.

Atorra's golden hair was pulled up into a coil, showing off her slender neck and making her look older. Her long robes were jewel-toned with the scale weave that made them shimmer like dragon-scale in thin layers, with a cloak embroidered with twin dragons in gold and green. The sleeves fell well over her hands by design, in the old Imperial style, and her long robes trailed across the immaculately cleaned stone floors.

He expected the coronation robes to overwhelm her, especially considering her petite size, but she met his eyes.

She looked stubbornly determined. Her green eyes blazed like she was trying to survive in a desert until she reached the next oasis. She didn't look so much regal as she did scared, but she wasn't going to let this swallow her up.

The soft conversation and whispering of twelve hundred people was very loud as she bowed to him and he held out a hand to her, as was expected of them both.

Her fingers clenched his tight. He felt her terror. She was overwhelmed. She felt like an impostor.

And yet, she is able to look like a queen, he marveled.

He carefully spoke into her mind. *Atorra*, *you are doing yourself credit today. You certainly do belong here*.

Her eyes widened, startled at his voice in her head, but speaking to the dragons had likely helped acclimate her to it.

Frazzled thoughts skirted across his. *Harrai looks so handsome*. *Oh, I hope he can't hear me. Stars, I need to practice telepathy more.*

He almost smiled, and squeezed her hand back instead.

Well, she wasn't what he expected at all, but...she was rising to the occasion, as best she could.

He kept ahold of her small hand as the ceremony went on. She clung to it. The court telepaths declared that she was the true incarnation of the Queen of Songs. Long documents were read relating to her duties and legal status, and the priestesses of Eskamir circled them in a song of blessing.

Finally, Atorra signed her name on the scroll beside Harrai's, where years ago he had been crowned himself, and she knelt for the Queen's Crown, made of gold as delicate as lace.

"Rise, Queen of Drai, Queen of Dragons, Queen of Songs..."

She rose with grace, and a face lifted bravely.

I will protect her as a partner, Harrai told himself. She will need it, and it's best for all of us if she can focus on helping the dragons and not dealing with my brother and the cattier elements of court.

When he finally released her hand, she gave him a tiny smile--grateful and slightly surprised, the expression so real. When he first saw her, he wondered how Daramons could even desire the artificial perfection of these girls, but now he wondered if her face had changed a little somehow.

It didn't seem quite the same.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ATORRA

Atorra couldn't help it. Harrai looked so utterly beautiful, such the perfect image of a king, that she couldn't say a word to him at the coronation. His broad shoulders. The way his horns made his hair a little wild no matter what. The fierce cut of his nose and cheekbones and his serious brown eyes.

She knew it didn't mean anything, really, but the coronation had made them husband and wife by the laws of Drai, and it was so difficult not to think about that even the tiniest bit.

She knew he would never really touch her, or look at her with desire, but he didn't look at anyone else either. That was clear by now. And when it was all over, she sat beside him at another feast, and they danced the first dance together, once again, because it was expected.

Curses. Why does he have to be so handsome? I'm sure this feeling will pass after tonight, because I am certainly not in love with him.

"One of our best telepaths left Drai today," he murmured to her, near the end of the dance, when the attention of the crowd had finally started drifting elsewhere. "I don't know if he will succeed, but he's heading to Atlantis to see about finding your friend Lorsen."

"Really?" Her heart leapt. She might not have a beating heart, but she felt everything grow lighter.

"Of course. If it bolsters your spirits, it's worth the attempt."

"Thank you so very much," she whispered.

When his hand brushed hers, she noticed his warmth. She remembered how easily he fought off the Daramons when he took her away from the House, how strong he was, and so brazenly confident that he could travel in enemy territory alone and no one would lay a finger on him. He had more power than she had yet witnessed. And...a pretty mouth.

Oh, stop it!

"I hate to say it, as I know you don't like this attention, and neither do I, but on this particular night we should probably have a few dances before I set you free," he said.

"You're probably right. I suppose I can endure," she said. "I see Lady Tashaya smiling at me over there. It does get a little easier to have a friend."

"I can see that would help," Harrai said, but he didn't look to anyone. The king always stood alone.

"Lady Tashaya also told me what happened. With—"

But she could tell she didn't have to say more.

"I should have been the one to tell you," Harrai said. "About my parents. I didn't want you thinking of that so soon."

"If I was a Miralem, would you have told me?"

"I don't know."

"You can tell me important things," she insisted. "If I'm thrown into this, I at least want to know what's going on."

"Not much else to say about that day," he said. "We don't know what killed them...what's out there. Our sorcerers keep investigating—from a distance."

"What about the future? Anything I should be aware of?"

He raised a brow. "You're sliding right into this role after all, aren't you? We are preparing for a visit from the Halnari, several months from now. I believe they're hoping to smooth over relations between us and the Daramons. The Halnari traitors like a little bit of war because they profit on it, but they don't like too much. They're not fighters. But it's in our interest to keep it that way, even if Jarl thinks otherwise."

"He wants to pick a fight in any direction, doesn't he?"

Harrai nodded. "Despite all of that, he's gotten farther with the Sreyelan tribe than anyone else has in years. They liked Tashaya's mother, but they didn't like my parents. Thought my father was too serious. I didn't even want to try talking to them; I'm sure they'd just think I was a scale off the same tail. Jarlan's been able to pick up where Aunt Imra left off."

"They must be an odd lot if they like him best."

"I think he's a good drinking buddy if you get him out of here," Harrai said. "Not that I'd know from experience. I'm not the same person away from the court either."

"I know," she said, and for a second, he looked bothered by this. That the two of them had ever been alone out in the world together.

"Anyway, at least his diplomatic role keeps him busy," he said.

Their fourth dance ended, and now Harrai stopped moving. "I think we've put in our time now, eh? Let's sit back and relax."

He bowed to her, formally ending the dance, and escorted her back to the table, pouring himself another glass of wine and getting into a conversation about taxes with an older man at the table.

Phew. That broke the spell, Atorra thought. He might be handsome but not romantic. All he does is work.

The last thing she wanted was to feel anything for him, even the most basic infatuation. She sensed he had the power to hurt her. It teased at the edges, even as she tried to hold fast against it.

Well, starting tomorrow, I'll work hard too. The queen's power surely has something to do with the shadow in the north. If I can help the hatchlings, cure Lady Tashaya, and protect the dragons, I don't think even Jarl would dare call me the Queen of Disappointments.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



ATORRA

"You looked absolutely empress-like," Soran told her as he helped her out of her clothes at the end of the very long day. "The court will probably keep giving you some trouble for a bit, but everyone was impressed, whether they admit or not."

Atorra sank into bed. She thought Lorsen would like Soran a lot; she would probably even welcome his attentions. As she drifted off to sleep, she found herself spinning a romance for her friend, imagining Soran declaring that for all the women he had been with out of duty, Lorsen was special, and Lorsen giving him her bright smile in return, and then a wedding...

Soon she was waking up again, her first day as queen.

Lady Kirska was waiting for her in the salon. "I let you sleep in this morning, child, but now that you are truly the queen and settled in to life here, our future training days will begin with the dawn."

Atorra bit down annoyance. Here it was again. Was she a queen with freedom over her life, or was Lady Kirska the boss? But she needed to learn this magic, one way or another. "Well, if I'd known, I would have woken with the dawn today," she said. "But where do we begin?"

"We'll train in the dragon caves," Lady Kirska said.

"Should I wear trousers?" Atorra picked at her two layers of silk robes.

"No, it is best if you do look like a queen at all times. This will be training of the mind. Someday you will be utterly fearless, because you will feel such power at your disposal, without lifting a finger."

"That would certainly be nice."

When they reached the bridge, Lady Kirska said, "You first, my queen."

"I'll slow you down. You should go first." Atorra had accepted that the bridge was a necessary agony to reach the dragons, but she was never quick.

"You won't slow me down, because if I don't like your pace, I will prod you forward."

She could hear Lady Kirska behind her, and was terrified of feeling a prod, so she moved quickly, even in the middle where the bridge slumped and swayed the most.

Before she knew it, she was across, and Dirjet greeted her with what seemed like a dragon smile, her wings fanning out happily. Dosskarja hung back in the shadows. Atorra got the sense he didn't like Lady Kirska.

"Excellent," Lady Kirska declared. "I was rather looking forward to prodding and you didn't even give me a chance. We're training today, so I'm using one of the unused chambers. Give us space."

"I could help with the training," Dosskarja said.

"Not with this one," Lady Kirska said. "Not yet. She doesn't even have telepathic powers to speak of. She needs my gifts."

Dosskarja looked at Atorra. "Very well...but tell me when I can help."

Lady Kirska led the way to a smaller chamber within the caves. Mats rested on niches and crude toys, balls and ropes were strewn around. It looked like a playroom for huge dogs. Atorra guessed this was a nursery for the hatchlings. The room was clean and well-maintained, so the dragons must keep it that way even over the long wait. Her heart immediately filled with the desire to see it full of tumbling, chirping baby dragons. She imagined tiny black baby Ebels and sleek golden Dirjets making higher pitched trills and lighter growls, tumbling over each other until they fell asleep on the mats.

Lady Kirska smiled briefly, as if she had the same anticipation. "All right, child. Take my hand. I want you to do as you did before and sing whatever comes to you, but as you go, I will help to guide your vision as best I can. I can't see what you see--at least, not unless I force my way into your mind, which I will not. And I don't know the songs myself. They belong only to you."

"Why is that, anyway?" Atorra asked. "Wouldn't it be better if someone else knew the songs?"

"That isn't how ancient magic works," Lady Kirska said. "Our magic now follows different rules. The magic of our ancestors was based more on faith, you might say. Or story. This sort of magic becomes more powerful in the hands of one person, because it also becomes special. It isn't like now, where a fire spell is just a fire spell, and you make it more powerful with training."

"But...that doesn't make sense."

"Are you sure?"

"Aren't the rules just the rules?"

"This is a different sort of rule," Lady Kirska said. "It still has logic. Doesn't it sound more powerful, more mystic, if only one queen knows the songs?"

"I mean...sure, but—"

"And so it is. Now I suppose you're going to ask why all magic doesn't work like that anymore?"

Atorra winced.

"Harrai asked me the same thing when he was a boy. And my only answer is that the world is different now, but...*you* are still special, my dear." Lady Kirska squeezed her hand. "Sing for me."

Atorra felt it now.

Special...this is special. Not me, not Atorra. I don't feel too terribly special, and Harrai said that when we're reborn we're new people no matter what we did before. But I do carry this magic, and it is special.

She imagined herself with a basket full of songs, that she picked up with every lifetime. They could feel heavy, but it helped to think that she was separate from the songs, merely tasked with preserving them--to help the dragons.

She started to sing, and once again she felt the same ancient chant come through her. She shut her eyes, giving herself over to it. She didn't really have a choice--it swept her up. She became bodiless, lost in the rhythm and some meaning she didn't quite understand.

This was a chant of connection. It opened her soul to every other soul that touched it, let her magic flow even into the very rocks--into time. She felt a slow thump in her body, almost a thrum. Her skin tingled with life.

As if she had entered the most vivid of dreams, she saw a man appear beside her, offering a hand. Harrai? No--he bore some resemblance, but this man was taller and thinner with features that reminded her of a cat. He also had black horns, ornamented with gold.

They stood in the great hall, with dancers all around them. Atorra's body kept thumping, faster and faster. She glanced down at her own hand before she offered it to the man.

She had veins and all those tiny lines on her skin like real people.

I'm flesh and blood. So that thumping...is my heart.

"Shall we dance?" the man asked. "It's all right if you don't know how. We don't have set rules. Just dance like you're back home."

"Our dances back home might be a little too wild for this place," she said, but it wasn't really her talking.

Atorra realized that the song had led her into this vision of the past, some other dragon queen's life.

Maybe this is the life of Lady Kirska's grandmother, she thought, because the great hall had much of the same furniture and the fashions hadn't changed that much either. What had changed was the mood, which felt lighter, and there seemed to be more people.

The dragon king swept her into his arms, grinning as he said, "Be as wild as you like. You set the fashions now, my queen."

Atorra's heart kept speeding up faster and faster as they danced, and he held her closer. She was hot with excitement, and a little sticky. *I'm sweating!*

But she didn't want to stop. She felt the thrill of the dance. She was the queen, and this handsome king was her husband. She couldn't tell if the feelings were her own or just an echo of the past, but it reminded her far too much of dancing with Harrai, and how his presence started to cause a reaction in her that felt dangerous, like a dam that could burst if it was not quickly shored up.

Thank the stars I'm not flesh and blood in real life. I can't control my body in this vision.

It wasn't that Fanarlem couldn't feel heat or nerves, but it remained in the realm of the mind. She had never realized just how much the bodies of flesh and blood people could betray all their feelings. It was overwhelming.

"Are you all right? You need a drink, I think," the king suggested, as the dance slowed down again. "Let's have a glass of water."

Atorra noticed two younger men studying them from the corner, whispering to each other. They looked almost like twins of her king, except

for the cool hostility on their faces.

"Don't mind them," the king said. "They're always plotting and scheming to try and undermine me. But they don't have my power--and they never will."

Younger brothers. Like Jarlan.

"I hope not," the queen said, with a hint of worry. "It doesn't always seem to end well when princes are plotting for the king's throne..."

"Princes can't do much here. When I took the throne I took on the power of my dragon blood. In Drai, the king is much more powerful than anyone else. We don't have a history of coups. Of course, if I don't serve well, my dragon companion would probably eat me, which is what keeps me in check." He grinned.

"That's a relief," the queen said, smiling back. "Or maybe I'd eat you. Like a spider."

"I don't doubt it." They both laughed together, and Atorra felt nothing but affection. They hadn't known each other that long, she sensed, but the marriage was already off to a good start.

"Atorra."

Someone squeezed her hand, hard. She looked down and suddenly the king was falling back into the shadows.

"Atorra!"

Lady Kirska was holding her hand, and the old woman was pale and perspiring.

Atorra realized she was flat on the ground. She must have collapsed again. "Are you all right? What happened?" She sat up, feeling the cold grip of Lady Kirska's wrinkled, fragile hand.

"I was holding back the darker side of the magic," Lady Kirska said, taking a slow breath. "I want you to sing the songs of bright magic first."

"I had a vision of the life of another queen," Atorra said. "We were dancing...I was flesh and blood..."

"Good."

"The king had two younger brothers who seemed very jealous."

"That must have been Queen Rasamir. Two of your lives back. She had a good long life. Most of her reign was very peaceful, and she died just before the War of the Crystals."

"The younger princes never caused any trouble?"

"Of course not. Our kings are quite powerful and so our kingdom is very stable."

"He said as much. I just wondered why I would see that vision in particular. If something happened."

"No mystery to it. You'll have many visions, most likely. I was doing my best to nudge you toward some pleasant visions, to help you see how our queens live. But it was probably Jarl's troublemaking that made you remember that one."

"Have Harrai and Jarlan always been at odds?"

"Since we lost their parents, yes. I blame myself. I was so absorbed with preparing Harrai to rule that I left Jarl to himself. He and Tashaya ended up left to their nannies and tutors more than I would have liked, but...I was also ruling the kingdom after I thought I was done with such things."

"It must have been awful to lose them all at once...and their dragons, too..."

Atorra felt a yearning just to know one had a family to lose in the first place. Of course, it must have been terrible--like losing Lorsen multiplied and magnified. At least Lorsen wasn't dead.

"Don't worry over all that, child. It's in the past," Lady Kirska said, with a hint of warning.

"But if you still don't know how they died..."

"The sorcerers will find out the why of it, eventually, just like they finally located you."

Does she think I would try to return to the place where they died?

But as soon as Atorra cracked the door open to that thought, curiosity flooded in. There was a mystery out there, and nothing would feel safe until it was solved.

OceanofPDF.com

PART II THE SHADOW



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



ATORRA

Spring turned from tentative blooms and cold nights to a glorious explosion of singing birds and bright flowers in the courtyard gardens. Atorra was always exhausted as Lady Kirska gave her a pause between songs, only to provoke her dormant telepathic ability. This was just as tiring; Lady Kirska would try to force her way into Atorra's mind or use her telekinesis to knock her off balance while crossing the bridge. She was an unforgiving teacher.

At first, Atorra felt defenseless, enduring the attacks with nothing but a rising anger. Every morning she woke up thinking she would refuse training, and then she would think of the dragon eggs and slump back against her pillow with a sigh, before allowing Soran to dress her in beautiful clothes and face another day of suffering.

And then, one day, she snapped.

Lady Kirska's mind knocked her down on the bridge, and she responded with a flare of her own mind, throwing the old woman back a few steps.

The rush of power surged through her, leaving heat beneath her skin. Lady Kirska smiled.

ONE DAY A WEEK, Lady Kirska spent the day in worship at the temple of Eskamir, and Atorra was free. She wandered the grounds and from a balcony she caught the sight of Harrai practicing his sword-fighting in one

of the courtyards, stripped to a thin shirt, his blade swiftly striking dummy targets. She lingered silently, cursing herself for admiring him, but she couldn't take her eyes off him. He couldn't see or sense her while he was concentrating on training, it seemed. He was so strong, so beautiful; the way his living body moved was so fluid and powerful.

Maybe I should go find some beetles to identify instead.

"Atorra, what on earth are you doing?" Tashaya found her an hour later, crouched by a flower patch.

"It's a blue rock beetle." Atorra pointed. "And the book says they're rare!"

"Does it do something interesting?"

"I guess I'll find out if I watch it," Atorra said. "I mean—unless you want to do something!"

"I do! I'm feeling good today and here to rescue you from lessons and studies. The day has come. Let's go see..." Tashaya spread her hands. "*Kenjo*."

They rode in a carriage with plush seats and curtains and a driver. Every time Atorra peered out the curtains, trying to take in the sights, people stopped in their tracks, trying to get a glimpse of her. Before long, curious commoners were trailing the carriage through traffic, and tension knotted her insides.

"The whole city's stopped to look at me, I think."

"I'm sorry. I asked for one of the more nondescript carriages, but word gets out anyway," Lady Tashaya said. "The people haven't seen much of you."

Soran had dressed her in a hooded cloak and a simple gown, and now she understood why he didn't even ask her what she wanted to wear. He knew.

As a result, Atorra didn't get the sight-seeing tour she hoped for, not when she was the sight for everyone else. She peeked out a crack in the curtains to see colorful houses, the gold-trimmed temple of Eskamir, painted statues of notable dragons in rows on the main boulevard, but any attempt to get a better look led to cries of excitement. "There's the queen!"

Worst of all were the people who stared at the carriage with fear, hugging their family members like she was the portent of an apocalypse. Jarlan had already hinted she might be seen as a bad omen.

They reached the theater in the early evening, a little before dusk. Kota Castle was simple in comparison to the extravagance of some of the civic buildings, and the theater was a good example; it was painted in red, blue and green with gold accents and life-size statues of figures in elaborate costumes. Tashaya took her to a side entrance, eluding the crowds, and straight to the royal box. Below them, people filed in and Atorra saw them look to her, and then more whispering. Tashaya waved down at them, and Atorra did the same.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect so much fuss over you," Tashaya said. "By the bright lady, they ought to be cheering; we've been looking for you for ages! It'll die down before long."

The people didn't cheer or jeer. They didn't stare at her like she was merchandise to be inspected, like the Daramons did. They glanced up at her quickly, like her presence unnerved them. When the lights dimmed for the show to begin, and the magic lights on the stage activated, panels shifting away to reveal the two singers....

For one beat the audience didn't cheer, but remained in that whispering hush. Atorra realized they had been so busy talking about her that they had nearly forgotten why they were here.

And they seemed afraid.

The fate of the whole kingdom depends on me...just me. And what am I? Atorra tried to block out the voice that whispered, Nothing. You are nothing. Barely a real person. A broken queen, the Queen of Disappointments.

Now everyone remembered to cheer the performers, and Tashaya briefly squeezed Atorra's hand before cheering herself. Everything was okay again as soon as Kenjo sang the first note, "I am but a man...humble of birth..."

A few girls screamed and were scolded by ushers. Tashaya watched him dreamily, elbows on the balcony.

Kenjo was undeniably handsome, dressed like a roguish traveler, apparently seeking his fortune in Kota from some farm village. He had a low, rich singing voice and a rapport with the audience. When he looked up to the balcony, Atorra felt like he was meeting her eyes and noticing her particularly. She flinched back, as by now she was worried she would throw him off. Tashaya covered her mouth, turning bright pink. "Nnngggh...he saw me...!"

For at least the next two hours, she lost herself in all the romance, heartbreak and joy of the singers, who led the audience through the course of a romance from Kenjo's first notice of a coquettish young merchant's daughter—too good for him, of course, but that never stopped them.

The two leads sang out their first love, the first misunderstanding, an even deeper misunderstanding that nearly tore them apart, a reconciliation, a wedding, the birth of a son, and finally, a death in battle, the man sending a telepathic goodbye to his wife from hundreds of miles away while she watches over the son who looks like his father.

By the end, everyone was crying or dabbing their eyes.

"Oh goddess, it's too unbearable, but I keep coming back for more," Tashaya groaned, gripping her wet handkerchief. "Wasn't it wonderful? Isn't Kenjo the most gorgeous man?"

"Yes!" Atorra gushed, but she was thinking more of Harrai than Kenjo. Kenjo probably couldn't battle off Jirra, his friends, and town guards like it was nothing.

"That part when he's like, 'I said I would die for you, and I will'?" Tashaya sighed again. "Goddess. Don't tell anyone, but what would I give for someone to say such things to me...in Kenjo's voice...with Kenjo's face..."

"I loved all of it," Atorra said. "I could relate to the songs even when I hadn't experienced exactly the same things. Daramon music never felt like it was written for me."

"We can come back anytime," Tashaya said. "In a few weeks they'll change the performers and the song list for the summer season."

They slipped back out the side doors, avoiding prying eyes. Night had fallen while they were in the windowless theater, giving Atorra the feeling she had skipped through a pocket of time. She dared to peer out the carriage window, now that the shadows offered some protection. Cafes and smaller concert halls were bustling with life, magical lights sparkling near and far, and dragons occasionally flew overhead.

"I wish I could just go to cafes at night, unnoticed," she said. "It looks so...enchanting."

"You and me both. But how about you ask Soran to mix us drinks back at the castle? Oh, you can't drink. Wait. He could mix us desserts!"

"Hot chocolate?"

"Oh, what is that?" Tashaya asked, intrigued.

"Stupid!" a stranger barked, just outside the carriage.

There was a whacking noise and a frightened screech. Atorra poked her head out the window.

Some boys were throwing rocks at a wyvern. It was trying to run away but the boys encircled it, preventing it from escaping, and it seemed to have a broken wing. Wyverns looked similar to dragons, but were only about the size of cats, and they didn't have the high intelligence and magic. They were, however, very cute.

Without even thinking, Atorra opened the carriage door. "Stop!" she shouted.

Rage boiled inside her, seeing the poor animal. "Stop the carriage! And stop hurting that poor thing!"

"This 'poor thing' is the stupidest wyvern ever born," the lead boy snapped, tossing another rock toward it.

"It's the doll girl!" another boy cried, getting a better look at her.

One of the other boys kicked the wyvern.

Atorra felt the heat of power stirring inside her. She had tasted enough to summon it up when needed, and now she flung out her hand and felt her mind respond. A wave of telekinesis threw the boys back.

"I am the *queen*," she said. "And if I hear of anyone throwing rocks at innocent creatures, I'll send my guard to your houses. Do you understand me?"

She hardly recognized herself, but the words slipped out easily.

"Do you?" she demanded, when they seemed frozen.

"Yes!" one of them cried out, with fear in his voice.

"Please forgive us, my lady," one of the more timid boys whimpered, before they all turned and started hurrying off in a pack, laughing nervously.

Well, that *felt weirdly natural*. Atorra imagined every queen who came before her would have done the same.

Atorra picked up the wyvern. It was shaking, still holding out its one wing stiffly. It looked female, based on its smaller size and sleek head.

"Atorra! Come, bring it into the carriage!" Tashaya cried. "By the lady, you were amazing! Was that the song magic in your voice? All my hairs stood on end!"

"Was it? I know I used telekinesis. That was amazing! They scurried off like scared rabbits!"

"Is it hurt?"

Now they were both trying to soothe the wyvern, and Tashaya fumbled in her bag for a bottle. "This is a healing potion for my sickness, so maybe..." She spilled a few drops into her palm and showed it to the wyvern.

The wyvern sniffed it and then looked blank and pushed Tashaya's hand away with her small reptilian one. It turned back to Atorra and stared earnestly at her, then chittered in a high little voice, almost like a peeping chick.

"She likes you!" Tashaya laughed.

The tip of the wyvern's tongue was still sticking out, just hanging there. Atorra started laughing too.

"Sweet girl! You do look a little bit ridiculous." Tashaya sputtered. "Although I don't know how anyone could throw a rock at *that* face."

The wyvern touched Atorra's face with her tiny one and then just left the hand on her cheek, still staring at her with her tongue out.

"She doesn't look ridiculous!" Atorra protested. "Well..."

"I ruv roo, Atorra," Tashaya sing-songed, perfectly capturing the wyvern's expression.

"I ruv *roo*," Atorra replied, and now they both shrieked with laughter while the wyvern let out a small "reet!" of concern.

"I wonder if she belongs to someone."

"They'd better give her to their queen if she does," Tashaya said. "You clearly have a new friend!"

The wyvern swallowed, tucking her tongue in. Her eyes slitted, like she was finally calming down, and she sniffed Atorra's nose, and then licked it, before climbing onto her head and laying down.

"Good practice for wearing a formal crown at the royal holidays," Tashaya said, as she reached up to apply the healing medicine topically to Atorra's new headwear.

Indeed, Atorra was still carrying a sleeping wyvern on her head when they walked into the castle to go see about hot chocolate in Tashaya's room.

Harrai was crossing the courtyard with some papers in his arms. "What is on your—um. I thought you went to the theater."

"We saw boys throwing rocks at her on our way home," Atorra said. "They hurt her wing. Tashaya gave her some medicine."

"Where did she come from?" Harrai asked.

"I don't know."

"I can inquire to make sure she doesn't belong to someone," Harrai said.

"But I won't give her back unless it's a good place."

"Atorra leapt out of the carriage and shouted at those boys," Tashaya said.

Now Harrai was frowning at her.

"What? What did I do? Was that unqueenly of me? I couldn't just let them hurt her." As she spoke, the wyvern stirred, yawned, made a full turn atop her head, and went back to sleep.

"You could have been hurt," Harrai said, looking slightly embarrassed, then frowning again. "I'll make inquiries but assuming she isn't the beloved pet of a child, I can't imagine her finding a better home."

"You're not angry at me for dragging home a pet?"

"Of course not."

"Well, you looked it."

"You did," Tashaya said.

Harrai growled. "Does she have a name?"

"Not yet."

"She looks like Berrajet the Gray," he suggested.

"A very beloved dragon of history," Tashaya explained.

"Berrajet it is," Atorra said. "Maybe you're wiser than you look, but either way I hope I get to keep you."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ATORRA

"Chocolate is special," Soran said, waving his hands as if speaking of a mystic object. "It only grows in the Daramon lands."

"I didn't know," Atorra said. "It's just something men would talk about like it was wonderful. We could have berries instead."

"Nonsense! You are the queen. You want hot chocolate, I'll make you hot chocolate. I know we have some in the kitchens. I'm *glad* you're asking for something indulgent." He paused. "How do I make hot chocolate?"

"I don't know!"

"I assume you heat up chocolate," Tashaya said, squeezing a large pillow as she lounged on the sofa. "And sugar or honey?"

"It's a drink," Atorra said.

"Is it diluted in a sweet wine?" Tashaya asked.

"Mead, maybe," Soran suggested.

"Maybe? I don't know about preparing food. Does that sound good?"

"Sure, maybe," Soran said. "I'll try it. This is how great discoveries are made. You, enjoy yourselves. Lounge about in the utmost decadence and I will be your humble servant." He bowed his way out the door.

Atorra laughed. "I'm not sure I'll ever be comfortable with having a humble servant."

"I think it's his kink," Tashaya whispered, and now they both giggled. Berrajet gazed lovingly into Atorra's eyes, periodically placing a little hand on her cheek, and that made them laugh harder.

"It's her kink too," Tashya added.

"Have you ever...thought about doing anything with him?"

"Are you thinking about it?"

"Oh, no, not me! It just seems like...you know...he'd be gentle with you and you have a good rapport."

"I'm somewhat terrified of developing feelings for someone. I'm sure it would end in disaster."

"Because of your curse?"

"Of course. I'd break his heart, because he'd be saddled with me, and I'd be such a burden. It'd break my heart too, because I think it would make me want more. Like a doorway opening up that I'm trying to keep shut. If I loved someone who had a dragon companion, it would make me think how I should have one. If he went to war, it would make me think how I should have been a warrior sorceress like my mother..."

"Your mother was a warrior sorceress?"

"Oh, yes! You'll hear stories about her." Tashaya suddenly burst into laughter again.

"What?"

"They called her Imra the Sweaty. I guess when she cast spells she would just drip everywhere... Well, probably because she was so into it! She was quite powerful. Very intense, I'm told. Maybe like Lady Kirska. She might have been a terrible mother for all I know."

"I'm sure she would have loved you."

"I might have been disappointing."

"I know what that's like..."

"Magic study is so exhausting! I don't blame you. Sometimes I dream of following her path but then I remember how hard it is. I don't have a warrior's soul. Astrologically, I'm pure deer."

"What's that?"

"Astrology? You know, when you're born the way the planets tune to the earth's crystals informs your personality," Tashaya said. "I was born just after the summer solstice so I'm a deer. We're gentle and sensitive, but we're loyal friends. Do you know when you were born?"

"No...we never knew our birthdays. I suppose I wasn't really born anyway, I was just created."

"Of course that counts! Dear me, what do I make of you if I don't know what your sign is? You don't even know the season? I bet I could guess."

"I think it was autumn."

"Autumn? Well, you're definitely not a spider. You could be a wyvern! That would suit the Queen of Songs all too well. But you could also be a raven..."

"I like both of those."

"I'll have to decide once I get to know you better, and then we'll give you an honorary birthday. My birthday is in summer, so I always have a sunrise picnic. I like to celebrate being alive since it's always been a little tenuous for me, but I feel as if everyone deserves a day for that. Harrai's birthday is also in autumn, but *he* is a spider."

"What does that mean?"

"Spiders are quiet and hard-working but they also tend to brood and worry. It's terribly accurate! Jarlan is a moose, meanwhile. They like to lock horns."

"I've certainly seen that! I never knew all this."

"I can give you a book about it."

They talked about astrology for half an hour at least. Berrajet chased spiders out of the corners, but finally she sighed, slowly drifting to sleep against Atorra's chest. Her tongue was out again, her eyes still half open, but she breathed heavily, and then snored a little.

"Look at this face..." Atorra ran a finger along the wyvern's sleek body. She didn't stir.

"I've never seen a wyvern look so silly. Berrajet is too fancy a name for her."

"Berry Boo," Atorra said.

"Boo for short."

The door flung open and Soran brought in a tray of cups. The wyvern's head lifted, half-startled and confused. Tashaya pushed her tongue in with her finger. "Be a lady, Boo."

"I think I've done it," Soran said. "The mead with chocolate was...bad. Although I sampled enough that I almost changed my mind. Then I thought, Daramons drink milk! Milk must be the base. So I warmed nut milk and added a spoonful of the dark clarified butter. And a pinch of spice too. Try that!"

"It smells wonderful," Tashaya said.

"Mmm..." Atorra took a sip just as Soran said, "Careful! It's hot. Drink it slowly." Soran and Tashaya were still blowing on theirs.

"Mm...ow! Ohh. I'm too impatient. It's so good. No, Boo, this is ours."

"I thought her name was Berrajet," Soran said. "She looks like a Boo, though."

"She does," Atorra said, smiling as Boo tried to poke her nose in his cup next.

"I must say," he admitted a moment later, "there is something to be said for spending time with ladies who don't want to have sex with me. Unless you changed your minds, of course."

"Oh, poor rejected Soran," Tashaya teased.

"I'm being sincere. It's nice to see friendships. Hear laughter. We've been pretty serious around here."

"That's true. I can't remember when I've laughed this much," Tashaya said, looking at Atorra fondly.

"I used to laugh like this all the time with my best friend," Atorra said, feeling the nervous clench of hope and worry inside her that came whenever she thought of Lorsen.

She'll be here soon. They'll find her. She and Tashaya will get along just as well, I just know it. And she'll adore Soran. Atorra was still imagining what a good match those two might be. Both flirtatious and fun, both existing to serve others...but perhaps ready to serve their own hearts. And Lorsen would need someone to comfort her after she was rescued.

"I hope we'll do for now," Tashaya said.

"You'll more than do! Aside from a few stares and rock-throwing boys, it's been a perfect evening. I think I can handle all these lessons and even Jarlan if I have moments like this."

"Cheers to that, my lady," Soran said. "But we will need to find a less rare midnight snack or the cooks will murder me."

* * *

Come morning, Atorra was still glowing with the happiness that only friendship could bring, and even better—Soran informed her that Lady Kirska had other obligations come up and the day's lessons were canceled.

"I'm sure she expects you to study," he said, gently tying her sash. "But you can do whatever you want."

"I'll have breakfast with Tashaya, then. Maybe we can set up some tests for Boo to see if she can do anything besides stare at me and pat my face..." Boo was, even now, staring at her as she was getting dressed, looking like she urgently wanted to climb onto Atorra's shoulders or head.

"Oh, I've heard Tashaya is too tired today." His brows furrowed. "She's always in some pain, I gather, and it takes a lot out of her to go have fun."

"She seemed fine just last night..."

"I'm sure she hid it for you. And of course, she wants to have fun, like anyone else, and that carries her through for a little while, but....then she has to recover. It might be a few days before you can see her again."

Worry twisted inside her. "Could Tashaya die? Or is it stable?"

Soran looked reluctant. "I don't really know." He sighed. "It does seem like she's getting a little worse."

"How could it be that no one can heal her?" Atorra's hands formed fists. "I thought healers...I mean...is it that hard? Can't they ease any pain?"

"Usually. But not absolutely always. Some curses are just very very tricky to break."

"But my songs could..."

Soran clamped a hand on her shoulder. "We have no idea. Don't pressure yourself too much. You have more than enough to worry about."

"But if learning these songs doesn't help Tashaya...what good is magic if it can't help the people you care about? No one else wants anything to do with me. And last night was so fun. It just feels so unfair that the kindest person in the whole castle would be cursed...or even dying..." Atorra turned from the mirror. She didn't want to see her own face look sad and angry. "Can I do anything for her?"

"She doesn't want her friends to think of her sick," Soran said. "But she'll be all right. Try not to let it get to you too much. I'm sure she still has plenty of years left. Maybe as many as anyone. We don't really know. Would you like me to take you into town? Shopping? A performance?"

"No...I think I will just study," Atorra sighed. "I feel more in a punishing kind of mood somehow. If I can remember all my power and break that curse, well...maybe that's the fire I need."

Soran nodded. "That is what a queen would say."

But Atorra didn't really feel like a queen. As she walked to the castle library to study alone, she just felt small.

As she turned down the hall to the library, she nearly bumped into Harrai. "Where are you going?" he asked.

He always looked so stern, with his golden eyes narrowing, the sharp lines of his face, and his tall body made even taller by the forbidding black horns. His light armor and sword gleamed with accents of dragon scale and gold over black tunic and leather boots. He looked like he was heading somewhere.

"Just to study," she said. "Lady Kirska wants me to learn about the lineage of all the former—"

"Not today," he said. "You're coming with me."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



ATORRA

"Am I in trouble?" Atorra struggled to keep up with his pace. He always looked severe, and he stormed everywhere. She couldn't read his moods. Or maybe he only had one mood.

"Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"You always look upset."

"Do I?"

"Yes!"

"I suppose no one tells the king he looks upset." Harrai frowned. "Or maybe I am always upset, after all. But, I heard you have a free day. So do I. I was going to ride Dirjet, and it has come to my attention that you've never ridden Dosskarja."

"Ridden? Like flying?"

"Yes. You're overdue to start learning."

Atorra tamped down what remained of her fear of heights. Flying with Dosskarja sounded wonderful, in all other respects. "Okay. Should I put Boo in my room? I mean—Berrajet?" she added hastily, when Harrai cocked a judgmental brow at the name.

"It only took you one evening to turn such a dignified name to 'Boo'?" He looked at Boo, who was persistently licking a spot on Atorra's sleeve for no apparent reason. Boo's head snapped up when she noticed the attention.

"Meep?" she said.

"Meep? Oh, come on, Berrajet, help me out here," he said. "Give me a good squawk."

"Meep?"

"She *is* a Boo," Atorra said.

He groaned. "Well, Boo can come with us and stay on your shoulders."

"I'm not sure I trust Boo not to fall to her death."

They reached the sky bridge, and Atorra gripped Boo tight.

"Once you're able to tap into your telekinetic powers, none of this will be an issue," Harrai said.

"Yes, so everyone reminds me! Constantly. Everything will be better once I tap into my powers, thank you, sir!" She was slowly making her way across, gripping the ropes. He outpaced her with an occasional impatient glance behind him. "I *am* tapping into my powers, just not with the speed of a glorious prodigy that you expect. I rescued Boo from a boy who was hitting her with rocks, and I threw him back with telekinesis."

He stopped and waited for her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to start off that way. I—I want to take you flying today." His voice lowered, nearly carried off on the wind, gruff.

"Why?"

"Why? It's what kings and queens do. I should make some effort at normalcy..." He offered a hand as they reached the end of the bridge. Was she imagining that his touch lingered on purpose for just a moment?

I must be. Once in a while, I start to think...and then it's gone.

His touch left a lingering warmth on her skin. She tried to rub it away. She hated that any part of her felt a pull to him.

My lord! My queen! Dirjet greeted them warmly, lowering her head to Harrai. He smoothed a hand over her nose in greeting, and Atorra felt the dragon's hot breath, scented of metal and smoke and mountain. "Are we riding today?"

"Yes. Both of us," Harrai said.

Dosskarja gave Atorra a lofty look from his full height, but his voice was teasing when he said. "I've seen you walk the bridge. I've already prepared myself for the training saddle...as much as I hate saddles."

"I'm sorry," Atorra said. "Maybe it'll just be this once?"

He snorted.

Atorra sensed that Dosskarja was just jesting with her, but this bemused snort frayed her last shred of patience.

"Never mind. Forget the saddle," she said.

"I admire your spirit. But I think--"

"No," Atorra insisted. "I won't fall. And if I did fall, one of you would catch me. And if none of you caught me, I still wouldn't die. So...no saddle."

She caught a flash of smile from Harrai before it was gone. "You heard the lady. Then, we can get right to it while the day is young." He went to her side and offered her a hand to climb up on Dosskarja's back. As soon as she started to climb, Boo stumbled and nearly fell off her shoulders, digging her tiny claws through Atorra's dress and right into her skin. Harrai removed Boo from her shoulders. "Maybe we will leave this ridiculous creature here until we get back, though."

I'll play with her, Het offered happily. The huge red dragon tossed some tiny object toward Boo, who caught it in her mouth midair and then let out a happy meep, immediately dropping it.

Atorra clambered ungracefully onto Dosskarja's back and situated herself between the ridges running down his spine. They looked hard as rock but were actually quite smooth and slightly pliable.

Harrai, meanwhile, climbed on Dirjet's head and held onto her horns. When she lifted her head, he shot above her. "Comfortable enough, Atorra?"

"I—think so. Should I be riding on his head?"

"This is an advanced position," Harrai said. "It's better for communication with your dragon, but you don't have as secure a seat. You can try it once you're comfortable on his back. Let's go."

"Show-off," she whispered, and Dosskarja chuckled.

The dragons walked to the great gates, which swung open for their approach, probably controlled by the dragons' own telepathy. Atorra could feel the spark of it around her, a tingling in the air. She bit her lip, vowing she wouldn't scream when Dosskarja took flight.

I will keep you safe, little queen, he said.

As the gates opened, Dirjet spread her wings and took flight, her powerful hind legs pushing off and her wings flapping in broad strokes that rippled the air, making a heavy sound like sails in a hard wind. Dosskarja was just behind her.

Atorra shut her eyes and gripped tight. Her legs clutched at Dosskarja's neck, her hands clung to reins and scales, her nails scrambled for a grip

even as it occurred to her that her nails could just break off. She felt a dizzying sensation, her stomach getting left behind--

And I don't even have a stomach. Stars, how would this feel if I did? This must be nausea...

Look around, my lady. I have you, Dosskarja said.

His voice was in her head, full of deep reassurance, and she forced her eyes open.

"Oh..."

They were already much higher than she imagined, nearly to the mountain tops, and beneath her was the entire city of Kota. The towers of the castle looked so small, the entire city just a miniature tucked into a dip in the mountain ranges. The road she first came in on was a tiny string following the larger ribbon of a shining river.

To the west, the east, the north...in every other direction the jagged, snow-capped peaks of mountains slashed at the sky. She realized how isolated Kota really was, but it also seemed like a shelter, a jewel tucked in the mountains' breast.

Harrai was grinning, sitting easy on Dirjet's head. Then he looked at her. "Beautiful, huh?" she saw him mouth, but the wind caught the words, and he switched to telepathic speech instead. *Are you holding up like a queen who doesn't need a saddle?*

I think so, she thought back. Since he had opened the channel, she felt she could send her thoughts back to him, and it did seem to work. In fact, she realized, maybe this simple telepathy was starting to come to her. *I caught you smiling for a minute before you remembered to look properly severe.*

He smiled again, although irritably. *I don't mean to look like that all the time.*

Just most of the time?

Exactly. He and Dirjet led the way, but Dosskarja was always just behind, and Atorra felt her dragon itching to take the lead. She could tell the dragons loved to spread their wings, flying so far with a powerful speed that soon Kota was out of sight. When she looked down, she saw strata of trees and rocks and snow, depending on the elevation. In smaller valleys, horned animals moved in herds and creeks rushed down from the snow pack as the weather warmed.

Atorra felt the entire world expand within moments. Up until now, Kota Castle felt fairly similar to the House. Stuck in her chambers most of the time, with one dear friend, daily studies, and gnawing anxiety about her future role.

Now all that shed away.

This is the world, she thought. It's absolutely huge.

- *Yes,* Harrai replied. *I feel the same. I suppose that's why I'm always so—*
 - *I didn't realize I left my thoughts open!*
- *It happens.* He swept a hand toward her. *Anyway. It is different out here. It feels so free. I sometimes wonder if my ancestors felt like this all the time. Before the storm.*
 - *You mean...when your parents died?* she asked carefully.
 - *Exactly.* He looked ahead—to the northwest.

The rest of the sky was clear today, with just a few white streaks of cloud, but in the north, a storm cloud of the heaviest gray roiled over the jagged, snowy peaks. Now that he pointed it out, that one isolated storm cloud stuck out like a shadow-clad demon hovering at the edge of a colorful party.

- *Is that where...it happened?* she asked.
- *That's it. Don't go that way if you fly alone.*
- *How close can we get to it, while still being safely far away?*
- *Don't mess with it,* he said.
- *I don't want to mess with it. At least, not right now. But why am I here if not to mess with it someday?*
 - *You're here to help the eggs hatch.*
- *Maybe.* Atorra thought of Tashaya. If I walked into her room today, what would I see?

An image flashed to mind. Tashaya sweating, writhing with pain. A nurse putting a damp cloth to her head, taking her hand. Trying to take the pain away. Tashaya panted, moaned. It never worked for long. She was so exhausted...so exhausted of this that sometimes she just wanted to die...

Atorra tugged the reins. She tried to focus her thoughts on Dosskarja alone. **Take me as close to there as you can—safely*.*

As you wish, my lady. While Harrai was scared for her, Dosskarja was as calm as ever—as if he expected this request.

"Atorra!" Harrai cried aloud as Dosskarja finally swept by Dirjet, leaving her behind. "Dosskarja, this is as close as we need to get."

It's safe until White Wing's Rest, Dosskarja said. *And she's right. She is our queen, and if anyone can break the darkness, it's her. She ought to at least taste it.*

Dosskarja pressed onward, his wings spread wide. The storm cloud seemed far away even as the landscape raced by below them. Atorra no longer had any fear of being on Dosskarja's back.

This feels too right to scare me.

Harrai and Dirjet stayed close, but she felt Harrai's fear, his mind brushing hers, just on the edge of calling her back.

Now they were close enough that she could see the distinctive shape of the clouds to the north, the dark thunderheads constantly changing shape, as if the storm was sucking itself inward, then billowing out again at the base.

Dosskarja slowed down until he was just hovering in the air. *I won't get closer than this, my lady--not today.* But you can get a good look from here, *I believe?*

And then, she heard a different voice.

Come closer...

At first she thought she imagined it: the familiar tone. Soft, low, seductive...

I don't want to hurt you. I would speak to the queen. I'll tell you how to cure your friend.

"Get just a little closer," Atorra said, patting Dosskarja's back. The voice almost felt too distant to catch; she was straining to hear it. "I can't...quite see..."

I'll welcome you here, the voice said. Do they welcome you? The royal family? The court of Kota? Are they really your friends?

If they really missed you, would they care what form you take?

You're not a doll. You're not broken.

You are the most powerful soul walking this earth, Atorra. Have they made that clear to you?

Dosskarja flew closer.

I don't trust you, she thought. I don't know what you are. Why did you kill Harrai's parents and curse Tashaya?

They killed me first, the voice said softly, and Atorra felt it now.

This was the voice of something dead. Something the royal family of Kota had seen as an enemy.

Who are you? Atorra asked.

You want my name, my lady?

"Atorra!" Harrai shouted, and she heard his voice but moreso, she *felt* him in her head, intercepting the voice. The dark clouds were billowing outward, getting closer, almost like a volcanic eruption flowing toward her, and lightning suddenly lanced through the sky, charging the air.

Dosskarja probably should have turned around. He did not. Atorra felt lured, and her dragon seemed to follow the voice as sure as she did.

Ask me for my name.

Atorra's hands were no longer holding the reins, her legs no longer gripping Dosskarja's back, but she didn't even realize it until it was too late. She had been straining to hear the voice, wanting to ask for its name...wanting to know why it knew hers already—

But she couldn't. Because Harrai was in her head, gripping her mind tight in his own. She felt herself cut off from the voice, blocked from replying—

As Dosskarja turned, something pulled her toward the clouds, and suddenly her body lost all weight, all sense of place. She was set loose, falling--

Not quite falling. Flying.

Flying toward an unknown name.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Harrai

HARRAI STOPPED TRYING to merely prevent this from happening. He launched off Dirjet's back, releasing his most powerful magic.

His dragon blood burst forth, and he hissed briefly with the pain of it. His form changed smoothly despite the burning sensation, his body contorting into wings and fangs and scales. He shot right for Atorra. With every second, she was growing smaller, farther away. He whipped his wings, strained his telekinesis—urged the very wind to hand her over. Every power he possessed stirred to its potential at once.

This was the power he was given, as king. He spent hours upon hours training. But none of that mattered. Even if he never trained, he would be the most powerful of kings.

And Atorra was his queen.

You're not taking her, he snarled at his nameless, bodiless foe.

But Atorra was still flying closer to the storm, and Harrai felt an odd weakness seep into his bones.

It's got Dosskarja too. I'll help to draw her in! Dirjet cried. *Dosskarja, snap out of it!*

Atorra's dragon seemed caught in the same thrall as his queen. It was not until Dirjet shouted into his mind that he finally twisted in mid-air and went to flank Harrai.

Now the two dragon companions were fighting with him to pull her back.

Atorra screamed, as if they were tearing her apart, as the dragons tugged at her with their telekinesis to pull her small body back from the storm, and Harrai pushed onward, even against this unsettling feeling that he was entering the place of death.

She looked so vulnerable, and all he could think was how long they had searched for her. How precious she was.

How she had borne all this so bravely, and mostly all alone.

I thought I was protecting her, but she needed more. She needed... Or maybe it's that I need her more than I wanted to admit.

His wings beat the air and his neck craned for her. Finally, his teeth caught her clothes. Relief flooded him as he felt the small weight of her.

Turn back! His thoughts snapped at the two dragons.

They were already on the move, all of them tearing away from that place as quickly as they could. Atorra was limp in his jaws, but he pressed his tongue against her and drew her inside his mouth. She didn't entirely fit, but he kept his teeth around her as tight as he dared. He'd rather hurt her than lose her.

He felt dragon flame stirring inside him, and tamped it down frantically. Goddess, if he burnt her by accident... He wasn't used to this form at all. He'd only transformed a couple of times in his life. It took so much out of him. A last resort, Grandmother said, but one he should never hesitate to use when the time was right.

They didn't stop until they were nearly home. The windmills and mountain sheep herds were in sight when he finally stopped to check on her at the picnic grounds on the side of Lura's Mountain. He dropped to the grass, set her down gently, and finally let go of the dragon form. He staggered and nearly collapsed next to her as the adrenaline rushed out of him.

He nudged her collar aside to check for the mark, praying the darkness had not been able to come home with her. Maybe her Fanarlem form would save her. He found nothing. "Atorra..." He took her hand. Of course, her body had no heat or pulse. He nudged her mind instead.

She was limp in his arms.

"Atorra..." *Atorra!*

Each moment stretched eternal as he started to feel as if he really was just holding a doll, an utterly lifeless pile of wood and stuffing, her head lolling when he tried to lift her.

Memories of his parents' funerals crept into his mind.

Reaching out to carefully touch his mother, and how her skin was as cold as the great stone hall...

It seemed to take forever before he truly believed and accepted their deaths, and now he realized that he'd put Atorra in great danger. She might never wake up. This might be the end of it all.

Carefully supporting her head, he pulled her closer to him. "Atorra... please. Please don't go. I know I haven't been—much of a husband. I have no excuse for that either, except maybe that I'm not very good with— I probably don't know how to be a good husband to anyone."

He felt her shift slightly in his arms. Her eyes slowly opened.

"Harrai..." Her eyes widened. Her mouth opened a little, and trembled. She looked shaken and relieved, clutching at his shirt.

"Thank Eskamir," he breathed. His skin warmed, wondering if she'd heard him. How did I ever find her strange or less real than a Miralem? The way she's looking at me now...

I wish I didn't even have to take her back to the castle. "What happened back there?" he asked. "Something--touched you. Pulled you forward."

"I heard this voice." She bit her lip. "Did you turn into a dragon? Or did I imagine that part?"

"Yes. That's the legacy of my dragon grandfathers. What did the voice say?"

"It wanted me to ask for its name."

"But you didn't?"

"No."

"Good. Names are part of an old magic."

"Like the songs?"

"Yes. I've studied old magic quite a bit. Not to use it, of course. It isn't something you can just *use* anymore. Names used to be more powerful."

"So then...what was that?" Atorra asked.

"I don't know. But it's old...and something stirred it up when I was a boy. That's the closest I've ever been to it." His heart was still hammering, stealing the weight from his words. He realized how tightly he was gripping her hand.

"It wasn't the first time I heard that voice," she murmured. "It was the same one I heard the first time I tried to sing the songs."

"Does it say anything else?"

Her eyes hooded. "Yes. It says...I'm very powerful. Like, the most powerful person in the world." She scoffed a little, but she didn't look at him. "And that I deserve better."

"It's probably not wrong."

"I don't like the idea of anyone *deserving* anything," Atorra said. "The Daramons said all Fanarlem deserved their fate."

"Why didn't you tell me about this voice before?"

"I didn't want you think *I* was thinking those things. That I'm completely ungrateful to you for rescuing me from Aiskan Nal, and I don't care what happens to the dragons. Neither are true."

"I won't think that." He looked at her troubled eyes and realized this was the second time now that he'd forgotten she was artificial, forgotten she was a Fanarlem at all.

And I should forget. Nothing about her is artificial on the inside.

She is my wife, even though I've never thought of her that way. If she was flesh and blood, even Halnari, even from some remote tribe with a dialect as thick as muddy water, this would all be different. Everyone would expect more from us--not just children, but love.

Would I have known how to offer it?

"You do deserve better," he said. "I can't always control Jarlan, but I realize...I've been cold to you. And I should be setting an example to the court."

"How? You don't have to pretend to like me. I don't want that."

"I'm starting to think I'm pretending *not* to like you."

"Because I embarrass you," she snapped.

"I'm afraid of you."

"Oh please!"

"When I became king, under the tutelage of my grandmother, I quickly learned not to show my feelings. I knew everyone was scared by the darkness, and my parents' death, and the Daramons rumbling of war again. How long can you hide your feelings before you're not sure if you have them anymore? And all those dangers are still with us."

"So this whole time you just don't want to have feelings for me because you don't want someone else to lose? That old story? I'd believe it if you ever looked at me like—"

"How do you think I'm looking at you now?" he shouted. Then he hissed a curse under his breath, looking away. "I'm sorry. I'm not good at

this. I hardly know what I feel, except that when I look at you, you're not foreign anymore. Something changed. I've put you through nothing but shit, yet when you started flying, there was pure joy on your face. When you came home with that ridiculous, broken-winged wyvern...and I see you laughing with Tashaya...well. I'm starting to realize I look forward to seeing you around the castle, far more than anyone else. Especially when you're smiling and laughing, which you are, surprisingly often, considering how little we've given you to laugh over."

"Harrai..." Her face finally dropped its defenses. "Well, I never do see you laugh, so it's no wonder that would break you down eventually..."

"Break me down," he said, looking at her, still prone on the ground while he leaned over her. She was full of life, more than he was. How had he not seen it from the very beginning? "That is what you do," he murmured, and then he kissed her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY



ATORRA

HARRAI'S LIPS MET HERS, his hand moved to her back, and she arched toward him--a reflex she didn't expect. Even though he was kissing her slowly, and shallowly, he managed to be rough. Every inch of his body felt honed for battle, even his lips--like they didn't know how to love gently, but only to make a strategic breach.

It was working. Her lips parted for him. He drew her body closer to his, and she felt like jelly in his arms.

Of course, the jelly feeling might also be from almost getting lured into the storm.

Now, he was supporting her, holding her, his arm encircling her. She felt surprisingly safe.

Then, she came to her senses. "Stop."

He jerked back almost like it was a military order. "Sorry."

"It's just--I don't want this unless it's how you really feel. In the court too. In front of everyone."

"I wouldn't kiss anyone like this in front of the court."

"It isn't allowed?"

"No. It's--"

"Frowned upon?"

"I don't show this side of myself to the court."

"Well, maybe you should."

"I need to show strength."

"And loving someone is weak? Were your parents this cold?"

His eyes went distant. "My father was. My mother wasn't. He only showed a gentler side to her. But she was...delightful. Sometimes you remind me of her, although I don't want to say it. I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to compare your wife to your mother."

"If you thought your mother was delightful, I'll take it! I would love to be delightful! I know I have no experience with royal courts, or really, any groups of people besides Fanarlem concubines and the men who buy them. But...I think the court of Drai is as dark as that storm. You're so distant and brooding. Jarlan is so angry. Lady Kirska is so strict, so focused on all of us doing what's best for the kingdom. Tashaya seems so lonely. I thought people who were free would be...a little more joyful."

"But we're not free."

"You *are* free! Who is making this prison? You are! What if you just told your grandmother to leave you alone, canceled your meetings, and spent a whole day flying? Would they take your crown away? Put you in the dungeons? Could Jarlan take the crown? You said you have power he'll never have."

"No one can take the crown from me. But the people could lose faith and trust in me, and that would be the worst fate I can think of."

"But would they, really? If the king laughed, and looked like he actually enjoyed dancing, and soared over the city with Dirjet? If he wasn't so afraid of that darkness, or a war that might come someday?"

As she spoke, his eyes went dark and hard as the rocks of a riverbed, and she hoped she wasn't saying too much. *I probably am. He's still the king. What do I really know?*

I'm making him angry.

Then—

He kissed her again.

Harder. Deeper. His kisses did feel angry.

His fingers dug at her clothes, bunching them up until they were tight against her skin, and he pulled her so close she could feel his heart beating fast, the sweat soaked through his shirt, his hard body.

She was briefly overwhelmed with him, the raw power of him, the masculine scent of his skin, the way he suddenly wanted her.

I could want him too. I could want him very badly.

Something was changing fast between them, making them both vulnerable, making it all feel much more dangerous than those clouds.

But she didn't stop him.

"You're right," he said. "We opened the door and let the darkness in. And you're my beacon."

"Not a beacon," she said. "Because I can't light Drai by myself. We're all candles and I just happen to have a flame you can borrow. But I certainly don't have all the answers. I don't know how to help Tashaya, and I don't know what...that was." She motioned out toward the northern mountains.

"We need to be true partners," he said. "I see that now. You are my wife, Atorra. From this day forward, everyone in court will know it."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



ATORRA

ONCE THEY FLEW BACK to Kota, Harrai had to rush off to the delayed meeting, and Atorra got back to her stack of books. She was too distracted to get much reading done and spent more time tossing a crumpled piece of paper to Boo and watching her lose it under the same shelf a dozen times. Each time Boo would stick her little arm under the shelf, desperately trying to get it out, until Atorra took pity on her.

Five seconds later? Back under the shelf.

"Breet!" Boo chirped excitedly when Atorra came to fetch it for the dozenth time.

"I'm starting to think I'm being played, Boo."

As the sun was setting, she was summoned to dress for dinner. Soran had laid out a strapless gown with a scaled bodice that gleamed green-gold and a long skirt of midnight blue embroidered with scarlet flames leaping around the hem.

Atorra stopped short when she saw it. It was utterly gorgeous, and yet—"I can't wear that," she said.

"The king went to the dressmaker today and requested it."

"Showing off so much skin? Or—there's a jacket that goes with it or something?"

"He said it is his intention to show his pride in you tonight," Soran said, with a barely suppressed smile. "You must have made quite an impression this morning."

Atorra rubbed her wrists a little nervously. Everyone could see the little line of stitches at her wrists, no matter what she wore, but she'd never displayed the stitches at her shoulders and neck so openly, or the stick-figure shape of her arms. Compared to the muscles that moved gracefully under Harrai's arms and shoulders or Tashaya's soft curves, Atorra felt all too aware that she was made for Daramons who liked their fragile, stitched-up dolls. The more skin she showed, the more obvious it was that she wasn't real. All those Miralem eyes on her was a troubling thought.

But I understand what he's trying to do. I did accuse him of being embarrassed of me. This is the opposite of that. So I don't dare get embarrassed myself.

"All right, Soran...pull out all the stops tonight. Make me stunning."

"Got it." He swept off the plain sash.

As Soran put the finishing touches on the outfit, there was a soft knock on the door. Atorra somehow knew it was Harrai. She moved to answer it, and Soran stopped her with a knowing look.

"My lady." He opened the door. "The king is here to see you."

Harrai looked at her with a small smile of approval. Considering how serious he usually was, this might as well have been effusive praise. Shyness stole her voice as he walked up to her.

"I thought I would escort you properly tonight," he said.

"Thank you..." This sudden attention made her anxious. Her eyes were level with the dragon emblem on his coat, and she briefly studied its lines before daring to look at his eyes. The kiss earlier had almost felt like a weird dream.

But it wasn't. He's...different.

Not that his face had particularly changed. He was still reserved, not offering a word on her appearance, but she felt sure he approved. It was clear enough when he didn't.

She took his arm, and they walked to the dining hall together. He stayed quiet, his posture rigid as always. Her shoulders tingled as they got closer to the doors. She felt practically naked, even though this was a popular cut for court gowns.

Most of the court was already seated for dinner, but Tashaya's chair was still empty.

"Don't bite your lip," Harrai whispered to her. "You look very regal." "Oops."

Harrai drew out her chair and didn't let go of her arm until her rustling skirts settled and he nudged her seat toward the table with a loud scrape.

"When you never date, you also don't perfect the art of moving a chair with a girl in it," one of Jarlan's friends said.

Harrai shot him a look.

"This is new," Jarlan said. "We heard you two went riding this morning. And afternoon."

Harrai's face was red, more angry than blushing. "She is my queen. I don't think anything more needs to be said."

"Good. You keep quiet why we loudly discuss theories amongst ourselves," Jarlan said. He winked at Ilvet, the wavy-haired girl in their crowd. Ilvet, from what Atorra understood, was descended from the sister of the last king whom Atorra married in her former life. It was very hard to keep everyone straight, but all she knew was that Ilvet's main hobby seemed to be smirking.

"The king has an afterglow, don't you think?" Ilvet said.

"I don't think my brother is capable of glowing, not even post-coitus."

"Jarlan," Lady Kirska said warningly as Jarlan's friends snickered.

"What do we think, yay or nay?" Jarlan swept a finger around his section of the table. "Oh, Harri, if only you could glow, maybe you'd loosen up a bit. Or was it just unsatisfying? I hear that doll girls chafe if you don't prepare. Maybe a little rug burn is the trouble?"

Harrai stood up, flicked his hand, and telekinetically threw Jarlan back in his chair. His body slid across the floor and against the massive stones around the hearth. Harrai stood over him.

"You will never speak about her like that again," he said. "It wasn't a hollow threat last time. This is a disgrace to our kingdom, for you to speak like this about the Queen of Songs."

Jarlan was gasping for air, but he managed to spit out, "Is she—?"

"I know it to be true. So did Master Peitir."

"I as well," Lady Kirska said. "Your brother is right. This is utterly shameful behavior, even for you. Get up, remain silent, and be a man, Jarlan. Ilvet, go to your chambers."

"Me?" Ilvet whined.

"Yes, you are not behaving in a manner that befits this court either." Lady Kirska flicked her fingers at Ilvet in what seemed a devastating gesture. Ilvet left with angry eyes but no protests.

Jarlan was still choking under Harrai's power, and Atorra rushed over to them. Jarlan looked at her with pure hatred, even as he was twitching and struggling.

Something's wrong with us, Jarlan's thoughts snapped at her. The darkness brought us a doll who can't have the dragon-born. We're utterly ruined. And the Halnari are going to stomp all over us with their stupid little slippers when they show up. And why not? Now's the time to storm the mountain and crush our eggs and—

Atorra took a step back. I read his mind. He wasn't trying to say that to me. But I heard it anyway.

Jarlan was scared of this upcoming diplomatic visit, and he firmly believed she was the reason. That a doll queen was worse than no queen at all, or even that the darkness had somehow made her this.

A shiver went through her. "Harrai, let him go."

"I will not let him slander you any longer," Harrai said, as Jarlan's choked noises grew more desperate.

"Stop." Atorra tugged on Harrai's arm.

That finally broke his anger. Jarlan immediately took a big, horrible breath that made Atorra clutch her own chest.

Harrai stormed back to his seat.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a soft voice meant only for her. "I don't know how to bring any happiness to this court. It's too late for that."

Atorra looked at Tashaya's empty chair, the sour-faced brothers, and the stern face of Lady Kirska; the table of eternally glum court sorcerers and the catty whispering of Jarlan's crowd. It was hard to argue otherwise.

And that darkness spoke to me...it knows me...

She shut her eyes.

What if Jarlan is right about me, after all?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



ATORRA

IN THE MORNING, she woke to Boo's pointy wyvern head poking itself into the depths of her neck and plucking at her hair and sleep clothes until ignoring her was impossible.

A lesson with Lady Kirska was on the plate today, and Atorra dreaded it. She was feeling both failure-ish and on the brink of finding a power that might be more dreadful than helpful. Last night I got in Jarlan's head. By accident. And Lady Kirska will surely know something happened with the storm yesterday. She always knows everything.

This time, Lady Kirska seemed unaware. She started the day with more apologies for Jarlan's behavior. "This is unacceptable," she said. "We may have to discuss temporary imprisonment or banishment for him."

Atorra stiffened. "I don't want that."

"It might be good for him," she said. "He's acting like a brat."

Atorra certainly couldn't deny that Jarlan's presence brought her nothing but stress, but this didn't feel like the solution. "Isn't part of Jarlan's trouble that he already feels unwanted?"

"He is too grown-up for that sort of nonsense," Lady Kirska said. "But I suppose we can wait and see. Today, I would like to try connecting with one of your previous existences again. Reading history books is one thing, but I want you to truly feel what it is to be a powerful dragon queen. The deeper we can go, the better."

"Okay." Atorra braced herself. She could manage feeling like a powerful dragon queen.

They always met in the old dragon nursery now. Firelight flickered along shadowed walls, an eerie loneliness infusing the dragon-sized toys. Lady Kirska took her hand and told her to sing, and she shut her eyes.

The song came quicker this time than previous sessions, and the melody was more complex. As she sang, an unexpected and unearthly layer emerged, as if she had discovered a second voice.

She felt a close heat, and a sudden pain shot through her as she sang. A hand clutched hers--no, two hands.

Lady Kirska's hand had been replaced by the hands of two younger women, and Atorra was crouching in a bath near a fire, sweating, screaming...

Her stomach was round and tight—swollen with life. Her belly was stretched out and huge, so huge she wondered that she didn't just pop open like a pea pod, and she felt like it had sucked everything out of her. Her arms were quite skinny, and she was bathed in sweat.

"Are you ready to push again?"

"No," her other self sobbed, and Atorra felt her pain, but was helpless to influence the scene. "Not...not quite yet..."

One of the girls pressed a cool cloth to her forehead. The other just let the queen grip her hand tight. An older woman bustled over now, and put a hand on her back, easing some of the pain with her touch. Atorra understood that she was the healer-midwife, and knew how to ease things along.

"There now...it's all going well. They're positioned correctly, they're just being stubborn about joining us...as some babies do! Drink some water..."

Atorra tried to scream, but she couldn't, because this was a memory and she couldn't make the old queen scream. All the sensations were too overwhelming to bear.

Fates! I thought the last dream was bad...but this...!

She was feeling so many things that she hardly knew how to sort them. Pain, discomfort, the weight of babies inside her, jabbing at her, knocking her out of sorts, the tug of them, knowing they must soon come out of her. More pain, more sweat. A sense that she had completely lost control of herself, that nothing belonged to her. The entire pregnancy had been terrifying; it all came too fast, she wasn't even ready to have babies yet and

now she was carrying three. She was twenty-five, not even past her sunrise years; twelve months ago she was still living with her parents on a farm outside Otaré, blissfully unaware of what fate had in store for her.

Scream--oh, *please*, *scream!* Atorra was trapped, silent in the shell of her old self, forced to watch the women fussing over and around her.

Cramping sensations and pressure swept across her abdomen in waves, and she felt sick, begging for more cool towels.

"Oh, I'm sorry for the fire. You were so cold earlier," one of the girls said. "I'll open the windows."

"They're coming now," the queen gasped out, as Atorra felt the sensations build to an intense need to push out the babies. She struggled against it, wanting to slip out of the vision, but she was trapped there, gripped tight by a hand.

But no one is holding the queen's right hand...

It's Lady Kirska, she thought. She guided me to this vision. But I need to get out! Lady Kirska? I need to get out, it's too much—

She tried to wrestle against the hand, but she couldn't move, just as she couldn't speak unless the queen of this memory spoke. And this queen was trying her best to bear it now, letting out strangled groans as she pushed. The midwife urged her to breathe, and Atorra felt it all, the quick, labored breathing, the tearing of flesh, the first child roaring into the world with an immediate cry, more pain, more sweat...

Let me out! She fought with her mind instead of her body. Let me go!

Suddenly it was just the cold rock floor of the caverns. She was curled up against it. Lady Kirska was no longer holding her hand.

"Child...vou're back too soon."

"I couldn't--" Atorra touched her stomach, feeling the empty fluff of her own self.

For a minute, she missed them. Unexpectedly, for all the pain and fear of the memory, she missed the babies. Her own babies.

"I am right, aren't I?" Jarlan's voice came from the door. "Harrai can say what he wants, punish me how he wants...but--"

"What is he doing here!?" Atorra scrambled to a sitting position.

"I came to ride Barla. Heard screaming. Sounded like someone was being tortured in here, so I figured I'd better make sure."

"You know we train in here. I have everything under control, Jarlan," Lady Kirska said. "Take your leave."

"You think that I knew you were training in here? Who would have told me? You? It's adorable how you think I know anything that you or Harrai are doing. Are you sure you're not being tortured?" He looked at Atorra, and for the briefest second it was almost as if he was truly concerned for her.

Frankly, she wasn't entirely sure. "I'm fine."

"If you say so, then..." He sauntered off again.

"He can just walk in here? He's going to tell everyone that I can't handle training."

"Never mind him. I hope you *can* handle training, child. You broke yourself out of your trance so quickly that I imagine you're feeling quite dizzy now. And that was certainly not torture. You have done it countless times."

Atorra couldn't help but remember the dark voice, telling her she deserved better. "I don't think that vision was helping me at all. I was giving birth, and as we know, I won't be having that experience this time. It was very painful and I was trapped in it."

"Maybe you won't be giving birth, but that vision surely came to you for a reason, my queen," Lady Kirska said, gentle but firm. "You may not experience much physical pain in this body either, but you could experience telepathic pain in battles to come. It's an important part of training to learn discipline in dealing with all sorts of pain--physical, emotional, psychological. You have to learn how to master these things so they can never master you."

"I wouldn't say getting out of the vision was easy," Atorra said. "I think you were trying to keep me in it."

"Of course I was! That's your training! And I would like you to try and finish it out."

"Go back into that? I already lived it once!"

"But you don't remember it."

"I'm a different person now, aren't I?"

"You're missing the point of training." Lady Kirska sighed. "Let's try it again."

Atorra jerked back. "No. I'm not doing that again."

"This task is unfinished. There is a reason you see the visions you do. There is something your past is trying to tell you. Are you telling me you don't even have the courage to revisit giving birth to the dragon-born? You could face far worse trials than that!"

"But that—that is not my trial to face in this life! I already faced it. And I don't think I want to relive it again. I was very scared, not ready at all to have those children, and...and whatever trials I face now, well, it isn't like I wouldn't have faced terrible things as a Fanarlem concubine! I'm not some coddled girl, I don't even *have* parents to miss the way Harrai and Jarlan do."

Lady Kirska crossed her arms. "This vision was sent for a reason," she insisted. "It will not kill you to relive it, will it?"

"No, but—" Atorra felt trapped by the old woman's glare in the flickering candlelight. It reminded her of being inspected by men who considered purchasing her, of Jirra finally deciding he would have her, of Harrai when he was a stranger giving Hrada coins.

If she refused, what would Lady Kirska do? Jarlan had already seen her panic during training. The rumors of her failures would increase.

And yet, her entire soul resisted.

Was it cowardice?

No. Maybe that vision was sent to me to show me what I left behind. I can't have children, and I don't want them either. I can do something else for the dragons, though. I must have something else to offer.

"I must admit, I want to think you can be as strong as previous queens, but if you can't even face visions," Lady Kirska said, her frown deepening.

It was hard not to cave. Her disapproval felt like a very weighty thing. Atorra's convictions felt right inside her head, but trying to explain them to Lady Kirska...

Do I just have to endure it, the same way I would have had to endure Jirra having his way with me? My body is never my own, is it? Concubine or queen...

Harrai appeared at the door.

"What is going on?" he asked. "Jarlan told me you were screaming. Grandmother, what are you doing?"

"Training, Harrai. You know as well as anyone that good training ought to provoke some protest."

Tell me what happened, Harrai said to her privately, mind-to-mind.

Atorra briefly grazed over the memory of the stifling room and the pain and her inability to scream. *I'm not afraid of training,* she added. *But... that isn't what I'm meant to do this time.*

"We will pause this training," Harrai said. "We've thrown too much at her at once. She can come back to it in a bit when she feels comfortable and welcomed at the court. But what reason have we given her to suffer on our behalf? Maybe instead of focusing your energies on Atorra, you should focus them toward everyone who is whispering about her."

Lady Kirska looked downright shocked. "Oh, we will? We will *pause* the training of the Queen of Songs?"

"Yes," he said. Atorra could feel his tension. Had he ever given her an order before?

"That will only increase the whispers."

"We're not going to train her if we break her," Harrai said. "We'll lose her to the shadow. And we'd deserve it. This is my final word on the matter."

"Harri—"

"No," he said.

They faced off, briefly, with their eyes.

"There will come a day," Lady Kirska said carefully.

"When what?" Harrai said.

"When you will be very sorry you were not prepared." Lady Kirska shut her eyes and bowed her head slightly, acknowledging his authority. She seemed pained. "But hopefully, we will have time to remedy it. I will try to discipline the court and tamp down the whispers."

She departed, still oozing such disappointment that Atorra almost expect her to leave a trail of it behind like a snail. Harrai looked at her apologetically. "But you're not hurt?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Thank you. I...I hope this doesn't make things worse. I'm not weak. It just didn't feel right."

"I want you to follow what feels right," he said. "If it makes anything worse, I'll handle it." His severe expression remained, but his body language turned flustered as he put a hand on her shoulder, then took it back. "I'll protect you, Atorra. More than anything, I...I want to protect who you are, not resurrect who you've been. That's what feels right to me."

Impulsively, she took his arm instead. It was the first time that touching him—feeling something for him—didn't feel as dangerous.

The tension in his arm slowly eased, and together, they walked back across the bridge.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



ATORRA

"SHE WAS SCREAMING and carrying on. Like even the simplest telepathic training would kill her." Jarlan spoke loudly enough that Atorra barely had to spy. His voice carried around the corner.

"It is a great shame, my lord. I believe her telepathic growth must be stunted. We all miss your mother." Atorra had to scurry closer to hear the older man. "She was such a clever woman, so enthusiastic about her role. She attended every meeting of the council."

"Which is better than my brother," Jarlan muttered. "It's a good thing the girl doesn't attend council meetings. She doesn't know the first thing about anything; I'd rather Tashaya keeps her busy with romantic singing shows."

"It is not my place to speak ill of the king...," the older man said.

"Of course," Jarlan said, both of them running through a script.

"But it does seem like the king does not enjoy his job. It is hard to excel at a job you don't enjoy."

"Exactly. But what can I do about it? He knows I would be happy to step in for him, but he'd rather do a poor job of it than--" Jarlan stopped. "Do you sense something? I think we're being trailed by a gnat...maybe a moth..."

Atorra turned the other way and started walking, trying to look nonchalant. She felt Jarlan's eyes on her.

He went on his way. Her body trembled with anger.

When Jarlan asked if she was being tortured, she almost thought he had sympathy for her.

But now he was back in the castle, and it was all posturing and cutting her down.

I guess I can't take it entirely personally. Jarlan seems to hate Harrai as much as me. This was the first she'd heard of Harrai not attending council meetings. Was that true? And is that bad?

She thought they were right about one thing. Harrai did not enjoy being king.

Would anyone enjoy being king...unless it was to claim power? I bet that's why Jarlan wants the throne.

Atorra, still battling off the uneasy feeling of standing up to Lady Kirska, forced herself to spend some time studying the lineage of the old kings and queens until dinner. It was obvious Jarlan and his friends were all whispering about her screams during training. Harrai was at her side the entire dinner, so they didn't say anything loud enough to be heard, but she could just tell.

Halfway through dinner, Tashaya quietly entered, looking white as a sheet and wrapped in furs, but she gave Atorra an apologetic smile.

"I'm so glad to see you," Atorra said.

"I'm sorry. I'm starting to feel better now. Just a rough few days, but I'm turning the corner. Hopefully you can come by for tea and maybe a game tomorrow."

"I'd love to! Why don't you just send me a message in the morning if you're still feeling better?"

"I will. Have I missed any court gossip?"

"I had a rough training session today." Atorra was almost out of her seat and half on the table to whisper across to Tashaya. "And unfortunately Jarlan caught me in the grip of fear."

"Fear? Your training sessions are that intense?"

"Well..."

"Why don't I switch seats with Lady Tashaya?" Harrai said wryly.

Instead, the conversation was put on hold until after dinner was over. Atorra desperately wanted to discuss this with a friend. Lorsen would have understood her more, but Tashaya might have another perspective.

"I don't know if I'm being unreasonable. I realize it was just...having children, not being tortured, and if I was a flesh and blood woman I'd have

to get used to the idea. Lady Kirska said I saw this vision for a reason, but..."

"I can absolutely see why you wouldn't want to relive that," Tashaya said. "I know it's a very difficult and painful birth, having the dragonborn. They say the Queen of Songs would die without inducing the birth early and having healers in attendance."

"Didn't you say you wish you could be the proxy?" Atorra asked.

"I did!" Tashaya flushed. "I might sound crazy. It's easy for me to say because I'm obviously too weak. But I don't think about how hard that day would be, I just think about...well, the babies. I dream about being a really good mother to them. The first one out will be the next king or queen, but I like to imagine I would have a soft spot for the others as well and make sure they were given something important to do. And just the act of birthing the dragon born makes the mother stronger when it's over, and I guess I have a lot of fantasies about being strong. I know I'm just a motherly type, not a warrior, so it appeals to me to think of motherhood strengthening one's magic and character."

"I bet you would be a wonderful mother to the next generation," Atorra said.

"Fanarlem don't think about motherhood much, I imagine," Tashaya said.

"Some of the other girls in the House were very maternal," Atorra said. "When we're young women, we have to watch the babies."

"The babies?"

"Well, of course, there is always another generation."

"Of concubines? I guess there would be..." Tashaya went especially pale. "I've never thought much about it. Fanarlem babies."

"We don't know our fate until years later," Atorra said. "I guess it's just sort of like an orphanage when we're young. It wasn't an unhappy childhood. There was an older girl who was sort of like a mother to me when I was very little, and then I guess...she was put into the front of the House and sold, and then we had tutors for reading, music, etiquette and so on." Atorra had not thought of Darsa in a long time, and had almost never considered that the sweet girl who once gave her piggyback rides and told stories about the sun and moon and the great crystals, had now been enslaved for over a decade. "Anyway," she said, shaking it off. "Lorsen and I didn't like watching the babies that much."

"Not everyone does," Tashaya said. "Quite reasonably. You wouldn't invite over an adult that was so loud and messy." She laughed. "But they are cute. Of course, you don't need that; you have Boo."

Atorra felt much better, knowing that Tashaya, who wanted children so much, nevertheless didn't judge her for being traumatized by the vision. Lorsen would have agreed with her, but not brought any new perspective to the conversation.

I've never had another good friend before. It would certainly be wonderful to have two at once!

After a bit, Harrai walked over to them. Luckily no one was dancing this evening, so she didn't have to worry about enduring that. He seemed like he wanted to acknowledge her, but wasn't sure how besides a polite nod. "You look well tonight," he said to Tashaya. "And that dress does suit you," he said to Atorra.

He really just doesn't know how to relax, Atorra thought. She looked up at him with what she hoped was a very serious face, although Fanarlem girls were not made to have regal, imposing expressions. "When is the next council meeting?"

"The king's council?"

"I assume. I heard that your mother the queen always attended them."

"Goddess, they're dull."

"But aren't they important?"

"Sometimes. What, did Jarlan mention to you that I don't always go to them? He always used it as proof that he should be king instead of me, as if the whole job is just a perfect attendance record. I usually do attend, but I also know if nothing much is going on, I can trust my generals and ministers to do their jobs without me overseeing every last detail. Jarlan would just get in everyone's way."

"If you attend, I want to attend. Even if they're boring."

"Why?"

"Because it will make Jarlan angry, I think, and he can't use this against me."

Harrai smirked. "He will find your presence extremely irritating."

"Good."
"Especially if you ask a few good questions."

"I'll...try." She caught the look in his eyes. "Or can you suggest a few? Telepathically? Can he sense that?"

"He might suspect, but he won't be able to sense it. He'll never be able to prove it."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



ATORRA

THE NEXT COUNCIL MEETING, however, was delayed for the visit of the Sreyelan trade delegation. Despite a lack of fanfare, Atorra was as excited as she'd ever been. She simply wanted to see what winged people looked like; although she had since found a few illustrations in the library of the leathern-winged tribe, she couldn't quite conceive of them in person.

She imagined a large group in festive traveling clothes, although she realized this may be mixed with vague memories of a theater troupe. But that afternoon, they arrived from the north, flying in to the large courtyard by the stables. Everyone gathered to watch them, except Tashaya who was resting up so she wouldn't miss the dinner later.

Their wingspan seemed huge against the cloudy day as they flew in, almost like small dragons and not people. However, as soon as they touched down, they immediately folded their wings and looked rather plain and rugged. There were just five of them, four women, all old enough to be well into their childbearing years or even slightly past them, and one young man.

Atorra was still entirely fascinated by their appearance, even if it wasn't as splendid as her visions. Unlike dragons and wyverns, who had small arms with clawed hands as well as wings, the Sreyelans only had wings. Atorra understood from reading up on the subject that their arms were shape-shifted into wings when they were children, over a period of years. They had a thumb and finger, so they could grip tools, but they were also

very skilled telepaths who could manipulate and carry objects with telekinesis.

"Welcome back," Harrai said. "It's been quite a long time, and we are honored to host the Sreyelan tribe once more. To what do we owe this visit?"

"To pay our respects to the new queen, naturally. It is good to hear there is a queen on the throne of Drai once more." The women all turned to her and bowed, their wings swept like cloaks, and the one in front presented her with a wrapped gift.

Atorra certainly wasn't used to this level of respect. She took the parcel with a bow of her own, speechless with surprise.

"I—I am very appreciative," she managed. "It's lovely to meet you."

"I am Niri, second chief of the Sreyelan clan," said the woman who offered the parcel. Her accent was thick and Atorra needed to take a moment to decipher it. Despite her plain, rustic clothing, she had a very elegant look, with her hair swept back, golden hoops in her ears, and a fur shawl. "This is Savwa and Kyei." The young man kept a polite distance from the women, and almost like an afterthought, she said, "With your permission, my queen, this boy from our tribe would like to take notes of our meeting so the rest of the tribe can have an account of it. He is good with letters."

Jarlan gave the man a very brief nod of acknowledgement, and Atorra knew this had to be Sairi, the one Jarlan liked to have a drink with, to Kirska's disapproval.

"He is welcome to it," Harrai said, even as the women were looking to Atorra for their answer. She nodded.

For all the complaints Atorra could muster about Drai, she had quickly grown used to seeing Lady Kirska's authority unquestioned and female generals. Outside of the expectation that the Queen of Songs must have children, gender never seemed a factor in what role anyone was allowed to serve.

Atorra was immediately thrust back to Aiskan Nal, where men were so clearly in charge, and even flesh and blood women were often valued more for their ability to breed than their other talents. It seemed just as strange the other way.

"It's an honor, Queen of Songs," Sairi said from behind them, his accent just a sharp, brisk bit of flavor requiring no deciphering. He grinned at her and took a pencil and small notebook out of a pocket, getting right to jotting down notes. It was hard not to wonder what he was writing.

They all took a tour of the gardens, which the Sreyelan women much admired. Atorra had the sense that they were a very outdoorsy lot and would much rather poke around the gardens than have a formal dinner. Savwa, who had a sweet face and the air of a healer, asked questions about medicinal plants.

"We have trouble growing sleep herbs," she murmured, admiring some of the plants in tidy rows in the central court garden. "Yours look so healthy. It must be the elevation."

"Our gardener is so good with them," Harrai said. "I'll have him speak to you later."

"That would be wonderful. The children have trouble sleeping when they're going through their shape-shift."

"For wings?" Atorra asked. "Does it hurt?"

"It aches for a time," Savwa said.

"When I was a girl, we didn't try to grow sleep herbs," said the third woman, Kyei, who seemed the oldest and had the harshest face, weathered and wind-beaten as a pirate. "Enduring pain was part of the process."

"I think it is important to endure that pain," Savwa said. "And yet, it weakens us if we can't get proper sleep."

This brief exchange alone confirmed everything Atorra had read about Sreyelans. They took pride in their ability to hone their bodies for the steep, rugged mountains where roads were impossible; they were a warrior race who probably had reason to teach their children a tolerance for pain.

Before long, they had reached the dinner hour and Atorra was relieved to see Tashaya make it to the table.

"I can hardly stop staring," Tashaya said. "But that's so rude."

"You're not the only one," Harrai said, grinning at the room. From generals to servants, everyone was looking at the winged folk. "Well, they haven't been here since I was a boy."

"Yes, I remember!" Tashaya said. "They wouldn't even let me come out because I was running a fever. I'm still bitter about it. But—did they bring a *man* with them?"

"That's Sairi," Jarlan said. "He's the one I'd like to poach for our court. He's far too clever for that bunch."

"Sairi can make his own choices," Lady Kirska said. "If he asks us, perhaps we could consider it, but we can't offend their council."

"But Sairi isn't going to *ask* for a role in our court," Jarlan said. "He knows that would be presumptuous."

"Yes, we are at a bit of an impasse," Lady Kirska said, shrugging.

"I wonder if you would say that if he were a woman raised among Daramons and denied her potential."

"You know I am equally strict with everyone," Lady Kirska said. "However, men are always safer than women in such conditions because he can't be forced to carry a child."

"Unlike me," Atorra said. The words slipped out and hung there a moment as Lady Kirska and most everyone else in earshot looked at her.

"Of course, that has always been consenting," Master Peitir said. "It has long been written that the Queen of Songs will have the dragon born! What else would one wish for?"

"And it will not be happening this time anyway," said the senior female general, from farther down the table. As if that was fresh news.

"What if the Queen of Songs decided she didn't want to be the Queen of Songs anymore?" Tashaya asked, in her earnest way.

Lady Kirska snapped, "Why would the Queen of Songs ever abandon the dragons? Could you imagine what would happen?" Lady Kirska sounded slightly anxious, although she quickly reined it in. "I know tensions are simply high at the moment," she said. "And that is why I'm fine with taking a less aggressive approach with the queen's studies. I'm pleased to see that the Sreyelans were impressed with you."

"Very impressive, since I wonder if they've ever once seen a Fanarlem?" Tashaya said, staring at them again.

By the time the dinner ended, it was clear that it wasn't the Sreyelans in general who had caught Tashaya's eye. She kept following Sairi with her eyes, and her pale skin had taken on a slightly feverish cast.

Sairi resembled the Drai people quite a bit, outside of the wings, with black hair, thick and straight and just long enough to be a little unruly. His eyes were pointed at the corners in almost a permanent squint in this windy land. His face was heart-shaped with a sharp nose, and a broad grin. He had gold hoops in his ears and probably, if the stories were true, more gold worn under his clothes. Miralem tribes were often depicted with loads of gold or silver ornamentation. They didn't have money so they wore them for

emergency currency. He was a rather contrasted figure, of primitive leathers and trader's gold, but very well-spoken, with excellent court manners.

He did have a certain sparkle that seemed perfect for Tashaya.

"Should I strike up a conversation with him?" Atorra asked, nudging Tashaya.

She turned utterly red. "No!"

"Really? Why not?"

"It probably wouldn't be proper to talk to him in front of the Sreyelan women."

"Do we really care? I guess I could talk to them first."

"No. No—just—I don't want to talk to him at all, ever. It's not like anything would come of that. In fact, I'm sure that's the attraction." She bit her lip. "He's almost as handsome as Kenjo."

Atorra tilted her head, not able to go that far, but then she felt Harrai was much more handsome than Kenjo. "He's very graceful," she said, and this was certainly true. Although his clothes were far more rustic than the people of Drai, they looked very well-made and tailored for what they were. His lean tall body and the long sharp lines of his wings also gave him a surprisingly elegant air.

Jarlan was talking to Sairi now, laughing and looking very relaxed with a drink in one hand and the other at his hip. Unlike the cynical, mocking smile he usually displayed, the prince seemed to truly be enjoying himself.

"Goodness, look at them," Tashaya said. "Hands off, he's my fantasy!" She laughed. "I'll bet Jarlan wishes he could fly."

Harrai walked by them and Sairi waved him to join the conversation. A maid stopped by and offered a fresh round of drinks to the three of them. Harrai and Jarlan both looked uncomfortable but it seemed neither one of them wanted to reveal their mutual hatred in front of Sairi.

"Now there's a miracle in the making," Tashaya murmured. "Maybe you should go see what they're talking about!"

"What about you?"

Tashaya shook her head vehemently. "Just report back."

"I'll bring him over here."

"No! No. I'll faint. I'll die. You just go."

Atorra sighed. "You're too shy. No reason not to live a little!" But she went, just to assuage her curiosity.

"I'd guess it *would* be stressful," Sairi was saying, sipping his drink. "But ultimately, aren't the dragons responsible for themselves?"

"No," Jarlan said. "Our magic and theirs has been entwined as far back as anyone can remember, and then some."

Atorra guessed they'd been talking about her and immediately regretted walking into the conversation. *I think it's about the first time I've tried to walk into a conversation, fates curse me. Back to my introverted ways after this...*

Harrai put a hand to her shoulder. His touch still surprised her, especially in public. It was barely romantic, but for Harrai even this seemed a bold gesture. "Don't worry, we weren't talking about you."

"Oh. Phew, I guess?"

"I was just making nosy inquiries about the state of things," Sairi said. "The prince looks very troubled."

"He always does," Harrai said.

"Because I am."

"I don't know; you seem downright relaxed once the formal meeting is over whenever you visit us," Sairi said. "You know, my cousin has a crush on you."

Jarlan stammered out an incoherent sort of half-word and Harrai raised his eyebrows. "Really? Why?"

"Well, probably because he's a competent gentleman by day and a jovial drunk by night," Sairi said.

"Gentlemanly? A jovial drunk? Where's that been?"

Jarlan looked embarrassed. "I wouldn't say—"

Sairi glanced at them both. "I don't know the same man, do I? I see, I see...well, that's not surprising."

"I suppose I used to know a Jarlan like that," Harrai said. "When we were boys. But a lot has changed since then."

"Yes, I know." Sairi looked thoughtful. "If what you're saying is true. The dragon magic is srab'lan."

"Fixed?" Jarlan said. "Yes."

"Srab'lan is a powerful concept to Sreyelans. When we begin the process of getting our wings, we say 'srab'lan kan'. It's the Sreyelan oath. We accept that this can't be changed. We accept everything that can't be changed. And then you have the dual meaning of 'kan' as luck...good luck or bad, it does imply a lack of control. In terrain like ours, it certainly

makes sense. We don't have a whole lot of control over many things. But then, in the books of Vallamir, it says that there is no such thing as magic that can't be reversed," Sairi said. "'All states are mutable."

Jarlan laughed at Atorra and Harrai's faces. "He's a bookish one, I told you. Particularly with languages."

"I was getting at something," Sairi said. "Despite this oath that we all live by...wings can be reversed. Is it worth discussing with the dragons whether you could free them from their need of you? Or..." He winced as Harrai looked so serious. "I shouldn't even ask."

"It is an interesting philosophical question," Harrai said. "But we have our own goddess in Drai. And I don't think her books ever said that."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



ATORRA

AND so, in the morning Atorra dressed for the council. Soran suggested somber colors with a short cloak, with pockets for a notepad, pencils, and her own map of both the realm and the continent because the big table map would be hard to see. He showed her to the council hall. Lady Kirska was walking in at the same time.

"Soran, you sly fox," she said, plucking at Atorra's cloak. "You did this on purpose."

"Did what?" He blinked and smiled at Atorra. "Enjoy your first council meeting, my lady."

"What did he do?"

"He dressed you in Queen Sula's clothes. She always wore this to the council meeting."

Jarlan and Harrai were both at the table already, having a tense conversation. A few generals, dragon emblems on their tunics, stood nearby with grave expressions. When Jarlan turned to her, his eyes were red like he'd been crying.

"Those are my mother's clothes," he said, in a strangled voice, like Harrai had just choked him. "You're both mocking me now, aren't you? Because Harri will never be our father. And you will damn sure never be our mother. This kingdom is doomed unless we bring all the dragons home, put all of our efforts to figuring out what that thing is out there..." He pointed toward the storm. "...and stop trying to be everyone's savior."

"Calm yourself, Jarlan," Lady Kirska said smoothly.

"Why should I calm myself? I just heard what happened."

"You picked a hell of a first council meeting," Harrai said, gently taking Atorra's arm.

"What happened?"

"We lost a dragon. Veru," said the general at the head of the table. "She was shot down off the coast of the western sea. The Daramons are claiming that she was over their waters, but we all know she wouldn't have strayed far from the city. Laionesse is sending a caravan with her horns and scales and will have buried her earthly body atop the Venna Hill, with great honor."

"Her horns and scales?" Atorra asked. This visceral detail filled her with horror. She imagined Dosskarja and Dirjet stripped of their horns and scales and then packed away in a giant hole in the earth.

Death. She never had to think about it much before. For a concubine, life was all one had to fear.

"Only certain scales, known as the treasure scales," Harrai explained. "They are very strong and used to make armor plate and ornamentation. The dragons wish for us to have them when they die, to honor them and protect ourselves." He swallowed. "Veru," he said. "I haven't seen her in years. She craved the adventure of protecting far away cities. She wouldn't *want* to be stuck here."

"Well, now she's dead," Jarlan said darkly. "Along with so many others. How many is that in ten years?"

"Thirty-two," the general said, lowering his head.

"She was young," one of the female generals said. "Her eggs are waiting for her."

"Her eggs..." Atorra wondered which eggs were Veru's. The little gold one? The grayish ones with a faint hint of purple? The one that had faint speckles like lichen on a rock? They were just eggs now, but Atorra already felt they had personality. She ached to see them play, to fill the empty nursery.

"I want them to pay for every dragon they've killed," Jarlan growled. "I would rather we all go down fighting, if we're not going to do the smart thing and lock down to protect Drai. They're picking us off, one by one."

Harrai lifted a hand. "Sit," he commanded the room, and everyone did, except Jarlan, who remained stubbornly standing. His face twitched and he

quickly wiped his right eye with the back of his hand.

He's still struggling not to cry.

"Everyone at this table knows that we can't just call the dragons home to stay sequestered here," Harrai said. "You know it too, Jarl. It's in their nature to fly far and wide. They want good hunting grounds. They'd start snapping at each other and worse. Just think how much you hate me, and then imagine if we were both the size of houses and had to share a mountain."

"How much I hate you," Jarlan said bitterly.

Lady Kirska cut off any impending brotherly argument. "The king is correct. Dragons have always roamed the continent. Drai is known as the home of dragons, but it is truly the home of their *eggs*."

"So then our best option is war," Jarlan said. "They're killing us, without any formal declaration of war—but essentially, the war is already happening and only one side is fighting it."

Harrai snorted. "Our tiny kingdom declaring war on the Daramons."

"Everyone would ally with us," Jarlan said.

"They probably would, but they have nevertheless made it clear that they don't want a war. Their nations are much closer to the borders and would bear the brunt of the fighting. We would have to send the dragons out to help them defend Laionesse and Otaré. The killing of dragons would only increase."

"So instead we let them just pick us off with no retaliation."

"Back in Aiskan Nal...I used to hear men bragging about the deaths of dragons now and then," Atorra said. "Whenever one was killed, the whole country seemed to know about it and take pride in it."

"See? They're laughing at us!" Jarlan cried.

"They just kill dragons in cold blood?" Atorra asked. "I always heard, from the Daramon perspective, that dragons attack Daramons first."

"That's a lie," Harrai said. "Daramons always start wars. Why would we start them? They breed like rabbits, not us. They pick fights, the dragons scare them back, and so it's been for as long as anyone can remember. But lately..."

"Something has changed lately...?" Atorra said. "I know. Sort of. At least, Daramon men brag about how powerful their leaders are these days. Lord Jherin and his Four Generals." Everyone in the Daramon lands knew their names, their faces, their heroics. Calban, the Peacock General; Dorn,

the Black General, and the two female generals, about the only women in such an elevated position. The Red General, Lisandra, and the White General, Alwythe. They were powerful sorceresses, and yet often touted for their many children. It was claimed that Alwythe had borne forty-five children, extending her fertile years through healing magic, a shining example for all Daramon women.

"What do you hear back home, child?" one of the generals asked, looking as if he'd suddenly realized she could be a source of information.

"That isn't home. And I'm not a child," Atorra said. She couldn't help bristling.

He bowed his head in apology. "Please, my lady—continue."

Jarlan grimaced, but she was emboldened. "The man who almost bought me was the captain of a merchant ship. He was a regular customer for years first. He used to boast about what he was shipping. And once, some months ago, it was smokeless powder for big guns. He said they were 'telepath-killers'. I didn't really understand at the time. I barely knew what a gun was, much less what a big gun would be, because I thought they were like bows and arrows."

"Smokeless powder," the general murmured, scribbling that down. "For better visibility, then."

"The Daramons have invented a huge sort of gun while we've barely figured out how their small guns work," Harrai said. "They're more like a cannon than anything, only superior in every way to the cannons they used during the War of the Crystals. These guns appear on so-called pirate ships around the borders. They seem to be dragon hunters. The leadership in Nalim Ima claim that they have no connection to these ships, that the guns are stolen in pirate raids or by rogue gangs on the river, and that the men take down dragons illegally. The 'pirates' are jailed or even supposedly killed for breaking our treaty...but—"

"But we all know this is a joke," Jarlan said. "Lord Jherin hires them. He gets the guns into their hands. And if we start making a fuss about how many dragons have been killed, they say it would be quite a shame if we all went to war again. At this point, it's clear that they are trying to weaken us as much as possible before provoking us into another war anyway. So why not just do it? What other strategy do we have? It seems like every year they have more impressive weapons to use against us and we have the same old pile of sheep shit."

"The other kings and queens don't want a war," Harrai said. "And for that matter, neither do I."

Ask me why the dragons don't stay away from the water, if they keep getting attacked by pirate ships, Harrai sent to her.

"Can I ask you something, Harrai?" Atorra said. "If the dragons don't want to bunch up here in Drai, but they keep getting killed by seafaring pirates, could we just call them back inland? Have them stay around more hilly and mountainous regions, even?"

Harrai gave her a small nod. "I think that is a reasonable compromise, and although the dragons have resisted any order curtailing their freedom, if we talk to Dosskarja, Dirjet, and Ebel first and have it come from them, I think they'll understand that the stakes are too high these days."

"Yes. We can't lose too many dragons or the population won't be able to sustain itself," Atorra said, genuinely worried.

Jarlan growled. He did want war, that was clear.

The very idea of a war filled Atorra with dread, but she could see that hearing about the death of a dragon pierced Jarlan as much as anyone.

"He does care," Harrai admitted when she mentioned this to him afterward. "But don't go getting soft-hearted over him. After all, the dragons are just the source of power he thinks should be his. And war would be a chance for him to snatch at glory." He put his hand over her arm, his expression shifting. "You did very well today."

His eyes were unexpectedly warm. "Thank you. I didn't expect the council meeting to be so..."

"Eventful?"

"I was thinking more like...sad. Will I ever meet all the other dragons?"

"They all come home for the hatching," he said.

"The hatching? But that's ages from now!"

"Most of them also come home periodically to check on the eggs, give a report, and visit with the royal dragons. So you'll meet them all eventually."

Atorra sighed. "So far my training has been so much about the past. I wish it was more learning about dragons and the rest of the world."

"You are the queen," Harrai said. "Study what you want. I already told Grandmother to lay off with the lessons. Take some time to know the dragons, study on your own, and keep Tashaya company. You were right. The severity of this court isn't doing anyone favors."

"Okay. I will study hard on my own."

"I have no doubt. But...do you have plans today?"

"I meant to visit Tashaya...but..."

His eyes held a spark as if he was also considering taking a day off. Just for her.

Just for us.

Suddenly Atorra became aware of tense murmuring off to the side between Master Peitir, Lady Kirska, and one of the generals. Master Peitir broke away to approach them, and Harrai's face grew cool with apprehension.

"My lord, can I have a word with you?"

Harrai gave Atorra a soft nod. "Go visit Tashaya. She needs the company. I'll see you soon."

"What's wrong?" she asked, but Peitir turned away from her. She knew no one would tell her.

I guess my telepathy is getting stronger, because even if I didn't have eyes or ears, I could sense this feeling.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Harrai

"My LORD," Master Peitir spoke in a hush. "General Noden has returned."

"And...Atorra's friend...?" Harrai could tell something had gone wrong.

"She's here. But from what I gather...she has been through an ordeal."

"Those...Daramon bastards..." Harrai knew. He didn't need to be told what the Daramons would have done to Atorra if they had found her just a little later. Eskamir's protection must have kept her safe...kept her for them.

For me.

But he chased that thought away too. He was well aware that Atorra was under tremendous pressure to be something she'd never asked or prepared for. *At least no one is raping her, harming her physically*, he thought, but then he wondered if he was simply justifying all the things they had forced her to endure. Not for the first time.

"Where is she?"

"A few of the maids took her aside. Amira is with her. Noden says she's been in great distress and said very little the whole way here, and she's reluctant to see Atorra."

"Can I see her?"

"You are the king. But...I would tread lightly."

Harrai counted the weeks. It had been two full turns of the moon and then some since he took Atorra from the Daramons.

Two months is more than enough to break a soul, he thought with a shudder. I should have asked Atorra sooner if she had any friends. I should

have brought the whole House with me to keep her company. She wouldn't be so alone.

Master Peitir showed him to the hall of bedrooms for visiting dignitaries. General Noden was waiting outside. "I found her in a very lavish house on the Atlantis River," he said gravely. "When I offered the gold and jewels, they handed her over easily enough, as if she meant nothing to them, dressed only in a negligee, with no possessions. I had to give her the clothes off my back and use my telepathy to calm her down, but I'm no healer. I had her nearly catatonic as I brought her home, so this is the first time she's really been aware of what happened in some days."

Harrai's hands made involuntary fists, his nails digging into his palms. "She is very dear to the queen. Thank you for retrieving her; I know this was not a pleasant mission. Now we'll make every effort to let her know she's safe, and welcome her like a member of the queen's family."

"Tell that to your brother," General Noden said.

"If he slanders Lady Lorsen, I will give an order to imprison him."

General Noden nodded, and Harrai could tell that whatever he'd seen in Atlantis had shaken him too, because in the past General Noden had been soft on Jarlan. Harrai saw none of that now.

Behind the closed door, he heard soft, soothing voices of young women. He sensed Lorsen herself--a coiled ball of pain, slowly daring to relax on the exterior. He knocked.

"Oh, my lord! She is here. We've just gotten her dressed nicely and Amira has been calming her down."

The room smelled of sweet herbs from a steam solution Amira used to treat sickness and distress. It reminded Harrai of the soldiers' hospital, where the young people came home with injuries of the mind.

In the midst of this swirl of slightly frantic attempts to soothe was the Fanarlem girl. Lorsen. Atorra's dearest friend.

Harrai didn't have a dearest friend, but if he had, he would kill whoever had done this to them.

Lorsen looked entirely different from Atorra, and even knowing little of Fanarlem concubines, Harrai was positive this had not been the case before.

They had *changed* her. None of the girls at Atorra's house had looked like this.

Lorsen looked...ethereal. Broken. Beautiful--undeniably, she was that, but in such a disturbing way that he wanted to turn away from her.

I'm not prepared for this, Harrai thought. I don't know how to comfort anyone.

"Lorsen...I am King Harrai Hondraisen, the Dragon King...and the husband of your friend Atorra. I want you to know that you are safe here. No one will ever tell you what to do ever again, and whatever is in our power to offer you will be freely given. The Daramon demons who did this to you are our sworn enemies. The Fanarlem are our allies and friends."

Amira and the maids looked surprised but not displeased. Certainly, this had never been the policy before, but Harrai realized he didn't just have the dragons to protect. Countless lives in the Daramon lands were also under daily threat. Atorra was so close to such a fate. It had never seemed so glaring as when he met Lorsen's eyes.

"I thought this was a dream," Lorsen murmured. "Amira said she could help me forget...everything that went before."

"Yes," Amira said. "It's one of my specialities as a healer, to help you to forget but also to let go. It does take time, sometimes years, and it isn't always perfect either, but whatever is haunting you now will largely fade away. I have years of experience helping our military families."

"You've all been kind," Lorsen said. "I hope it isn't a dream. I feel a little disoriented. I hope this isn't the drugs."

"No drugs," Harrai said sharply--probably a little too sharply. He didn't want to scare her. "General Noden said he had to use a little telepathy to sedate you on the journey home. You've been traveling for many days and he would have needed you quiet and calm so you didn't draw attention, just to keep you safe. I apologize."

"So...this is real," Lorsen murmured. "And Atorra is here? Atorra is your wife!?"

"Yes. A formal arrangement," Harrai said. "Atorra is the reincarnation of our Queen of Songs. She asked for us to bring you here."

"Is she waiting to see me?"

"We haven't told her yet, but she's been waiting for you for weeks. She misses you terribly."

"I'm not the same," Lorsen said, in a hollow voice. "She won't even recognize me."

"You and Atorra are the only Fanarlem in Kota. She's settling in, but there is a certain loneliness. She told me you're her sister. I'm sure she doesn't care what you look like." Lorsen whispered, "She'll blame herself if she sees me."

"I understand," Harrai said. "You have carried a burden alone and walked into a darkness she has never seen. But Atorra has her own burdens here. And she loves you, Lady Lorsen." He nodded to the attending ladies. "We will consider Lady Lorsen to be the blood sister of Queen Atorra and treat her as such."

"I'd like to see her," Lorsen said, after a pause. "But warn her that...I look different."

"Yes, my lady," Harrai said.

Before he turned away, he saw her slender hand clench the pillow at her side, and a dark look pass over her face.

Atorra's face, he realized, with her big golden eyes and playful smile, was not made to look angry. He'd never considered it before, but they probably designed her that way on purpose.

Lorsen was different. Her eyes were sad, her mouth a solemn line. She was made to look sad. But she could also look like all the shadows in the world had gathered in her eyes and all the storms at sea were carried in her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



ATORRA

"They treat me like I don't even exist. Mostly." Atorra sighed, staring into Tashaya's warm fire. The room was probably too warm, if anything, but Tashaya was still bundled up. "But for one shining moment, at that meeting, I felt like I was really a queen."

"Just keep working at it," Tashaya said. "A place like this doesn't change in a day, and no one was mentally prepared for you." She was moving slowly around the room, pouring water, and Atorra realized she was watering pots.

"What are you growing?"

"Flowers. My beloved annuals. They're so...ephemeral. And a little bit pointless. I identify with them, I think." She grinned.

"You're hardly pointless!"

"Well, neither are the flowers, really. They feed the bees. And their beauty is purpose enough, for me. Do you want a few pots for your room?"

"I'd love some!"

"Pansy. Marigold. Asters. Not sure which color. You can just be surprised." Tashaya clutched her head. "I'm okay," she added hastily. "Just a little dizziness here and there. I'm coming out of it. You look so stylish today, by the way!"

"Apparently I'm wearing your aunt's cloak."

"Lovely! I bet she and my mother would like you. I like to think they wouldn't put up with this nonsense."

As they chatted, the conversation moving easily from family stories, back to flowers, to exchanging stories of childhood gardens, a humorous anecdote about a handsome gardener, and onto plant lore and astrological prophecies. Atorra felt worlds better just having a friend again, someone who was always so easy to talk to.

There was a brisk knock on the door. Harrai. The tense feeling of the council rose right back up inside her as she opened the door.

"Atorra," he said. "Your friend has been found. Lorsen is here."

"Lorsen!? Lorsen!" Atorra should have been overjoyed, so why was an absolute chill going through her. "Where is she?" Atorra studied Harrai's face. "What's wrong...?"

"She's had a long journey. We've shown her to a room where she can rest and wash up, get some fresh clothes." His eyes slowly lifted to hers. "I was briefed on her condition when she was found. That was why Master Peitir interrupted us."

Atorra wrapped her arms around herself. She knew what that probably meant. "I was too late..."

"I was too late," Harrai said. "I shouldn't have thought only of saving you. But what's done is done. Souls can heal, with love and time." As they walked, he kept looking at her as if he was seeing her for the first time. "Atorra, she wanted me to warn you...they changed her appearance."

"Oh....no. We were all scared of that...though it isn't uncommon."

"Is that so," Harrai said, through gritted teeth.

"Of course. People get an idea of what they want, I guess. And we're made to have general appeal, but not everyone wants general appeal. Plus, the styles are different in Atlantis."

"They treat the souls of people like trash. I can't comprehend their cruelty. Their stupidity. They had you. They had my queen. One of the most powerful, most precious souls that has ever walked this earth, and they had you prisoner, and they never even knew. And your friend Lorsen--" His voice was nearly hoarse with his sudden anger. "They hurt her. I won't ask her how; I don't need to. Amira will try to erase it from her mind." He sucked in a breath. "We'll help her as much as we can."

"Harrai--"

"Maybe Jarlan is right. We should go to war."

"Not in this mood," Atorra said. His anger sent a thrill through her. He was always so cool but seeing Lorsen had done something to him, and that

terrified her. But it also sent heat through her body, stirring memories of that fleeting kiss. She wanted to know what it would be like if he unleashed these feelings on her body, with mouth and hands and—

Stars, where did all these thoughts come from! At a moment like this, too.

She steadied herself, thinking of Lorsen. She knew what fate Lorsen had probably suffered, and this was no time to consider passions.

"When Jarlan spoke of war today, a part of me wanted very badly for you to agree with him," she said. "But there's a reason you didn't rush into it. You're thinking of all the potential consequences. A king should have a cool head."

"But have I been too cool-headed?" He stopped at a door and locked eyes with her. There was violence in his copper eyes and a faint sheen of sweat on his brow. He visibly steadied his emotions. "Lorsen is waiting for you here. Take all the time you need and let me know if I can help in any way."

"Thank you--for everything."

He shook his head.

She opened the door and saw what they had done to her sister.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



ATORRA

LORSEN'S EYES were the same, of course; they were the one thing that never changed. But the shape around them could change, and there was little left of Lorsen otherwise. Atlantis had taken her away, molded her in its image, used her like a toy.

While all of Hrada's concubines had a round, cheerful aspect, with even proportions, Lorsen was now a long winter shadow, a weeping willow, a painting of an impossible ideal of Daramon womanhood.

"Hi," she said, clearly self-conscious of it. "You...look wonderful, Atorra."

"Lorsen...I'm so sorry. I tried, as soon as I could--as soon as I realized I could ask for you, and Harrai sent someone right away...but...I'm so sorry!"

And then Lorsen was rushing to meet her and their arms were around each other, and they cried so much and locked so tightly together that Atorra felt their ribs banging against each other.

When Atorra shut her eyes, she could feel that Lorsen was Lorsen. There was still some of the old familiarity. But as soon as they drew back a bit, she was once again looking at the haunted face of a stranger.

Lorsen finally sobbed. "It's not a dream if you're here. I'm really safe, aren't I?"

"Yes. I promise. It's not all perfect here; Jarlan can be an ass, but if he so much as looks at you wrong I'll bite his nose off."

Lorsen laughed a little, through a choked tone. "That would have been my line, before..."

"It's my turn to be the spitfire for a bit, then." Atorra gripped her hand. "I am the queen of dragons now. Fates, I have so much to show you, to tell you..."

"Dragons...so you've really seen dragons! Well, I guess you would, if the 'Dragon King' is your...my goodness, he is so *royal*."

"I've ridden them! I have a dragon companion, Dosskarja, the Queen's Wing. And a pet wyvern you'll adore. And a friend whom I know will love you; she's not as good as you, of course. I'll only say she is if you agree that you like her as much as you like me. But she took me to this romantic concert-play, and now I can take you. And I can eat now!"

"Me too," Lorsen said, but in a twisted little voice. She looked up at Atorra, her hands clinging to Atorra's wrists almost like she was dizzy. It gave Atorra flashes to her own self giving birth, gripping the hands of the attendants. "Oh, Atorra...it was just like the stories...it was just like all the bad stories...and...I just need to forget first...before...anything..." She started crying again, and Atorra put her arms around her.

Lorsen's hair was down to her waist now; it must have been so expensive. It was still black, at least, but a different texture—thicker, with the shorter strands around her face flipping up into curls. Her face was all different, all wrong--long lashes, long mouth, and high cheekbones with the smallest of chins, leading into a neck as slender as was possible, and the same for her waist, and her wrists, and her ankles. She was the same height as before but she seemed so...diminished.

For a long time, she soothed Lorsen, and it broke her heart. Lorsen was always the flirty one, the one who reassured her that they could manage the men who bought them. She was more brash than a Fanarlem girl should ever be, and that was why that man bought her.

To break her.

I'll do anything to fight for you, Atorra thought.

And Harrai would too. She had seen that look in his eyes.

"My lady..." Soran called to the shut door. "It's time for dinner, although the king said you may feel free to stay with Lady Lorsen or have dinner brought to you."

"You can go to dinner," Lorsen said. "I've cried myself out. That is, if you want to. I can eat now but I don't like a lot of the foods."

"I'm still getting used to them myself," Atorra said. "The desserts are my favorite."

"I like cheese, but I guess the Miralem don't eat much cheese. And what about the company? Do you like your...husband?"

"I do like my husband," Atorra said. "More by the day... At first he didn't like me much, but as he's been warming to me, I guess I've been..." She trailed off, unsure where she actually stood with Harrai. "But unfortunately, a lot of the table is occupied by Prince Jarlan and his friends, and he's hated me from the day I arrived. He calls me 'the Queen of Disappointments'."

"Well, it sounds like he could use a Hrada-ing," Lorsen said. This was their old private talk. When they hated a client Lorsen would joke about cutting off his balls, but after Hrada reprimanded her for it, she started referring to it as a "Hrada-ing". Of course she was careful not to be caught again. Hrada would have certainly sewn her mouth shut for that one.

"You don't want to come to dinner, though, do you? I think we could just stay in and order some cheese and desserts. We do have some aged sheep cheese, I know."

"I think I'd like to see the court," Lorsen said. She looked at the door, her eyes more hardened, lacking the bright old gleam of mischief. "I'll say one thing. When your king said I was safe here, I believed him. And if that's true...I'm not afraid of anything here. I've seen what there is to fear, and it's not court snobs or snide remarks. If the prince calls you the Queen of Disappointments in my presence...say, do they let you carry knives here?"

Atorra smiled wide. "They surely do. Soran, are you still there? We would like to dress for dinner."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



ATORRA

SORAN, in his ever-accommodating way, brought not one but twin knives for Lorsen to wear at her hips. They were beautifully worked blades with stylized dragon bodies, wings spread to form the hilt, with tiny jewels for eyes.

He dressed them both for dinner, and here, too, Lorsen had changed. Once, she would have gushed over the long silk gowns and trailing sashes, but when presented with a selection of clothes she chose a plain gray tunic, cut knee-length. It did have bell sleeves lined in purple and a little frill all around the collar and hem, but was quite sedate for Lorsen's taste. Underneath she wore a black shirt with a high collar and black tights. They had made her feet so small that Soran dug up child's boots.

But between the outfit and the knives, she was delicate only in the way a wasp is delicate. Atorra knew Lorsen couldn't fight, but she managed to look like you should think twice about laying a hand on her.

They arrived a little late to dinner, but Harrai had a chair waiting for Lorsen next to Atorra, and he rose to greet them. Every time she saw him now, Atorra was more aware of how he was changing, treating her like she truly was the queen he had been waiting for.

Jarlan was, of course, raking his narrowed eyes over Lorsen.

Atorra studiously ignored him. "This is Lady Tashaya. And this is Lady Lorsen. Both of you, my dearest friends of my old life and my new life. I hope you don't become better friends with each other than you are with

me." Atorra was a little nervous, seeing the two of them together, praying that they liked each other. Since she'd never had two friends before, she had no idea how to navigate the situation.

"This is rich," Jarlan said. "Now there's a whole doll family going on?"

"This must be the ass you told me about," Lorsen said, lacing her hands on the table, giving Jarlan a little sidelong smile like he amused her.

"Is that how you talk about me?" Jarlan tried to ignore Lorsen.

"No worse than how you talk about me," Atorra said.

"But I'm not here to set an example, am I? Have you asked why no one's held a public event for you or taken you out of this castle to meet the people? Stay out of the damn council meetings until you know what you're talking—"

Harrai had just shifted in his chair to intervene when Lorsen sprung from her seat and drew a blade on Jarlan instead.

Guards rushed forward. Jarlan held up a hand, waving like he meant it all as a joke. "No need for all that. She won't hurt me."

"I would," Lorsen said. "Don't speak to my sister like that."

Jarlan shoved back his chair and walked up to her. "You don't even know how to hold this properly," he told her.

"I'll learn."

He took her hand and shifted her grip. "But I have a feeling you can't land a blow on me."

"Sit down," Harrai said. "Jarlan, stop making every dinner so tiring. Eskamir's soul."

Lorsen put the knife away and stabbed an asparagus spear off her plate. She looked like she would have really enjoyed running Jarlan through. Atorra smothered her shock. Lorsen always had a bold tongue, but pulling a knife on a prince in an unfamiliar court...well, it would have been delicious if it didn't also seem a bit unhinged.

"Sometimes I think it's gotten a little too exciting at dinners, that's for sure," Tashaya said, trying to laugh at it all, but then she coughed. She was barely eating, Atorra noticed.

"Tomorrow, we could go into town and get some clothes and personal objects for Lady Lorsen," Harrai suggested. "Whatever you need to feel comfortable here. You can choose one of the spare rooms as your own."

"Or you could even stay with me until you feel comfortable," Atorra said, since they used to share a bed.

"Maybe...for a few nights," Lorsen said. "If you don't mind."

"Of course not."

"I don't need much, your majesty," Lorsen told Harrai. "But I would like to learn to fight, if that's an option."

"'Course it is," Jarlan said, around a mouthful of mutton. "If you're going to glue yourself to the queen's side, you might as well know how to guard her. Even from me." He sucked the marrow from a bone.

Lorsen kept her face turned away from him. "Thank you for your generosity, my king."

CHAPTER FORTY



Harrai

JARLAN HAD his eyes on Lorsen the entire night, until the moment she left the room. Harrai noticed. No one could fail to notice.

"What are you thinking?" Harrai growled, deeply suspicious. "If you're planning to hurt Atorra through Lorsen--"

"Goddess! You think I'm the demon here." Jarlan's cheeks reddened. "I wouldn't hurt her. She's no one. And she's different from Atorra, isn't she? She looks even more like a little doll. Imagine her fighting me."

"Well, I imagine it won't go well for her, which is why you won't be trying it."

"I don't need you to tell me not to fight someone helpless," Jarlan muttered. He scratched the back of his neck, still looking at the door where the ladies had exited. "She belonged to someone, didn't she? She was-raped." He paused on the word before saying it, like he was looking for something more delicate, and then decided there was no sense softening it. It was unusual for Jarlan to even think of softening a word.

Harrai squinted at his brother. "Don't even think whatever you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking a damn thing! I'm not attracted to dolls. But you are."

"I'm attracted to...Atorra." It was the first time Harrai had admitted it to anyone besides Atorra. *And what better person than Jarlan?* he thought sarcastically. Of course he'd been trying to show it, rather than say it, which

was probably why Jarlan was tossing it off like an accusation. "I am attracted to my wife."

"Ugh. Well, it's not natural. What do they call 'em, in the Daramon lands? Skarnwen? Hell, they made dolls for men to want and they *still* came up with a slur for men who want them."

"I admire how hard you're working this campaign to insult Atorra," Harrai said. "But you know it isn't like that. I find Atorra to be smart, kind, and not easily cowed. These are attractive qualities. And you found Lorsen to be the sort of woman who will threaten you with a knife, which I believe to you is also an attractive quality."

"I can't argue with that bit, but she's still a freak of magic."

"It's time to drop your campaign against having Fanarlem in court. We have too many other problems."

"But that's the thing. That's why I don't like it. Of all the Miralem born...how could our queen end up as a Fanarlem? And why?"

"Why? It's just a bad roll of the dice."

"I can't shake the feeling that...some force is working against us. It's not just the storm and the marks. It put the soul of our queen into a doll. So she could never have the dragon heirs. What if she never remembers the songs? And Grandmother told me she asked for a break?"

"I told Grandmother to give her a break! She's driving her hard just like she did with us," Harrai snapped.

"Not us. Just you. She didn't care what I did or learned."

"Are we going to have this old argument again?"

"Grandmother agrees with me, you know," Jarlan said.

"That someone forced Atorra to be a Fanarlem? Some enemy? She hasn't said anything to me about it."

"Yes. Because you're afraid of the darkness. And war. You want to keep things safe as they are, but the world is changing around you anyway. Someone--or something--is already at war with us, and maybe they scored a huge victory the moment Atorra was born, only we just found out now."

A faint sweat broke out under Harrai's fine clothes. *All these damn layers...*

Jarlan was making him feel stupid. He had never seriously considered that someone could have *made* Atorra a Fanarlem.

Rarely, some Daramons chose to become Fanarlem if they were dying. So it was possible. Someone could have found Atorra first. They could

have--

"We really have no evidence that Atorra was anything but a normal Fanarlem," he said. "Our sorcerers are attuned to the soul of the Queen of Songs. No one else is. How could anyone possibly have found her before us? Even the most talented Halnari telepath wouldn't have the map of her soul, to know what to look for."

Jarlan looked thoughtful, which was so unusual for him. "I didn't really think of it either until I saw her friend. They changed her from when Atorra knew her, didn't they? She doesn't look natural. It got me to thinking about how the Daramons don't have any reverence for how someone is born. They shape-shift their own faces; they'll accept being brought back from the dead and even in an entirely different body. The only thing that doesn't match is that they left her unprotected. So it might all mean nothing."

"Yes..."

"All I know is, something's wrong and we shouldn't take that lying down."

"I can't send more of our people into the storm to die. We've already tried it. Declaring war is no joke and we have no idea if or how the Daramons are connected to the storm. What do you want me to do?"

"All I know is, I wouldn't let any envoys from Halnari here until you figure it out, but...I'm not the king."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



ATORRA

Atorra and her friends skipped the dances that night. Everyone was exhausted.

"Are we going to talk about what happened back there?" Tashaya finally coughed out, as they walked back to her room for a little fireside leisure. They stopped at Atorra's chambers to fetch Boo.

"I'm sorry," Lorsen said. "I don't really know what came over me. But then, I'm not extremely sorry. Since no one arrested me, I might do it again tomorrow."

"I'm more impressed by the fact that Jarlan stopped talking," Atorra said. "Even to whisper to his crew. Lor, I don't think he knew what to make of you!"

"Mm-hm," Tashaya agreed. "That's what I noticed too. Jarlan is never so quiet. And when you didn't stay to dance after dinner...goddess, I almost felt like he wanted to ask you."

Atorra cackled. "He'd never! It'll be fun to watch you grind a heel into his heart."

"That would be fun." Lorsen smiled enigmatically.

Soran made them all hot chocolate, although he cut the chocolate with a common bitter herb so they didn't use as much of the rare food. He added a pinch of spice and it was quite good. Someone must have told him of Lorsen's situation. With her, he was particularly warm and gentle, and he got her old genuine smile. Tashaya and Lorsen also got on very well, thank

the stars. Lorsen had such a good memory for amusing stories of the House, and she could even tell them about Atlantis as if she'd been there on vacation. She never mentioned a master or mistress or whatever she might have suffered there, but she told them about seeing the riverboats and the city lights twinkling through the evening mist, the theatre district where all the actresses wore furs and curled their hair, the crumbling remains of the ancient palace and statues of the old water gods, and the maze of canals a level below the streets where secret shops sold every sort of potion you could imagine.

She made it sound enchanting. Lorsen had always told a good story. Atorra tried to hold herself to the same standard as she told Lorsen about the dragons, the court, and the town--but she hadn't really seen much of it.

When they finally let Tashaya sleep and returned to Atorra's room, Lorsen dropped onto the bed and was asleep almost immediately, without even a mumbled goodnight. She was still fully clothed except for her boots. Atorra desperately wanted to gossip with her into the night about things only Lor would understand, but it all melted away when she saw how small and exhausted Lorsen looked.

And not like my Lorsen at all...she's so different...

It felt unbearable. If she thought about it too much, she wanted to rip through time and space, to do anything to prevent Lorsen from being hurt. But even the Queen of Songs couldn't do that. It had to be bearable. There was no other choice.

I'm so sorry. I was too late to save you...

Atorra slipped down to just one silk undergarment and got under the covers. She tossed the blanket over Lorsen too, and then draped an arm over her shoulder--but Lorsen instinctively flinched and flailed.

"Oh, Lor, I'm sorry. I was hoping you'd feel safer with me close."

Lorsen was silent for a moment and then took Atorra's hand and held it. "I do. It's okay. I...just need to get used to it again." She paused. "At least until you sleep with Harrai again."

```
"I've never slept with Harrai. I think he's slow to--we're--"
```

[&]quot;Oh," Lorsen breathed. "Okay. That's good."

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;Go to sleep."

[&]quot;You too."

But she didn't. Not for a while. Almost as if she sensed the next day would be a disaster.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



ATORRA

When she woke, Lorsen was nowhere to be seen. For the first time, she called Soran before he appeared on his own.

"Yes, my lady. I'm sure you're looking for your friend. She woke up very early and asked if she could go outside. She dressed for a stroll."

"I see. Well, I guess I should also 'dress for a stroll'. Harrai and I are taking her to town. Maybe I'll ask Tashaya if she's up to going."

"I have already heard from Tashaya's maid. She told me Tashaya sends her apologies. She's not feeling well again today."

"Again?" Atorra's mood kept falling further. "But she was fine last night. Is it because we kept her up too late? I wonder if the chocolate is too much for her..."

Soran came closer, lowering his head. "It isn't your fault," he said. "It's just how things are."

Atorra reminded herself of what he said before. Tashaya always felt very sick, and even her good days were hard-fought. She clenched and unclenched her hands, feeling helpless. "I understand..."

Harrai met her in the hall and he was also 'dressed for a stroll', his clothing relatively plain and mostly black, like the day they met. He had a short dark green cloak with a gold dragon pin.

"I bet your own attendant insisted on that little pop of fancy, didn't they?" Atorra asked.

"However did you guess?" His lip briefly curled with irritation. "I heard Lorsen went wandering off, but once we find her we'll head into the city. Jarlan is right about one thing. I should have you make more public appearances, with some fanfare. But we'll start small."

"I don't think I would hate fanfare."

"Really?" he asked. "Why not?"

She laughed. "Is it so strange to endure some fanfare?"

"Willingly? Yes. I endure fanfare, but I certainly don't ask for more."

"I guess I'm getting over the shock of being queen. I realize that this is what I am. Therefore, even though I feel like an impostor, I might as well go all in. Attend council meetings. Wear beautiful gowns and dance with the king. Let the people gape at me. Ride my dragon over the city."

"So Dosskarja gets to be 'your' dragon but I am just 'the' king?"

"That's right. You don't really feel like mine."

"What would it take?" he asked.

"Is this a serious conversation?" The first answer that crossed her mind was...nerve-wracking. "Am I really your queen?"

"What do you think the other day was?"

"I think it was one kiss after I almost died. And not much more."

"I think I've been much more of a proper husband since then!" he said. "I escort you to dinner and dance with you whenever there's dancing."

She gave him a furtive look and then frowned.

Am I really about to say this?

I am.

"You haven't asked me to share your bed," she said. "And I don't necessarily mean...that I'm ready for...everything. But even to warm up to the idea. Plus, Lorsen thought I was only sleeping with her for a few nights before I went back to your bed and it was...a little embarrassing to tell her that we have never shared a bed."

He glanced at her and she could swear she saw his ears turn a bit red. "Okay. Tonight, then. Come to bed. For sleep. If you like."

"Can I bring Boo?"

"Oh, for—" He grumbled, "Yes. You may bring *Berrajet*."

"Okay. I will bring *Boo*." For a second she felt her chest pounding before realizing it was just a memory of her past selves.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



ATORRA

HARRAI SPOTTED Lorsen before she did. Atorra caught herself.

I was looking for the old Lorsen.

"Stop," Jarlan was barking at her. "We need to work on your breath before you just go flailing around with weapons."

Lorsen was holding a blunt wooden practice sword like she was acting out a play, hopping around, ready to dodge a nonexistent assailant. "I can't breathe!" she snapped back at him.

"Then how do you yell so loud?" he retorted. "You're doing something. Give me that. You're holding it like a rapier but this is a Drai sword."

"Take it from me," she snarled back.

Atorra had a very bad feeling about all of this. What in fates? "Lorsen!"

Lorsen whipped around, still on her guard. "Oh..." Her arms relaxed. "Good morning, Atorra! If it's all the same to you, these clothes already suit me fine, and so does the bedroom as it is. I don't think I really need to go shopping."

"Oh." *Why did I already know she would say that?* "It would still be fun to see the city together."

"Definitely. I think I would just rather settle in first. Of course you and Harrai can still go. I've always wanted to learn how to use weapons, but I know that isn't really your thing."

"Sure, of course." Atorra glanced at Jarlan, who was breathing heavily and gave her a brazen grin. "Lorsen, are you sure you want him to be your teacher?"

"The sword master won't want anything to do with her," Jarlan said.

"If I learn from him, I won't feel bad about striking him," Lorsen said coolly.

"That'll never happen," Jarlan said.

"Can I just talk to you for a second?" Atorra gave Jarlan what she hoped was a threatening look, but she feared he was unconvinced.

"Oh, I wonder what on earth this private conversation could be about," he said.

"You would prefer I say it to your face? Fine. Lorsen, I already told you that he has no respect for Fanarlem, and he's not worthy of your time. He makes his disdain for me so obvious that it would almost seem funny if it weren't also so sad. As princes go, he's embarrassing. As people go, he's disgusting. Is that what you wanted to hear, Jarlan?"

"Why, yes it is," he said, with a maddening smile, before he looked at Harrai. He spread his arms. "Are you going to strangle me for a bit now?"

"You deserve it," Atorra growled.

"At this point, I probably do," Jarlan said. "But I know you don't have any bite, so you will have to rely on him to do it for you."

Atorra unleashed on him with her telepathic power, just as she did with Boo's bullies. She was capable of something, although he was able to block her easily.

"I look forward to the day when we have a real queen," Jarlan said.

"Me too," she said. "And that day will be here sooner than you expect." Harrai snapped out a hand.

"Stop it," Lorsen said, pounding the practice sword into the packed dirt. "Please. I just want to learn to fight and Jarlan offered. He's right. The swordmaster took one look at me and tried not to laugh. It's not like this is the beginning of a damned secret love affair, it's just a bored prince and me getting what I asked for. And if he tries to make it anything more, I'm done with him."

"The last thing I would ever do is have a love affair with a doll," Jarlan said. "Don't worry about that."

"Okay. So we're good," Lorsen said. "Thanks for checking on me. I'll see you when you get back."

Harrai still had a cold, disciplinarian air about him even as Atorra took his arm and turned him back to the front of the castle. "Don't make that face," she said. "You remind me of your grandmother."

"Ouch. Is that really true?"

"Well...it's not untrue."

"Spoken like a diplomat born," he said. "I'll try to relax. But you weren't happy about any of that either."

"No, I don't want him anywhere near Lorsen. I don't really know where her head is at when it comes to men right now."

"No, I wouldn't trust him," Harrai said. "I know all too well that...the strange becomes the familiar before long. But it seems like it's probably best to let Lorsen do what she wants to do. As she heals and forgets her time in Atlantis, she'll probably seem more like..." He trailed off.

"The person I remember?"

He shook his head. "I'm trying to make you feel better, but you never really go back to the person you were when something devastating happens." He grimaced. "That's the thing about Jarlan and me. When our parents died, we never found our way back. I was granted such an overwhelming amount of power and I had to learn how to manage it. I hardly saw Jarlan anymore. But when I did, he would act out. He was just a kid, but he'd have tantrums...sneak alcohol and get piss-drunk... He broke our heirloom clock one time, and that was one of Father's most treasured possessions. That was the first time I used my power to choke the air out of him."

"So what you're saying is..."

"He was young and alone. But so was I. So much was expected of me and I had to accept it; I had to obey. He didn't, and I envied him, while he envied me. I hadn't used my power on him in a while, but I can't be soft. Atorra, I don't want you to be as disciplined as I am. I don't want your whole life to be an exhausting training regimen that teaches you how to bury your own self away. I'd rather be the one who protects you from that."

"Oh, so that's what you're thinking now. So everyone can just keep laughing and sneering at me. Harrai, I have to become good at what I do or no one will ever treat me like a queen."

"At the picnic grounds, we talked about...bringing more happiness to this place. I'm starting to think respect does nothing to feed the soul." He shook his head as he walked beside her. She realized he had slowed his pace to match hers. She used to hurry to keep up with him. And he was melancholy. All that power and Harrai seemed as unhappy as anyone she'd ever met. "What does feed the soul?" she asked.

He stopped. "I could show you."

"Please do!"

Harrai led the way downstairs to the castle basements. Servants rushed by with linens and trays, their steps jerking sideways when they saw the king. They would murmur apologies the whole way down the hall. At the end of the hall they reached a service entrance and Harrai slipped out, taking a narrow road that led gently downward and overlooked the river. Carriages rattled by, heaped with crates and jars. Atorra had to hold Boo tight to keep her from wriggling off to sniff everything.

The road followed the river, sloping downward to a broad street with the docks and boats on one side, and warehouses to their right. This was clearly the behind-the-scenes of Kota's trade, where goods were stored, and it didn't seem like a place for the king and queen to be wandering around. Shirtless men heaved bales onto ships, carts and wheelbarrows jostled, and a woman was haggling loudly with a scowling, cross-armed girl who hardly looked old enough to be wheeling and dealing.

Somehow, no one even noticed them. Harrai must be using his powers, like he back in the Daramon lands.

He winked. "Sometimes I'd rather just...brush off attention. This way." Now they ducked down a side street, and Atorra heard the clang of hammer on anvil and distant singing. A strapping smithy with his hair trimmed close to his head was pounding on some small piece. Across the way was a sign for a potter. A few plain, cracked vessels sat outside, with cheap price tags slapped on them.

"Poor things," Atorra said. "Those pots look so dejected! I could use one for storing scarves. It wouldn't matter if that was cracked."

"We're not here to buy cracked pots," Harrai laughed. "I promise they don't know they're sitting in the dust at a quarter the price of their betters, and they don't care if you feel sorry for them."

"Now I feel even worse."

But he was smiling, and she couldn't help returning it. He seemed relaxed here, away from the castle. Even the way he walked seemed looser, springier.

Past the potters and a furniture-maker, was the overhanging roof with a banner that declared proudly, "*Ho-Insin*": the royal pickles. Inside, a

younger boy chopped garlic and chilies with a curved blade on a big concave wooden board, a woman was scooping pickled greens into smaller jars, and in the back someone was singing Kenjo's merriest love song. The room was immaculately clean with glossy wooden floors and strings of garlic hanging from thick, dark beams. Atorra smelled the pungent chiliand-garlic concoction.

"Harri!" The woman halted her singing and dropped her scoop. "You brought the queen!"

"I figured it was about time."

The woman rushed over, wiping her hands. The boy stared. "Don't gape like that," she said, exasperated. "Sorry. We hired him three months ago. He's a good boy. Pandi's son. Look at you! Oh...lovely little queen. Welcome. We're honored." She bowed, full of restless energy.

The other woman was pounding up the stairs now. Her head appeared. "What am I missing? Is that the queen herself!?"

"Now, you know I don't come here for fuss," Harrai said. "So get it out of your system now; give her one good look, and then it's just Atorra. We came to work."

"We did?" Atorra asked.

"Well, I will," Harrai said. "I won't make you do anything."

"Well, there's always plenty to do at this time of year! Peel and slice, peel and slice... We just got in a load of radishes, and I do mean a load," the singing woman said. She was sturdy and plain, short with strong arms.

"I can peel," Atorra said, interested in the cheerful bustle of the place.

"Good idea. I'll slice," Harrai said.

"Sounds fun!" Atorra said. "So I guess we're here because you love pickles?" It was obvious Harrai knew these women, and it was not the first time he had shown up to slice vegetables.

"I'll explain," he said. "While I slice." He shed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Boo was watching a fat cat sleeping on a little bed in the corner. The cat blinked slowly at the wyvern. Boo, with a flap of her wings, jumped down to investigate.

"I'm Umina," the singing woman said. "Since Harri has forgotten introductions.

"I didn't forget. I was getting to it. Umina and Nora," he said. "And Orzy," he added, waving a hand toward the boy.

"You know my name?" the boy marveled.

"Well, I know your mother," he said. "I commissioned new curtains from her when you were little, and you were playing at her feet the whole time."

Orzy flushed. "Yeah, she said I was a clingy kid. But I got to working when I turned twelve to help her out since my dad went bumming off to the east somewhere."

"We don't work him too hard," Nora said softly, as if she felt bad for him. Nora looked far more like a proper queen, Atorra thought—a slender, poised woman of middle aged beauty with calm eyes.

"Radishes, radishes!" Umina sang out, heaving in a crate heaping with them. "And more where that came from!"

Harrai picked up a big knife. "Bring them on."

Now Atorra was the one gaping--at her husband-of-sorts. He looked....happy. Happy at the prospect of slicing a hundred radishes. King Harrai was brooding and serious, and was this all he'd needed the whole time? Some vegetables to chop?

When he's here, he can let go of all that responsibility...

Atorra picked up the peeler and started on the pile.

I'll make some tea now," Nora said, opening a cabinet. There was a little stove in the corner, a half-eaten loaf of bread and a crock of sheep butter sitting at the little table by the window. "In a bit I can make a quick noodle soup. I'll soak some dried mushrooms." More cabinets opening, while Atorra peeled and Harrai thinly and expertly sliced each radish as quick as she could peel them, and Orzy got back to his chopping. Umina, still humming, carried jars of greens out back somewhere.

Boo was creeping closer to the cat. The cat slowly extended a lazy paw. Boo jumped, and then dared to get closer. She seemed to be all neck at this point, stretching her nose out to the greeting paw.

The cat gave Boo's head a playful bop. Boo skittered away in terror, flailing claws scratching the floors, wings flapping. She flew back to Atorra's shoulder.

It was very cozy here, in a way that felt familiar, yet Atorra had never really felt cozy in her life. It's like...this is just the way life ought to be, and once you see it, you know it's true.

"I don't make it here often, of course," Harrai said. "The schedules of kings don't usually slot in food preparation. But...this is where I go when I feel like I can't take it anymore. I probably became even more fond of

pickled food because this was a refuge. My Aunt Imra—Tashaya's mother—was a good friend of Nora's, and she loved pickled vegetables as well."

"She always wanted pickled green tomatoes," Umina said. "And we hardly grow any tomatoes in Kota. Although to be fair, the tomatoes we do have are better green than they ever are red. Still, I'd try to talk her into something else."

"Oh, I'll never forget you arguing with the queen's sister. Over tomatoes," Nora said.

"I argue with everyone! That's why they love me. Most royals secretly love being sauced at. Makes 'em feel alive, doesn't it?"

"It's true," Harrai said. "Though I wouldn't try it in every court... Anyway, when I was little I tagged along here with my aunt because I liked pickles too. I'd play on the floor and taste test. When they were gone, Umina and Nora reminded me of my family. I felt so damn lost back then. I just wanted to be a kid with my parents and aunt and uncle again. Only my father was strict; the rest of them were fun and they balanced out Father and Grandmother. I loved to visit here and chop and slice and stir. No huge stakes for the kingdom. No need to think at all, really."

"That's right, you could just hang out with two brainless women with big chopping arms," Umina teased.

Harrai muttered, "Well, after hours of studying Drai law... I dreamed about running away and just becoming a peasant. But of course, I couldn't, even if i wanted to. Not that I really would..." He touched one of his horns reflexively. "You might think I'm crazy. I'm sure the last thing a Fanarlem wants to do is servant-class jobs."

Atorra laughed. "What do I want? I don't know! I always have this feeling that I'm an impostor, and I'll never comprehend half of it, and I'd much rather just hang out with Tashaya and go to the theater. The other half of me...does want to be the best Queen of Songs I can be, to protect the dragons so well that Jarlan could never call be the Queen of Disapppointments.."

"That crusty sheep's asshole!" Nora snapped.

"You don't have someone you can have a drink with now and then, Harri?" Umina made a grumbling sound. "You need one. And it is your own fault. No one ever said a king has to be the castle, with all the doors barred against intruders. Let your guard down a bit."

"Easier said than done. And I don't really want to."

"Well, there's your problem," Nora said.

"My father never let his guard down."

"Yes, but he made it look easy. And he had your mother."

Atorra stole a glance at Harrai. He was waiting for the next radish, watching her peel. Now his eyes snapped away, almost nervous.

He said I could share his bed tonight. She knew he must be thinking of it too. Of course, I know what'll happen. It'll be just like when we were on the road. He'll roll to his side, back faced to me, like sharing a mattress with a warm rock.

I know what he's planning now. He'll be just like his father, the stern king. He thinks he can protect me, preserve my happiness and live vicariously through it.

Would that really be enough?

Out of some sudden wild impulse, she bumped her knee against his knee, and passed him the next radish. He took it, his fingers brushing hers, and he lingered one second longer than necessary.

"Soup time!" Nora said, to the sound of some loud whistle blowing by the docks that sent Boo flying into the rafters.

"Soup sounds great," Harrai agreed, carefully meeting Atorra's eyes, in a low voice that seemed not to be thinking of soup at all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



ATORRA

Atorra didn't see Lorsen at dinner, nor Tashaya either. Tash must be sick again, but Lorsen—

She looked to Jarlan, ready to do battle, but he immediately threw up a hand.

"If you're wondering where your friend is, she didn't feel like crowds tonight. I didn't do anything," he said, flopping his hand back on the table and suppressing a yawn.

"What, practice with a doll girl wipe you out?" one of his friends asked.

"Fanarlem can barely lift a sword, but I'll admit they have stamina," Jarlan said.

"Well, sure, I guess they're made for *stamina*," the other boy said, chuckling, but Jarlan didn't look like he had much energy for making fun of Fanarlem that night.

He called us Fanarlem, for once. Fates, do I ever want to ask Lorsen how this practice session went.

But she felt shy about paying Lorsen a visit tonight. She could no longer read her friend, no longer assume that she relished Atorra's company. Even as Atorra's telepathic powers had grown stronger, Lorsen seemed veiled.

She picked at her food, trying not to cast too many glances at Harrai. She didn't want to put too much on this night, but it felt a little like fates were conspiring to bring her and Harrai together. Her friends would not be distracting her, and even Jarlan was subdued. Harrai was his usual stoic self,

quietly eating a healthy meal, skipping dessert entirely, and drinking two glasses of wine while listening to Lady Kirska and the council members discussing the banquet for the Halnari visit.

There was no dancing tonight, just a concert by a composer from some bygone era. Jarlan's friends slipped off to gamble, and the elders slowly waved fans or nodded off to the gentle strings. The spring night was warm. Harrai leaned toward her. "Let's just go."

A nervous thrill danced down her body as she rose, her silk dress rustling. She was more conscious than usual of her clothing, as she wondered what she would do with it, in the room alone with Harrai. Would he take it off? Should she remove it herself? Or would they just quietly change into sleep clothes in separate rooms?

Probably that.

But Harrai did take her hand as they left the room, and he kept hold of it. His fingers were warm and even a little sticky. She knew from her own visions of previous lives that palms got sweaty when one was nervous. It was exciting to note that he might be sweating over her. *Those visions were useful for teaching me how real bodies work. I wonder if his heart is beating a little faster, too...*

"Should we check on Lorsen first?" he asked.

"Oh—I—I'm afraid she wants to be alone and I'll be bothering her." Atorra shook her head. She almost felt afraid of Lorsen, which was ridiculous.

"I think she will say exactly that," he said. "But you should still check on her. I'd do it myself, but no one has ever found me comforting."

They detoured to Lorsen's rooms first, and Atorra softly tapped on her door. "Lor? I know you want to be alone tonight, but I just want you to know I'm here if you need me."

Lorsen snapped the door open, and Atorra almost jumped. "I'm fine," she said. "I just didn't feel like being around people. But don't worry or anything."

"Okay. I won't." Atorra kept expecting Lorsen to need cheering up, and Atorra knew how to cheer up her sister, but what she didn't know how to deal with was this closed-off girl with grit in her eyes and voice. "Sorry to bother you."

"No—hey. Did Jarlan show up to dinner?"

"Yes, although he was unusually quiet..."

"I slammed the wooden training sword into his balls. So hopefully he'll be on better behavior now."

"What! Really!?"

"I didn't mean to get him quite as hard as I did. I didn't think I was really capable of whacking too hard, but—I mean, he *screamed*. He was down for a while. I started actually getting worried and telling him I'd call a healer over, but he wouldn't let me."

"Oh, I imagine this isn't a story he wants getting out," Harrai said, with a faint chuckle.

"Anyway, that's it. Have a good night with your husband." She winked and shut the door.

"You have a good night too!" Atorra called through the door. Then she winced. Lorsen's nights probably weren't ever great. Night was when the worst thoughts always came to visit.

"I do like your friend," Harrai said. "I definitely won't piss her off."

"I'm so flustered around her now."

"Time will help," he said. "Keep trying."

Harrai understands Lorsen better than I do, I think. I've never had that sort of shock.

Harrai's stride was slow down the dim corridor. The moon glowed on the courtyard garden below, and a few magical lights lit the way in occasional soft pools.

"I get the feeling she would enjoy riding," he said. "If Dirjet gives her consent, you could take her on a ride."

"You'd let her ride your dragon?"

"Dirjet wouldn't let anything happen to her. Just don't go north. Take her south. Ask Dosskarja to lead you to Nircama Forest. You could go hunting."

"Hunting!"

"Well, I don't know that you'll catch anything, but it'll give Lorsen something to do with her knives."

"I don't want to kill anything."

"I'll give you a mushroom and berry guide. Anyway, the main point is I suspect Lorsen likes being kept busy. I would not ask her to be your attendant. I think she could find something better suited to her."

"Sounds wise."

"I try to be an exceedingly wise man of thirty-two." He laughed.

"I never knew how old you were! You're a real adult." In the Daramon lands, thirty was considered the age of true adulthood, when your sun had fully risen and you no longer had to listen to your parents.

"You'll probably exceed my wisdom in no time," he said. "If you start remembering your past lives, you'll be a hundred real adults."

She shivered. "I think I'd rather not. It feels like losing something important to just skip my sunrise adulthood. I didn't think I'd really have one, and I want to grow into things at my own pace."

"I'm not sure I feel ready to be a true adult myself," he said. "As grown up as some parts of me feel...there are other ways I've barely lived at all."

"So let's do it together," she said, and then she wondered if she sounded silly and over-eager, but he smiled. Even though Harrai's usual smile was small and fleeting, she was always glad to see it.

He led the way to a suite of rooms that were, in fact, right beside her own. The walls touched. She had never known where he slept. They never seemed to get up or turn in at the same time.

"Good evening. Can you tell Soran to bring the queen's sleep clothes to my rooms? And then tell the kitchens to send up a bottle of warm spiced wine."

"Yes, my lord," said Harrai's attendant, a lean middle-aged fellow who sounded entirely professional but shot them the barest hint of a mischievous expression before leaving.

"And...cue all the gossips," Harrai sighed. He opened his door for her. "Make yourself quite at home. Although I don't think we need that fire." He came in just behind her, waved a hand at the fire, and staunched it.

"A nice, casual power display," Atorra teased. "I thought it felt nice. But you do seem to be sweating."

"Unfortunately even dragon kings still sweat..." He moved two magic lights to the mantle to compensate for the lack of firelight. They glowed within mirrored lanterns that cast the light around. This was a sitting room, with a map book and papers heaped on the low table by the fire, and some letter-writing in progress on a smaller side table. A statue of a dragon crowned the mantel, which was a beautiful red-veined marble. The walls were paneled in a patterned fabric of dark red, black, pink and gold, depicting mountains and soaring dragons, with tiny birds of prey flying under them. Boo settled right down on the rug by the fading warmth of the logs.

"Do you usually do a little reading before bed?" he asked, crossing his arms, then uncrossing them. He looked at his half-finished letter.

"Do you need to finish that letter?" she asked pointedly. "Just say so."

"Should I?"

"You tell me. You're still the king."

His eyes locked on hers. "It can wait."

"Okay," she said. "Good." She was tense from head to toe. His presence was overwhelming when they were alone. Always serious, always powerful —but also, a little shy. Not like the way some of the men who came to the House were shy, though. She hated the shy men at the House almost more than the bold ones. The shy ones were often the worst for sneaking a little grab somewhere, and then descending into flustered apology.

Well, the last thing Harrai would ever do is sneak a grab. But the way he looks at me has definitely changed.

That look was all the more precious because it felt like such a surprise, like even he didn't know what to do with those feelings. She felt sure that he had started to like her actual self. It had nothing to do with physical trappings. *And I'm starting to like his actual self, too...*

"Am I just—supposed to kiss you again?" he asked. "You're looking at me expectantly."

"I wouldn't mind."

"I'm sure I wouldn't be as bad at this if you were flesh and blood," he said. "It's just—I don't ever want to come off like—the men you knew before."

"That's impossible," she said. "I would kiss you first...and touch you... but I—I don't know if you're entirely comfortable with me either."

He shook his head. "You're not strange to me anymore. I am sorry for the things I said. I disregarded your feelings."

"I think I'm glad we did start off that way. It showed me that I could trust you. But now—if you do see me as a woman—as your wife—as... *more*...then I would be very happy if you showed that side to me now."

He nodded once, as if he had been waiting for her full permission, before he closed the gap between them, and then he took her hand. He pressed her fingers to his lips, and kissed them like it was an oath.

"It would be my greatest honor and pleasure if you would be my wife now," he said huskily.

"Me too..." *I could lose myself forever in his eyes... He's so beautiful.* Between the forbidding black horns and the formality of his words, even now, she wasn't sure she would ever forget he was the king. But she hoped she could learn to make *him* forget. To lose himself in her eyes, too. She was sure he would be an even better king if he could forget for a few minutes now and then. If they could just share a mutual joy, skin to skin, soft words whispered in the shadows, safe and trusting in each other after all the burdens of the day.

She had never expected to *want* to please anyone.

There was a quick, hard knock on the door.

"The wine?" Harrai said, but he seemed to sense something that made him rush to open it.

It was not his attendant, but Master Peitir.

"It's Lady Tashaya," he said.

Atorra's entire soul seemed to drop into her feet, and she ran.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



ATORRA

Atorra didn't stay to listen to Master Peitir; she dashed all the way to Tashaya's chambers, thanking fates she had not taken off even her shoes yet.

No, no... Don't leave!

Boo flew behind her, letting out a high-pitched screech sure to annoy all who heard it, and Atorra pounded on Tashaya's door. "It's me, Atorra; it's the queen!" she cried.

A young healer opened the door right away. "This way, she's asking for you..."

"Asking for me?"

Amira, the elder healer, was holding Tashaya's hand, murmuring a chant, so lost in her healing magic that she didn't look up. Tashaya's usual nurse Merusit, her long black hair in thick coiled braids, was watching over them both.

"We're losing her," Merusit said. "She keeps slipping into delirium and we just...we can't seem to do *anything*. It's never been this bad."

"I can help her," Atorra said. The words seemed to come out, as if from some other self, some other life. She didn't know what she would do, but she felt that the right song would come, and the right magic with it. She had met the darkness in the north, the source of this sickness. It had nearly gotten to her, but—here she was, unmarked and safe. And she would not let the darkness take Tashaya.

She took Tashaya's hand and let a song pour out of her. She didn't let herself think about it, to second guess. She became the Queen of Songs, setting Atorra aside, surrendering herself for Tashaya. By now, she had slipped into enough visions of the past that she could reach this deeper power.

That didn't mean it was easy. A spell ripped from her lips. It had a melody, but no one would call it music—or anything but what it was—pure, ancient magic.

The song vibrated through her body, and then, the very room itself. Atorra felt it thrumming through her fingers and into Tashaya, shaking her bed until it creaked and Tashaya moaned as if with pain.

"Don't stop. Don't let go." Harrai's voice. He had entered the room behind her. The healers had backed away, she noticed now. Her vision was blurred, her concentration only on the song and Tashaya.

This was the most powerful magic Atorra had ever tapped into, but even as it filled the entire room, Tashaya barely stirred. A faint moan dribbled from her lips, but her eyes stayed shut. Her skin was deathly pale.

The mark. I need to find the mark, the source.

Atorra remembered Tashaya saying the mark was over the heart. She shoved the blankets down, pulling Tashaya's nightgown low, until she saw the edge of it. A pictograph, stroked on her skin as if with a pen, and black as ink. It had a faint glow, almost purplish. Atorra pressed her fingers to it and the song stuttered as she shrieked with pain. Her hand burned.

Hello, my queen. I do apologize. I won't hurt you again.

There it was. The voice.

At first, she imagined the voice was not a person speaking, but perhaps the embodiment of a feeling, forming words only in her head.

By now, she was starting to think this was not a some*thing* but a some*one*. Someone was out there, speaking to her whenever they could make contact.

She let the song magic flow again, although her voice was softer now, and pressed her fingers to the mark again. As promised, it no longer hurt her, although it was very hot. *Leave Tashaya alone*.

Who is Tashaya to you?

A friend. A dear friend.

You haven't been here long enough to make a dear friend.

What do you know about it? I can tell right away what a dear friend is. I feel better around her, more like myself. Do you know anything about that feeling? I bet you don't.

It takes more than months to earn my loyalty and respect.

Just get away from her. Atorra pushed at the voice. Go make your own friends by your own rules, then, but leave mine alone.

Leave mine alone! As she sang it aloud, she felt the ancient words that would cast it as a spell, as if her old selves whispered it in her ear.

All at once, the voice was gone and the room was very still, and a little color rushed into Tashaya's cheeks.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Harrai

EVERY FINE HAIR on Harrai's body stood on end as he watched Atorra cast her magic. When he first rushed to the door, her song was low and loud enough to shake the room—full of such overwhelming power that the healers had drawn back from her. When she went silent, he didn't breathe. Then, she sang almost in a whisper and her voice was lovely, and then she spoke in the ancient tongue. He had to work a moment to guess at a meaning. He knew some words of the ancient Drai tongue, but could only take a stab at the grammar.

She had told someone to go.

And they had. The room felt palpably different. A shadow had passed over, and gone for now.

"Tash!" Atorra said wearily.

The girl's dark eyes cracked open, unfocused at first, then slowly finding Atorra. "Oh—hi... I'm sorry you had to see me like this..."

"Don't be ridiculous. I had to see you." Atorra lifted her hand from the mark, and let out a choked sound of frustration. The skin had burned right off her hand, leaving tatters of clothing and fuzz over wooden fingers darkened by fire. "It's still there. This is far from over..."

"Atorra, your hand! You were trying to get rid of the mark?" Tashaya noticed Harrai and yanked her covers up. "The king's here!"

"Don't mind me," Harrai said. "The king isn't here, I swear it. Just your cousin Harri."

"All that matters is...you're okay..." Atorra clutched her head with her good hand and shut her eyes.

"Are you all right, my queen?" The healers drew in again. "We should inform Lady Kirska," Amira said.

"Not yet," he said. "She'll put herself in the thick of it. Let them rest."

Harrai had never seen Atorra like this before. Even if Tashaya's illness remained incurable and mysterious, Atorra had fought for her. She had thrown herself into it, and let that powerful magic flow through her. *It's too much for her*, he thought. *But she does it anyway, without fear, as if she had been training much longer*. He knew better than anyone that tapping into powerful magic was not an easy thing. You had to be willing to surrender to that power, to let go of a little of yourself.

"Just a minute. I'm a little dizzy," Atorra said. "I never knew I could be dizzy like this without spinning in circles first!"

He half-smiled at the image of her spinning in circles. "Here." He took her hand.

"Oh, no...my hand *is* ruined..." Atorra tried to give him the other one, but she seemed a little addled.

"I don't mind your hands."

"Aw," Tashaya breathed, in a thin voice.

"Are you all right for now, cousin?" he said, a little stiffly. He had never been sure what to do with Tashaya's personality. "I'd like to take Atorra to her bed so she can rest."

"I'm exhausted...but alive." Tashaya's smile was weak too, but at least she no longer seemed in imminent danger. "Thank you, Atorra. I don't even remember what happened, but it's quite obvious you took on more than you should."

"Not at all, I had to!" Atorra insisted, with sudden passion. "I won't lose any friend ever again!" Then she wilted into Harrai's touch, which was alarming in itself. Even as he tried to help her up, she murmured something incoherent and then slumped in the chair.

He took her in his arms. As soon as one of the healers opened the door to let them out, Boo flew onto her chest, adding slightly to her weight. She weighed a little less than a real woman of the same size, he guessed, but she wasn't very big to begin with. Of course, magic didn't require physical strength or size. When she mastered her power, the Queen of Songs was far

more powerful even than the king, and his mind could still feel the faint echoes of power rippling through her.

He brought her to his bed, turning back the blanket with the toe of his boot before he rested her on his pillow.

She still hadn't stirred, even after all that jostling, and now Boo kept trying to walk across her chest.

Earlier, he had thought of kissing her. Touching her. Held back only by his lack of experience, with Fanarlem women, or any women. He'd never seemed to feel much for anyone. There were the adolescent urges, sure. The book of erotic paintings shoved under his bed. But real women? The king had to wait for his queen. And it felt so much easier to wait, than to attempt unlocking his frozen heart to some pretty young thing.

Now, his urge was just to protect her. Her power left him in awe.

I'm not alone anymore. I have my power, and she has hers. Even my parents didn't have that.

He wanted to stroke his hand along her cheek, and take her damaged hand, and sit with her all night until she recovered.

So why not do it? She's made it clear. She would touch you first, even.

He traced the curve of her cheek. Her skin was very soft. He'd never noticed before, when he took her hand, just how soft she was. Her lashes fluttered slightly, and her mouth opened as if to murmur, but no sound came out. He brushed her thoughts, just to make sure she didn't have any troubled visions, but her mind was fairly calm. He dared to admire her fine little eyebrows, and how they were a little darker than her hair, like many flesh and blood blondes—and so expressive, he realized, that he was not used to seeing them just sit there on her face like a painting.

She's beautiful, he thought, almost wincing. He had resisted thinking it. Because someone made her, and they wanted her to be beautiful, and he couldn't think about *her* without thinking about that. The Daramon hand that made her, that wanted to manipulate someone into paying coins for her without any regard for the soul inside.

But she's here with me now. She's safe. I'll keep her safe. And she's beautiful because she's Atorra.

He let out a breath. A great and unexpected relief washed over him. Yes. It was okay to admire his queen, inside and out. To love her, and want her. They had both earned that, hadn't they?

He took her hand in his, and fell asleep in the chair beside his own bed, with a wyvern head resting on his arm.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



ATORRA

Atorra stirred when someone knocked hard on the door, and then she felt Harrai's hand slip from her own. He was sitting by her bed—no, his own bed—quickly swiping a hand over his face to shake off exhaustion. "Yes?" he called.

"My lord, we have an unexpected visitor—Sairi Hlefyndris, and he wishes to relay some important news to the court. We felt you would want to be present. I know you and the queen had a difficult night last night." The attendant looked sympathetic. "But we're all glad the kind Lady Tashaya is still with us."

"How is she?" Atorra asked.

"Very weak, I hear," he said. "I haven't seen her."

"Thank you, Jilka. We'll get ready. Please have Soran bring some clothes for the queen, and see about some fresh skin cloth for her hand."

They dressed in separate rooms, and Atorra had to shake off her frustration that she never got a moment to pay Tashaya a visit. Soran wouldn't even let her sew her own hand back together, but his needlework wasn't as quick as her own.

"My lady, it would just be shameful for a queen to be stitching herself together!" he said, and she didn't want to offend him.

"I'm concerned that Sairi is here alone," Harrai said as they walked briskly to the main hall. "It would be so unusual for the Sreyelans to let a man deliver a message. I hope nothing terrible has happened." Everyone of importance was already waiting for them. It was already late morning, and Atorra had the sense of time vanishing—one moment she was battling the shadow that tried to take Tashaya, and the next moment it was nearly noon and the whole court was waiting for the two sleepyhead royals. A number of people actually smiled at her, as if in gratitude for helping Tashaya—not just Lady Kirska, although getting warm approval from the strict woman was already a shock—but even people she didn't know.

Sairi was dressed similarly as before, in trousers of soft buckskin, kneehigh black leather boots, a black sleeveless shirt and a short cape of light gray fur.

"Your majesties," he said. "Thank you for the warm welcome, and I'm sorry for arriving unannounced. I confess, I'm here without the knowledge or permission of the elder council."

"Is that so? Mr. Hlefyndris, has something happened?" Jarlan asked. He looked sweaty and was wearing very plain clothes. Atorra wondered if he'd been interrupted in weapons practice, and looked for Lorsen, but didn't see her.

"I was visiting Kurui," Mr. Hlefyndris said. "As, I confess, I was forbidden from doing by the elder council. So it would only take something of great importance for me to tell you that I was there at all...but as I was flying outside of town to make camp in the hills, I saw banners in the distance. Halnari banners. I know you're expecting a visit from them soon, and—"

"They're coming early?" Jarlan looked ready to meet them with dragonfire.

"Well, they are definitely heading toward Kurui now. And not shyly," Mr. Hlefyndris said. "I can't imagine they intend to spend the next couple of months in Kurui... I'm sure your own messengers will bring word soon."

"Maja is down there," Harrai said, brow furrowing as he considered the dragon posted near Kurui. "He should have reported back before you could get here."

Jarlan muttered something ominous.

"You believe that the Halnari are coming straight here? Now? Without any warning?" Lady Kirska snorted. "Goddess, how very rude that would be. The Halnari are traitors, but they are also sticklers for etiquette. Perhaps...they do have business in Kurui."

"There's more," Mr. Hlefyndris said. "A man riding at the head of the delegation on a beast of a black horse. I didn't want to get too close, but he did *not* look like a Halnari. A Daramon, I believe, and I don't think he's just there to braid their hair and brush their robes..."

"A Daramon official?" Harrai's eyes narrowed and swept over the entire court. "That would be extremely irregular. But I don't doubt your assessment."

"We should not receive a Daramon," Jarlan said. "This is a hostile action."

Harrai grimaced. "I don't see we have much choice."

"We always have a choice. Why do we have a military, if not for—surprises?"

Harrai tugged slowly at his chin, and for once he seemed tempted by the thought.

What do you think, Atorra?

She was startled by his voice in her head. He had never asked for her opinion like that before. **I*—*I* don't know. I'm not sure I grasp the situation well enough.*

But what does your gut say? You know more of the Daramons than we do.

My gut says—we receive them first and assess, she said, and while that did seem to be what her gut told her, she wondered if it could be trusted. Logically, she feared Jarlan was right. The Daramons dreamed of sending the dragons to extinction. Why delay this war if it was coming anyway?

But there was no good answer on short notice.

"We will prepare to receive them," Harrai said, his voice conveying confidence. "Call back the regiment at Fort Pirai and alert all the dragons in the vicinity. Send someone to check on Maja. And get ready for the banquet, as planned. We will not show them the slightest hint of anxiety or surprise. Mr. Hlefyndris, has anyone shown you to a room yet? You must be tired, and you're welcome to rest here."

Jarlan shot Harrai a fiery look, which was ignored.

Mr. Hlefyndris gave another snap of a bow, his eyes bright. "Thank you; that's very generous of you. If I could just have a day or two to rest after that long flight, I'd be grateful."

"Of course."

An attendant hurried forward to offer Sairi a room, and Jarlan leaned in to Harrai. "The Sreyelan elders aren't going to be happy about this."

"Well, what are the Sreyelan elders doing for us anyway?" Harrai said.

"Not much," Jarlan said grimly. "Sairi may have just saved us from being taken completely by surprise."

"He seems overjoyed to be here," Atorra said. "I can certainly understand why, if he's forbidden from leaving his town. As far as I'm concerned, Mr. Hlefyndris can stay as long as he likes," Atorra said.

"I agree with you," Jarlan said, raising his brows.

"Well, if the two of you are in agreement, I won't say another word about it," Harrai said. His brows raised the same way, giving them a strong resemblance.

"Why don't we have more dragons at the border by Kurui?" Atorra asked, as they all headed into a hastily convened council meeting.

"Our border has natural protection from the mountains. They can't sneak up on us with an army. So most of the dragons are out in the more vulnerable regions of the continent."

"But what about...not an army, but just someone really powerful?"

"Like a sorcerer? Few individual Daramons are that powerful. They need numbers to make even an attempt to match us."

"But there are a few. Like Lord Jherin and the Four Generals."

"I highly doubt Lord Jherin is at our door. Good questions, though. We might make a military strategist out of you eventually. However, this meeting will be full of minutiae. I'm not trying to get rid of you but I think it'll mostly be arguing about this banquet, and you might want to go check on Lady Tashava."

Master Peitir, walking ahead of them, turned back and nodded. "Lady Tashaya wouldn't have made it through the night without you, my lady. Why don't you see if you can help her rebuild her strength."

Atorra hurried along to Tashaya's room. Her friend was awake and sitting up in bed, with a cup of strong-smelling tea and a thick robe. Her smile was tired but bright. "Atorra! I heard you saved my life!"

"So everyone thinks! They're actually appreciating me out there."

"Goodness, who knew they cared about me so much?" Tashaya chuckled.

"Of course they do. I'm just thankful I was up to the task. I hardly knew what I was doing. I just took your hand and let the magic come through

me."

"That's how the best magic works, isn't it?" Tashaya's cheer faded a little as Atorra sat beside her and Boo started tromping all over the bed. "I've never felt that close to death. I don't remember what happened, exactly, but I felt something...dark. And scary. I think it whispered at me, but I don't know what it said."

"It's that voice I hear. It comes from the storm in the north."

Tashaya shivered. "If I die, do you think it can...get to me, then? Do you hear it often? You haven't told me about it."

"I think if you die, you'll be safe from it. You'll be free from the mark it left on you. But you *won't* die."

"I...hope not. I felt like...I don't know. I'm worried it's—it's waiting to take me." Tashaya petted the wyvern rather absently, her cheeks colorless. She spilled a little tea on her covers. Atorra removed the cup to safety and took Tashaya's hand.

"I won't let it," she promised. "I'm here, Tash, and I fought it off. Every time I fight it, I get a little stronger, and one day I'll figure out how to get this mark off you entirely. I'm starting to understand what the queen does and why I'm here."

"I've never seen that look in your eyes before." Tashaya grabbed Boo close. The wyvern squirmed madly and wriggled away with a little meep. "I feel like I've spent my entire life preparing to die. Making peace with it. And yet—I've completely failed. As sick and weak as I was last night, all I could think was that I've never let myself fall in love or have any ambitions. I've done nothing except to play the sweet little invalid that everyone expects to die. I've been afraid to grow up at all."

"How about this? I will make a solemn vow to you right now, witnessed by Boo. You will truly grow up. You'll fall in love and contribute to the world. You have time and you'll have the strength. I'll make sure that whatever this shadow is, it can't get to you. My magic drove it away last night, and I'll drive it away a thousand more times if I need to, until I grow powerful enough to banish it forever."

"Okay." Tashaya pounded her fist to the blanket. "Life begins today. If I can get out of bed."

"Do you want your tea back?"

"Thank you. What should I do?"

"You tell me! What have you dreamed of doing? Kenjo is supposed to perform when the Halnari get here. Should I command him to dance with you?"

Tashaya turned pinker, and shook her head. "Is that true?"

"Yes—the Halnari are on their way, actually. They're coming early. Sairi showed up and said he'd seen them coming, with banners, and a Daramon on a black horse. So everyone's losing their minds."

"Sairi!" Tashaya flushed. "You dropped that one on me last!"

"Surprise attack," Atorra said.

"I guess that's what the maids were trying to tell me this morning, but I was barely conscious."

"There's a lot to talk about. But I'm also going to ask Lorsen if she wants to go flying. Should I take you flying too?"

"I'm afraid that would—" Tashaya cut herself off with a quick frown. "Do you think you could really take me flying?"

"I do."

"Okay. I do want to go flying. More than just about anything. But first —hmm..."

"You want to spy on Sairi?"

"Is he in the main hall?"

"I don't know. Let's get you fancied up real quick and find him."

Atorra felt a rush of excitement and urgency, some of which was surely fear more than anything. But at least—it belonged to the whole court and to her too. *I am truly starting to feel like a queen*, she thought. *Even without Lady Kirska's lessons, I'm learning plenty on my own*.

Soran also seemed full of restless energy, hardly asking their opinions but just making nearly frantic declarations that he knew exactly the thing for Tashaya's hair, and the orange dress would be a vibrant color. It was obvious he'd heard Tashaya had nearly died, but in the discrete way of servants, he didn't want to say it outright.

Even as he dressed her, Tashaya looked tired and at one point, didn't seem to hear him ask if she needed an extra cloak.

Atorra touched her hand and found it cold and clammy. "Yes, get the extra cloak."

"I'm sorry," Tashaya said. "I'm just sleepy. Yes, an extra cloak would be wonderful."

Stars above, I hoped I had gotten her through the worst of it last night, but it seems like she could lapse back any second...

"Are you sure you want to leave your rooms?" Atorra asked.

"If we go slow. I'm still weak."

Atorra offered her arm, and Tashaya did lean on her, which was a little unnerving since Atorra lacked physical strength herself. She ended up tapping into a little telepathy to hold herself up against Tashaya, another skill she hadn't realized she possessed until now.

They didn't have to go far; Sairi had a room not too far from Tashaya's chambers. The servants kept scurrying by hoping to catch a closer look at him.

"Nice to see everyone gaping at someone else now!" Atorra said. She knocked on his door while Tashaya hung back, all blushing nerves. "Mr. Hlefyndris, it's—"

He opened the door right away. "Come right in! Ah—the Queen of Songs! Thank you for your hospitality." He bowed as Atorra walked in, and Tashaya shut the door behind them.

"Of course! I hope you're comfortable here."

"To what do I owe this visit?"

"Um—to make sure you were comfortable here."

"It's a real treat to be back in Kota Castle," he said. "I hope you don't mind if I take a walk all around the castle and take notes." He went to the bed, where some books were spilled across the covers. "I was actually—well, this will sound ridiculous. I certainly can't build a castle. But I was looking for information on building techniques. Our caves are pretty crowded—and very cold. So I got some books on construction in Kurui." He picked up one of the books, between his thumb and the taloned finger at the crest of his wing, while the end of the wing nearly scraped the rug. "I hate to say anything good about Daramons, but their book market—"

"It is amazing," Atorra said.

"You have books in your tribe?" Tashaya asked, shivering against Atorra. Atorra put an arm around her, but she had no warmth to lend.

"No," he said. "That's why I need to bring some. Whether I can convince them to build houses, I don't know, but it's always worth a try."

"But—not to pester you with any rude questions—how did you learn how to read and write?"

"Not rude. A very good question. No one else in the tribe can read. I expect I'll have to build a cabin all by myself and show them how it's done. They aren't going to look at a Daramon book, not even the pictures, that's certain. I learned to read by—well, I wouldn't do it now, but when I was young I just stole the information out of some Daramons' heads. It was that year, you might remember, when we had a very cold, long winter and the hunting and harvests were bad."

"I do remember, or at least I remember older people talking about it," Tash said. "It was a little after the storm came."

"Exactly. I was twelve. My aunt was barely eating. She would go out with the hunting party and divide the food up between me and my cousin and herself, but she'd give herself the smallest portion and then she'd fly right off again. I know she wasn't feeding herself enough for how hard she worked. And my cousin was too young to hunt yet. So if anyone was going to help us out, it had to be me. I figured I had to get farther south to find food, and sure enough, when I flew down the ridge for a few days, there was enough food to feed everyone, but I didn't know how to get it home." He paused. "I'm making this story longer than it needs to be. To make matters short, I ended up in Kurui with furs to sell to hire a Drai cart to bring food north, and in Kurui I saw books for the first time. I was so enthralled by them that I just—stole the words right out of people's heads. I've never done anything that greedy since…but…" He shrugged. "It is useful."

"You're very resourceful," Atorra said. "And a talented telepath. It's troubling to me that your people aren't happier to have you."

"They were happy with the food you brought, though?" Tashaya asked.

"Not really. They did come and clear out the cart, but they were furious at having to come to Drai for their food, and that I'd flown so far, and traded furs... Nooo, they were not happy with any of it, but they did have to give me that we managed to scrape through the year because I found so many nuts."

Tashaya sat heavily on his bed, visibly shivering. "Sreyelan men don't hunt, right?"

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine! Atorra's here."

"You look like you should rest," he said, glancing at Atorra with clear concern in his dark eyes.

"I didn't come here to sleep in your bed, sir!" Tashaya said, refusing his offer of a blanket.

"It's not my bed," he said. "I just got here. I haven't touched it yet. But...you're sick, aren't you? I thought the Drai healers were exceptional."

"They are," Tashaya said. "But..."

"She was marked by the shadow in the north," Atorra said. "I'm learning how to help her. I plan to banish that shadow away, when I fully remember my magic."

"The shadow..." He nodded. "It's affected us too, obviously. It's colder than it used to be, and nothing grows well. I'm glad the Queen of Songs has been found, and my people are too."

"But they won't agree to any kind of alliance."

He folded his wings to a more guarded position. "They don't feel like... our worlds have much in common or should have much to do with one another."

"You don't agree."

"No."

"Could you stay, Sairi?"

Lady Kirska told Jarlan he couldn't invite Sairi to stay. But she was the *queen*, and she needed allies.

"Stay? For what purpose?" He perked up, but he was trying not to look eager.

"Secretary and scout to the queen?"

"You hardly need a scout; you have dragons!" he said.

"But you're small," she said. "I mean—compared to dragons. And more importantly, the dragons can't join me in the court. I could use someone to observe, advise, take notes..."

He nodded. "I should warn you that my handwriting isn't very good."

"As long as you can read it back yourself, it's fine."

"You don't need to get back to your tribe and show them how to build houses?" Tashaya asked. "Will they be all right?"

"All right? They'll be very upset with me for leaving, but not for practical reasons." He kneaded his forehead. "They're very stubborn women."

"We have those here too," Tashaya warned, with a laugh. "I don't know what Lady Kirska will say about this, Torra..."

"I don't care," Atorra said. "She's the one who always tells me to be more authoritative. I'm sure the queen can hire her own secretary! I'm just not sure what I can offer for wages because I've never hired anyone before, but I'm sure we can figure out something reasonable."

"I accept." His eyes sparked. "I was hoping to find some excuse to stay."

"How exciting...," Tashaya murmured, and then she seemed to slip into unconsciousness right there on his pillow.

"Tash!" Atorra took her hand. "She's so cold... Does she feel too cold to you? I'm not always sure how cold flesh and blood people should be."

He touched his wing to her forehead. "She is cold."

"She almost died last night...and it happened so suddenly..." Atorra reached for Tashaya with her mind and felt her steady breath and heartbeat. She seemed stable, but certainly not well.

He glanced at her. "You said she was marked."

"Yes. On her chest. It's a black character."

"Can you write it out?"

"I don't remember what it looks like. It's sort of complicated."

He looked at Tashaya's chest, but it didn't seem proper to disrobe her in front of a strange man.

"Do you know the Cave of Symbols?" he asked.

"What is that?"

"It's a very well preserved example of ancient writing. In the west, a few days' flight from here. Do you have paper and ink?"

"At the desk."

They both moved to the desk, and he chose a small brush from the jar of writing implements, for writing in a more classical style. As far as Atorra knew this was only for poetry. She didn't usually write this way herself and they puzzled a minute over the tools in the desk until Tashaya softly said, "You have to wet the ink stick in that little basin... What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying not to ask to see your chest," Sairi said wryly, and he closed his eyes and traced a shape in the air, paused, and then attempted to recreate the shape on paper. It came out crude and misshapen with ink blobs everywhere, and yet it was a very elaborate shape that definitely resembled the mark. "That's very similar! I can't quite remember how it goes, but it is just that sort of shape..." Atorra said.

"Can I see it?" Tashaya asked.

But as soon as Atorra brought it over, Tashaya shivered. "No—no, take it away. That's it. I'm sure." She put a hand over her chest and started breathing rapidly. "It's getting closer. I'm scared."

"Getting closer?" Atorra asked. "What do you mean?"

"I feel like...the shadow is coming out of the mountain. Maybe—maybe it's just the sickness talking. I'm just so scared. Don't leave me."

"I will never let it get you," Atorra promised again. Tashaya was making her more and more nervous.

"The shadow..." Mr. Hlefyndris looked grave. His people were just as tied to these mountains as the Drai.

"This symbol is in a cave?"

He nodded. "The cave is actually full of writing. It's all very elaborate. But this character is quite large and it's on the altar piece. I believe it's a very old temple. I could take you to see it sometime."

"You said it's a few days from here, but how quickly could we get there on dragons?" she asked. "Could I see it before the Halnari arrive?"

"You want *me* to ride on a dragon?"

"Yes. I need to protect Tashaya. I feel like the fates have brought you to me, Sairi, and I need to see this cave as soon as possible."

Tashaya smiled gently. "You truly sound like a queen, Atorra."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



ATORRA

"You can call me Atorra in private," Atorra said. "In public, I should probably maintain some formality, but it sounds so odd to me."

"I don't think I should call you Atorra," he said. "Save your true name for your friends. You're a queen, and not just any queen. I'm only a man."

"We're just—people," Atorra said, but he was clearly unconvinced by this.

Harrai was out of his meeting, and she didn't want to leave without telling him, although she expected him to argue the idea.

"The 'Cave of Symbols'? How close to the storm is it?" he asked. He brushed a hand over the back of Atorra's head, and her skin tingled at how protective that brief touch felt. Every time he touched her, he seemed to offer just a little more of himself. "I'm still afraid there's something out there that is trying to lure you away from me, any way it can."

"It's west and slightly south," Sairi said. "Many ridges away from the storm."

"Sounds like it's just slightly out of our usual range, then. I'll trust you can keep yourself safe," he said, although he sounded nervous.

"I promise I will," she said.

"Just come back quickly. Hurry and go before Grandmother catches any word. The visitors will be here in less than a week now. A Daramon entourage won't move too fast through the passes, but... Will you take Lorsen?"

"I can ask her if she wants to go."

"It'll do her good to get out of the castle. You can take Dirjet and Ebel both if they wish to go to carry more people. I won't be flying anywhere."

"Thank you, Harrai."

"Just—be careful." He hesitated, and she took one step closer to him. He suddenly put an arm around her and pressed her close for a fleeting moment. She drank in the scent of him, something like woodsmoke and incense and tea. *Although I'm surprised he doesn't smell like pickles!*

She was surprised he let her go so easily, and it took her a moment to realize what was missing. Possession.

A Daramon man would never send his wife off with a strange man, certainly not without threats and reminders that she belonged to him. Nor would a male Daramon servant have accompanied a married woman without promising her husband that he would protect her on the journey. But Harrai didn't threaten, and Sairi didn't promise.

I really am responsible for myself and my own choices.

Now, she checked Lorsen's rooms, but she wasn't there.

And where was she?

"If you can't manage to throw a knife better than that, you're useless." Jarlan's voice carried across the practice field. "Would it help if you aimed at my balls?"

"Probably."

"Then give it a try."

"Well, then, get over there by the target."

"I don't think so. You'll have to throw farther than the target."

"Curses," Atorra hissed under her breath. "I'm sorry, Sairi. Let me attempt to pry her away."

"It's no rush to me," Sairi said. Of course, he probably had little idea how Jarlan had been treating Atorra.

Jarlan was already turning his attentions on them from across the field. "Sairi. I didn't expect to see you with the queen."

"The queen has offered me a position here," Sairi said. "And I'm taking her to see one of the western caves."

"A position?"

"Yes. Sairi is my new secretary," Atorra said.

"Your new—"

"I think we agree that he's a good man to have around."

Jarlan looked caught. "Yes. We do. Welcome to the castle of Kota," He had the sudden air of a man forced into an itchy suit. "The western caves?"

"Yep," Atorra said, a little sharply. "I thought you might want to come along, Lorsen. We'll be flying on the royal dragons and it'll be an adventure. The views from up there are so beautiful; I've been dreaming of taking you flying."

"Flying?" Lorsen lit up. "Yes, of course I want to go flying!"

Jarlan was assessing the situation; she could actually sense his mood. Another little sign that her telepathy was improving, but it was annoying. "We have to hurry."

"None of you are skilled riders," Jarlan said. "I'm surprised Grandmother is letting you ride off without an escort."

"Well, remain surprised."

"Did you even talk to her?"

"What do you think, Jarlan?"

"I think I should send her a telepathic message right now and inform her that you're riding off without an escort."

"I spoke with the king," Atorra said. "I don't think Lady Kirska really *needs* to know about it. I'm not letting you sabotage this journey, for fate's sake. We're leaving now."

He threw up a hand, then crossed his arms, then grimaced. "It's—it really doesn't feel very safe, does it?"

"The cave is nowhere near the storm," Sairi said. "I've been there a number of times."

"But the situation is always changing. When—our parents went out on that picnic—no one thought anything would happen," Jarlan said. "No one knew the storm was anything except an ordinary thunderstorm. That it could come up on them so fast—and never leave. It wasn't like they were off on a mission. They had a baby along with them and everything. And—didn't Tashaya nearly die?"

"Yes. And I fought it back."

"I don't think Harrai should let you leave the castle."

"Luckily, it's between me and Harrai, and he trusts me."

"Do you want to come with us?" Lorsen asked coolly.

"Lorsen! What is wrong with you? Weren't you so proud of whacking his balls yesterday?"

"Oh, I am very proud," Lorsen said. "I'm not inviting him. I was just asking if that's what he's getting at."

"I let you whack my balls to build your confidence," Jarlan said, giving Sairi an awkward just-between-guys look.

"I don't think I should comment on this dynamic," Sairi said.

"All right. Look. We don't get along," Jarlan said. "I feel sure that just having our queen reincarnated as a Fanarlem is a sign that something has gone wrong, and we're doomed. We need dragon-born heirs, *now*. Harrai is being way too relaxed about the whole thing."

"What do you want him to do?" Atorra said. "I can't help that this is how I came. Do you think he should also treat me badly, like this is my fault? Like I chose to be born a Fanarlem slave just to ruin your kingdom?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe you wanted out, Queen of Songs."

She wondered this herself. Yes. Had her soul chosen this body to break the cycle?

Atorra didn't want to admit it. There was no way of proving what souls did in that mysterious space between, but deep down...

I think I could have chosen it myself. So they would never find me. So they would never force me to have the dragon born.

"I'm here now," Atorra said. "Doing my damned best."

Jarlan's jaw tensed, and he paced a quick circle, kicking the dirt. "I'm just—terrified. And no one else seems to care that we're going—to lose—everything. Under Harrai's watch. And now, yours. You—flying off somewhere. And the Halnari coming early. They respect their own shits more than they do us."

"I'm doing everything I can think of to do," Atorra said. "I agree with Harrai. We shouldn't rush into war. The Daramons are getting better at fighting against us. But explanations are never enough for you. You have to keep picking at the same old seam."

"I'm coming with you," he said.

"No."

"None of you have as much fighting experience as I do. You should have a guard."

"All right, then send a guard with us, but not you. Lorsen—stop looking at me!"

"Well—when we were practicing the other day, he told me that Harrai doesn't want to fight the Daramons, which I see is true, and that since Harrai is the oldest child he gets to be king, no questions asked, even though he doesn't want to be and he has no taste for war and politics. And that you bonded with the dragon he'd been flying since he was a child. I sort of understand why he's so upset. He *does* have a crude tongue and that is why I gave him a good strike. But...I'm not sure you really know...what horrible really looks like."

I can't argue with that. I can't argue with Lorsen about anything.

Atorra huffed and tried to put away her anger at Jarlan. "Fine." Lorsen has been through it. If she wants Jarlan, should I even deny her that? Just—gods. She really must have been traumatized if this is what she thinks a good man looks like now.

"I don't need you defending me," Jarlan said, as if just to remind everyone how horrible he was.

"Seems like you do. You're invited now, no more arguments from anyone, all right?" Lorsen said. "I'm ready."

"I'll get some provisions. I'll meet you in the caves in half an hour," Jarlan said, seeming happy to rush off somewhere.

As if this wasn't enough to worry about, as they walked to the bridge, Tashaya came up behind them, panting and struggling, all dressed in a furlined robe and boots. "Were you leaving without me?"

"Tash, I really don't think you're fit to go today."

"But...I want to stay near you in case that whole episode happens again," Tashaya said. "You're the only one who knows what to do to help me. And we just talked about going flying."

"It's cold up in the air—"

"That's why I'm wearing furs!"

"And flying is a little strenuous. You have to hold on and move with the dragon..."

"We can ride together," Tashaya said.

"But I'm not very strong!"

"Jarlan could ride with her," Lorsen said.

"Jarlan!?" Tashaya's expression revolted. "He's coming?"

"My thoughts exactly. But...yes," Atorra said.

"I can fly with her," Sairi said. "All of us Sreyelans have strong telekinesis. If something happened I can hold her on the dragon."

Tashaya turned pink and her lips parted slightly, but she said nothing.

"Aren't you flying on your own?" Lorsen asked.

"Unfortunately, we need to go at dragon speed if we want to make it back before the Halnari arrive. I'm not going to enjoy that, but if I have a secondary purpose to riding, that'll keep me from itching to fly myself."

"Perfect," Atorra said. "Sairi and Tashaya can take Ebel."

"Ebel probably would have been my wing if I was in good health," Tashaya murmured, as if centering herself on some other thought.

"And Lorsen and Jarlan?"

"Ask the dragons," Tashaya said. "They can be particular about who they like to fly with."

They crossed the bridge, Atorra taking the lead but sticking close to Tashaya. Tashaya was slow, gripping the rope tight, but she wasn't nervous. Lorsen got very quiet, unwilling to voice her anxiety over the height. Sairi took easy flight, spreading huge wings, and swept past them.

No wonder Lady Kirska insisted she can't fly with telekinesis. She's probably seen the winged folk fly before, and nobody else flies like that. Sreyelans didn't have all the power and force of dragons, but Sairi's flight looked so nimble and joyful that she envied him utterly.

Lorsen watched him and then clutched her head. "Ooh, vertigo..."

"It's okay, Lorsen! I was scared the first time too."

"I'm not scared," Lorsen insisted, lifting a foot and then putting it right back down again, having made no progress. "I'm not used to—" She tried to move again. "Damnit! Who even cares if I fall! This isn't even my godsdamned body. Dash it on the rocks, why don't you..." She clung to the rope, paralyzed. Tashaya was between them, and Atorra couldn't get to her on the single-file bridge.

But Atorra's tongue went numb. This was more than just fear of the bridge. Lorsen keeps trying to talk about how bad things were for her in Atlantis, but...I don't know how or when or if to really ask. She must have been so terrified and alone, and I was here becoming a queen.

"It's okay," Tashaya said. "You can take a minute."

"You're safe," Jarlan said roughly, just behind her. "Here. I've got you." He slipped a hand under the sash at her waist and twisted it in his hand so he had a strong hold on the center of her body. "Hold the rope and look ahead at the doors."

She nodded faintly and kept moving.

Somehow Jarlan is able to...help her where I can't.

And yet, Jarlan really hadn't done anything to redeem himself. He was not worthy of putting a hand on Lorsen, even to help her over the bridge. Tashaya gave her a little frown of agreement.

The bridge was no place to think about it for long, so she kept walking. Behind her, Jarlan murmured an occasional word of assurance to Lorsen, although he sounded quite unaccustomed to being helpful or reassuring. Sairi circled overhead, waiting for Atorra to reach the dragon gates.

And someone was missing.

Harrai should be with us instead of Jarlan. But he's stuck there in meetings. That's how a good king has to be, but...I wonder how many times he spent the afternoon with advisors while his friends kept living their lives.

He doesn't have friends, anyway.

Maybe I should have stayed with him. But he's the one who told me to take care of Tashaya instead, to take Lorsen flying. He doesn't want me to be trapped by a title.

She thought of him kissing her fingers, the warmth of his skin, his words to her last night. And then, waking up to feel his hand holding hers, and see him sleeping in his chair, keeping watch over her. He was probably very tired, too.

That morning already felt like a long time ago.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



ATORRA

You seem troubled, little queen, Dosskarja said. *You don't care for my old rider one bit, do you?*

No. I certainly don't. He has been cruel and unwelcoming to me since the day I arrived. He disrespects me and all Fanarlem, when he should be on our side.

He is very much still a child, Dosskarja replied.

How did you end up being his wing?

He chose me when he was a little boy.

They had taken flight now, and Atorra leaned into the wind, feeling Dosskarja's powerful body beneath her.

Sairi and Tashaya were seated together on Ebel, Tashaya on the saddle with Sairi behind her. Occasionally, he swept a wing around her to steady her. It all seemed a lot for her fragile body to handle, but she was laughing. Sairi was taking good care of her.

Lorsen was flying on Dirjet and she declared that she wanted to ride alone and that was that, despite still getting used to the heights. Jarlan looked like he had been about to offer her help, but he quickly wiped that expression off his face and went about asking the other dragons if they would take him to the cave. Het came forward to offer, squashing Atorra's dreams of leaving the prince behind.

And I took you away from him, Dosskarja... But did you like him? You get to choose too, don't you?

Yes. Of course dragons can reject a rider. But I believe Jarlan needed a dragon's age and wisdom. I did all I could to be someone he could trust. I think he might be important to this city yet.

What makes you think that? Atorra bristled.

He did not grow up quickly like the king, but he will not be young forever.

And he did trust you... I took you away from him.

He must accept this, Dosskarja said serenely. *I am yours now. And my age and wisdom is yours as well.*

Are you an older dragon, Dosskarja?

I am the oldest dragon left.

You!?

I'm glad I don't look it. He snorted with humor.

Do you know anything about this cave? Do you think we might find any answers there?

This cave was a ruin long before I drew breath. It is a place of the ancients. We do not remember their names, and we do not know their ways. You may see something there, Queen of Songs.

Is it safe?

It has always been safe, and that's all I can be sure of.

Atorra shut off her thoughts to him, at least as far as she could tell. *Well, that's a little ominous, but Dosskarja does have a way of talking.*

They flew for hours, the dragons seeking out the mountain passes. Sometimes they had to take a roundabout way to keep the flesh and blood people, particularly Tashaya, from getting too cold or short of breath. They streaked past peak after peak, some of them snowcapped. Occasionally a river wound between the steep mountainside. The dragons pressed on as the sun peaked and then began to slide into the west, and that was when Dosskarja murmured, *We are quite close now.*

"There! Where the trees part; that little ledge!" Sairi called, directing Ebel. Dosskarja was already taking the lead, bringing Atorra down first. The ledge was only just big enough for all four dragons, and one stray sweep of Dirjet's tail sent a rock tumbling down the mountainside.

Oops, she said.

Lorsen strode to the cave entrance, which made her look like the adventurer of the group, but was clearly just to get as far from the edge as

possible. Sairi helped Tashaya down. "Are you feeling all right on your feet?"

She nodded, blushing pink, watching him as he stretched his wings and legs. He looked quite relieved to be off dragon back.

Jarlan studied the cave's exterior, one hand on his sword. "It doesn't look like much from here," he said, and he unpacked a few lanterns. He gave the magic light stones inside a brisk little rub and they started to glow.

He was right. The cave didn't look like much, just a craggy opening in the rocks, about eight feet tall but narrow and slanted. Nor did Atorra feel anything unusual. There was no whisper of the shadow voice and the storm was nowhere in sight.

"I'll go first," Atorra said, and he handed her a lantern without argument.

"My sword is right behind you," he said.

"Keep it down, son," Lorsen said with a tart chuckle.

"I meant that I'm ready to fight," he growled.

"Mmhm."

Atorra was too tense for humor, but that joke was more like the old Lorsen so she didn't complain. She stepped over rocks in the narrow entrance—and then the cave suddenly opened up like a temple, with arched ceilings and columns shaped from the rock. Near the entrance a fountain was built into one of the columns, with a trickle of water still running into it by some mystery of engineering. Three slabs of stone were arranged to form a triangle around the room, and as Atorra passed within the triangle an involuntary shiver went through her.

All the energy within the room was caught inside this triangle, and in the center of the triangle was a symbol painted in black.

"Stay back," Atorra said, holding out a hand. "Especially Tashaya. This *is* it. The same mark. I'm sure it is."

"The entire cave wall is covered in writing and pictures," Sairi said, lifting one of the lanterns. "But that is the one that seems the most important. Do you know what it is?"

Yes.

The answer was deep inside her, waiting to bubble up if she stopped holding it down.

"It's the name of the shadow," she said. "When they got too close to him...he wrote his name on them. It was...it was a warning."

Tashaya gripped her heart. "His? How do you know it's a he?"

"I heard him. I just know it is." Atorra looked at the symbol, a stark black on the floor. It was surrounded by a painting that might have been two dragons, but the painting was faded and worn away, no longer easy to decipher. The symbol, on the other hand, must be as clear as the day it was painted.

"Do you feel anything?" Tashaya asked. "How do I get rid of it? I don't want his...name on me."

Atorra was trembling very badly now; the longer she stood inside the triangle the more she felt something. It was different than the shadow speaking to her.

"This is one of the temples that binds him," she said, and she was as surprised as anyone by the words. "I know something about this place... I —I don't know. It's familiar to me. I think *I'm* the one who wrote this before. The Queen of Songs bound the shadow, a very long time ago." Atorra couldn't seem to move. She felt an urgency, inside the center of the cave. It wanted her there. It wanted her to remember.

She looked at her friends—and acquaintances—wishing someone could save her. *Harrai would have helped me*.

Lorsen took a step forward.

"No," Atorra said. "You can't come in here. None of you should."

"I've explored the entire cave before," Sairi said. "I must have spent an hour right there, tracing that symbol in my mind until I was sure I would remember it."

"It's different now that I'm here. The cave is trying to tell me something."

"You look terrified," Lorsen said. "Just what is it trying to tell you? And will it do you any good?"

You must be prepared to give up everything.

"What do you mean?" Atorra whispered.

Close your eyes and sing the song of binding. You'll remember what happened here.

"I—I can't—"

You know the song of binding. You must. Because soon it is time to unravel the bonds.

You sang this destiny for yourself, and you sang it long ago, when the world was green and all people sang one song, the song we taught them.

"I can't unravel the bonds. That would set him free, and what will it do to me? I don't—I don't like this. Something's wrong."

You're afraid of your own self? You don't have true attachments here, and it is time to return. Your little body made of cloth and wood is nothing at all.

You are a dragon, Queen of Songs. When you unbind him, you will unbind yourself, and the world needs the song that only you can remember...

The voice was heavy as it spoke inside her, not just in her head but from deep within her. It pressed on her shoulders and turned her bones to lead. She tried to fight against it. She couldn't move. If her friends were talking to her, she couldn't hear them. She opened her mouth, trying to scream like she was inside a nightmare.

"I don't want to be a dragon!" Atorra finally cried, and Lorsen stormed inside with her and put an arm around her, dragging her toward the door.

"You're not a dragon," she said. "Let's get you out of here. I don't like this place at all."

Atorra still couldn't seem to move, and Lorsen struggled with her weight, but even as both Jarlan and Sairi tried to help, Lorsen dragged her out on her own, and as soon as she was past the pillars that shaped the triangle, she could move again.

"Torra, are you okay!?" Tashaya cried.

"I would never have suggested it if I thought you were in danger," Sairi said. "I've been here a number of times and nothing strange ever happened."

"So you think that you're the one who painted the cave in a past incarnation?" Jarlan asked. "And bound the shadow? So...was there another cave somewhere with a broken binding, and is that what caused the storm and the death of our parents and all of that?"

This felt like way too many questions, and Atorra really wanted nothing more than to cry. She knew she shouldn't cry, especially not in front of Jarlan, but probably never again about anything.

I really am one of the most powerful people in the world.

And I don't like it at all...

"Lay off her," Lorsen said. "She's upset. We should get her home."

"But we need to know," Jarlan said. "I'm afraid she'll forget what she heard by the time we get home. Magic is funny that way. So just tell us."

"I heard a voice that said...yes. That's pretty much it. I used some magic to bind the shadow a long time ago, and it said I will need to unbind him so I can free myself. And it said *I'm* a dragon—or I was, and I need to become one again."

"The Queen of Songs was a dragon once? I've never heard that. But maybe..." A pure note of hope wiped the usual cynical scowl from Jarlan's face. "Can you turn into a dragon, even from a Fanarlem body, and have the heirs of our kingdom as a dragon? Maybe that's what saves us... Maybe you *should* go back inside the triad and try to sing that binding song. This voice might be trying to help us."

Atorra couldn't do it anymore. She started to cry angry tears.

Fates, it was humiliating. Crying in front of Jarlan. Crying about mystical voices that were maybe trying to guide her toward her destiny and show her how to help the dragons. Why shouldn't she want to be a dragon? She could eat Jarlan if she wanted, probably. She could fly and fight and generate fire and spend time with Dosskarja and Dirjet and the other dragons who had been welcoming from the start.

This could be the answer to everything. It seemed almost elegant in its simplicity. Ages and ages ago, she had bound the shadow and bound herself in a human form. Now, she would free them both, and fight him, and win the eternal struggle between light and darkness.

She couldn't seem to stop sobbing defiantly, and Lorsen was holding her and smoothing her hair like the old days.

"Could you three step out—for just a minute?" Lorsen said softly.

"Of course," Sairi said. "Call if you need us."

Jarlan dragged his feet, holding his lantern up to flicker on the walls of the cave.

"This is not our cave," Sairi said to him. Sairi was obviously sticking close to Tashaya, making sure she didn't keel over. Jarlan huffed and moved toward the exit.

Lorsen put her arms around Atorra and let her cry and cry. She didn't say a word until Atorra slowed down. Atorra pulled back, looking at Lorsen, and her friend's face was almost familiar. Lorsen had softened toward Atorra, although she still held her own feelings back.

"It's okay," she said. "You don't have to turn into a dragon. It sounds ridiculous."

"It—it does. I'm sorry, Lor. I didn't mean to lose it like that in front of everyone."

"Still as hopeless as ever." Lorsen smiled. "What really happened in there?"

"It's just as I told everyone. Ever since I got here I've been hearing this voice, and it's been trying to tempt me. It told me I deserve better, that I'm more than just a Fanarlem. It's seductive. I'm not really sure what it wants from me, or anyone in Kota, but it doesn't feel...benevolent. At all. This voice, though—"

"Are you sure it isn't just the same voice, trying to trick you?"

"This voice was very different. It felt like—this voice was my own self." Atorra swallowed. She would *not* cry again. "And it knows what I have to do. But...ever since I arrived here, I've been trying to be more myself. I've been trying to shake off everything they told us at the house and be more confident—but as Atorra. I feel like I could be a good queen. A good wife, a good friend. I can feel myself getting better at everything, every week—sometimes frustratingly slow, but my confidence is growing, and my magic gets stronger, and now it feels like I'm supposed to throw all of that away. Like my true destiny is to return to the dragons. I don't feel like a dragon."

"Maybe it's only temporary. You just have to fight the shadow. Then you can be Atorra again."

"It's not temporary." Atorra shook her head. "I don't entirely understand it, but I know what was being asked of me. I need to give up everything."

"You would still live in Kota, wouldn't you?"

"The dragons aren't the same. I like the dragons, so much. But I don't want to be one."

"I understand," Lorsen said.

"Lorsen...I don't mean to just worry over myself either. I've been so self-absorbed. If you need to talk, or anything, ever..."

"You've been reading me just right. I don't want to talk. I'm working with the healers on forgetting, and I think when I've forgotten everything, maybe I'll be myself again. Or...closer to it. And we can both just forget that we were ever apart. I just want to help you, because you seem in the thick of it." Lorsen's voice was cold, and sad, but she was trying so hard to sound like herself. "You are not self-absorbed in the least; you are a queen

with a great weight on your shoulders, and I want to help you. If you promise to stop looking at me with concern, I can do my job."

"I never meant to make you feel pitied. I've been so awkward. I get so nervous and I don't know what to say."

"I am still your shoulder to cry on. I'll be your lady-in-waiting, your protector as I learn to fight, whatever you need. I just want to be here for you, and for you to promise me that you won't worry over me anymore. You saved me, and now I'm the one who owes you a debt. I'm quite strong."

This still didn't really sound like the old Lorsen, like a best friend. Best friends supported each other; they weren't ladies in waiting or protectors. She supposed it was different for queens, and maybe Lorsen was just being practical, but it reminded Atorra that their friendship had changed for good. Lorsen had declared it.

We can't ever go back.

"And most of all, as your friend, I will tell you this: don't destroy yourself to fulfill someone else's expectations," Lorsen said.

"Even if that self was me, once?"

"Forget that! You're Atorra now, aren't you? Not an ancient dragon or whatever. Would you want your five-year-old self advising you now? Of course not. So why would you listen to your five-thousand-years ago self? What do they know? You don't owe them anything."

Atorra wasn't sure it was this simple. If she was the only one who could defeat the shadow or save the dragon kingdom, such were the sacrifices that made legends, and did the hero really have any choice? And if she did, was she the heroine at all?

"I'm afraid Jarlan will tell Lady Kirska, and she'll see this as the only solution," Atorra murmured, as her thoughts turned darker. "She might demand I return to this cave, and follow the commands from my past..."

"Lady Kirska will not be told," Lorsen said, narrowing her eyes. "We'll make that clear to Jarlan."

"How?"

"Let me handle Jarlan."

"No. I don't like the way you are with him, Lor. I can't tell if you like him or he likes you or both."

"Neither," Lorsen said, with a ruthless air. "I'm forbidden fruit, he's sexually attracted to me, and I'll use it. I won't let him touch me, but I'll

make it clear to him that he will not be making trouble for you anymore."

This was very hard to believe.

"Like I said, Torra...I'll protect you now."

No, Lorsen. I'm the one who should be taking care of you. You don't seem quite strong, you seem...like you could get into trouble.

She wanted to be honest, but she just knew that would make Lorsen more defensive, more determined to prove that the Daramons hadn't beaten her down.

I'll just have to make sure I handle Jarlan before she has a chance.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY



ATORRA

Outside, Tashaya was sitting against Ebel, bundled up in all her furs, while Sairi and Jarlan were having a soft but animated conversation with a lot of pointing. A wind was stirring and shaking the cedars on the peaks around them, and the sky had grown overcast, making it seem later than it was.

"We need to make camp for the night," Jarlan said. "It's getting too dark."

"Lady Tashaya is extremely cold," Sairi said. "We need a warm place with a fire. I think we should go north a little to the cave by the three-forked creek. It's a low elevation and we'll have fresh water."

"I don't think we should go north at all," Jarlan said. "We'll be in sight of the storm and I already don't like the looks of this weather."

"Not from the cave," Sairi said.

Atorra looked at Tashaya, who was conscious but otherwise pale and listless. "Does anyone know a better place to camp?"

I'm afraid not, Dosskarja said. *The ridges are high going east and south. It was difficult enough finding a good pass to fly through, as you know. The cave is still a long way from the storm.*

"All right. Dosskarja agrees with Sairi. We'll camp there, let Tashaya get some sleep by the fire, and head home at dawn tomorrow," Atorra said.

They took flight again in haste, with the smell of rain in the air and the wind picking up, buffeting the dragons' wings and making them all hunker down. They swept down to the creek bed just as the rain was starting to pelt

them, and everyone hurried inside. The dragons didn't fit in this cave either, but they found rock outcroppings nearby for cover. Atorra added that to her list of reasons not to be a dragon.

"I'll find some firewood," Sairi said.

"I'll help you with that," Jarlan offered.

Atorra helped Tashaya get settled on her furs. "We didn't bring bedding. I hope you're warm enough. I wish we had body heat, times like this."

"Sairi's warm," Tashaya murmured, giggling. "He smells good too."

"You could order him to sleep with her as a secretarial service," Lorsen said.

"Should I?" Atorra asked.

"Do you think he would?" Tashaya slunk under her furs. "Girls, can I make a confession?"

"Of course."

"You didn't warn me that when I agreed to a dragon ride I would also end up with a man's wing around me for hours upon hours!"

"That isn't really a confession; we all saw it," Lorsen said. "And I guess, thanks to Atorra, he'll be sticking around."

"I'll confess that I thought he seemed perfect for you from the start," Atorra said. "It was so sweet when he covered you up with his blankets. It seems perfect that you had just vowed to live a little and that very day—he returned."

"But as soon as I dare think about it, I also think that I'm not physically capable of wild sexual affairs," Tashaya said. "And then I could die, and leave him heartbroken. And then I'm right back where I started. Except, dead."

"You can't keep living thinking like that," Lorsen said. "He can take care of his own heartbreak."

"It seems cruel. I know it's all fantasy right now, but we had very nice conversation on the flight, and it was hard not to imagine what it would be like to have a partner. I'm used to having healers and nurses and tutors taking care of me, but it's...very different with a man close to my age making sure I'm warm and secure. But I know he would always be taking care of me. I don't have a lot to offer him."

"If you let him court you all the way through marriage, he would be marrying into the royal family," Lorsen said. "And right now he's just an outsider from a very isolated tribe." "That's not romantic!" Atorra protested. "He doesn't seem like the type to calculate all of that anyway."

"All I'm saying is, you have practical advantages to offer in exchange for needing some care, and that's assuming Atorra doesn't find a way to get rid of the mark. Is it acceptable for you to marry a Sreyelan or is that some big fuss?"

"At this point, I think I can marry anyone," Tashaya said. "It's dangerous for me to get pregnant, and I doubt I could if I tried. So there's not even the smallest amount of nudging to marry from a good family. Plus, my grandmother has never cared; she married a Daramon after all, and Great-Auntie is generally more impressed by magic talent and intellect than family lineage. We're getting way ahead of ourselves, though."

"True. I'm sure the men are off talking about how to make fires or something, and we might as well be back at the House with nothing better to think about," Lorsen said, huffing.

But when the men returned with the firewood, Sairi's eyes went to Tashaya before anything else. And Jarlan's, for that matter, went to Lorsen, but he quickly moved on and started piling up the wood.

Sairi touched Tashaya's forehead to check her temperature while Jarlan started the fire. Tashaya certainly looked like she was on fire at the casual brush of his wing. "Are you managing?" he asked. "We should have brought bed rolls..."

"Sairi, I hate to ask, but she really could use a warm body tonight," Atorra said, as Tashaya shrank into her furs. "She'll be all bundled up but Lorsen and I, you know, we don't put off any warmth."

"Of course." Sairi looked at the blushing Tashaya, and he looked flushed too, and said, "First, the fire. And dinner. Jarlan, if you want to prepare your fish I'll get this going..."

"Sure."

"You caught fish?" Lorsen looked impressed.

"Just two little ones," Jarlan said. "But I was trying to hurry."

"At least the rich boys here do have practical skills," Lorsen said. "You know, the rich people in Atlantis don't know how to do anything for themselves. They have fleets of servants to cater to their every whim. They don't know how to catch a fish, cook a fish, or wash their plates."

"What are they good for, then?"

"Selling things that other people make."

"Sounds pretty useless," Jarlan said. "Auntie's husband was like that, though. He was elegant and talked about books but he didn't know how to actually do anything himself."

"Where I come from, it's the opposite," Sairi said, positioning the firewood. "We don't have any books at all; knowledge is all passed down and you only get it if the elders think you're the right person to have it. Only the women learn to make snares and nets. Some five hundred years ago or so, only women had wings, but there was a blizzard that killed an entire hunting party and after that every child was shape-shifted."

"Why the women?" Jarlan said, paring a smaller stick into a point, presumably for spearing the fish over the flames. "I've always wanted to ask, but I figured the elders would never invite me back if I did. Men are still physically stronger."

"Doesn't matter," Sairi said. "It's all telepathy and telekinesis for taking down large game, and the way the terrain is—no one's carrying the meat back in one piece. You have to be able to fly, and at that point, you sacrifice the strength of a hand to get wings. There's not much difference."

"What if your telepathy is a low level?" Tashaya asked.

"No Sreyelan is a low level telepath. A long time ago they used to sterilize children with poor telepathic skills. Now, no one is born without high level skills anymore."

"That's so cruel," Tashaya said.

"It's cruel terrain," Sairi said. "Of course, I agree—it has been a brutal way of living. But our tribe couldn't survive there otherwise."

"Couldn't you live in Drai?" Atorra asked. "We could support the Sreyelan population here, couldn't we? Or are there more of you than I think?"

"We could," Jarlan said. "We've always offered."

"It's not easy to leave your home or your way of life," Sairi said. "Few Sreyelans wish to change it. I think I could be happy here in Kota because it's easy to visit my family and these are my mountains, but not in Avalon or Otaré or somewhere else far from home."

"How did you end up there in the first place?" Tashaya asked. "Do you know?"

"It is tricky to know for sure without written records. But the story goes that the Sreyelans were once warrior priestesses who followed a god of battle. When the more peaceful goddess-religion started to spread everywhere, they were urged to put down their weapons and only kill when necessary. I presume they didn't like that, and found a place they could keep to their ways. We don't worship that god anymore, but our version of Eskamir is definitely darker than the Drai's version."

"The Sreyelan alliance is never going to happen, is it?" Jarlan said. "We're alone here, so you can tell me your honest opinion."

"My honest opinion? Ahh..." Sairi squinted like the truth hurt his eyes. "They still just think the Drai are soft. Even the dragons. If you rushed into war waving swords over your heads, they'd come with you. They don't care much for trade agreements, treaties, promises, paperwork..."

"We *should* rush at this Halnari contingent with swords over our heads, I swear... They're the ones coming early, and it's a power move to show that they can just march in here whenever they want."

Atorra still couldn't agree with Jarlan. Hrada used to say 'Only fools and prey will hurry' if they were sloppy with lessons or getting ready for the evening in the front of the House. Which did seem a funny thing to say to Fanarlem; they might not be fools, but they *were* arguably the prey.

"It wouldn't take much to end the Sreyelan tribes," Sairi said. "I would resolve the shadow and storm before I try taking on the Daramons."

"I agree with that. Sounds like that's up to our queen," Jarlan said, pointing his scowl at Atorra.

Atorra stood up. She already knew yelling back at Jarlan like squabbling children went nowhere—but she was tired of it.

"You have the same look as my brother," he said. "Do you want to choke me? Have you learned that yet?"

"No. You make sense sometimes," she said, struggling for a regal calm. "And you are truly concerned about the dragons. Would you be a better king than Harrai? I don't think so. You're so eager to see us go to war—for me to throw my life away and listen to a voice in a cave. You're scared, and you just want us to do something—anything—to fix it."

"I'm not scared. I'm pissed off."

"Well, this is your chance, isn't it? The Halnari are coming and you're our diplomatic ambassador. I assume you will be involved in these conversations, but if you're the one who leads us into war, then every last person and dragon who dies will be on your head."

"Are you giving me permission to negotiate with the Halnari, my lady?" he said, a crafty smile twitching at his lips.

"You know I can't do that. And that's the problem with you. You're acting like running the kingdom is a game that you can win. I'm telling you that..." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "I'll tell Harrai to give you a fresh chance and listen to your opinions. No choking you. No calling each other names and sneering at each other. Same for you and I. You can talk to the Sreyelans and so...we should all be able to talk to each other with mutual respect. If you leave me alone to figure out my own business, I'll support your business—and you *are* the diplomatic ambassador."

Jarlan narrowed his eyes, still faintly scowling, and definitely skeptical. He glanced briefly at Sairi like he wished he hadn't heard any of that.

"Maybe we could...try it," he said warily. "If I act ill-tempered at court, it's because Harrai still lords it over me like the all-important big brother, and grandmother is always right behind him with a judgmental sniff. No one in Kota lets me have a place in my own right."

"I'll give you a place." Atorra itched to add a caveat. She hardly believed Jarlan could behave himself. And she was really only doing it because he'd been along on this trip to the cave. She knew that threatening him not to tell Lady Kirska would have the opposite effect. Plus, she didn't want Lorsen involved.

No, her only hope here was to give him something he wanted that Lady Kirska denied him.

Hopefully I've picked up some wisdom from the queens who came before me...

It certainly doesn't help with my nerves over these visitors, though. I may have made things worse.

Atorra and Lorsen slept close, generally miserable since they hadn't brought bedding, and caves were damp. They might not get cold, but they could certainly feel damp, and it was the worst sort of state for a Fanarlem. If Jarlan slept at all, he did it sitting up, propped against a rock near the fire, but whenever she peeked, he was carving a piece of wood into a crude figure, just to keep busy.

Only Tashaya seemed to truly sleep well, since she had enough furs to bundle up in, and Sairi stayed close to her and draped a wing over her. It rained all night, and even though it was just an ordinary spring storm, distant thunder had her jolting in terror.

As soon as the sun rose, the storm had also passed, and it was time to fly home. They should beat the Halnari by a day or two, just enough time for her to delicately warn Harrai about everything she learned in the cave, and what she had promised Jarlan.

And then...

She had no idea what could happen, and only pray to the fates that it was nothing much.

OceanofPDF.com

PART III THE VISITOR



OCEANOFPDF. COM

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



JARLAN

THEY RETURNED home in the late afternoon. The women and Sairi went to the castle. The queen would likely report straight to his brother and warn him of her promise to Jarlan, and Tashaya was swooning like a girl of fifteen, even though it seemed to Jarlan that a swoon might mark the end of her.

His cousin was visibly sick, and had always been, but all of the kingdom of Drai was rotting inside. Tashaya's weak body was simply the rot they could all see, day to day—and pretend it wasn't happening to all of them.

Jarlan lingered after he dismounted from Het's back. Dosskarja, his old dragon, was watching him with his ancient eyes.

**I miss you*,* Jarlan said, with a frankness he didn't offer to any person.

I know, Dosskarja said. *But it is better this way. She is the Queen of Songs...and she chose me. It is my children that she will bear.*

Jarlan cocked his head. *So you've known about this. You knew that she could become a dragon?*

I prodded the Sreyelan's memory. I wished for him to bring her there. I could have taken her there alone, but I don't want her to know the idea comes from me. And I wanted all of you to see this place.

You sly beast. Jarlan grinned with unexpected relief, almost as if he had heard from his parents again. *You have a plan. Why didn't you tell me? I've been despairing over the state of things.*

I've told you many times, my prince. You must learn to accept loss. Even if the queen fulfills her destiny, there will be more losses. None of us, and none of this, will be here forever. It's better to find peace with this truth before you try to fix every little problem around you.

This is hardly a 'little' problem. He knew Dosskarja was wise, but it was impossible to learn to accept that everything would be gone someday, even dragons. It was the job of the Drai royal family to make sure that they never saw that day. And princes and kings should not be philosophers. *Our problems are urgent, and I won't have the suffering of all of my people on my head.*

But you are not the king, and if you ever become king, my prince...you must also see the march of decades. The consequences of momentary decisions. The Queen of Songs is an ancient soul. She is giving you an opportunity.

She doesn't seem like an ancient soul, Jarlan thought to himself, closing his thoughts to Dosskarja. To the dragon, he simply accepted the words with a nod. He took a long breath, knowing Dosskarja had endless patience to give advice, and a centuries-old dragon could never understand how it felt to manage one's temper in the castle, surrounded by people who saw him as a worthless child. They pitied him once, the orphan prince with no purpose. It was so much better to take control of the situation, to get under Harrai and Grandmother's skin.

He crossed the bridge back to the castle, and was swept immediately into questions from servants who were trying to juggle a thousand tasks in a matter of days. Jarlan had handled some of the previous communication about the visit, but the Halnari had not come to Drai in their lifetime. He knew they would expect hot baths, and soft music. Their cuisine tended to be light, with many courses. They would want to strike just the right note—impressing them without catering to them. *No baths, but do keep the music light and refined.* It was easy to overthink every last detail.

He thought he'd go punch around a practice dummy a bit before dinner, just to blow off steam, but he found Lorsen already there, whacking it with the wooden sword.

No one else was even thinking about fighting right now. But there she was, this ridiculously dainty, useless little doll girl, beating the absolute shit out of a sack of straw.

"He doesn't have balls," Jarlan said.

Lorsen whirled, and swept the stick toward him. Then she pulled back. "You startled me. What are you doing here?"

"Same thing you're doing."

"Don't you have a pack of friends? Why are you always coming here by yourself?"

It was a good question, one he didn't like probing too deeply. "I just wanted a quick training session," he said.

"Okay," she said, looking a little peeved at the company. "Well, don't tell me I'm holding it wrong. I just wanted to beat up something for a while."

She actually was holding it correctly. But it also didn't matter. Her body was too weak and there was no way to strengthen it. It was painful to watch her practice endlessly, knowing that all that hard work wouldn't matter. "I get it," he said. "I want to be alone too. I'll go to the end of the yard."

"Sure." She bit her lip, glaring at him as he chose a bow instead. He'd mess with the targets down there. Archery was one of his weak points.

"I wasn't following you or anything," he added. "I assume you've been here a while."

"Yeah."

"See ya."

He walked across the field, at the back end of the castle by the stables. The ground was a little muddy from the rains last night. At the far end, he chose the first target, nocked an arrow, and took aim. It barely hit the outer ring. He fired off another, managing slightly better, but not much. He'd gone through the whole quiver without a bull's-eye, and yanked the arrows out of the target, when the bells rang the impending dinner hour.

He finally looked over and saw Lorsen across the field, watching him. She had a hand on her hip. She looked like she'd seen the whole thing, every lousy shot, just based on her cheeky pose.

Goddess banish my thoughts. He hated that he kept looking at her, and that she kept hanging around. She was a Fanarlem and he didn't want anything to do with a Fanarlem. Didn't matter if she was a queen or a regular girl—no self-respecting Miralem prince was going to choose that.

"How is your practice going?" he asked her.

"Better than yours, I think," she said, in a low voice. She looked at him like she was daring him to respond.

You want to pick a fight? Fine. I'm game. "You do know, I trust, that you are never going to be able to fight effectively with a sword. If you're going to practice, stick to throwing knives. Maybe try the crossbow? I don't know that any Fanarlem has the strength to fight with weapons, but especially not heavier ones."

"I managed to get you good the other day."

"You know damn well that I had my guard down. In a real fight, that won't happen. Plus, your opponent could just grab you, pin you down, and probably crack your rib cage. All of this is useless."

"What else am I supposed to do?" she snapped, and then she threw aside the practice weapon and looked away. "I can't just accept being helpless. I won't."

"Have you ever displayed any telepathic skills?" he asked.

"No."

"Well—"

"Don't say it."

He threw up a hand. "I was going to say...we're not much for fighting with potions in Drai, but that's what you need. If you dip projectiles in some potion with ill effects, then you could just toss a dart and it would be good enough to do some damage."

"Where could I get those?"

"Best place—cheapest—is the magic market. Vendors come from other regions, where they use more of that sort of magic. You can also get ingredients for mixing them yourself."

"When and where is the market?"

"On the south side, just past the old gates. It's tomorrow morning. But...you'll want to bring someone with you who's been before. Maybe one of the servants." He absolutely did not want to come off like he was angling to take her to the market.

"Anyone you recommend?"

"I can ask Alaja."

"Thanks." She nodded and walked toward the doors back into the castle.

He exhaled. Not for the first time with Lorsen. Even before the day she took a stick to his groin, there was something about her that made him feel relief that he'd survived the conversation.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



ATORRA

WHILE TASHAYA RETURNED to her room to sleep, Atorra went looking for Harrai.

I have so much to tell him. And I really don't know what he'll think of it all. Keeping the dragons safe is so important to him. But...I'm important to him too.

Maybe he would help her reason through the decision, either way.

I am probably supposed to follow my destiny...aren't I...? That's the point of a destiny. Doing the heroic thing. Sacrificing yourself.

She could not really comprehend it. Being a dragon? It was like suggesting she become a Daramon general, or a cloud, or a talking cat. She was a Fanarlem girl and had never considered being something else, except perhaps a flesh-and-blood girl with more freedom.

"My queen!" Lady Kirska snapped behind her, as she peered in the council meeting room, which was empty except for one old man looking over maps. Atorra gave him an awkward smile and turned to Lady Kirska.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good *afternoon*," Lady Kirska corrected her, crossing her arms. "You will never do that again."

Atorra's first instinct was to apologize. Profusely.

But that impulse didn't last long enough to part her lips.

"You put Lady Tashaya, the prince, and yourself in danger. Going off like that—with the royal dragons—to the far mountains! What possessed

you? And you didn't even think to inform me?"

"I suspect you would try to forbid us from going," Atorra said. "But all of us wanted to go. And more than that, I needed to go. I need to know what and who I am and have been, and I can't get all the answers from you and our sessions."

"I see," Lady Kirska said. "Yes, I understand. You've reached that stage where you've started to taste your power, healing Lady Tashaya, and you think you don't need training anymore. You are the incarnation of the Queen of Songs, but you are also still Atorra, a young woman."

"You can't ask me to take on the burden of all this power and responsibility but not give me anything of my own."

"You have plenty of your own. You have everything you could wish for."

Atorra let out an incredulous laugh. "How do you know?"

"What do you want? To run off whenever you like? Do you think that is what any mature queen would do?"

"Maybe," Atorra said. "I was investigating a cave that had answers I needed. And ultimately, I...I have a lot to think about. Decisions to make. They're not yours, or anyone else's." Atorra remembered having a heartbeat in her visions of the past, enough that she knew it would be pounding now, saying these things. It went against all her training to be a concubine, and now she was defying an older woman who pretended to have all the answers.

But she doesn't. I don't think she even knows I'm the incarnation of a dragon.

Lady Kirska took a slow breath, and forced a patient smile. "Your decisions will impact every person in Drai, and every dragon in the entire world. So I hope you realize there is only one path to take. You have to serve our people, as I do—as Harrai does—or the fall of the dragons is on your head. I realize just how harsh my words sound. I'm sure you think I'm very strict, and my training hurts you. You'd rather do it on your own. But there is no room for your own emotions and your own life in this position, Atorra—unless they happen to align with the dragons."

Atorra's throat felt like a lump of fuzz. *Could she know what I saw in the cave?*

"You're quiet now," Lady Kirska said softly. "Good. You know there is nothing you can say, because there is nothing any of us can do to change this fate—unless you want to destroy everything your soul has ever worked for."

"I..." Atorra pressed her back to the wall, touching her fingers to the cool plaster wall.

"Atorra! There you are..." Harrai rushed into the hall with them. Atorra tried to relax, to shake off the trapped feeling.

"I'll let the two of you catch up," Lady Kirska said, giving Atorra a steady look that felt vaguely threatening. Harrai put a hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She looked up at him, tall and handsome—but young. He was older than her—than *Atorra*—but some part of her was starting to feel a thousand years older than him, only just as lost. "Harrai…"

"Something has you really shaken." Now he put a hand on her head. The weight of it was tender. The way he touched her had changed so much. "Should we go to my chambers and talk about it before dinner?"

"Yes...I have a lot to tell you, but I'm a little afraid to tell you. I'm... I'm so afraid..." She shook her head. "I know I shouldn't be. The Queen of Songs shouldn't—"

"Forget that," he said. "These are scary times. I've learned not to say I'm scared to anyone. No one wants to hear that from the king. But... you're...we're...together in this." His golden eyes were cautious, hopeful. "Whatever you tell me, I won't judge you or repeat to anyone else. I swear that. Be honest with me, and I'll be honest with you. Always."

He was still touching her head, and he felt so secure. She had never trusted anyone but Lorsen.

He was so very different from Lorsen.

She nodded.

He lowered his hand from her head, and held it out to her. Their eyes met. She touched her fingers to his palm, and he closed her hand inside his. A funny shiver went through her. It wasn't just the touch itself—it was his eyes. He was looking at her so differently now. The other night—before they were interrupted—

It would be my greatest pleasure and honor if you would be my wife now.

She had not forgotten those words. She was sure he hadn't either. And, he still let her fly away to the cave without him, but now she was back, and he was here waiting for her, looking at her like no time had passed.

They walked back to his chambers together, his warm hand enclosing hers, and he locked the doors behind them. He gestured to one of the chairs, and poured himself a little drink from a cabinet. "Tell me what happened out there," he said. "And particularly, what made you look so scared when I walked into the hall. What did Grandmother say?"

"It's not what she said. It's what I felt in that cave. There was a symbol painted on the wall, and I knew it. I heard a voice in my head, and it explained to me that I...I used to be a dragon. In my earliest incarnation. The purpose of the cave was to bind this dark dragon, and I was the one who bound him, so long ago. But now...one of the bindings is broken. The shadow is loose. I have to unbind him. I have to fight him. And first—I need to become a dragon again."

Harrai almost choked on his drink. "Become a dragon? How?"

"I can't explain how. But...I think it's something I could do. I think the magic is there. I might not be flesh and blood, but my dragon self is available if I released those bindings. And then I would kill the dark dragon and mate with Dosskarja, and have dragon children. It would end the union of dragons and Miralem. Dragons would just be dragons, and I would be a dragon, and you all would be..." She spoke matter-of-factly, until she got to the end. She bit her lip, shaking all over. "It would fix everything," she whispered. "I need to get rid of the shadow, and I need to have heirs, and I need to keep the eggs safe and strong. Sairi was right. Everything can change."

Harrai rushed to her, dropping to one knee next to her chair. He was taller than her anyway, so they were still nearly on eye level. He took her hands and felt them shaking.

"And you don't want any of that," he said.

"I'm a coward." She shut her eyes.

"No..." His hands firmed around hers. His eyes studied her with compassion, like he wanted to soothe her, but what he could say either? She sensed that he was troubled.

I'm starting to pick up on his moods, as my telepathy grows stronger. I should be happy about that. But his moods are as unsettled as mine.

"Atorra, you know about the goddess Vallamir," he said.

"I mean, of course. The Miralem goddess."

"We worship a variant version of her, as you've gathered. Eskamir. The lore says Eskamir is Vallamir's earthly sister. But the teachings are extremely similar. All beings are equal and valued. Men and women. Royalty and farmers. And when we are reincarnated, it's a renewed and fresh life that should be respected on its own terms. We don't believe, as the Daramons do, that what you did in your past life affects—or should affect —your present life. You shouldn't be punished for what you did in the past."

"Did I do something wrong in the past after all?" Atorra asked, a little confused by his swerve into spiritual territory.

"No. In fact, quite the opposite. You have served this kingdom with bravery and loyalty as far back as we know. If you were once a dragon, we don't even know that. It precedes our written records. But one major area where Eskamir's teachings are different from Vallamir is that Eskamir has exceptions for the Queen of Songs, and the Drai royalty. It's written into our holy books that we must always find the queen, and she must recall the songs and sing them to the dragons, choose her Queen's Wing and bear his children. We believe in fresh beginning, in choices, for everyone..." He gave her a different look—resolved, almost pained. "Except you."

"I suppose it has to be that way," Atorra said, feeling a prickly sensation all over, like she was indeed trapped—in her skin, in this life. "The alternative is...what? It's not good."

"Maybe not," he said. "But...we're assuming we should control your fate. That we should chase you to the ends of the earth, over and over. When I brought you home with me, you were fresh and new. You were so delighted over everything. Books and berries, and jingling bells, and cold wind. And every day you're here, you take on more responsibility. More weight. You're...going to become just like me." He looked down, still holding her hands, crouched in front of her, like a knight pledging himself to a lady.

"Harrai..."

"Maybe I'm the selfish one, the coward," he said huskily. "Maybe I am supposed to tell you to fulfill all your duties, even becoming a dragon and battling the shadows. But something about this feels wrong to me. The Queen of Songs has served long enough. You should be allowed to taste some freedom after thousands of years, I mean—good goddess, do you never get to do anything but this? I'm already tired of it. But I think it would be a lot more bearable if..."

"If what?" she pressed.

"If I had someone I could be honest with." He lifted one of her hands. "If I could give my heart to someone..." Now he took that one hand in both of his, and slowly drew it to his chest. She felt his heart beating. "If...you were more than my queen. If you would be my companion in all things." His cheeks had reddened, and he winced. "I'm not very good at all this courting business."

"You don't think? I think you're doing a perfect job." She tried to move closer. The chair was very plush and had nearly swallowed her, so she had to wriggle and flail her way to the edge, to get closer to him.

"I don't want you to be a dragon," he said. "And I don't want to make you have anyone's babies, even if you could. I just want you to stay yourself, in all the best ways—and grow stronger only on your own terms, Atorra. I don't want to lose *you*."

He stood up, and drew her up with him. She looked up at him, and although he was wearing clothes fit for court with gold wrapped around his horns and a shimmering dark scarlet tunic, she saw the young man who had traveled with her.

Well, not exactly. He was distant to her on their travels. Now he looked both determined and a little anxious.

"You'd be within your rights to reject me," he said.

"You know that isn't what I want!"

"But I want you to know it. I was so cold to you."

She shrugged. "I don't know if I would be any better to you, supposing I'd never been around many flesh and blood people before. We *are* very different."

"But we're also...just people. I understand that better now. And you're not just any person. You adopt stupid little wyverns. You make friends easily, when they give you a chance. You've been training every day even though I know some of grandmother's lessons have been painful. You're kind, and brave, and maybe most impressively—you're fun. I'm not used to fun."

"I do think you could be just as good of a king if you had more fun," Atorra said. "Maybe even better. Fun isn't *just* fun. It's survival, sometimes."

"I can see that. Grandmother and my tutors never encouraged it, but... maybe you could remind me what it looks like."

"That would be the easiest task in the world." She smiled, and he smiled back—crooked and tentative, at first, but when her smile grew, his finally cracked.

"Be my queen," he said. He slipped an arm around her and pulled her a little closer. "Be mine and mine alone, because I've been waiting for you all my life, and you're so much more than I imagined."

She tried to say something, but no words came. She just tugged on his shirt.

So this is what it feels like to actually want someone.

He kissed her again, his arm still around her, and started walking her backwards to the bedroom door. She pricked her ears and mind, half-expecting another interruption. But everything felt still except the beating of his heart.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



ATORRA

SHE FLOPPED onto the edge of the bed, and he leaned over her, lifting her more squarely onto the bed. He could move her easily, and dominate her physically, which of course was intentional—Fanarlem girls were small, and she had always been conscious of that vulnerability around the men who came to the House.

But Harrai would never take advantage of that. His ardor was tempered by an obvious desire to never hurt her, as well as his own uncertainty. She knew he had never been with a Fanarlem girl before, or heard stories from friends, as a Daramon man might. In fact, she now knew he had never had sex with *anyone*, as a Daramon man certainly would have.

Which put them on equal footing.

And at first, they just kissed and embraced and ran each other's hands along backs and arms, disrobing outer layers, discovering nothing too new except the emotion of it. She could see him trying to make kissing work, but not particularly enjoying it. For all the powerful magic that Daramons had developed, Fanarlem had dry, flavorless mouths. She nudged him away and grinned.

- "Harrai, that's just not what I'm made for."
- "Yeah—I—I gather that." He frowned.
- "I'm sorry."
- "Don't be sorry. I just feel like an ass getting right to business."

"I won't mind. Because it's you. And I want to know what you feel like. I've been hearing about it forever, and I know it's quite nice if you actually care for the person..."

"So you do feel pleasure?" he asked, brows furrowing with concern.

"Goodness, yes! I certainly can. Not that I really have, but I know I can. I feel all buzzy and excited right now and it's all concentrated! Same as you!" She gestured to the hard length pressing at his trousers.

"Oh...well...good," he said, self-consciously.

"But you need the oils that you refused from Hrada."

"I was never taking them from him," Harrai growled. "Any kind of lubricant will do, I suppose."

"As long as it's safe for your skin."

"I have some massage oil."

"Who gives you massages?" she asked, trying not to sound jealous.

"A big burly man."

"Okay."

He laughed. "Just after a hard physical training session."

He found the jar and put it within reach, but first he pulled his shirt off. She already knew he was all lean muscle from touching him, but seeing his bare skin drove home to her that she was truly about to get close to him. His presence suddenly seemed much more physical, his chest rising and falling with his quickening breath. He looked so strong, his skin such a beautiful warm color in the soft light. And he seemed younger. It reminded her of when they were on the road together, before she saw him as the king. Of course, he had been quite cold to her then, but he also seemed...normal.

In the castle, he was always coiled tension, holding a power that was nearly too much for him—too much for anyone.

Here, alone with her, his body and expression relaxed. He reached for the thin silk of her inner layer of clothing. "May I?"

"Yes. I'm sorry if—I still seem strange—"

"Don't you dare," he said. "You're beautiful. I want to see you." He slipped the edge off of her shoulder, lightly tracing her skin along the way, and then the other shoulder, and she tugged the ties away from her waist until her breasts were slowly revealed to him.

"I should be apologizing to you, anyway," he said. "If anyone ever farts during sex, you'll know who it is."

She laughed. "We'll keep pets around. And aren't pickled foods good for digestion?"

"Yes. They are. I do like a good pickle fact in the bedroom."

They both laughed now, easing a little of the tension of discarding their clothes in front of each other, but soon they were quiet, and the only sound was Harrai's breath and their hands softly touching each other, and the covers rustling beneath them. His hand caressed her, and she brushed his hand and guided it to her breasts. Her nipples were tingling, aching to be touched.

He grazed one with a thumb and she moaned.

"Like that?" he said. "You do feel all the same things as a flesh and blood woman, then... I wasn't sure if pleasure was dulled, since I know Fanarlem don't feel much pain."

"I—I don't think so," she whimpered.

"Then I would guess this feels even better..." He moved closer and brushed his fingers between her legs.

Now she groaned as the sensation took her completely by surprise. Fanarlem concubines were punished severely for touching themselves, and with that driven into her head, she had not thought to try, but then—she was sure it wouldn't feel like this.

He stroked his hand between her legs, and then massaged and teased at her nipples with the other, and then even leaned over to lick and nibble at the one closest to him.

"Is this good?" he asked, as if all of her desperate moaning and clawing at the covers and arching back against him was not signal enough.

"I didn't know this would feel so pleasurable," she panted.

"That is the idea, in a loving marriage." His voice was low against her ear.

"Is it good for you?" she asked. "Should I be doing something for you?"

"I want to make you happy first," he said. "I'll feel better about this if I give more than I take for a while."

"Fates..."

He stroked her deeper, and a little faster, and in another moment she felt utterly explosive. She clamped her hand over his, slowing him down, while she rode out the intense feelings sweeping over her. Slowly, it passed, leaving her warm. She twisted to face him, as happy as a cat in a sunbeam.

"Do you want to try—now?" she murmured. "I want to share this with you..."

"Are you ready?"

"I think so. That was intense, but..."

He reached for the massage oils and ran some up and down his length.

"Inside me, too, I think," she said, and now she brought his finger between her legs. Still, it surprised her when he slipped the finger inside her and gave it a swirl. She bucked at the touch, feeling fluttery all over.

"Stop me if I'm hurting you," he said.

"I hope not. I don't want to stop. But I will."

He held her tenderly as he entered her, and she gripped his strong shoulder. "You're tight," he groaned.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No, it feels better than I expected. I don't know what I expected."

"Fabric? Chafing?" she guessed.

"Well...yeah, I knew it couldn't really be that bad but I guess so." He winced. "But you're very soft. You feel so nice in my arms, Atorra... I think I could stay here like this for a very long time."

"You needed it, I imagine," she said, rubbing his shoulders. He was more relaxed than usual, but that wasn't saying much. She could still feel all the knots. And she could feel him, deep inside her, one with her. At first he didn't do anything but hold her, letting her get accustomed to him, but when she was ready, she flexed her hips a little, and he responded in turn.

It was over all too fast, quite frankly, betraying just how much he had grown eager for her—for this—and she felt the same.

But they were in no hurry, and stayed nested together, talking a little, and soon caressing, his mouth soon straying to explore her ears and neck and breasts in more depth, and then his cock was stirring, and this time it was slower, more delicious. She wondered if flesh and blood people felt this way when they were hungry—the first course always seemed to be eaten faster, while dessert was savored.

Somewhere in the castle, the bells rang for dinner.

"Damn it all, why did we decide to do this for the first time by *day*?" Harrai muttered.

"Can we just skip it?" she said dreamily, nested in his arms.

His response was just a huff.

Of course, they couldn't skip it. The Halnari would probably arrive tomorrow, and the king and queen couldn't be off with each other at such a moment.

"Still, at least we tasted freedom, and it was better than dinner," Harrai said, tugging his clothes on. "Should I try the Soran yank on you?"

"Anything but that." She laughed. "But I do want to dress very well tonight. I want to feel like a queen."

"Then you'd better go to your wardrobe, and I'll poke at mine, and...I'll see you at table." He kissed her hand.

Atorra felt that they were both glowing, and everyone would look at them and know what had happened, but everyone was so preoccupied by the visitors that their appearance went without comment.

Even Jarlan spent most of the dinner speaking to an older woman who managed hospitality. Lady Kirska peppered Harrai with questions and plans.

But it was the Daramon that had everyone the most concerned. No one knew who he was or why he was there, only that it was a huge breach of conduct to bring him—and could mean nothing good.

Atorra scrambled to pay attention to things she half-understood. She wished she had more experience with all of this, but at least she understood how to project confidence and grace around visitors whom she found unwanted and frightening. And she knew what Daramon men were like, probably better than anyone here.

I can manage this man...whoever he is.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



JARLAN

JARLAN SLEPT POORLY and got out of bed at a time when only the servants were awake. And all for what?

He couldn't stop thinking about taking Lorsen to the market.

And of course, he should have found a servant to take her. He told her he would ask Alaja, but did he? Of course not. Alaja wouldn't even be a good companion for buying poisons; she was a mild-mannered type who would probably lecture Lorsen that it was always better to try peace first. Forget that!

He would take her.

Simply because, of course, he wouldn't judge her and he knew a few basic things about poisons.

So he went to the kitchens himself, nicked a few leftovers for breakfast, had an ill-advised nip of brandy to calm his nerves, spent more time than he should getting dressed, and then casually lurked in the royal gardens, within view of Lorsen's bedroom, although not overly close.

All the while denying his reasons for doing any of this.

Whenever he heard a door open, his heart raced.

Right about the time when a few people were starting to ask if he was all right and if perhaps he had lost something in the garden, Lorsen came out of her room, dressed in a short coat with deep pockets, trousers, and sturdy lace-up boots. She was slinging a sack over her body and gently patted a pocket, the good old double-check for coins.

"Oh, Lorsen," he said, falling in next to her. "I apologize; I wasn't able to find a servant to go to the market with you."

"I figured. I'm going myself."

"I'm also going, because I think I need a freshly charged protective bauble before the visitors arrive."

She gave him a very sly expression. "Okay."

"There are some rough types at the market," he added.

"Heavens," she said, with mock horror. "Not the rough types."

Well, of course, she could see right through this.

"Anyway, I'm going with you," he said curtly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"That's fine."

He kept trying to lead the way, first out of the castle and then down the streets, but the crowds were out today and whenever she got a chance, she took advantage of her smaller size and scurried ahead of him, forcing him to hustle to keep up. Since she was also shorter than most of the crowd, he easily lost sight of her. He could always use telepathy to track her, but that was a chore in such a throng.

"You studied a map, I see!" he snapped, after the third time she made him shove past people to keep her in sight.

"I actually took a whole test run walk to the market grounds after you told me about it," she said.

"You know, I wouldn't bet that even Kota is free of people who would sell a Fanarlem girl back to Kurui," he said, horrified at the thought.

"I'm not going to live as a prisoner," she said.

"You're not a prisoner."

"I could be a prisoner anywhere, if I thought like that," she said. "As if, at any turn, I might be kidnapped, no matter where in the world I am. I don't think it's likely."

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"You're *worried* about me," she said, brushing his arm with her hand and giving him a brief, soul-eyed glance. "That's so sweet."

She was still mocking him. And he was getting flushed.

She was good. Damn, she was good.

He stayed quiet until they got to the market, and just used his telepathy to track her when she hurried out of sight.

The market grounds were just outside the city center, a good forty-minute walk from the castle. It was hard to find a large piece of flat land in Kota, so the market grounds were in a rather twisting strip with odd little nooks. Although it was hated by the vendors, because some spots ended up quite a ways off the main thoroughfare, this also gave it a charming quality, a maze of delights and surprises.

And the vendors worked hard to make their booths enticing and lure customers. Some booths were housed inside colorful tents with a small opening, with lights twinkling within and alluring scents of incense trailing out. Others were open and bright with fluttering banners and lush greenery.

Some of them had musicians or dancers to attract attention.

Lorsen's jaded and sly expression slowly started transforming to wonder. It was hard not to surrender to curiosity at a magical market.

She darted right into one of the tents and ducked in. Jarlan shrugged and went after her, stepping into the interior lit in soft blue, with magical lights twinkling everywhere and illusory butterflies fluttering all around them for good measure, along with shelves crowded with trinkets, crystals, and charms.

Lorsen's eyes tracked a butterfly and then she waved a hand through it. The butterfly disappeared. "Illusions...!?"

"You look surprised," Jarlan said.

"I've never seen an illusion before."

"Aren't Fanarlem illusions?"

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth twisted, like she'd never thought of that. "I have substance."

"Actually, they do too," said the proprietor, a lean rangy type with his feet propped up, chewing on a stick. "They're all gnats I attached a little pizazz to. That's why they disappear when you swat at 'em. It's always easier to attach an illusion onto something or other."

"Clever," Lorsen said. "Well, I suppose you were right. I am just an illusory butterfly after all. Nothing but a gnat underneath."

"I never said that," Jarlan said. "Just—stating facts."

"Didn't you need a protective charm?" she said, looking over the rings and bracelets.

"Not sure," Jarlan said. "Plenty to look at."

As they left, he said, "You never tell them what you want. Don't show your hand. And you look at everything. I don't think I want to shop at a

booth full of a hundred gnats."

Lorsen made a face. "You're right. I'm such an amateur. I've never been to a market before."

"Weren't you telling Atorra about the market in Atlantis a few days ago?"

Her eyes flashed and then she looked down. "I just absorbed all the stories the men would tell around me," she said. "Everything about life beyond the walls. But in fact, Mr. Noren took me right to the Wode house and I never left. But if you tell Atorra, I'll find some way to cut one of your eyeballs out."

"Only one? Might as well go all the way. Besides that, you won't have to cut them out. We can get you some blinding potion. Then it's easy." He waved her to the first potions booth.

"Is there anything more interesting?" she asked. "Maybe just melting someone's face off?"

"You are brutal," he said, grinning. He picked up a bottle. "I feel like you might enjoy this one."

She looked at the label. Witch's Curse. Results: Burning genitals that break into pustules within three days and may last up to three weeks. Can cause temporary or in 5-10% of victims, permanent impotence.

"Am I that transparent?" she asked.

"A little bit. But why not?"

"I do like it," she said. "Should I buy it here?"

"No, take note of the price and we'll keep looking. I would advise you carry a few different weapons with different types of poisons. Maybe that one along with blinding and paralysis."

"Is there a type of poison that's good at taking out telepaths?" she asked.

"Telepaths?"

"Well, that is the power that surrounds me here. These seem more effective against Daramons."

"All right, trade the blinding or paralysis potion and try one for confusion. They're each useful for different things. For a physical attack in close proximity, you want paralysis. A blinded or confused person can still thrash out and pin you down. Blinding potions take longer to fade so they're good in situations where you don't want the person coming after

you anytime soon, and they deter weaker telepaths who rely on being able to see their target. But confusion is best for skilled telepaths."

"I want all four," she said. "I could carry a weapon at each hip and then two more at the thighs."

"I'm not sure you're really going to enjoy lugging that many weapons around, but sure. We can get all four."

"They're expensive," she noted, as they strolled to another booth and she studied the prices of each. "But maybe not to a prince."

They weren't exactly cheap. Even to a prince. The purse strings were always closely managed, and the royal family mostly inherited lavish heirlooms. Kota did not mine and export their crystals, and they didn't have much else of great value, so their greatest source of income came from the offerings other kingdoms paid in gratitude for the protection of the dragons.

He would have bought her anything she wanted.

It was this realization that really made him think he was in trouble. He'd slept with several girls (two maids and two distant cousins, not that he was counting), and in the heat of the flirtation, he usually did buy them a necklace or something. But he would readily admit he was selfish and didn't like to clear out his personal coffers just for a girl. He always felt like they should be happy enough to say they slept with the prince.

Besides that, he was far from sure Lorsen would sleep with him, or even if he would ever ask for the rest of their lives.

On paper, he didn't even want to sleep with a doll. But he also didn't want her to ever think he was anything like the Daramons.

Where the fuck is this feeling coming from? Maybe I should stab my own eyes out.

Except he had the sense that wouldn't fix anything. She was as weird looking as she was pretty.

"Well, let's finish looking at all the booths and then we'll get a snack while we think on it," he said. "Or at least, *I* get hungry at markets."

They finished exploring the potions booths and the other vendors as well. He always enjoyed looking at the swords and knives, and Lorsen seemed to find them as interesting as he did. She didn't look bored when he told her about some legendary swordsmiths, and so he took her to the most exclusive booth at the market.

It was always clustered with curious onlookers, but everyone kept their distance. They had to, because the entire booth was enchanted so you were

physically unable to get close to anything. The booth was at the center of the market, with six long wooden tables and nothing else. Each had one sword resting upon it, like a museum, under a glass case. This was where Berrai, the curator of sorts, offered some of the rarest swords in the world, some of them centuries old. They were usually purchased by wealthier Miralem from Otaré, Avalon, and Laionesse.

"Some of them are centuries old," Jarlan said. "That one, there, was made by Iringa Han, who only ever made five swords before his untimely death. They're supposed to be the best, but we don't even have one in the armory."

Lorsen stared until her entire body seemed to be aflame. Her eyes were already too big. When she looked at something that hard, she was quite uncanny. "I wish I could fight," she whispered. "Fates, what I would give."

Jarlan understood that feeling all too well.

"Even when you can...you don't always get the chance," he murmured. "Maybe poisons aren't what your brutal little heart desires, but we'll get you started today."

She hardly even seemed to hear him, and he saw a flash of her fantasy: a beautiful room overlooking the Atlantis river, with blood pooling on the floor and dead men cut down at their dining room table with wine glasses tumbled and roast meats cooling in their juices, bodies slumped on their chaise lounges, collapsed on the floor with trousers around their ankles.

I'm the amateur, he thought. *I've never imagined revenge on this level.*

And it must be absolutely eating her from the inside, if the vision was so strong she had accidentally projected it to him. Were the court healers helping her at all?

What a terrifying girl.

And what did it say about him that he couldn't remember when he'd last felt so easy and delighted than walking the market with her?

"Let's get some popcorn," he said.

"Popcorn?"

"Have you ever had it?"

"No."

"You might like it," he said. "And then we'll get all the potions from Madam Larna's booth, I'm thinking. She's up for haggling and I think she'll be the cheapest. But we'll discuss it. I know you were intrigued by that one acid."

She smiled, coming out of her trance. "And what about your protective charm?"

"I think I'm good."

"You're not buying the very thing you came for?"

"No," he said. "I'm not buying the thing I came for."

She almost—almost—genuinely smiled. But then, who could really tell with these weird doll girls anyway.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE



TASHAYA

"I THINK you'd better stay in bed, my lady," the healer said, having held a hand to Tashaya's forehead for a good minute. "The travels have taken a lot out of you. You're running a low fever and your heart is accelerated. I can't believe you even want to attend a court dinner tonight. You can't be feeling well. Just take your meal here."

"I feel fine," Tashaya insisted.

Of course, she didn't feel fine. She never felt fine, and especially lately. She had the terrifying sense that her body was changing, that it was failing her for real this time.

I've been dying so long, it's like I almost forgot there's an actual end... And I'm sure I would have died the other day, if Atorra wasn't here.

The shadow had stalked her for her entire life. She had grown used to being sick, had never known anything else. She had learned to use the feeble tools in her arsenal: one day she might will herself to be strong so she could see the latest performance or enjoy a festival. Other days, she milked her plight for sympathy so she could get her hands on southern fruits. She had long since abandoned any guilt over that. What else did she have?

She rarely left Kota Castle, barely even left her rooms. She read all the romances, legends, and ghost tales in the royal library every year, and was quite good at embroidery. As a child, she had a pet wyvern, but when he

died, she was so shattered by his death that she couldn't bear to have another.

She had tried so hard to accept her lot. It had not really been a bad life. She didn't have all the troubles of her cousins, just peace and quiet.

But also...no dragon to ride. No marriage to plan. No babies to kiss. No legacy to leave behind. Tashaya's mother was still remembered fondly, but Tashaya herself felt more like a pet rabbit. Sweet, maybe cute (although Tashaya only felt so on her better days), sort of a nuisance to care for and not as smart, useful, or interesting as a wyvern. Why bother?

Now, as she felt that shadow growing closer and closer, she also felt more stubborn by the day.

I won't let it have me.

Or at least if it does, I'll have something more for myself first.

She could not stop thinking of Sairi. She realized this was selfish. Just a silly crush. She had always forbade herself these feelings. She didn't want to hurt anyone—or make her own small world hurt *her* more.

But then she had seen this magnificent Sreyelan. She didn't feel like she could hurt him the same way as a man of the court. Drai was so insular; few people left and few people came. They were cut off from the rest of the Miralem world, with their own goddess, their own dialect, and their dragons. But Sairi Hlefyndris didn't have to stay here. He didn't have to indulge her. He could just fly away.

He was also quite handsome. Not intimidatingly beautiful like Kenjo. A sharp-eyed handsome, carrying the wildness of the sky with him. That didn't stop him from adapting to court life quite easily, though. Just watching him across the room, she could see him watching everyone and everything around him. She was sure he was taking note of every nuance of etiquette, every personality he encountered.

He's ambitious, she thought. But he's patient.

Once the dinner was over, the court was free to mingle. Despite a somber air, some of the younger men and women still danced. Tashaya sidled up to Atorra.

"Torra, I think I've lost my mind... I'm struggling not to stare at him."

Atorra's expression lit up, clearly relieved to think about anything except the Halnari. "Should I ask him to dance with you?"

"No. I should just ask him myself."

"Then do it."

"But do you think he likes me, or is he just nice?"

"Who even cares?" Atorra said. "Just go for what you want."

"I hate to think of him saying yes just out of pity. Or obligation, because I'm the king's cousin. I can't read him. He doesn't let his thoughts bleed out. I'm afraid he knows I like him."

"I'm sure he knows you like him. And I also think it is almost certain he likes you back," Lorsen said, edging into the conversation after taking a tiralem nef cigarette from Jarlan. Atorra glared at it briefly before studying Sairi across the room.

"He's always checking on you," Lorsen continued. "Pity? Maybe. But you have healers and nurses for that. When you weren't at dinner last night, he asked more than one person if you were all right."

"That's true," Atorra said.

Sairi was the quietest member of a four-person cluster in the corner. He was nodding, and occasionally adding a word, but mostly he just seemed to gather information. He should stand out like throwing a circus act into the middle of the great hall, with his wings folded carefully around him. There had never been a Sreyelan in Kota Castle before, which meant he couldn't know too much about them, and they knew very little about him.

And yet...

"How on earth does he just...mingle like that?" Tashaya marveled. "Everyone should be staring at him like they stared at you for weeks, but he looks like he's been here for ten years."

"I think he's a perfect spy," Atorra said. "Somehow. You would think he'd stand out too much, but instead—" She waved her hands. "I don't know why I said *spy*. He's a secretary. And you should just talk to him. I don't want to say you should live every day like it's your last, because I promised to keep you alive, but maybe we should all be living like that anyway."

Sairi seemed very far away just now, and it was almost impossible to believe she had slept with his wing over her. "I'm afraid I'm too...dull for him."

"But Sairi is kind of dull himself," Lorsen said. "That's why he blends in so well."

"Sairi isn't dull! He just doesn't swagger around throwing opinions no one asked for."

"Hmm...I wonder who that could be?" Lorsen gave an inscrutable smile. "You might be just his type. And I agree with Atorra. Only one way to find out. Look, he's walking away from those men..." She nudged Tashaya.

Lorsen was definitely more blunt than Atorra, and Tashaya almost wished she hadn't shown up. Atorra might have let her talk it out for a while, but Lorsen had a look of mischief, like she would gladly step in if Tashaya didn't act now.

Tashaya took a deep—but careful—breath. She didn't want to stir up any coughing fits. She glanced at herself in one of the two large mirrors on either side of the room, and tried not to dissolve into a puddle of nerves. She wished her sickness left her slender and delicate, and not just pale and chubby like risen dough, but she did like her thick, glossy hair with its natural soft waves, and she had big eyes and round cheeks, which was the ideal in older paintings, although not as much now.

And then, Sairi is the exact opposite of that! Maybe Sreyelan women are all sharp and slanted and lean, and that's what he expects!

Now he had noticed her, so it was too late to worry, especially when he smiled at her, as warmly as anyone ever had.

"Good evening, Lady Tashaya. I'm relieved you're still feeling well after all that cold rain."

"I'm feeling very well," she lied. "Thanks to you..." *Oh, goddess, was that too bold?*

No. It wasn't. He looked faintly embarrassed, but pleased, and said, "I'd ask you to dance but I haven't figured out the etiquette yet, and my wings might be too ungainly."

"There isn't a lot of etiquette," she said. "You can just ask. And there are no specific dances that you must do. That is, some of the people here are more deliberate about it, but it's fine if you just...take my hand and step to the music. And I don't think you're ungainly at all." She had surely solved one problem with her appearance—she couldn't possibly look pale in his presence, not with her whole face burning like this.

"Good. Because I did want to ask you something." He looked sideways, at Atorra and Lorsen, who were staring at them and immediately pretended to be busy talking to each other.

"Oh—ask away!"

He held out his wing, spreading his two fingers. It didn't work well, because his wings dragged if he lowered them where she could take his hand naturally. He put his wing around her shoulder instead, which felt much more intimate, like a cloak creating a private world just for the two of them.

But then, it wasn't just a cloak, it was him. His skin. The Sreyelan shape-shifting was truly impressive; spreading arms into wings like a bat was no small job. She was sure it must be done in multiple stages. Painful, too. She knew shape-shifting was always a miserable experience if muscle and bone was involved. Of course, he was probably too young to remember any of it.

She felt a kinship to him because she had also been transformed as a baby, only her transformation had not given her wings or any other gift.

"Is the queen...how do I put this?" he asked. "Well, she's watching us again, isn't she? Am I being match-made?"

Tashaya didn't know her face could get any redder.

"I'm not opposed," he said. "But—"

"No! I mean! But—but—of course, you're not being match-made, no, no one really is trying to match me because of my sickness. But—but also, still—" She stammered, unsure what she was trying to say anymore. She wanted to sink into the tiled floor.

"You're a royal of Drai," he said. "I'm a Sreyelan tribesman. I would have guessed that would be frowned upon. Is it acceptable because you're ill, and if so, does that mean if you recover, I would be a forbidden match for you then?"

"No," she said. "It's fine. No one really pays attention to me."

"I'm probably being too blunt," he said. "But I don't know how high the stakes are. If I could get in some kind of trouble for dancing with you—or more—well, I want to know that now. Because you are very pretty, and I'm not used to having anyone whispering over me."

Very pretty!? Does he mean that? He's flattering the sick girl.

He had a very straight-forward air, though. If he was a born spy, he was the type who could just blend in anywhere, not the type who flattered his way into information.

"No trouble," she said. "I promise. No one cares."

"I like the answer...but not the reason," he said. "I find it difficult to believe that no one cares who courts you. Surely you've had other potential suitors."

She gaped at him. "No. And I—I guess you must have many suitors. In your tribe."

"Not really. I wouldn't be surprised if the women hide their daughters when they see me."

"So then we're even."

"I suppose we are," he said. "I'm glad you've been feeling better. It sounds like you really got the bad end of a curse. If I can do anything to help break it...I enjoy puzzling over things like that."

"If you can help Atorra at all, I think she's the one who can help me. But she's been pretty alone since she arrived. She does need some of her own staff. The court hasn't been that welcoming to her."

"Is it just because she's a Fanarlem?"

She nodded.

"Even though she's the Queen of Songs?"

"It's ridiculous. I think they're starting to come around a little, but...she shouldn't have to prove herself. A lot of people think it's some sort of bad omen or curse that she's a Fanarlem. As if she was tainted and isn't really the queen we've known. And then, without the dragon-born..."

"In the cave..." He looked thoughtful. "If there are no dragon-born, the Drai lose power with every generation. If she became a dragon, supposing that was possible, the Drai royals still lose their power, but at least it's still around, as long as the dragons are."

"Yes. Supposing."

"It really is a lot to ask from her." They both glanced at Atorra again, who was now talking to Harrai. They were both angled close to each other, and Harrai touched her arm.

It was more obvious by the day that the king was falling for his queen after all.

"Too much," Tashaya agreed. "I don't want her going anywhere. But what do you think of it? What do the Sreyelans think? Or—maybe those are two totally different questions."

"On a lot of things, yes. But I think our elders would agree with me on this one. We all come from somewhere, and our bodies and souls are shaped by the people who raise us, our culture, and our environment. Once you're an adult, it's hard to change who you are. If you choose it, that's one thing —but realistically, you might lose something in the process. And if it's

forced on you—that's a crime in our tribe. Even demanding that the queen have the dragon-born would be considered pretty horrendous back home."

"It doesn't go unnoticed here either," Tashaya said. "We all know it's an unfair thing to expect from her. But we need it so badly to hold onto power. So...we're greedy, maybe."

"Greedy, or pragmatic for the greater good, that's always the question, isn't it?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Have you traveled a lot, Sairi?" she asked. "You sound like you have experience with this question."

He nodded. "I have. No personal experience, though. I've just been to other kingdoms, and I listen to what people worry over in the cafes and the taverns. Sreyelan life is much more narrow."

"Sreyelans don't usually travel, do they?"

"Not at all."

"So why did you?" She paused, as a wave of dizziness swept over her. She shouldn't be dancing with a fever, but she wanted this so, so badly. She didn't want him to pull his touch away, to stop talking, to send her off to bed for her own good.

"Should we sit down?" Sairi asked, noticing her faltering steps, which were already so slow. He looked around for a quiet place, but of course the entire room was abuzz with conversation and music.

"We could sit in the garden," she said, catching her breath, although why her breath had to go missing to begin with when she was barely moving... "It's still considered a public space."

"All right. I'll trust you not to ruin me." He led her outside, and indeed, no one seemed to notice except Atorra, because Tashaya didn't really matter much to anyone. He kept a wing at her back, and despite his long legs, he slowed to matched her pace.

It was amazing how just walking a short distance could seem like a momentous occasion, if you had the right person with you.

The moonlit courtyard was chillier than she expected, especially when she sank onto the stone bench.

"You're shivering... This was a bad idea."

"No. I'm fine. Please." She crossed her arms. "Please let me pretend I can have a nice normal night for once. I can take my own risks. If I die I swear my last words will be that it wasn't your fault."

"Okay. But I'm getting you a blanket." He dashed off before she could argue with that.

Tashaya sighed. I sound so pathetic. 'Just give me one normal night before I die!' Like he could say no to that.

He quickly returned with the blanket from his guest room, and wrapped it around her thoroughly, until she was a little round cocoon. *How sexy*, she thought miserably.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

"Mmhmm. So tell me why you traveled."

"My father left the tribe when I was little," he said. "My mother had died, and he loved her, but he hated everything else."

"What about you!?"

Sairi shrugged. "Good riddance. I was fine. My mother's sister raised me, and she was very close with my mother. She raised me like her own, with my cousin Bru. But—I was a boy, so I hit that age when she started taking Bru on hunts and I was left behind. That was when I started feeling rebellious and I wanted to find my father. I wondered if he knew something I didn't—that maybe it *was* better out there."

"Did you find him?"

"Sort of. I tracked him down, but the people in that town told me he had his wings shape-shifted away and married a local Miralem girl, and had two kids with her." He paused, glaring into the moon-shadows of the garden, like the memory still burned him. "I didn't want to see him, then. Still don't. It had taken me nearly a year to find him and by then I'd been all over the place. I already had my answer."

"And you went back home. So it wasn't better out there?" Tashaya tried to imagine. "I've never seen anyplace but here."

"It was better, in some ways. But it wasn't as much better as I thought it might be. The problems were different. I didn't see where I'd fit in, either. I mean, I don't fit in that well in the Sreyelan tribe either, but they do care about me anyway. And I care about them. With the storm and the poor crops and the cold…I feel a pull to these mountains."

"To help your people even if they don't want your help?"

"I think they do want help. They're just too proud to admit it. They think they can keep out of the troubles, but I've seen what the Daramons have. Their knowledge is extremely impressive—the volume of books they have, and their libraries. As the Daramons share and record more and more information, they're growing more powerful. I'm not sure anyone realizes what a powerful weapon that can be."

"A weapon? Is that why their sorcery has gotten stronger?"

"Probably. And it's how they've consolidated their leadership. They spread pamphlets all over boasting about the power of the Wodrenarune, what he's done for people so far, how he communicates with fate itself, and what his grand plans are. It's exactly what they want to hear, and the pamphlets are handed out at no cost."

The Wodrenarune... Tashaya shivered at the title, which was rarely used in Drai. Lord Jherin, the 'Hand of Fate'. He was the first leader of the Daramons to win a war against the Miralem, capturing one of the great crystals long before Tashaya was ever born, and he still ruled them to this day, growing unnervingly old. "So you spent time in the Daramon lands too?"

"At the border," he said. "Yes. I visited their libraries. They're nearly as good as the royal library here, in every city and hub town, but *anyone* can go into them and read anything they want. Well, not Fanarlem. But they did allow me in, much to my surprise."

"As good as our royal library!? That can't be possible."

"Well, probably no rare or ancient magical tomes or anything. But anyone can study sorcery, right there in the library, along with history, botany, myths, engineering..."

"Do *you* think we should all be worried about the Halnari coming with a Daramon official? Everyone's in such a state over it."

"I don't know," Sairi said. "But there is a mood in the Daramon lands I'd call optimistic, and that doesn't seem great for us. I could certainly see them wanting a rematch of the War of Crystals." He looked at her. "Still warm enough?"

"Definitely."

"Am I talking politics too much?"

"No. Never. Most people don't bother to tell me anything. When I came of age, I went to some council meetings. I thought maybe I could become like, a wise woman or something, even if I couldn't be a warrior like my mother. But I passed out during the second meeting I attended. It was so embarrassing, I just figured I was fooling myself."

"It seems to me you could have a very important perspective," Sairi said. "We're all dealing with this darkness, but you more than anyone. You

should still be at those meetings. Even if you pass out now and then."

"Maybe...but no one's ever said they wanted me there."

"What do you enjoy doing?" he asked.

"Reading, mostly. Some needlework. I have to spend so much time in my room that I figured I might as well embroider everything in it to my liking." She wilted a little, feeling so boring. Even if she tried to seize the day, she couldn't turn herself into an adventurer, an artistic genius, or even a great philosopher. Her dreams had always felt too simple.

"Would you like to help me work for Atorra?" he asked. "Are you able to write when you're in bed?"

"Usually! I do have nice penmanship."

"That's perfect, because I don't. I can barely read my own writing. But it depends how much you trust me. I was thinking that if I want some notes on conversations, especially during this diplomatic visit, I could send the thoughts to you, and you could get them down. Then, I don't look suspicious around the visitors, and you can get everything fresh. But we would need to open up a mental channel so that you're ready for them quickly, and you'd need to be ready with a pen and paper as often as possible. If that's all too much for you, I certainly understand."

He looked at her like he knew exactly what she wanted—and needed. To be useful to someone—or better yet, *wanted* by someone. But maybe this was the first step.

Opening a mental channel meant exposing him to more of her stray thoughts about *him*.

It also meant that she would get more of his thoughts about her.

That's certainly a risk. I'm still not sure if he likes me, or just pities me and wants to give me something to do, like letting a child help out in the kitchen even if she makes more messes.

But this is my era of not giving a damn, isn't it? If he doesn't like me, I'll survive. Or maybe I won't, and I wouldn't have anyway. What is there to lose? I have to stop being a pet rabbit and a throw pillow!

"That sounds wonderful," she said. "I'll keep a pen and paper with me at all times and wait for your signal."

"Give me your hand." He helped pull her blankets back from her arms, and offered her his wing. When she slipped her hand against his finger and brushed the leathern skin of his wing, he draped the other over it. "And

now, I offer you my trust, and an open line of communication, day and night."

"I offer the same to you," she said, feeling quite warm now, and squirming in her blanket.

He met her eyes, and she felt the unraveling of the telepathic channels that usually stayed shut enough to offer privacy, giving her a deeper glimpse into his soul. Now she really knew she could trust him. No one would do this if they carried a hidden agenda. Sairi had a very pure sort of mind, like fallen snow—the sort born from a society where everyone knew everyone else and was always quite honest. His travels had wiped away the backwater naiveté that you might see with any tribesman, but had not quite banished that straightforward, honest nature.

And he truly thought she was attractive. He liked her expression, her gentleness. He felt protective of her, and sure, that wasn't new. Lots of people were *protective* of Tashaya. But he still respected her. He wondered if the people around her were holding her back—and he knew how that felt, because Sreyelan men were not given many opportunities.

She wondered what sort of thoughts he was getting from her, and let out a breath when he released her hands.

He gave her a squinting, nervous smile, like he'd just realized how much she liked him and didn't know what to do about it.

"In my tribe, women do all the courting," he said. "And they just say what they want. Men can say no, although they usually don't. And a lot of Sreyelan women have multiple lovers but live alone, like my aunt. That's about the end of it. So...just know that I'm bad at this."

"I'm bad at this too," Tashaya said. "Are you saying I should just tell you what I want?"

He paused. "I could say no, but...I probably won't."

"Good to know." She giggled, nothing but nerves. "Maybe—soon."

"Then, you can await my messages," he said. "And I will await yours."

He stood up and gracefully offered her a wing, and it was all she could do not to tell him to go wait in her rooms, except she wouldn't really know what to do with him when she got him there.

Hopefully Atorra would have some idea.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



ATORRA

"Tash! That's so romantic! A telepathic bond? I'm so glad this romance is going smoothly." Atorra squeezed Boo until the wyvern made a little meep of protest and pried her way out of her arms. "Oops—I'm so sorry, Boo! I just got excited."

"I'm sure it wouldn't normally move so fast," Tashaya said, curling up on the sofa and plucking at the embroidery on the pillow. Lorsen and Tashaya were cozied up by the fire in Atorra's bedroom, relaxing into the gossip. "The fact that I almost died is giving it all some urgency. But I'm glad he's up for it. We mostly just talked about cultures and politics and history, and I could find a dozen people to talk about those things with, but... I can't take my eyes off him. Is this all very weird?"

"Why would it be weird?" Lorsen asked. "He seems very nice and clever and I have a feeling lots of girls would want a winged husband if there were more of them on the market. Although I think I'd be jealous of him."

"No, I'm not jealous," Tashaya said. "I think all my clothes would look terrible on me if I had wings. And I'm sure I'd bump them into everything."

"Ooh, I definitely would," Atorra said. "I get nervous watching him around the vases, but he is very careful. I wouldn't want wings because I hate being careful."

"I would just fly everywhere," Lorsen said. "All over the world." Atorra glanced nervously as Lorsen's eyes roamed to the window.

"Of course, you have Dosskarja, anyway," Lorsen said, with only the tiniest hint of envy.

"So...so what do I do now?" Tashaya said. "Do I actually invite him to my bed? Like some..."

"Like some royal lady who can have anything she wants?" Lorsen asked. "Sure you should. If he said he's up for it, why even wait?"

"He'd have to be very gentle with me. I'm so scared that it'll be so awkward and I'll ruin the mood."

"Sairi seems very capable of being gentle and listening to you," Atorra said. "You could ask him to go very slowly, and see what he does. Maybe he'd do something really enjoyable." She started feeling very distracted just thinking about Harrai insisting that he would take it slow with her.

But that terrible blank look on Lorsen's face could snap her right out of it.

"I'm sorry, Lor, We won't talk about it."

"What?" Lorsen snapped. "I mean, no. Go right ahead. I've already forgotten most of everything, thanks to the excellent mind healers here, so please, talk away."

Atorra just couldn't believe her, but now she felt bad for even mentioning it.

"Atorra, did you and Harrai...?" Lorsen gave her a sly look now. "Don't hold back on us, now. I'm rooting for both of you!"

"We did. A couple days ago. Before dinner."

"And it took you this long to mention it!? Was it good?"

"Harrai finally stopped looking grumpy, and...he was... Well, it was...it was very good." She struggled for words. "Miralem men are so different from Daramons. Highly recommended."

Tashaya laughed. "Noted. Okay, I'm going to ask Sairi to...*my chambers*." She waved her hands dramatically.

"Tonight?"

"No! Not tonight! Just soon. When it feels right."

"Oh come on," Lorsen said. "Just do it tonight. Is there any reason not to?"

"Too fast!" Tashaya said.

There was a rap on the door that Atorra knew all too well. Harrai, and she felt a dark cloud of mood from him from here. She realized how long they'd been lingering over a private breakfast, chattering about men and sex like she didn't have more important things to worry about, and rushed to the door, trying to look dignified with a wyvern on her head and a memory of him licking her nipple still dancing around her mind. "Good morning."

"They're here, Atorra," he said, his eyes widened with alarm. "The Halnari contingent—"

"Already? Weren't we expecting them...tomorrow at the earliest?"

"They must have pushed hard to get here tonight. And it's not just the Halnari—it's the damned Black General himself."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



ATORRA

"LORD DORN DRESEDEL?" Atorra whispered.

"Yes. You would know more about him than I do, I suppose," Harrai said.

Atorra knew of him, of course. In the Daramon lands, he had been a renowned figure since long before she was created.

Of them all, the least was known about the Black General. His grandmother was an low-born islander, which meant he was occasionally heralded as proof that islanders were respected now, that Lord Jherin valued people for their talents and not how rich their parents were.

Like Lord Calban, he was known for strategic talents on the battlefield. He would be a dangerous man to have in court.

But...

"I can't say I really know what Lord Dresedel has been up to in my lifetime," Atorra said. "He's not like Lord Calban, who is always making public appearances and publishing articles and poetry. And the lady generals have had a slew of children that would be held up as an example of perfect Daramon womanhood. Lord Dresedel was...quiet. I know he's a powerful sorcerer, based on his reputation in the War of the Crystals, but...I don't even know what type he specializes in."

"Nothing good," Lorsen said. "I'm sure he wasn't dubbed the Black General for helping orphans and kittens." "Well, then, all we know is that he's up to something. We can't trust anything he says or does, but we will greet him with cold formality. Lady Tashaya; Lady Lorsen...you can choose whether or not you'd like to receive our visitors, but I'll have to steal Atorra for the rest of the night."

Lorsen and Tashaya were already putting their outer layers and shoes back on.

"Well, we have to at least *see* anyone this notorious," Tashaya said. "We are sorely lacking in rogues, assassins and salacious criminals here in Drai."

Atorra made a detour to fetch her very finest outer robe and add some jewels to her hair as well as dramatic earrings of purple dragon scale tipped in gold. Harrai stuck close to her, looking antsy but never telling her to hurry.

They looped around the castle so they could come into the main hall at the royal dais, as they had during the coronation. Footmen swung the doors open for them, and the room was aglow with a lavish number of magical lights that caught all the dragon scale and made the room glitter from floor to ceiling. The columns were adorned with garlands of white flowers, a pure and calming note among the brilliant color.

Of course, Atorra had been in the great hall many times by now, so its beauty was no longer so startling.

It was the strange visitors that captured every eye.

The Halnari contingent was there, of course—twenty or so of them, each looking quite similar to the next. Halnari had strict beauty ideals and shape-shifted their children as they grew to ensure they matched the others. Men and women alike wore long, delicate robes, long sleeves, the most delicate gold and silver ornamentation, and they never cut their hair. The only difference was that the men wore their hair in a single braid and the women, two. They walked carefully with their long hair draped on one arm and their robes skimming the floors.

Atorra felt the entire room crackling with tension as the Drai court took in their greatest enemy: Miralem traitors.

Without the Halnari, the Daramons could not even make Fanarlem. When she was created, a Halnari had called her soul into her body. This was magic that Daramons could not do themselves.

But among the Halnari, a lone figure drew her energy toward him, so that at first she was afraid even to meet his eyes. One man stood stark and black as shadows and raven-feathers in the room of fragile-looking Halnari and anxious, colorful Drai.

"Greetings, and well met, your majesties." Lord Dresedel spoke.

That voice...

Atorra was frozen as he swept into a bow and lowered himself to one knee in front of Atorra and Harrai. Harrai held her arm firmly, like he was afraid to break contact with her for even a moment. "I am Dorn Dresedel. I apologize for my brazen and unwelcome appearance in the court of Drai."

"It is quite unexpected," Harrai said coldly. "It is difficult to see this as anything but an attempt to intimidate us."

He drew out of his bow, and looked up at Harrai on the dais.

Atorra suppressed a shiver.

Lord Dresedel was quite handsome, and not in the standard smoothedover Daramon way. He had the black curled hair of an islander and piercing black eyes. His chiseled warm brown features, and the way he stood so patiently and gravely in the center of the hall, made him almost look as if he had been carved from a beautiful piece of wood. He was definitely more broad and muscular than the average man, but carried himself with elegance. On the surface, he seemed humble and respectful in every word and gesture.

And his mind was completely veiled. Of course, the Halnari would protect him from intrusion. They would get nothing out of him with telepathic probing.

But neither his good looks nor his manners soothed her mind. She sensed danger. Darkness. *Familiar* darkness.

Maybe it's my imagination, she thought. There has been so much going on to put me on edge, and he's a mysterious visitor with a reputation. It would be easy to read more into it.

Everything in her gut screamed otherwise.

"I knew you would think so," Lord Dresedel said. "As we would if you came to our doorstep with your dragons. But, I have nothing but respect for the dragons. In fact, it has been a dream of mine since I was young just to set foot in the land of the dragons."

His voice is the voice I've been hearing. The voice that rises up when I try to do magic. The voice that called to me in the storm.

She tried to shake off the feeling, or at least to poke holes in her panic. The voice she heard seemed deeper, and ancient. His accent was even a little different. But it felt just the same.

"Why have you come?" Harrai asked. He didn't look intimidated, even standing face to face with one of Lord Jherin's four generals.

"I am here to make an offer to both of our benefits." Lord Dresedel added dryly, "You can all relax. It is a very boring reason. In short, Lord Jherin's engineers have vastly improved our ability to extract resources from our mountains. I'm here to discuss sharing those techniques with the Drai in exchange for a portion of certain resources that you have and we do not."

Atorra's brow furrowed before she could help it.

I don't believe him, she sent to Harrai.

Jarlan, predictably, looked at Harrai as if he was thinking the same thing at him. Lady Kirska's face was also troubled.

"The Daramons are not welcome here, certainly not without advance notice," Harrai said smoothly. If he was getting peppered by mental opinions, he didn't show it. "You could have just as easily written a letter informing us of your new techniques and requesting an audience. How do I interpret you showing up at our doorstep unannounced, besides as a hostile act?"

"I don't think you read our letters," Lord Dresedel said. "Lord Jherin has requested an audience with Drai many times over the years, going back to when Lady Kirska was a young queen." He gave a respectful nod to the older woman. She opened her mouth to retort.

"He is certainly an old man indeed," Harrai cut in. "Your Lord Jherin. And you are not much behind him. The shape-shifting that hides your true appearance is truly impressive."

Lord Dresedel smiled. "It's a funny thing, but one only feels as old as one looks. And I prefer to be young. We have quite a lot to accomplish yet on this planet, and you won't be left out, if you care to listen to my sales pitch...tomorrow, perhaps?"

"We aren't interested," Harrai said.

"I can't say I didn't expect a hostile reception," Lord Dresedel said. "We will not expect to be hosted in Kota Castle, then. We'll find rooms in town. But I will leave you with a packet. I hope you might look it over before I go, and see if your interest isn't piqued after all." He glanced behind him and one of the Halnari men strolled forward, producing a large clothbound book.

Harrai accepted the book. His severe expression had finally cracked, showing a little concern. "We have made rooms ready for your party in the castle," he said. "I don't want the people of the town to scramble to host you. They will be agitated by your presence, wherever you go. Stay tonight and leave tomorrow."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Lord Dresedel said, as graciously as if Harrai had offered the entire banquet that Atorra knew was already prepared.

The court snapped into action to settle in the visitors, with everyone playing their expected roles, showing Lord Dresedel and the Halnari to rooms in the eastern wing of the castle, as far from Atorra and Harrai as possible. It was already quite late.

"Shall we try and get a little sleep?" Harrai said to her, in a soft voice. "I want to keep you close."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep at all."

"No," he agreed. "But...we can talk." He had still not let go of her the entire time. She felt the fierce protectiveness radiating from his fingers. She wondered if he had felt the danger deep inside him, the same way she did.

She nodded. "Let's see Tashaya and Lorsen to their rooms, and then... we'll talk." She looked behind her, to Tashaya and Lorsen, who both looked troubled.

"So you're really going to send them right back home tomorrow?" Lorsen asked.

Harrai ignored the question. "Let's see you safely back to your rooms. Stay put. We'll have all the guards on alert tonight."

Only when they were in Harrai's bedroom, with the door shut firmly behind them, did his shoulders finally relax, and his hand finally release hers—and even then, not for long. He reached for her, and drew her close.

"Harrai...you felt it too, didn't you?"

"Yes. This isn't about making deals over mining the mountains. The Black General wouldn't come all the way here for that."

"When he spoke, I thought he was the voice I'd been hearing. The dark voice that spoke to me when I got close to the storm. But...one of the Wodrenarune's generals couldn't also be...the storm."

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "But then, I don't know if anything makes sense. I have no idea why he's here. And I feel like every moment he

is here is another moment I'm putting you and the dragons and all of my people in danger. And yet—" His arm stiffened.

"You want to know why he came."

"Yes. We need to find some way to break into his thoughts. He has all those Halnari around him, but...they won't all have their guard up at once. If we entertain his proposal tomorrow at the banquet...at least some of them will likely drink if offered. And then...I will enlist Dirjet's help to crack his defenses and see what I can get out of him."

"Won't that open you up to an attack, if they have anything planned? They expect us to try something like that."

"Well...I'm hoping you and Dosskarja can protect me," he said. "I know your telepathy is still improving bit by bit, but...your songs are powerful, and Dosskarja can support you. Times like these are why we have our dragons. We're more powerful with them and with each other than we are on our own. Lord Dresedel and the Halnari might expect something like this. No doubt they have some protections or tricks to try and stop us. But in the end...telepathic powers are difficult to block with anything except stronger telepathic powers. Lady Kirska and the other court telepaths will be probing them carefully to see if they have any extremely high-level operators among them."

She finally dared a small smile. "So you already had a plan, as soon as you saw it was the Black General."

"I didn't, really. Except that either way, I wasn't going to give them a warm welcome."

"If you were nervous, you didn't show it at all."

"I was nervous." He shook his head. "In the past, I think I might have faltered. I would have let Grandmother do half of the talking. Or Jarlan might have tried to butt in. But this time, I felt like he was *my* opponent." He drew her to the bed. "Having you...changes my feelings about bearing the horns. You've been growing stronger and I won't let you leave me in the dust. I'm your protector. Your husband. You can rely on me, always. That's the vow I want to live up to."

"Harrai..."

"There is a reason the king waits for his queen. Every day you become a better queen, while I've spent years just thinking I'll never be the king my father was."

"I never knew your father, but I'm sure you'll be your own kind of king," Atorra said. "As it should be." She leaned her head against his shoulder, wanting to stay close and warm in his presence as long as she could before she had to face a day of Lord Dresedel and that alluring, terrifying voice that was so strangely familiar.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



Harrai

HE WOKE with her in his arms. She slept heavily, clutching her wyvern. Boo blinked at Harrai and then put her sleek head back down with a long contented groan. He should wake Atorra, but he wanted her to have all the rest she needed. Gently, he brushed her mind, and felt her restless dreams.

He yearned for her. Not to make love—well, not that he would say no to that either.

But he wanted more than that.

The spring air was turning to summer now. The room smelled fresh and the songbirds were singing. He wasn't exactly well rested, but he still felt full of the freshness of the new day. He wished he could wake her slowly, with kisses and caresses and breakfast, and then tell her that he was taking her to his favorite mountain meadow to pick berries and find all the rare beetles she wanted.

Even the one time I tried, she ended up almost getting caught up by the storm...

He left her alone to have a little more sleep. He dressed in plain black, with silver ornaments on his horns and two protective rings—one against sorcery, one against telepathy.

The Black General isn't the only one who knows how to be intimidating.

"My lord, your grandmother is...um...leaving," one of the servants said.

"Leaving?" he snapped.

She was a sweet girl, the daughter of sheep farmers, and she looked very nervous. He softened his expression, but the damage was done. "I'm—I'm so sorry, my lord," she said. "I thought you might want to know. If I overstepped—"

"I'm not angry at you at all. Eskamir's blessings on you for thinking to inform me. I am, however..." He grimaced. "Where is she now?"

"Loading a carriage."

He followed her to the courtyard, where his grandmother was overseeing things, a blue traveling cloak falling from her shoulders.

"Good morning, Harrai. I have to make a short journey," she said curtly.

"Right now? To where?" He was flabbergasted by this sudden departure. Grandmother was the last person who would run off in the middle of this important visit.

"I need to leave now," she said, barely meeting his eyes. "I've been waiting to hear about it for some months. I'll get us what we need."

"You've been waiting to hear about what? What secrets are you keeping from me?"

"You'll have to trust me." She yanked open the carriage door. Amira was already seated inside the carriage with her, with her blue priestess' cloak pulled around her.

Now Harrai was angry. He grabbed her arm, holding her back from the carriage. "*I* am the monarch. Not you. Anything so important that you can run off without notice and take our best healer with you, needs to go through me first."

"I will not tell you, Harrai. I'm sorry. I've already made my decision."

"Your decision?" Terror rose in his throat, and he wasn't sure why. "What decision?"

Her eyes darted back and forth, betraying fear he had never seen in her.

"You'll be very glad of it," she said, in a voice that didn't convince him. "You must trust me."

"I don't trust you! What is this about?"

She tugged her arm from his grip. She was physically frail; he could have gripped her so hard that she could never leave. He could have summoned up all his powers and struck his grandmother down and locked her in the holding cell in the basement.

"I'll be back shortly," she said.

"'Shortly'? Why aren't you taking a dragon?"

"No time to waste, now," she called to the driver.

Even as he watched her go, he cursed himself for not stopping her.

But he knew he would have to hurt her to stop her. He'd seen it in her eyes. She might not have as much power as he did, but she had enough that it would get ugly, because she wasn't one for backing down on anything.

"Good morning, your majesty." Lord Dresedel came striding out from the east wing, trailed by a few of the Halnari, who kept catching their robes on overgrown bushes in the garden. Harrai could just imagine the Halnari gardens landscaped within an inch of their life. "I slept very well. Thank you for your hospitality, however reluctant."

Harrai immediately had to shake off his fury. His grandmother was acting as shadow ruler, undermining him. He should have had the resolve to stop her, but he couldn't hurt the elder of his family.

"The queen and I have discussed your presumptuous arrival," Harrai said. "We've decided to hear out your proposal, although I make no promises. We are quite happy with the current state of things as far as extracting our resources. As you may know, we try to leave our mountains as undisturbed as possible."

"I'm pleasantly surprised to hear it," Lord Dresedel said. "Do I have time to enjoy a little stroll in your magnificent gardens, or should we begin immediately? There is a lot of ground to cover."

"By all means...enjoy the gardens," Harrai said. "A light luncheon will be served shortly and then we'll have a long afternoon."

Harrai took this moment to drop in on Master Peitir and ask if he had any idea where his grandmother was going.

"Going? Going where?" Master Peitir asked. "She hasn't gone anywhere, has she?"

"Shit."

What could this be, that she wouldn't tell a soul, not even Master Peitir? *Grandmother, what have you done?*

<u>OceanofPDF.com</u>

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE



TASHAYA

Lady Tashaya, are you available to take notes for me?

Tashaya snapped awake from her nap when she felt Sairi's presence in her head. One of the younger healers was sitting near her bed, waiting for her to wake up and take a tonic. They were all extra-fussy lately, hardly leaving her alone.

Tashaya had basically woken up, eaten breakfast, and then gone back to sleep. It was just one of those days. She had stayed up too late after all the shock of last night. The Black General was sleeping just across the way from her, and...he was connected to the shadow. Tashaya sensed it, and Atorra sensed it. They hadn't had time to talk about it yet, but she already knew Atorra would agree.

And yet, she couldn't stop sleeping.

Until she heard Sairi.

If you don't feel up to it, don't push yourself on my account.

Oh, no, I'm fine! she answered hastily.

"Oh, bring me a pencil and paper, quick, please!" she asked the healer.

"You're looking more lively all of a sudden," the girl said with a smile, rummaging in the desk. She handed Tashaya a stack of papers, the pencil, and then a large book to prop it on.

The king and queen are meeting with Lord Dresedel now, Sairi said. *They're exchanging all the usual formalities—although it's tense. I'm waiting for them to get started. Atorra told me to take notes for her on Lord Dresedel's proposal. I'm going to scratch out what I can, but hopefully you can get more than I will.*

I'm ready when you are, Tashaya replied.

She hardly felt able to leave her bed, but her mind was working now. It felt so nice to be needed, as if she was attending the meeting in some fashion. She hoped he couldn't get any inkling of how tired she was mind-to-mind. If he could *see* her, she had a feeling he would tell her to go back to sleep.

Last night was something else, eh? Sairi said, mentally chatty. The formalities must be dragging on. *It's very strange to be looking at the Black General right now from just a few feet away. What do you make of him?*

Oh—well, on the surface, of course, he was handsome and—

I'm not sure I like how this is going, Sairi cut in.

She giggled. *Let me finish! I'm glad I'm not in a room with him right now, that's all. I'm terrified that he has something to do with my sickness. There was a moment last night when he actually locked eyes with me and I felt the worst chill go through me. And I'm already experienced with chills, so when I say it was the worst...*

I'm still not sure it was necessary to mention that he was handsome, Sairi replied acerbically. *I think I'll be sure to stand between you and him at all times.*

I think it was just to keep you on your toes, she replied.

She actually wasn't sure why she'd led off with that either. Last night she had been absolutely terrified of him, and in fact she couldn't even remember what he looked like besides that he had very dark eyes that bored into her soul, in that one awful moment where he looked at her.

Now she wondered if he had bewitched her a bit. Atorra had already mentioned that the shadow spoke to her, in a compelling way. If Lord Dresedel had some connection...

I think that's a very good idea, she told Sairi. *I don't want to meet his eyes again. It's a good thing you're so tall and offer so much cover.*

I'm glad I have some use in a castle setting, he said. *Besides almost knocking over the decor at every turn.*

'Almost' just proves that you're very graceful, she assured him, chuckling again. His wings were going to smack a vase one of these days, to be sure.

"Are you talking to someone?" the healer asked.

"Sairi."

"Oh! Didn't you dance with him last night too?"

Tashaya nodded, grinning like a fool.

"Ooh, my lady! I'll be rooting for you."

"Thank you." Tashaya beamed as Sairi started up again, in a more serious vein.

All right. They're getting down to business now. I'll relay to you as much as I can. Lord Dresedel has a big book he's spreading out with diagrams and maps. He says he understands that the Drai respect the landscape. They will be sparing in their mining operations, and that they don't want to extract crystals. He is interested in the anthracite deposits in the eastern mountains, by the northern sea.

Anthracite? What is that?

Coal, Sairi replied. *He is explaining how he knows there is anthracite there. Something about a fishing colony the Halnari used to have there hundreds of years ago. I think he just wants to establish that they haven't been sending spies.*

Tashaya scribbled everything down, and even managed to keep her handwriting legible.

Harrai is asking what he wants the anthracite for. He says coal is used for heating in Nalim Ima. They don't have a lot of wood and the winters are very cold. I'm skeptical that this is the only reason... I think Harrai is thinking the same thing. I won't say it now, of course, but I think they're using it to fuel their ships. I've flown over a very odd-looking Daramon ship with three masts and a smokestack in the middle, spouting black smoke. I didn't get close.

Where!? You were flying over the Daramon seas? Going to the border towns was one thing, but she hated to think of him flying out over their oceans, far enough to see strange ships.

No. It was actually there in the northern sea. Where you don't expect to see much of anything but a few fishing boats.

Tashaya shivered at the thought of such a lonely, isolated place—but there was a thrill of adventure in it as well.

What's wrong? he asked.

I'm just thinking of you flying over the lonely northern sea.

It's not really lonely, he said. *There are three Drai towns on the eastern coast, and the Pipa Islands tribe. They're fun to visit. I've only been twice but they always roast a huge fish and ask if I want to marry one of their girls.*

I'm not sure I like how this is going, she shot back at him.

She felt him trying to suppress a laugh, probably in real life.

Now Dorn is showing the maps of the area he thinks should be surveyed for anthracite deposits, Sairi said. *Harrai is calm but not forthcoming. He doesn't see any benefit to this. Jarlan is extremely cold. He clearly doesn't think Harrai should have even taken this meeting.*

Well, that's no surprise, Tashaya said.

Harrai says that he will not use any Fanarlem for labor in the mines, and he doesn't see how the coal could be safely removed. It's getting very interesting, Sairi said, his voice sounding almost startled. *Lord Dresedel is showing a few plans and diagrams. I'm surprised he would even show these to us without any sort of bargain. No—goddess, there's no way we could even begin to replicate them. I hardly know what I'm looking at.*

What is it? Tashaya asked. *You sound a little scared! What sort of plans are they?*

I've pored over a few Daramon libraries and as I said, you can study magic there without any sort of vetting. I never saw anything like this. They're machines for use in the mines.

Sairi tried his best to explain, and she tried her best to get it all. Her wrist ached, but she didn't slow down. It felt good for some part of her to ache because it was being *useful*.

He knows he has something, Sairi said. *He's playing it cool but you can just see the arrogance in his eyes.*

What does it really matter? Tashaya asked. *Do you think they can mine more powerful crystals?*

I don't think this is even about mining crystals, Sairi said. *They want the coal to power more of those ships, would be my guess. Atorra has some inkling of it too. She just looked at me like she's thinking the same things. But Lord Dresedel said he'll hand over the plans to Drai in exchange for permission to mine a small sliver of the eastern mountains. Harrai says he needs to discuss it with the council. Lord Dresedel keeps pressing the idea that this is to improve the quality of life here and in Nalim Ima and that he

wants peace between the nations. I don't think anyone believes him. And he looks like he doesn't expect them to.*

So why is he really here? Tashaya mused.

Harrai is thanking him for his time and says he needs some time to discuss it.

Then, Sairi was quiet for a bit, long enough that she started getting restless. They must be having some discussion in the council, and he seemed preoccupied. They were probably including him in it, since he knew a few things no one else did.

Tashaya wished like never before that she was well enough to attend council meetings—without passing out or otherwise being a distraction with her general air of malaise. She wished she could have seen the plans and diagrams that had Sairi so startled. She wished she could be in the discussion, offering her own input as to the fate of her country.

Her parents would have been there. She never knew her parents, but she was positive they must have imagined she would be at Harrai and Jarlan's side when they all came of age.

Maybe I should have fought harder for it all along, she thought.

But it also felt...improbable. She really wasn't well, and it was delusional and even unfair to herself to imagine that she could have kept up with all the council business over the years.

I mean, look at you now. You hardly feel up to getting out of bed.

She fleshed out her notes with a few things she remembered but had not properly written down at the time. A few minutes later, there was a rap on the door.

I'm out of the council meeting now, Sairi said. *We have a little time to talk before dinner.*

She gasped in a strangled way and gestured frantically to the healer. "Call Soran—um—wait—" **I'm not presentable!** she told Sairi.

Not presentable? Impossible. I'm only a tribesman, my lady. I'll bet you're wearing a fine silk robe and looking very beautiful.

She was wearing a silk robe, but as to the rest, she was skeptical.

"I can tell him to come back later," the healer said, looking at Tashaya as she spoke to Sairi in her head, probably making some weird faces along the way, while trying to tame her bedhead curls.

"No—no—let him in," Tashaya said, because in the end she couldn't resist seeing him.

He leaned in head-first and said, "Just as I imagined." The nurse looked uncertain, and Tashaya waved her away while also nodding at her encouragingly. The healer clasped her hands, wishing Tashaya good luck, and ducked out of the room, shutting the door.

He looked back. "And you're sure I won't have any trouble being alone with you in your room?"

"No. No one cares what I do. Or if they do, they're all hoping I have a good time." She paused. "That came out a little...more indecorous than I meant."

"Well, you don't have much experience in courting, so you're allowed some leeway," he said, grinning. His grin was enough to melt her in her bed. She would never get tired of it. It was very quick, but wide and earnest. She felt, just seeing his smile, that he would be a wonderful husband, the sort that would lift her spirits when she was sad and have patient and reassuring conversations with their children.

Is it possible to ache for an entire life with someone that you've only just met?

Is this just what I always feared would happen if I ever dared to feel anything?

Or...is it happening whether I like it or not, because I've never met anyone who smiled at me like that before?

"I should hope you don't have any experience in courting either, but please do tell me about the Pipa island girls," she said, teasing to cover up her burning desires.

"Oh..." He moved aside the chair near her bed, where the healers tended to her, and dragged over a stool from the corner which wouldn't hem in his wings. "I think I might be a secret snob. In my heart of hearts I dream of having my own library..." He glanced over all the books piled around her room, some of them from the castle library and some of them her own. "...and the sort of wife who likes to pull her book off the shelf, and I'll choose mine, and now and then we'll swap. But...they don't have books in the Pipa Islands."

"Or in your tribe."

"Exactly. Although—don't get me wrong—I like practical applications for knowledge, not *just* knowledge for its own sake. And they do have that in the Pipa islands. They have a wealth of knowledge about fishing, navigation, trapping, tanning hides, and preserving food. They make

delicious dried fish. And if I bring them deer hide, they'll give me some fish. That's the real love of my life on the Pipa islands."

"I see. I feel better. I think I can compete with dried fish, at least."

"I want to make a quip about how you might taste, but you're a lady and I'm trying to be a gentleman, so even though you set it up, I'll resist."

"I—I didn't mean to set it up." She blushed. "Why don't you have a look at my notes and see if they work? Can you read my handwriting?"

He took the papers from her. "Much better than mine. Your handwriting is so tidy that I'm jealous."

"What happened in the meeting, after Lord Dresedel was dismissed? Is he leaving tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure. Harrai didn't seem like he wanted to make that decision yet. I just know the big fancy banquet is on. Do you feel up to it?"

At any other time, she would have said no. Sairi's presence was giving her adrenaline that kept her awake. Otherwise, she still felt terrible. Weak, sluggish, cold.

But she didn't want him to think of her that way. She had to fight it.

"Lady Tashaya," he said gently. "If you don't feel well...but you want company...I'll skip the banquet. If you'd just like to talk. I can get you some dinner and a cup of tea. Or I could read you a book."

She bit her lip, trying to hide her emotions.

He already thinks of me that way. I can't stop that, no matter how much I fight. And...maybe he doesn't care.

She swallowed. "Sairi...I—I am enjoying this so much. Every moment of it."

"I know you're sick," he said. "You don't have to make some huge effort to pretend otherwise. I feel very fortunate that you seem to want my company, because I like your company quite a bit myself."

"I could die," she whispered. "You would invest your heart in me...and I would die. And hurt you. And...it would be so much harder to die, because I would know I was hurting you." She spoke the words, those dreadful fears that were also truths, and then she choked on a sob. She turned away from him, humiliated—now she was a sick and generally useless girl, and a weepy one too.

He reached for her. "Tashaya," he said. "Stop it."

"I'm sorry..."

"Do you think I don't know that you could die? Anyone could die."

"Sure—but—me *especially*!"

"I know," he said. "But it's worth the risk. Do you think it's easy to find someone that you just...feel easy around? Happy? Excited just to see them cross your path?"

"I know it's not easy," she said. "I've never felt that way before." *That's how he feels...*

"Do you just want to wait and see if you get better first, and miss a chance at having anything at all?"

"But having it...and losing it...you know...so soon..."

"I can't think that way. I would never do anything. I put myself at risk too, going into Daramon lands, flying over the northern sea where storms can take you off guard over the open ocean, poking my nose into strange caves. I could die and leave you alone first."

"But that would be terrible!" she gasped, because she had never thought of that, and then she almost laughed again. "But...that does make me think even more that I want to feel your arms around me. I want to take whatever I can get."

He nodded, brushing her face with his wing, wiping away her tears. "Exactly."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTY



TASHAYA

HE LEANED in and met her lips.

She reached for his hair and drove her fingers deep into it, and took a deep sighing breath through her nose, drinking in the scent of woodsmoke and wild mountain air that surrounded him while he kissed her deeper. He shifted a knee to the bed. She could hear his breath quickening along with hers. She was shivering as he slid his wing under her and lifted her a little, against him.

She was panting, feeling breathless. He stopped. "Too fast?"

"No." She shook her head vigorously.

"But if it's too fast—or too much—just stop me."

"I really don't want to stop you."

"Just promise me you won't let me kill you. That is not what I want to be known for."

"I promise." She reached for his shirt and slipped her hands into the arm-holes (wing-holes?), as she kicked off her covers and then nudged herself closer to the edge of the bed so he had more room there. She wished her bed was larger, especially since he was so tall and his wings were massive unfolded and still rather unwieldy held close to him. She was pretty sure Sreyelans just slept on furs on the floor so they could sprawl.

But when he wrapped his wings around her, she felt so safe and protected, and he was so warm. She kept kissing him, now sliding her hands down to fiddle with the ties of his shirt. There were just a couple that held

the soft leather around his body, and she pushed it back and freed three necklaces of polished gem beads and medallions stamped in silver, the currency of all Miralem tribes across the entire north from sea to sea. His skin was a little paler under his shirt, light brown and all lean muscle.

"Goddess," she murmured, closing her eyes.

"Oh, come on," he said, sounding embarrassed.

She wrapped her hand around the necklaces. "You look so wild right now. But you're also so scholarly. And you can *fly*. It's too much. This can't be real."

"If you live long enough you'll realize I'm boring," he said.

"No, I'm boring!"

"You're descended from the royal line of Drai, surrounded by books, which is very intimidating. You have beautiful handwriting and stunning hair, and an irresistible laugh. Nothing about you has bored me in the slightest. In fact, you are incredibly distracting...and it's pretty hard to be scholarly at all when I'm looking at you..."

"Mm..." Their mouths met again, hungrier than ever. She tried to push off her quilted robe, which was quite warm, and he helped her. Her nightgown was cut lower, showing some cleavage. He started kissing her neck, and she started shivering. Unfortunately, it was not just from arousal.

"Too cold?" he said, because of course he noticed.

"It's okay."

"How about...nightgown off, heavy robe, back on? Keep your arms warm."

She flushed and nodded, because she didn't have anything on underneath and suddenly it all felt very real. She tried to help him remove the nightgown, shivering and blushing and fumbling. She felt like she ought to be covering herself up with her arms, and couldn't resist folding herself up into a little ball of anxiety.

He was looking at her with color in his cheeks and his eyes losing all their windblown squint as they drank her in with what seemed like awe. "Goddess indeed," he murmured.

She squirmed.

"It's really surprisingly embarrassing to be admired, isn't it," he said. "But I have to admit that I really hope you don't die. I want to find out everything you like...and do it to you countless times..."

"That—sounds great." She pulled at his clothes, unfastening his trousers, but she couldn't tug them down. "I don't know how to get yours off..."

"Sorry. Just a sec. The fasteners pass through my wings and hook in back...it just takes a little telekinesis."

"Let me see. I can do it." She motioned for him to turn around on the bed and she could see now that there were tiny buttons just behind where his wings met his body. His wings had a few holes in them, like wide ear piercings, where a thin strip of leather passed through and fastened with a closure. They doubled up at his waist, one strip for his shirt and another for his trousers. "That's clever. I wondered all this time how your clothes fit around you so well." She pulled the strips free and now his shirt slid right off his head.

"Hang on. Let me get my boots off." He leaned over the side of the bed and unbuttoned his boots, which took some time, time for her to curl up in her robe and feel her own naked body under it and watch his back, with powerful shoulders for powerful wings. She wiggled her toes. The anticipation felt nearly unbearable. Her entire body was throbbing. She had waited a very long time to be desired, to feel these things, and it was finally happening, and it was worth the wait.

He turned back to her. The ties that held his trousers on were loose now, and she had already released the buttons at the front. That last scrap of clothing was barely hanging on. She pulled them down, and he kicked off the last of it before leaning over her. She was bundled in her robe, with her covers still covering her feet, but her breasts and her sex were exposed. She reached for his shoulders and drew him closer, sliding her tongue against his. His hardness pressed against her slick folds, so close, and she was ready.

"I want to feel you, Sairi," she breathed. "Make me yours."

His breath hitched, and he shifted his position a little. "Yes, my lady," he said, with a little smile. "It will be my greatest pleasure...to say that you are mine..."

His cock nudged her wider, and it took them a bit of shifting and rearranging to get the right angle, until they were both laughing a little at their inexperience. But when it was right, it was right. A little painful at first, but quickly less so. They already had a telepathic connection so it was easy for her to share that subtle communication with him.

And once he was there, deep inside her, she couldn't stand to just lay there passively. Her instincts screamed to match his rhythm, and she did, even though she was so tired, and soon she was breathing so hard. And then she was struggling for breath, and he slowed down, and then stopped.

"Tashaya," he said gently. "It's okay."

"No," she moaned. "It's not. I hate—hate!—being so weak. So sick. For no good reason. It's not a sickness, it's a curse, and it's on the whole kingdom but I'm the only *person* who has to bear it!" She was crying and then it was harder to breathe. "I just want to—share this with you—please..."

Still crying. Goddess curse her. Crying in the middle of her first time having sex. Crying with him hilt deep in her, just leaving him there in limbo.

"Of course you're sad, and furious too," he said. "Tashaya...look at me. Don't worry about me. Goddess. If I just have to hang out here like this for a while, I can think of worse things. And if you need me to just stop...well, why else do I have a thumb and a finger?"

She couldn't help laughing, then. "Don't stop, though."

"Slow, then. Really slow..."

She groaned and dug her nails in his skin, half-crazed with frustration. "I don't want slow!"

"I'm not the type to make crazy promises I can't keep," he said. "But I will do everything in my power to figure this out. To help Atorra and all of you lift this shadow...especially for you."

"I—I should tell you something."

"Go right ahead."

"I want babies," she blurted, before she could even consider whether it was a wise thing to spring on him. "I think you should know, just in case—I get cured—" Miralem women would not have babies they didn't want, but on the opposite end of that, if Tashaya was cured—well, she felt sure that she would get pregnant immediately.

"I would love to have babies," he said. "I would love to be a father. Just —not yet. Don't try anything until we figure it out—your health, and whether we really suit each other."

"I won't."

In the end, their first time didn't end in any glorious mutual climax. She just didn't have the stamina for pleasing him in any way. She felt so

inadequate.

"It doesn't always happen," he said. "Even for healthy people. We live in caves, Tash. I know way too much. I certainly don't mind seeing what you taste like..." There was that grin again, knocking her breathless. "And I can take care of myself."

"But don't go away," she said. "Stay here and kiss me while you do it. Get me all messy. I don't care."

His eyes hooded. "That's very sexy in its own way, you know. Just the way you said that...and that look in your eyes..."

He kissed her, not breaking contact yet, their skin so close that she was attuned to every movement of his muscles and every hitch of his breath. They relished each other so slowly and gently that she stopped feeling self-conscious about her weaknesses and could only think how wondrous it was that he had showed up in the castle as if he was just for her.

They had plenty of time before dinner, and yet, it still wasn't enough.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE



ATORRA

LORD DRESEDEL WAS GAZING at a painting in the hall when the royal entourage finally broke up their meeting. Jarlan, Harrai, and their personal advisors and attendants had turned one way, while Atorra took the other path with Lorsen.

"Not the best likeness," Lord Dresedel said, with an inscrutable twitch of his lips, his hands clasped casually behind his back behind his black cloak. "Do I really look this terrifying?"

Yes, Atorra thought, but curiosity plucked her closer. "We have a painting of you, Lord Dresedel?"

"I remember this battle well," he said. "Of course, from the other side. But there is Lord Jherin, and Lord Calban and I beside him." He pointed to three small figures on a riverboat, Lord Jherin with a snarling expression and hands thrust out as if barking orders, Lord Calban in a red and gold coat and a cockamamy grin, Lord Dresedel with arms folded and black armor with an exaggerated kasi-morra headdress, looking more like giant gazelle horns than anything.

The boat was powered only by magic with no sails or oars, heavily ornamented and even more heavily armed with bowmen, clashing with a battalion of Drai soldiers. The Drai looked heroic in vibrant colors, riding several dragons. Everything about the scene suggested ancient history to Atorra; the ship was of a style no longer seen and the paint was crazed with age.

It was a stark reminder that Lord Dresedel was very old. Too old. No one lived that long, and magic could only do so much, but here he was. His skin didn't even look thin or dry.

Something is keeping him alive. He holds some power I don't understand, and he doesn't want me to forget it.

But Lord Dresedel's eyes did return to the painting, as if he was actually reluctant to look at anything else even though he resembled a horned ghoul in it. It must be lonely, though, Atorra thought. Whatever power he has, he must have outlived nearly everyone he once knew. That probably leaves a lot of holes in you somewhere deep down.

She needed to get him relaxed and off his game by the time dinner ended, and this seemed like an opening.

"Well, of course we would favor our own," Atorra said, "but was there ever a battle like this? You and Lord Calban and the Wodrenarune himself fighting dragons? I'm afraid I don't know all the history yet."

"I suppose you think we surely would have lost if we had," he said, with a sly look. "We look so small against your dragons. In fact, we did engage with the Drai during this war. This beautiful boat was smashed to bits. Most of the men on it died. But the three of us stuck close and were able to get away. I was struck by a falling mast and broke my leg. Calban had a gift for all the elements, as if he could speak to them, and even when I was struggling to shore, he rode them like a dolphin and swept me up. Lord Jherin too."

He sounded wistful. Apparently Calban wasn't doing that anymore, although she couldn't tell if it was due to age or changing eras with fewer great battles, or if they had grown apart.

"Good friends will do that," Atorra said. "Whatever side we're on, I think we all understand the bonds forged under duress."

"Yes..."

"But you did very well in that war, didn't you?"

"Yes. But I don't imagine you want to hear about that."

"On the contrary, it all happened so long ago that at this point it's just an interesting story," she said. "I'm sure we'd all love to hear it at dinner. I need to get dressed for dinner, but...please, summon up all your most interesting tales."

Lord Dresedel smiled. She couldn't tell if he saw through her or not. Those cursed Halnari, cloaking his thoughts so well. "I look forward to our

next meeting in a bit, then."

Lorsen hung back after they had walked away.

"Atorra...do you mind if I skip the dinner?" she asked softly.

"Of course not," Atorra said. "That actually works well. I can give your seat to Sairi. Is everything all right?"

"Lord Dresedel bears a resemblance to my old master..."

"Lor!" Atorra gave her a tight hug. "Then go and stay away until he's gone. You don't have to look at him again."

Lorsen didn't return the hug. But then, when Atorra pulled away she suddenly gripped her sleeves before slowly releasing her fingers. "I'm sorry that I can't be useful to you..."

"All I wanted was to have you here and safe. Please, go enjoy yourself. Ask one of the servants to take you to the theater, maybe. And—oh, you *could* watch Boo while I'm so busy."

"I could certainly handle Boo," Lorsen said.

"Yes, let her goofy little face comfort you."

They finally let each other go, and Atorra was just glad that Lorsen asked for what she really needed. She hadn't been communicating much, and Atorra just wanted to offer her everything she wanted and needed.

Soran dressed her for dinner, and she tried to steady her nerves. She must be charming, must make Dorn lose himself in memories of his glory days.

"Is it true that Lady Kirska has left Kota?" Soran interrupted her thoughts.

"Apparently..."

"I feel as if I was told the moon failed to rise. What could she be doing that's so important she wouldn't be here *now*?"

"I certainly don't know!" Atorra said. "But you're not helping me stay calm, Soran!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sure it's a very good reason. Maybe she'll return with a secret weapon."

"I'm sure it's nothing less," Atorra said, but privately she felt her anger at the old woman bubbling up, more fierce than ever before. What excuse could she have for not informing Atorra and Harrai?

Unless, of course, she does mean to do something that will force me to become a dragon.

Dressed in pale, smoke-blue silk as light as a cloud, decked in dragon scale and jade ornaments and embroidered slippers, Atorra took her seat at the table. Lord Dresedel was sitting across from them, in the seat that normally belonged to Lady Kirska. Beside him was the Halnari ambassador, Lord Aselmir, and his quiet and visibly pregnant wife, who seemed extremely hungry.

Tashaya and Sairi were late. Atorra poked at them telepathically, which was still not easy for her from a distance, but all she got was a blur of happiness.

Well, at least someone is enjoying themselves...

Luckily, she had Harrai at her side, and on her side. While she might know all his deeper fears and dreams of walking away from the crown, he didn't show any of it. He projected nothing but a calm strength. She caught her first tiny wisp of Lord Dresedel's thoughts. For a moment, his shields cracked.

He reminds me of Kal, Lord Dresedel thought.

Kalan Jherin? Harrai reminded him of the Wodrenarune himself? Atorra guessed this was a compliment, but it was hard to imagine.

That painting is what caused the crack, she thought. It was pure coincidence, but good luck for us. She shot Harrai a brief telepathic thought, showing him what had happened.

"I hope you've had time to think up some good stories for me, Lord Dresedel," she said, hopefully with all the charm she had once been trained in. Men did love to talk about their exploits. "It must have really been something to see those river battles with the war boats. Was it on the Atlantis River or the Sirian?"

"The Sirian. And of course, they are not 'boats', that was a samara, the arrow of the river, and then we also had the bredasara, the sword of the river."

"Mmmm," she said, like this was a tasty fact. And actually it was; Atorra could easily see the fun in identifying ships just like beetles or lizards. "I've never seen the like."

"No, those swift sorcery-powered ships are not used much now," he said. "And we don't spend as much time giving our ships gilt and splendor. But it was quite a sight to see them skimming across the water at speed, with sorcerers weaving the magic with their hands."

"Eskamir's eyes, I'm surrounded by lovebirds on all sides," Jarlan muttered under his breath when he saw Tashaya and Sairi slip into the dining hall belatedly.

Tashaya was fighting not to smile, her cheeks flushed as she took her seat at the table. Sairi was across from her in Lorsen's place as Atorra's guest. Tashaya tore her gaze from him and poked at her food, shooting Atorra her starry eyes before looking down again.

I'll tell you all about it later! Her telepathic voice was practically shooting off little fireworks.

There was no time to truly enjoy any of this burgeoning romance, alas.

Lord Dresedel looked to Tashaya with a polite nod. "I don't think we have been formally introduced," he said. There was only Master Peitir seated between them.

Earlier, Master Peitir had told them that he couldn't really tell what Lord Dresedel's magic was. *Not elemental. Obviously not telepathic. The only magic it bears some resemblance to...*

Tashaya froze like a mouse.

...is yours, my queen.

"This is my cousin, the Lady Tashaya," Harrai said.

"Cousin," Lord Dresedel said. "It's a pleasure. I'm Dorn Dresedel."

"I—I know," she said.

"Who is your Sreyelan companion?"

"Mr. Hlefyndris," she said.

"Do you really fly like dragons, your people, Mr. Hlefyndris?" Lord Dresedel asked.

"Yes, they do!" Tashaya said.

"Not like dragons," Sairi said. "I don't think that's really possible."

"I'm glad Lord Calban isn't here to see that; he'd be asking for wings himself," Lord Dresedel said with some private amusement.

"I believe they still need telepathy to fly," Tashaya said. "So a Daramon wouldn't be able to do it."

"Lord Calban is an elemental master," Lord Dresedel said. "I'm sure he could manage the same effect with wind magic."

"That must be a torturous process, such shape-shifting," the Halnari wife said, as if she had some idea. She certainly looked shape-shifted half to death herself; both Halnari looked more like dolls than Atorra did, she thought. Still, it seemed a very rude thing to say.

"No," Jarlan said. "I don't think anyone is as talented at shape-shifting in all the world as the Sreyelans."

"Well, I don't know," Lord Aselmir said. "Perhaps we should have a friendly competition with them sometime."

"I know where my bet would go," Jarlan said. Sairi glanced at him like he was in on that bet, although he wisely didn't fan the flames.

"So you would not hesitate for your own children to go through this procedure?" Lord Dresedel asked.

"Of course my children would have wings!" Sairi exclaimed. Then he glanced at Tashaya with immediate regret. Her hands waved, brushing it off.

Atorra knew Tashaya dreamed of having children, so discussing them at all would sting.

"Well," Lord Dresedel said, picking up his wine. "Then, I raise my glass to keeping of old ways. I admire conviction."

But the tension was sharp. No one liked each other much, and it wasn't going to get any better. Tashaya was scared, Lady Kirska was fates-knewwhere doing stars-knew-what, Jarlan and Sairi looked ready to team up for a duel against the Halnari...

"I never realized we had a painting of you, Lord Dresedel," Harrai said, steering the conversation back as he briefly pressed his hand around Atorra's. His steadiness brought her back. "It's always hung there and I never considered who the figures on the enemy vessel were. Now I must say it's a poor likeness."

"I don't mind it," Lord Dresedel said. "You made quite the villain out of me...but so I must have been." His grin was briefly wicked. "But you don't have to be afraid of me tonight. I must confess: fighting the dragons that day, as a young man...it changed me profoundly. I was enraptured by them. I'm not the only Daramon who feels this way. For some of us...we dread fighting dragons not because we hate them, but because they provoke our greatest sense of awe. The last thing I want is to slaughter your dragons. I hope I might ease your mind ever so slightly."

"And does your leader feel the same as you do?" Jarlan asked.

"Lord Jherin does not wish to kill the dragons either," Lord Dresedel said. "Although he is, perhaps, more resolved that it is necessary to protect ourselves now and then."

"Is it? Because we have certainly had an unusual rise in the 'pirates' capable of killing our dragons," Jarlan said.

Jarlan, we need to relax him! Atorra couldn't help snapping at him, although she had never tried to speak to Jarlan's mind, and it felt like walking in on him in the bath—not something she wanted.

"That is—do you know how the pirates are learning that sort of sorcery?" Jarlan actually listened. He tried to recover the mood.

"Do pirates go to the library?" Sairi asked. "I've been to a few of your towns and have been very impressed by your libraries. I was especially shocked to find books on magical instruction and potion making there, where anyone can learn the sorcerer's arts."

Now Lord Dresedel finally poured himself some wine, a look of fatherly pride crossing his dark eyes. "That was important to me, and to Lord Jherin, from the day we met. Yes...one of our first conversations was about freeing the knowledge of magic—the knowledge of everything—from schools for the wealthy and guilds for the elite, and letting everyone learn anything... We still haven't fully accomplished our goal of opening schools in every town in every province, but I can at least say that if a boy can travel a bit, he can learn anything he wants."

"Only boys?" Sairi asked.

"I'm afraid our women are too badly needed elsewhere," Lord Dresedel said.

Yes, for breeding. And then you can have your fun with slaves, Atorra thought. Truly, this was a difficult conversation to keep light. There were just too many reminders that Lord Dresedel was the enemy. It wasn't just the wars past—it was personal. Lorsen was hiding right now because he looked like her old master.

It didn't matter if Lord Dresedel was relaxing, showing a more honest side, and admitting his love for dragons. She couldn't wait for him to leave. They just needed to poke at him once and see what he wanted with them.

Atorra glanced at the pregnant Halnari wife. She wasn't drinking anything, and they couldn't do much about that. An unfortunate bodyguard. Lord Dresedel was sipping his wine and talking more freely, but she couldn't shake the sense that he was in control of the room. She wasn't sure why or how, but her instincts were still screaming danger.

In the midst of it all, without any warning, Tashaya suddenly clutched her head, going white as a sheet.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO



ATORRA

**Are you okay*?* Atorra spoke to her mind and tried to send her a little strength, if she could. She didn't want to call attention to it.

Tashaya put a hand to her chest, where the mark was, and slumped in her chair, going sideways into Master Peitir, who scrambled to catch her. "Lady Tashaya! Oh dear. And Amira isn't here…"

Harrai glared. No one was supposed to mention that. "It's all right," he said. "The queen can heal Lady Tashaya better than anyone."

Atorra left her chair, rushing to Tashaya, as some of the healers hurried to do quick checks and carry her to her bed. Lord Dresedel pushed his chair back as well.

"Please, enjoy your dinner," Atorra said. "I'll be back soon."

"If I may be of assistance..." Lord Dresedel stood up, looming over her.

"No. I have it all under control and I don't see that you could do anything about it."

"I'm here," he said gravely, "to help your kingdom." He looked at her with those penetrating dark eyes. "I can lift the mark. Once and for all."

"Back off," she growled. But she was shaking as she hurried from the room with the healers.

He knows about the mark.

Of course he does.

Sairi left with them. "I hope I didn't...over-stress her or worry her..."

"This is not your fault," Atorra said. "It's—it's *his*. He knows about the mark. He knows everything, I suspect. More than we do. Maybe he had a hand in creating the mark. Master Peitir said that Lord Dresedel's energy reads more like ancient magic than anything we know now—except my songs."

"How could he have ancient magic?" Sairi whispered. "I've barely even heard of that sort of magic outside of Drai."

"Damned if I know."

Tashaya was dead weight as the healers put her in bed, not stirring at all, and paler than Atorra had yet seen her. Atorra took her hand and felt just how weak she was. "This...isn't right," she said. "Tashaya was well enough to come to dinner, and she looked pretty perked up. I'm afraid Lord Dresedel is doing something to her. I just know he has some tie to this, and we were going to try and find out what it was tonight. I feel like he just outmaneuvered me."

"You think the Daramons caused that storm? And Lady Tashaya's mark?" the healer asked. "How could they do something like that?"

Atorra shook her head. On the surface, it didn't make sense. But deep down, she just knew that Lord Dresedel and the voice that spoke to her, that wanted to tell her its name...they were connected. He made Tashaya sick on purpose. This was a trap.

"I won't let him have her," Atorra whispered. "Sairi...take her other hand."

The Sreyelan was hanging back, but she could see how worried he was. As brief as the courtship was, they both seemed drawn to each other from the start, and that might be the key she needed. Tashaya needed more than magic to bring her back. A reason to live, a person to live for—that held a magic of its own.

Sairi took Tashaya's other hand.

"You make her happy," Atorra said. "Try to reach her mind and draw her to you while I deal with the curse."

"Of course. I won't let her go."

Atorra shut her eyes and reached for the song that had battled the darkness before. She felt it hovering powerfully before her—as familiar as a vivid dream but just as hard to grasp. One thing she had realized about the songs was that she knew them all very well. Once she trusted it, they came to her. But they didn't feel solid the way other magic did. It felt like she was

reaching through time to drag them forward, into a world where they didn't quite belong.

She opened her mouth and the notes flowed readily, transcending any ordinary song. This song was like music made by stars; it felt impossible and yet it belonged to her, the Queen of Songs. It shimmered through Tashaya's body, as well as everyone else in the room. It vibrated the walls.

Banish this curse!

Give me back my friend!

She felt how strong her magic was when she really cared. Tashaya was her friend—her only friend here, at first. Tashaya had shown her nothing but the warmest welcome. She didn't belong to the darkness.

Atorra didn't know how much time passed. She no longer saw the room. She floated within the song, across time and space. Her only anchor to reality was Tashaya's cold hand in hers.

Finally, the hand gripped back.

"Atorra..."

Atorra fell back into the room, as if her soul had been elsewhere, although her body had clearly not moved from the chair.

Tashaya broke into a sweat. Sairi looked relieved and weary, like he'd been there for hours.

"I told you I'll always...," Atorra tried to say, but then the aftershock of the magic hit her, and she lost consciousness, even as she tried to fight it. She couldn't leave Lord Dresedel for Harrai to handle by himself.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE



Harrai

Something was wrong. Harrai knew he should be focusing on the visitors, but his mind wandered off with Atorra. He felt her struggling.

Very wrong, he thought.

Harrai was well practiced in maintaining his composure. His grandmother had stepped down when he was only sixteen years old. This was quite young, but the advisors all felt he was ready. Even by then, he had learned to take bad news calmly and weigh important decisions with care.

But this evening, he felt his edges slowly unraveling. Grandmother had run off and Tashaya seemed to be getting worse. He wasn't exactly close to his cousin, but then, he wasn't very close to anyone. She was, at least, a steady and cheerful presence in his life—and very important to Atorra.

And then there was his queen, battling against the darkness while he sat across the table from Lord Dresedel, who slowly sipped his wine and looked politely concerned. "I do hope the ladies will be all right."

"I am sure," Harrai said, unable to hide some sarcasm.

He has something to do with this, and I have to take him down. But there are no open hostilities. I can't attack him without just cause. I have to crack his mind.

"My queen knows what she's doing," Harrai added. "She is quite skilled at healing Lady Tashaya. Hopefully she'll return soon, but in the meantime, please...I am quite interested in Lord Jherin's approach to education. So there are schools available to every young man in the provinces? What if the family has no money?"

"Then, it is paid for with taxes."

"The wealthy of Atlantis must be *thrilled* to be taxed to educate the poor," Jarlan said.

"They are thrilled, in fact, because fate has willed it," Lord Dresedel said. "Lord Jherin, of course, presented the moral argument for educated poor young men in one of his tracts, and like all of his tracts, it was sent to every household in the provinces that has postal service. I've heard enthusiastic support from the Atlantean merchants. We Daramons understand that education benefits everyone. Of course, I can see why the Miralem would be reluctant, since you would have to send women to school as well, and that would be double the burden on the system, and on families to have all the children going to school and not helping with the household..."

Jarlan glanced at Harrai. *If Grandmother was here she would have a hard time not tearing him a new asshole right now.*

Harrai wished he believed that were true. Grandmother had been exceedingly conservative lately, as if something else had her preoccupied and unwilling to stir the pot.

Well, let's try to hold off on doing it ourselves until we figure out what he's up to, Harrai replied.

Lord Dresedel was trying to provoke him. Just as they were hoping to get him to lower his defenses, Lord Dresedel had some plan of his own.

And had his defenses lowered at all? It didn't seem like it.

Goddess help us, it almost feels like he has his own defenses—as if he is competently blocking me from reading his emotions, much less his thoughts, all by himself.

Most Daramons did have some natural defenses against telepathy, but this wasn't normal.

Does he have Miralem blood? Or is this part of his connection to the shadow?

Harrai had never felt so trapped—unable to attack him without starting a war, unable to penetrate his mind, and without sufficient evidence to accuse him directly.

If he is the voice within the storm, that also means he is the one who killed my parents. I'm looking at their murderer right now. I have to do

something.

If I got him alone with all the dragons to help me, I could surely get him, then.

Outsiders were never taken to the dragon cave, but Harrai saw no choice. The dragons could help him with their telepathy over a distance, but it was always much more powerful if you were in the presence of the person you were trying to manipulate. And Harrai didn't feel like this was a moment to take chances.

Jarlan, don't stop me from what I'm about to do, he communicated to his brother.

What is that? Jarlan snapped.

The dragons need to see him. To help me crack him.

Won't Dresedel see through that?

We'll see.

"Lord Dresedel, I wonder if, after dinner, you might like to meet the dragons?" Harrai said. "I know you find them impressive, but you've probably never had the chance to look on them without worrying about dodging them. I think they would be very curious to meet the Black General. I can't promise a warm welcome, but I can at least promise they'll hold their fire."

"It would be an honor," Lord Dresedel said, his eyes sparking—with excitement, or something more sinister?

For all Harrai knew, taking him to the dragons was playing right into the reason he was here. But without being able to read any of his emotions, it was impossible to say.

There is no greater enemy for a Miralem than a Daramon with his thoughts blocked, Harrai thought crossly. We're too used to using our telepathy on them whenever needed.

I'm coming with you, Jarlan said.

I would rather you stay here in case something happens to me, but if you insist, I won't stop you either.

In this moment, the hostilities between them were petty against the Black General in their midst. Harrai had no desire to battle his brother.

Sairi returned to the dining hall just then, not taking his chair but going right to Harrai.

"The queen would like you to know that Lady Tashaya is recovering nicely," he said, but then he spoke telepathically: *The queen was able to

pull Tashaya back from death, but then she collapsed, and Lady Tashaya lost consciousness again immediately. Tashaya doesn't look well and we haven't been able to rouse the queen either. Not even with two healers and myself...*

Harrai's heart was now pounding. He stood up before he could help himself.

"Dinner is nearly over. Sairi, you should enjoy the final course. Forgive me for my bad manners, but I think I would still like to visit my cousin. She has really been struggling lately."

I can't lose Atorra, Harrai thought, and it was so damned hard to stay calm. *If I lose the queen, what's the point of any of this?* He had never cared for anyone like that before, not since he was so young and safe and happy with his parents alive. Atorra laughing, Atorra's curiosity and wonder, Atorra's dreamy smile in his arms...

For so long, his duties had been enough to sustain him, but now he'd grown selfish. He wanted her. He couldn't go back to that life when everything felt so cold, even in the peak of summer.

He'd just made a plan, and now it was already tossed aside. He wouldn't take Lord Dresedel to the dragons. He would keep vigil at Atorra's side again, waiting for her to come back to him.

Jarlan glanced at him. *Let me handle Lord Dresedel.*

No. Just put him off until tomorrow.

I can handle it! If the dragons are all there, and Sairi and Lord Peitir accompany me... Goddess, if the whole lot of us can't crack him, you couldn't either.

As Jarlan spoke, he looked back to Lord Dresedel with an easy smile. "Good. With my brother out of the way, I can get down to the real business —what are the ladies like in Nalim Ima? I've heard they're the prettiest things you'll ever see. I'm still in the market myself, you know, and I wouldn't mind discussing some other types of alliances." He was playing the part, and it made Lord Dresedel smile indulgently. Every man did like to think his native women were the world's prettiest, Harrai supposed.

All right, Harrai told Jarlan. *I will trust you.*

He had never trusted Jarlan with anything this important. Speaking with the Sreyelans or other Miralem, yes. Handling written correspondence with the Daramons, yes, but it was always reviewed by someone anyway. Atorra was the one who felt he should give his brother another chance, even though Jarlan had been more cruel to her than anyone.

But he trusted her. And so, he would trust Jarlan today. It wasn't like he could trust himself either, not with his heart beating this fast and his thoughts fleeing to his queen's side.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR



JARLAN

"I THINK we will leave the court to the dancing without us, as much as I would love to dance with your Halnari women...none of them seem to be single. We can pay the dragons a visit," Jarlan said breezily, slipping into character.

When he wanted to be charming, he played the flirt. He had never been able to bottle up all of his emotions like Harrai, but he'd found that he could put his energy elsewhere. He didn't lose his temper as much if he was flirting, and even the stodgiest Miralem women seemed to like the attention as long as he was equal opportunity. Jarlan often genuinely preferred older women to younger ones, and odd-looking misfits to the most beautiful woman in the room—they gave him more in return, and it was all a game to him anyway.

"The king will not mind if we go without him?" Lord Dresedel asked.

"Not at all," Jarlan said. "You're in good hands. The dragons trust me and if I tell them not to hurt you, they'll listen."

As if he thought Lord Dresedel was worried about that, for even a moment.

"I'm sure I am," Lord Dresedel said graciously.

"Master Peitir and Mr. Hlefyndris will accompany us," Jarlan said, leading the way out of the room, and quickly filling in Master Peitir and Sairi telepathically.

Jarlan's old crowd didn't look happy at this turn of events. He'd been spending less time with them lately. Downright ignoring them, since that trip to the cave. All of them were the lesser royals, the second cousins and cousins once removed, who might have been kings and queens themselves if the right people had died at the right times—but instead, the lines of succession had slipped out of view.

Mostly, they had spent the past twenty years complaining about it. It really wasn't fair. Harrai had not trained more than them, but he would always be far more powerful. Once he took the horns, his innate talent didn't even matter. He had the power of the dragon blood.

And by all rights, Harrai needed to be the one testing Lord Dresedel.

But everything was going awry, and Jarlan had trained hard all his life. He would never be Harrai. But sometimes he forgot that his own power was still formidable.

I can handle him, especially with Dosskarja's help. He might be Atorra's wing, but he was my wing for far longer.

As they crossed the bridge, the wind was pleasantly cool after a warm day, and smelled of summer. It was the time of year when all of Drai basked in the short yet delicious fertile season, when the lower elevations were a vivid green and the gardens exploded with flowers all over the city. Jarlan's confidence grew. This felt like an important day, when everything would turn around for good.

Deep in the back of his mind, where he tried to ignore it, was the specter of Lorsen. He noticed her absence at the table, and he knew seeing Lord Dresedel was like opening an old wound for her. He was going to send Lord Dresedel home licking his own wounds, and Lorsen would see that these men who had terrorized her could be defeated. Not just by the dragon king and queen, but by ordinary people. He really needed to stop thinking about her, and this was probably an indication that he had to find himself a proper wife already. Though not from that lot, goddess forgive me but I hate everyone in this castle.

Still, Lorsen could at least see that we have her back here in Drai. Yes.

He led Lord Dresedel to the dragon's gate, ignoring the tingle of fear that danced down his spine. It felt wrong to allow an enemy into the dragon caves. For any reason.

"Welcome," he said, turning to their guest. "You just might be the first Daramon to see any part of this mountain."

"I am...exceedingly honored," Lord Dresedel said, looking up into the shadowed heights of the cave. Magical lights flickered gently from the walls, and veins of luminescent rock ran along the walls and ceiling in places, but they were too faint to cast any light. The dragons had excellent vision and didn't need much illumination. Lord Dresedel walked slowly now, since they could hardly see the ground.

The dragons stirred, coming forward to see this unexpected visitor.

Who have you brought for us, my prince? Dosskarja asked, slinking past Het to come forward. *A Daramon?*

Forgive the intrusion, Dosskarja, but we need all of your help. We need to find out what Lord Dresedel wants with us and if he has a connection to that storm. He seems to have good defenses, and we can't let him feel us—or remember us, at the very least—poking around. Please tell the others.

He sent the telepathic message quickly, and said aloud, "This is Lord Dresedel, the Black General who served Lord Jherin in Nalim Ima. A few of you may have even encountered him in the War of the Crystals, so I realize that it was presumptuous of me to bring him to your home, but...the king and myself feel that you should have a chance to meet him and make your own decisions. He has proposed a treaty to help us mine the eastern mountains. We have a common interest, and that is peace between our nations...if it is possible for an understanding to be reached."

Lord Dresedel swept to his knees in a bow, lowering his head. "Dragons," he said, his voice husky and awed. "Despite our past history, may I express to you now that I bear nothing but admiration. For over a century, I have regretted that I took one of your lives in the War of the Crystals. My kinsmen fear you. I am hoping to broker a treaty today and a long term peace that will cease all killing of dragons."

Harrai spoke to me about the mining, Dirjet said. *We don't trust it.*

Neither do I, Jarlan assured her. *I'm just going to feed him some niceties. I need all of you to try and find a crack in his mental defenses while I speak to him.*

We will get into him, Dirjet said. *It was wise to bring him where I can see him.*

Yesss, purred Het, delicately sniffing the air. She had always been a little more ruthless, more of an animal, than Harrai's wing. Het was his grandmother's dragon, but Jarlan was hoping that his grandmother would

choose to retire her wing and let him partner with her, since he had lost Dosskarja.

It was Dosskarja's approval that he still wished for. He looked at the oldest dragon, his purple-black scales vanishing into the shadows outside the small pools of soft light.

Dosskarja carefully studied the Black General.

My prince, he said. *I have an unusual request.*

What is that?

I want to bring him to the cave of symbols. There is power there, and we will be able to tap into it. You and I.

The cave of symbols? Jarlan recoiled. He was glad to leave that place behind. But it only seemed to come alive for Atorra.

I know how to tap into its power, Dosskarja said. *You don't need Master Peitir or the Sreyelan or even the other dragons to crack open Dorn Dresedel's mind. I've been waiting for this moment, my prince. I have something to show you that will give you more power, and the Drai the tools to fight off the Daramons. You know I've watched your brother and Lady Kirska treat you like you're a useless afterthought after the death of your parents. And yet, you are the only one with the stomach for war. It's time for you to receive power of your own.*

Jarlan's breath hitched. *Dosskarja...you've had a trick in your pocket this whole time?*

It's no trick, Dosskarja said, and then with more humor, *and no pockets. I've been waiting. You have finally grown enough, and I will show you what to do with this Black General.*

Let's go. Jarlan almost grinned before he caught himself, and turned to Lord Dresedel.

"Lord Dresedel, the great dragon Dosskarja requests that he and I meet with you alone. He would like to show you our kingdom from dragon back."

"What on earth? This is highly irregular," Master Peitir said. Of course, Master Peitir would be playing the role of stick since Grandmother was gone.

"I would be honored to be a dragon rider, if only for one day," Lord Dresedel said, bowing low again.

"Dosskarja was my wing for most of my life, Master Peitir," Jarlan said. "We still share a bond. It's quite safe." *Dosskarja has more power than the

other dragons,* he added to Master Peitir mentally, and Sairi as well. *He can take care of our little visitor.*

Jarlan...this doesn't have anything to do with Atorra, does it? Sairi asked. *With the voice that said she could turn into a dragon and defeat the darkness? Where are you going?*

Sairi, you've been a welcome addition to our court, but this is between me and Dosskarja, Jarlan said as diplomatically as possible. He liked Sairi, but what did he really know? He'd only been here a few weeks. In the end, it was just as it should be. Jarlan and the dragon he had ridden since he was a boy, the dragon whose scales he had shed tears on and let the wind dry them.

It was only as he was showing Lord Dresedel how to mount that he ventured another message to Dosskarja. *This isn't going to harm the king and queen in any way, though, is it?*

Of course not, Dosskarja said. *You have to ask me? This is your moment, my prince, not theirs.*

Jarlan remembered the first time he drank too much. He'd been prodded to go into the town and drink himself stupid by his cousin Karse, and then to grab one of the barmaids and pull her onto his lap, forcing a kiss. She didn't fight him and he remembered knowing it was because he was the prince and she wasn't even part of the castle staff. He remembered the rush of it, the feeling that he shouldn't be doing any of it, but he *was* a prince, a forgotten and useless prince, and what was really the harm? Just a few drinks, just a kiss, just a bit of fun.

That was not his finest moment.

But Dosskarja was not Karse. There was no one in the world that Jarlan trusted more.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE



Harrai

Atorra was heavy in his arms. He could feel her spirit, and he knew she was alive.

But he also knew she had pushed herself to the brink.

And Tashaya was barely hanging on. All the healers were at her bedside now, barely speaking above a whisper, faces pinched.

Harrai felt helpless. For all his powers, he was not a healer. He left them to their work, and took Atorra back to his bed where he could try his best to rouse her.

Eventually, he had to just accept that she needed sleep—or whatever this was. It felt more like a coma, in truth. As if she had taken on some of Tashaya's sickness.

"Stay with me," he murmured, and soon his pleas were not to her but to Eskamir. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was ever ungrateful to have her, that I was cold, or doubtful, or...anything. Just let me keep her. I would give anything to keep her."

Harrai shivered. It was terrifying, to feel this way. To love someone.

The last time he loved someone like this, he had been thrust into the icy rivers of grief. He swallowed, unable to speak the words aloud anymore. Grandmother would have said that you should never promise 'anything' to a god in the first place, but it was how he felt.

He kept his hand in hers. It was the loneliest feeling in the world, keeping vigil while she seemed so far away, and he hated it, but he wouldn't

leave her.

Eventually, as the candles he had lit burned down, Sairi knocked on the door. Master Peitir was with him.

Well, that can't be good.

"That fool brother of yours flew off with Lord Dresedel on Dosskarja's back," Lord Peitir said. "He shouldn't be dealing with this by himself! If Lady Kirska was here—"

"Well, she's not, is she?" Harrai growled. He scrambled over this bit of information. "Why? Did he say? Dosskarja is Atorra's wing now, and...he wouldn't do it if he didn't think it was in our best interest. He never would have, even when he was Jarlan's. You know that."

I'm concerned...well, do you think Dosskarja might want Atorra to become a dragon? Sairi said, without alerting Master Peitir.

Master Peitir was saying something. "...could have tricked them both, do you suppose? Dosskarja must be more powerful than any Daramon, even the Black General...surely. It was just so odd."

"Where did they go?"

"Toward the storm," Sairi said.

"Shit."

"Sheglin is going after them," Master Peitir said. "But he wanted to trail them where he wouldn't be seen or easily sensed, just in case. I'm sure he will send word of what he sees."

Sheglin was the quiet one of the dragons in the cave. He rarely spoke and was excellent at telepathic concealment. That he would volunteer to go implied stealth was thought necessary.

"How is Lady Tashaya?" Sairi asked.

"You should go to her," Harrai said. "I'm sorry."

Sairi lowered his head a little, his expression grim but resolved. Sreyelans seemed more accepting of death; their life was harsh. He almost turned away, but then he briefly touched Harrai's shoulder as if in comfort, before leaving.

Harrai almost broke down right then and there. It was really nothing, probably a very normal gesture to a normal person. But even when his parents died, hardly anyone touched him. He was the king. His grandmother might have been handling most of the real business at first, serving as regent, but Harrai had lost his family, the kindness of his mother and his big-hearted aunt.

"We'll just have to trust Jarlan and Dosskarja," Harrai said. "Atorra needs me now. Let me know when Jarlan or my grandmother return."

"Y-yes, my lord."

Now, he was alone again, and the night stretched long. He yawned but couldn't sleep. The castle grew quiet, but it wasn't the usual summer "quiet" of frogs and cicadas and a soft wind stirring the curtains. He heard doors opening and occasional voices. The sound of rumors and plans, spreading slowly in the night.

A soft knock on the door. Lorsen.

He would rather be alone, but he opened the door for her.

"Is she...is she all right?" Lorsen looked up at him, her unnervingly lovely face pinched, and her usual brashness gone. She was clutching Berrajet, who saw Atorra and let out a happy little chirp.

"The magic she used on Lady Tashaya just has her down for a while," Harrai said. "I can feel that her soul is still close, and...safe." He had to force himself not to add 'for now'.

"Could I just see her?" Lorsen added, "Lady Tashaya is still...in danger, isn't she?"

Harrai nodded. Lorsen went to Atorra's side and took her hand."My sister...," she whispered. "I'm sorry." Boo was nudging her face under Atorra's chin and pawing at her robes, trying to get her attention.

Harrai knew these words weren't for him, and he hung back. But he felt for her. He would always regret not asking Atorra if she had any friends, on the day he took her from that terrible place.

Lorsen didn't look like she wanted to leave Atorra's side, and Harrai decided this was not the time to kick her out.

"You want me to get you a cigarette?" he asked after a moment.

Her shoulders heaved once, and then she squared them and turned to him. "I sound so trashy," she said. "One of those Fanarlem who smoke all day."

"This just isn't the time to give up a vice," he said. "I'll get cigarettes for you and some brandy for myself. It's a long night."

"Thanks. Do they call you Good King Harrai?"

"No."

"Well, they should." She smiled crookedly. "They don't know what they have here."

He brought the brandy, and a tin of cigarettes pilfered from Jarlan's bedroom, and some little sweets from the kitchen as well. When he came back, Lorsen was sitting next to Atorra in the bed, gazing over her protectively.

"To company on a long night," he said, lifting his cup.

"Atorra told me you don't have any friends."

"I wish I could protest that," Harrai said. "But she's right. I think it could be different. If we make it out of whatever this is."

"They're saying that Jarlan went off with Lord Dresedel by himelf..."

"He did, yes."

"Do you trust him?"

"I...I don't know," Harrai said. "I trust the dragons. But there's something going on that I feel like I'm missing. I still don't know why my grandmother went riding off. And you saw what happened in the cave of symbols. I'm not letting Atorra out of my sight. She doesn't want to become a dragon, and she won't. Everyone else, though? They could have some motivation for letting it happen. My grandmother and Jarlan care about saving the dragons more than anything, and Dosskarja would have a proper mate, and proper dragon babies. For thousands of years, the dragons have allowed their children to live as people, but what do they really get out of that anyway? I don't know."

Lorsen looked at him thoughtfully, playing with a cigarette in her fingers but she hadn't lit it. "You feel really bad about it."

"Well, yes. Of course I do."

"I remember when we were kids," she murmured. "The day we found out that someday when we grew up a man would come to buy us. It wasn't like we always knew, of course, when we were little. I think we were eight. At that point Hrada made it sound like we were special and we would be taken good care of, but...I hated the idea. I was upset that *I* didn't get to choose. But Atorra was excited that she would get to leave the House someday. She wanted to see the world, different places and animals and cultures...and as imperfect as this situation is, she is happier here. She's changed."

"I'm glad you think so. I feel like she was happier when I first found her."

"No. She was scared. And stifled. But she always tried to look on the bright side and didn't like to dwell on how bad it might be when we were

bought, and separated, and had no one at all to look out for us." Lorsen finally took some matches from her pocket and lit the cigarette. "What I'm trying to say is, whatever happens...you made her life better. And you saved me."

"She saved you."

"You didn't have to send one of your men all the way to Atlantis for me."

"We should have come sooner—"

"You came for your queen. I was already gone. Don't beat yourself up."

"Thanks." He nodded. He needed to hear that. Lorsen was too direct to say things just to make him feel better. He clutched Atorra's hand, imagining her slowly learning in brutal stages just what she was, how worthless she was in the eyes of Daramons, and what they intended for her.

She twitched, and stirred, and suddenly scrambled to wakefulness.

"Atorra?" He put a hand to her back to help her sit up as she flailed and twisted, as if having a bad dream.

"Is Tashaya all right?" She looked at Lorsen, at her other side. "Oh, no. You're both here..."

He grimaced. "She's still alive."

"No...you shouldn't have let me sleep! I need to get back to her."

"You weren't really asleep," he said. "You passed out. You were totally spent. There's nothing you could have done."

"You don't know that! I can't let her die and I'm not losing another friend! By the way, why am I here and not with her? Where is Sairi?"

"Because you need rest," Harrai said. "And Sairi is with Tashaya."

"I want to stick together," Atorra said. "If Tashaya is dying, I want to be nearby the minute I wake up, and is Sairi just there alone? At least the two of you were together, I'm happy to see. What happened with Lord Dresedel? Were you able to get any information or...I ruined it, didn't I?"

"No. *You* didn't ruin it," Harrai said. "I'm afraid it's all up to Jarlan and Dosskarja...and Sairi said they were flying toward the storm."

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX



JARLAN

Isn't this too far north? Jarlan asked Dosskarja, as he saw the lightning growing closer, lighting the northwest sky. *I know you know where the cave of symbols is, but...I really don't think we should get anywhere near that storm. I'd rather we took the southern passes.*

This is the right way, Dosskarja replied, with an ancient calm that left little room for protest.

**All right, well…it's just that my parents*—* As if he needed to tell Dosskarja what happened to his parents.

We're not going to the cave of symbols, Dosskarja said. *And you don't have to be afraid. Nothing bad will happen to you.*

Jarlan's heart galloped. But it was Dosskarja. He was the oldest of dragons, so he wasn't going to let anything happen to the dragons. Jarlan knew this as well as he knew anything.

Still, the initial thrill of the flight drained away. He was on Dosskarja's head, his legs gripping the ridge of scales around his brow, and his hands gripping a strap that slid over his horns. Lord Dresedel had the more secure seat at his back, and whenever Jarlan glanced back, he was riding like he had experience—good posture, no sign of nerves.

Do you already know what he wants? Jarlan finally asked Dosskarja. He'd been wondering for a while if Dosskarja knew something more about their visitor.

Yes, and I'll explain it to you shortly.

- *You do know?*
- *Lord Dresedel is not like his kinsmen. He actually does want to preserve our race. And seeing how things are going, he might be our only chance.*
 - *When did the two of you get to talking, Dosskarja?*
- *Thirty years ago,* Dosskarja replied. *Just before your parents were killed. Hang on, my prince...*

Dosskarja was flying closer to the storm, and the air grew more turbulent, even this far from the actual roiling clouds. Jarlan's throat felt dry, and he swallowed as he clutched his legs against Dosskarja's head and twisted the reins around his wrist, as secure as he could.

This storm had killed his parents, and Dosskarja was taking him straight into it.

He's been keeping something secret from us, Jarlan considered, battling a rising sense of terror. *Thirty years...?*

Dosskarja's wings swept powerfully through the sky, the mountains below racing by. They seemed to be going faster, even as the air seemed charged and invisible currents knocked Dosskarja this way and that. The fancy dinner churned in Jarlan's throat.

You're afraid..., Dosskarja said gently. *Please, don't be afraid of me. Of any of this. You're about to get everything you've ever wanted.*

Jarlan steadied his breath.

You know how long I have cared for you, Dosskarja assured him. *I would never bring you into this storm to die. I am bringing you here to give you its power for your own.*

They were nearly at the edge of the storm clouds. Jarlan's skin tingled and the air smelled like ozone. He understood what Dosskarja was saying, even if he didn't know how it could be true.

A power as great as my brother's...or maybe even greater?

And Dosskarja wants me to have it.

He trusts me, even if no one else ever did, but he's also the only one who ever really knew me.

Dosskarja plunged into the clouds and Jarlan lost his breath as the darkness surrounded them. The stars and moon were now blotted behind the clouds, and Dosskarja's body jerked around wildly as flashes of lighting and slow rumbles of thunder echoed across the mountains. All Jarlan could do anymore was to hang on for dear life.

He still couldn't quite feel excited yet, because it was so hard not to think of his parents' dragons flying into this storm, his mother's body being torn from the back of her wing, his father shouting for her, his voice lost to the thunder and wind.

Of course, he didn't really know how it had happened; as far as they knew his parents never even got this close to the storm. Something had killed them and marked them simply for getting too close.

Suddenly Dosskarja's feet struck the ground. The dragon used his wings to steady the landing, and dug his claws into rocks. The turbulence was abruptly over, but the wind still whipped at Jarlan's clothes. Dosskarja lowered his head so Jarlan could slide off, his legs shaking.

Lord Dresedel jumped down from Dosskarja's back, stroked one hand through his dark curls, and then straightened his cloak behind him.

He lifted a hand.

The storm clouds parted in front of them, revealing a tall door in the jagged rocks, which were all rain-slicked and dark, great slabs that jutted out at sharp angles, a brutal and uneven architecture.

"Your castle, my lord," Lord Dresedel said, with a little gleam in his eyes.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN



JARLAN

"My CASTLE? WHAT IS THIS?" Jarlan crossed his arms. "Now that we're out of the turbulence, I'm past my patience about being told what's going on. You're Lord Jherin's general and yet you act like you own the place yourself. Dosskarja apparently knows you, but I want to know why and how before I set one foot through that door."

This is the ancient palace of Kurala the dragon king, Dosskarja said.
The last true king.

"I've never heard of him," Jarlan said. "Or this palace. What do you mean by the last true king?"

Of course, you do know the tale of King Norgai, Dosskarja said. *That he was cursed, along with all dragons, to tie themselves to the fragile Drai people and give his first-born child over to them. And now you have learned that this first Queen of Songs was also born a dragon. This was Norgai's love, his bride. She was the one who chose to walk among the people, to tie the fate of the dragons to theirs.

This was a story I didn't know myself, my prince. Even for me, who has lived for three hundred years, this story was lost to the ages. Only bits and pieces are alluded to in songs and legends.

Dosskarja looked to the door, in a moment of silent reverence, before he continued,

*But who came before Norgai? Norgai took the throne from another dragon. This was his castle, tucked far, far away from any road the Drai

could ever carve from the mountains. Kurala was the last true dragon king, the one who served our people and not the Drai.*

Jarlan's thoughts were reeling. He glanced at Lord Dresedel. "And where does he come in?"

"I was here a little over thirty years ago," Lord Dresedel said. "I came alone to study. The magic is different here. I thought perhaps some unusual crystals were hidden in the mountains. Yes, I was spying on your lands. And I found this place. I spent months here, exploring the area and studying the strange magic I sensed. And as I carefully studied this place, one day a voice spoke to me. It was the spirit of Kurala, still resting in these mountains...watching over the dragons...but bound by the Queen of Songs. He cannot speak to any dragon or person of Drai or even a Sreyelan...but he could speak to me."

"So that's exactly what Atorra heard in the cave of symbols," Jarlan said. "That to break the curse, she has to unbind and fight Kurala."

"That is one way," Lord Dresedel said. "It could also be done peacefully. Atorra is not needed to *unbind* Kurala, only to fight him—or unite with him. Anyone with sufficient power in sorcery can break the seals. I'm not saying it is an easy task, but I was able to do it myself. I unbound this first seal myself, here at the castle. This unleashed the storm and freed up some of Kurala's power and voice. I am sorry to say that your parents surely encountered Kurala and tried to fight against him, and were slain."

Jarlan wished he could sit down. His legs were shaking and it was difficult not to feel like a mere boy in front of Dosskarja and Lord Dresedel.

My prince, of course you are still upset about your parents. It was not really that long ago, and you have suffered for their loss, Dosskarja assured him. *But you will honor their memory, to claim the power that killed them. It is all somewhat of a misunderstanding, I'm afraid. All Kurala ever wanted was for dragons to remain independent and I'm sure you can agree with this wish.*

"How do I claim the power?" Jarlan asked.

"Shall we take a look inside the castle?" Lord Dresedel said, lifting a glove toward the huge doors. "This is the site of the first unbinding. I think it's wise for you to get a feel for it, and we had to come here first to shake any followers off Dosskarja's tail. Then, we will proceed to the cave of symbols where we can break the second seal."

"There are three seals?" Jarlan asked.

"Yes," Lord Dresedel said. "The first one is beneath Kota castle itself. So naturally, that will be the final seal. But a considerable amount of Kurala's power will be released simply from breaking the first and second seals."

And I do not want to hurt the little queen, Dosskarja said. *I want to return her to her true glory. I want her to become a dragon again. She chose me, and I'm sure it was for this very purpose. When you have Kurala's power, we can restore her to her true form.*

"How? She's a doll," Jarlan said. "Where is her body going to come from?"

Her dragon bones are buried nearby, Dosskarja said. *We will bring her here. But...I will also offer you this. When you claim Kurala's power, you can also claim his form, as Harrai is now able to do through his dragon blood. You have been barred from this power—until now. You can take the queen for your dragon bride and assume the throne—the true throne—of the dragons.*

"I could be a dragon?" Jarlan felt a rush of heat, of desire—and it had nothing to do with taking Atorra for his bride.

To have the power of a dragon...to fly swiftly through the clouds, at elevations the Sreyelans or even the dragons with riders could never reach...to breathe fire and live for centuries...

Harrai never wanted to be king. And Atorra doesn't want to be a dragon, Jarlan thought.

But I want both.

This was always meant for me.

He had no real friends, no ties to the castle. Only briefly and irritatingly, he thought of that trip to the cave of symbols. Lorsen's verbal sparring with him. Sairi protecting Tashaya. Atorra's fear of the voice in the cave, Lorsen comforting her, and then how she offered him a second chance when they got back.

And then he thought of Lorsen at the market. Her fierceness, the pain in her eyes, the vulnerability, the stubbornness. She reminded him of himself, but she had been through a complete loss of identity and control—and still, there was a fire burning in her.

A fire that—

He swallowed.

"Atorra doesn't want any of this," he said. "What if she refuses? Does she fight me, then?"

I imagine she will choose to fight, Dosskarja said. *But if she does not embrace her true power, she will lose. Undoubtedly your brother and some dragons will take her side. That is the cost of war, but you know as well as anyone, my prince...we are dying anyway. We are killed with the weapons of Daramons. Many of the dragons will ally with you and so will some of the people of Drai. I believe the Sreyelans will as well.*

Lord Dresedel touched his fingertips to his heart. "I have tried and failed to convince my fellow Daramons not to kill the dragons. But I believe we will be able to work something out once your brother is no longer calling the shots. I'm sure this is a lot to take in right now. Think about it while we step into this sacred place, and you can imagine yourself back in the ancient world of free dragons..."

The doors were just large enough for Dosskarja to pass through, and he took a step forward.

I will lead the way, my prince, he said.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT



ATORRA

They're going into the storm...and are lost.

Sheglin's message floated into Atorra's mind like someone calling to her from far away.

Harrai looked at her, clearly having also received the message.

Stay clear, he told the dragon, keeping his thoughts open to Atorra as well. *Don't get yourself killed.*

I will remain at a safe distance and watch them, Sheglin replied.

"It is as you said," Harrai told Sairi. "They flew into the storm."

They were all with Tashaya now, and had been throughout the night. The sun was beginning to rise, bringing a sense of hope and relief that was probably false, but Atorra had always loved sunrises.

Atorra kept taking Tashaya's hand, sensing out her condition, but it was always the same. She was alive, but that was all. She didn't seem to dream, and Atorra couldn't rouse her. She wanted to try the song magic again, but Harrai and the healers protested—she should save her strength unless Tashaya started to truly slip away.

It was a long night. The healers urged everyone to sleep, and everyone did—in short, unplanned fits. Sairi was a champion at sleeping without hardly slumping in his chair, while at one point Harrai lay down on the sofa looking completely plastered and Boo wedged herself between his face and shoulder, right in the drool zone, but they were both awake again forty minutes later. Lorsen passed out on the rug for a bit, but in the morning she

took the bastir out of the corner and played a little music while the servants brought in some breakfast.

"I should probably say something to the Halnari," Harrai said, rubbing his forehead. "And then...I feel as if I should go after them."

"Then I would have to go with you!" Atorra said. "But Dosskarja is with them. Surely I would have heard some signal from him if he was in danger, even if it was brief!"

"I want to think so," Harrai said. "I just don't know."

"And you would put Dirjet in danger too."

He looked at her, and shook his head.

No, he meant to turn into a dragon.

Soran walked in, looking rather tired himself. "My lord, your grandmother was just spotted on the mountain road."

"Grandmother? She's the last person I want to see anymore. Once upon a time, I might have trusted her to fix it, but she's a bundle of secrets herself these days."

"Do you mind if I leave her to you and stay with Tashaya?" Atorra asked.

"Of course not. I can handle her." He kissed her forehead and left, with Soran asking him if he wanted to freshen up his clothes and hair. She could hear Harrai's grumpy reply before they got out of range.

Atorra looked out the window, trying to keep calm as she watched butterflies and bees making their rounds of the garden. Boo flew to the window and started making excited little chirps at everything that moved.

Of course, it didn't last.Lady Kirska swept into the room moments later. She wasn't wearing her usual court finery, just plain traveling priestess robes in soft blue and forest green, and sturdy boots. Her hair was coiled in a plain silver braid. She almost could have been a common woman.

"Oh, Tashaya...," she said softly, going to the girl's side and pressing a hand to her cheek. "Oh, no...no. No. I shall not have this." She took a deep breath, grief marking her face, which looked even older than before. "Harrai has briefed me on the situation. I'm sending a letter to my sister and telling her to come here immediately. We need all the family together. And I know she is a bit of an...easier personality. She is better able to express warmth and love. I think it is time she left the Daramon lands, anyway. I don't care how cold she thinks the winters are here."

Harrai looked even more alarmed. "It's a long trip for her. Surely that's hasty."

"I don't know if...this dear girl will have much longer." Kirska clapped her hands together and chanted a prayer over Tashaya, and it was not the sort of prayer Atorra wanted to hear, that was for sure. Although the language was somewhat archaic, she made out something like, "Spirits watch and welcome this child." Sairi went pale and stopped eating his breakfast.

Lady Kirska rose. "Atorra, I need to give you another lesson."

In this moment, Atorra would have dealt with anything that would make her stronger, that might unlock more of her magic and give her a chance to save Tashaya.

Even if she did have to become a dragon. Even if she had to battle Kurala. She must keep all of her loved ones safe.

"We will go to the dragon cave, to our usual chamber," Lady Kirska said. "The rest of you, stay here and leave us alone. This will be a difficult lesson for Atorra, I'm afraid. I am hoping to awake her deepest powers. When the lesson is over, she will need you, Harrai. Wait for my call but do not come before that."

"Will she be in any danger? Is she ready for this?" Harrai asked.

"She is ready," Lady Kirska said. "This power is her destiny."

He grabbed her arm before she could leave. "Swear to me that you are not going to turn her into a dragon. Because that is not what she wants and I won't have it."

Her eyes went wide with shock and it was clear she had no knowledge of this possibility. "No, Harri. I swear it."

Relief washed over Atorra. At least she wouldn't have to face that.

He released her. "I'm on edge."

"Of course you are," Lady Kirska said, taking a breath like she really needed the air. "We all are. But we have the courage of dragons in our veins, and we will prevail. Come, my dear. This will be the final lesson I make you do."

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE



JARLAN

THE STORM SWIRLED around the castle, darker than the darkest night, but inside the castle, a soft glow beckoned.

Jarlan followed Dosskarja, with Lord Dresedel bringing up the rear. The castle was dimly lit by magical lights. They could not still be burning from over three thousand years ago, so he guessed Lord Dresedel had brought them in. But it did give the place an eerie sense of ghostly inhabitants.

The castle was in obvious disrepair. The rooms were soaring and grand, large enough for dragons but much finer than the cave in Kota. Columns were carved with spiraling patterns that led up to arched ceilings, only chunks had fallen from them, crashing into the floors and cracking the glazed green tiles. The walls were scorched with dragon flame, but the rooms were ice cold at this elevation, even in summer. Fireplaces were mostly broken or caved in, and a few piles of rubble and dust hinted at past features. Some furniture was broken and sideways as if tossed around in a struggle.

They passed through the throne room and into another grand room, a long hall, and then down a spiraled ramp carved from the rock. They were going deeper into the mountain than Jarlan envisioned. He was feeling claustrophobic and kept wanting to put a hand on his sword, as if that would do any good. Since Lord Dresedel was behind him, he resisted the urge.

The ramp led to an antechamber with rotting tapestries on the walls and some sort of large pit in the floor, and beyond that, another room that pulsed

with ancient magic Jarlan could feel down to his bones.

He had never felt anything like this before, except when Atorra walked into the cave of symbols.

Here, Dosskarja said, stopping at the door. *Please enter, my prince.*

"This is it," Lord Dresedel said. "This is the room where Kurala's spirit was sealed. His name was marked there, binding him."

Jarlan took a step into the room. Here, too, were a few magical lights that barely illuminated what looked like more rotting tapestries, a huge pile of furs that had also seen much better days, an empty pedestal, and a scorched wall.

"The royal chambers," Lord Dresedel said. "Of course, it isn't much to admire now, but...even as the decorations rot away, the power of this castle has not dimmed. You can still taste it."

"So you broke the seal here, and took a little of his power," Jarlan said. "And if I break the other two...will I have the final piece from you?"

"I'm afraid you would have to take it from me," Lord Dresedel said. "But I don't think it will be in your best interest. If I carry a little piece of Kurala's soul, you can trust that I will always aid your dragons and protect you from *my* lord."

"Why would you still follow him at all? With the power of a dragon? Does Lord Jherin have that?"

"No," Lord Dresedel said. "But he does have two centuries of brotherhood. He is not an unreasonable man by any means. It's just that all Daramons find your dragons threatening."

"And why help me unlock this power? Why not just take it all yourself?"

"You really think I'm lying about something," Lord Dresedel said. "You don't have a very trusting nature. I care about the dragons, as I have said all along. I want to help them become free again. I care about my own people too. I'm hoping both can co-exist."

My prince, I have searched his mind. He speaks the truth, Dosskarja said. *I want to give this power to you, and he is in agreement. I will be at your side, helping you learn to rule as the true dragon king, and advising you in dealing with the Daramons. But ultimately, as you know, we must do something. Harrai is a weak king, and our race is dying under Miralem rule.

"Take it in," Lord Dresedel said. "Taste the power in the air, and know that this castle will soon be yours. You can restore it, and fill it with light and hatchlings that will grow up deep in the mountains, in their true home, without intrusion from the people."

"That does sound...quite wonderful," Jarlan said.

He would be king. He would have a castle that was all his own and this ancient, terrible power would be his to wield.

Harrai would never choke him again. Grandmother would never insult him. He would be remembered as the first new king of the dragons, and he would never see his dreadful family again.

His chest was very tight.

Goddess, you have just given me everything I've ever prayed for. Forgive me for asking for strength. I'm just nervous, he thought.

And then he thought that this was rather ironic because he hardly ever prayed in the first place and if Eskamir could hear him, she was probably just pissed off.

Because I'm an ass, Jarlan thought. I spent so much time scorning and belittling Atorra the doll. And then...Lorsen showed up, and fuck me, but the goddess is just laughing at me. I've never prayed, and since the day my mother died, I've never tried to follow any of the wise advice she gave me. And what do I get?

I want what I scorned far more than the thing I've always wished for. I want that girl in my bed; I want her to see that I'm not so terrible after all; I want to be the one who chases the demons out of her haunted eyes. She can tie me down and smack my balls if it helps. I don't care.

Jarlan, Dosskarja whispered into his mind, soft as a purr. *There is one thing, and only one thing, that you have always wanted to protect with your entire soul, and that is the dragons. Your birthright. Your blood.

This is what you want, and you will never regret it once you spread your wings and feel your power.

Let us leave this place and go to the cave of symbols. We will break the seal, and you will get your first taste of Kurala.*

Jarlan nodded, the cold of the room numbing his hands and feet and face. "No one knows me better than you, Dosskarja."

CHAPTER SEVENTY



ATORRA

SHE FOLLOWED Lady Kirska across the bridge and to the cave, where the mood was subdued. No one spoke. They ventured into the hatchling's playroom, where they always had privacy.

"Take my hands, Queen of Songs," Lady Kirska said. "We will do something a little different today. You will see the last time we met."

"Oh! My—my most recent life? And you will be in the vision? That will certainly be interesting."

Kirska smiled faintly. "Yes."

Atorra took her hands, feeling her frailty, although Lady Kirska should still have many years left. Atorra supposed the kingdom's troubles had aged her. It was odd to think that Lord Dresedel was much older than she was, and he still looked in the prime of life.

"Close your eyes, my dear, and enter my mind. Sing to me your song. I open myself to you. Today, I will give you what I can."

Atorra shut her eyes and chanted a spell that felt soft and kind. She didn't want to hurt Lady Kirska with her magic. By now, slipping into the memories was a familiar sensation, even if it remained unnerving. The room faded into a new scene.

Lady Kirska was holding Atorra's hand, while she lay in bed. It felt all too similar to how Atorra had woken up to Harrai and Lorsen at her bedside, but now she felt utterly weary.

Kirska was of middle age, with only the faintest wrinkles, and glossy black hair. She was a handsome woman at this age, not a conventional beauty, already with a stern resolve in her features, but just now her eyes were red and tender.

"Grandmother," she said. "You're awake."

"Yes, love... I don't think it'll be much longer. I don't feel very... tethered to this world. I'm ready to fly for a bit."

I'm dying, thought Atorra. This is the last time I was alive as a flesh and blood person.

"I hope I'll see you again." Kirska shut her eyes. Her tears flowed freely now. "You've taught me everything. You always encouraged me...even to become a priestess..."

"If you feel such a deep call to something, you have to listen. Even if the people around you have other ideas for you." Atorra felt the pain of her old body trying to speak. I must not have even been that old! she thought. But I suppose being the queen aged me too. And here I am, giving Kirska advice she wouldn't pass on to her own grandchildren... Doesn't that figure.

"Well, now my only call is to serve the people and dragons of Drai," Lady Kirska said, resolute as ever. "I'll carry on just as you would. I'll never forget everything you taught me."

"I just wish...I wish I would have taught you the songs."

Kirska twitched. "You...you can't. I understand that now."

"I don't know. I just feel...tired. I don't want them anymore."

Atorra felt the weariness and the pain, and it all started to feel like her future.

Oh, my old self! I know just how you feel! I don't want to let the dragons down, but isn't three thousand years long enough?

"I could never use the ancient magic," Kirska said. "I knew it was foolish even to ask, back then, and you were right to refuse."

So Kirska yearned to learn the songs when she was young... Atorra understood now that Kirska had always been a serious person, and she had tried to take on the Queen of Songs' burden for herself. When she couldn't, she had turned to the temple of Eskamir to train.

"I could have tried. You would have used them wisely. Perhaps more wisely than me! You always keep your head. And you're not selfish. You could stand to give more of your heart, my love, but at least I know you are not in this for power, and you would be fair. I could have tried," she

repeated. "But all the books and the elders said it couldn't be done. Why did I just take their word for it?"

"It's all right," Kirska said. "They were most likely correct, and you have been the most wonderful grandmother. I don't want to send you off with regrets."

"I'm ready to leave. Will you help me?" She lifted a frail hand to Kirska's cheek.

"Right now?"

"Yes...as a priestess. I would rather leave this body now, while I am aware, and there is nothing more to do."

Kirska choked back her sobs. She nodded silently. She held Atorra's hands, as tight as she could without applying any painful pressure. "Yes, grandmother. It would be my honor to help you ascend."

"I go with love."

"Yes. The light of Eskamir surrounds you. Nar Calla awaits you. Leave this earth with love, and join the spirits in the shining hills..."

Atorra was dying.

She felt herself leaving, and she panicked. It seemed so real, as if she was melting away, becoming bodiless. As if this trance might trigger her own ascension by accident and she might slip away, tempted by the freedom of leaving this magic and these burdens behind her.

She panicked, but just as with the other vision, she could do nothing. She couldn't scream or thrash but was bound by her past self.

"I'm sorry," Lady Kirska said.

Her hands were the only thing that felt solid anymore.

"I'm sorry, my dear. You were always right about me. I hope you will understand...and I *pray* you will forgive me. I know how tired you are, I know, but they need your protection more than ever. Harrai will be at your side through everything. He loves you; I know it took him time, but now he would do anything for you. You'll get through it together, and...you must. You have to slay that dark spirit that has cursed us. It can only be you, and you must stop him now. Go to the cave of symbols."

What are you saying? Atorra tried to cry out, but she was dying. She had left the body of her memories, and her own body was nowhere to be found. She was in a void, in the darkness, not the shining hills or anywhere else. Just lost and dead and...spinning, she was spinning...

And now everything was flashing and tingling. The world was damp and cool and dim but also real, too real. She was on the floor, cool rock against her bones. She felt strangled, pained, ragged breaths, heart beating fast.

Heart—

She sat up in a rush. A dream. A memory.

Faster now.

She touched her arms.

Not cloth. Not soft enough. Not bony. Too real. Flesh.

I'm flesh.

I'm a flesh and blood girl.

She let out a weird shriek, and then she gasped, feeling breathless. She was going to die because she couldn't breathe properly, didn't know how, and her heart wouldn't stop galloping.

Harrai! she screamed. *Harraiii...!*

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE



Harrai

HARRAI HAD NEVER FELT a scream like that.

Atorra?

He felt incoherent terror. Something terrible was happening, and he ran into the courtyard and burst into his dragon form, almost without thinking about it. His wings spread, and he flew to the mountain, to her voice. The bridge and the river rushed beneath him, and the moment his feet struck the edge of the mountain he scrambled for purchase, to follow that voice.

Dirjet let out a chitter of alarm, following him. *What's wrong? Harrai, why have you transformed? Atorra is with Lady Kirska...*

He didn't even bother to answer her, not until he'd found Atorra.

He rushed into the old nursery and found her hunched on the ground, clutching herself. His keen dragon senses immediately picked up her scent, and it struck him like lightning in the dead of winter. All wrong, all out of place.

She smelled of sweat and fear, not woodsmoke and wool.

She looked up at him with a real girl's face, transformed—contorted with a level of ugly fear no smooth, sweet Fanarlem visage could manage.

His grandmother was nowhere to be seen.

He transformed back into his human self, leaving him a little dizzy, and he went to Atorra's side. For one odd moment, he almost felt afraid of her, as if he had never seen a flesh and blood woman in his life, and then he realized what irony that was. For months, he had cursed her fate and wished she was this, and now—all he could think of was how frightened she must be.

He put his arms around her, and she gripped his tunic and put her head to his forehead and sobbed. Her cries were a little wild, uncomprehending. Her tears leaked through the fabric. He didn't try to stop her, just held her as she shivered all over.

Only when her sobs finally started to die down did he wipe her tears with his sleeve and say, "What did she do to you?"

"She—she brought me into a memory...like always. I was her grandmother, and I was dying, and she was saying goodbye to me. But then, at the very end—she spoke to me, to Atorra, and she was apologizing and telling me the kingdom needs me and I have to slay the dark spirit and..." She jerked, as if to bolt, but then slumped again, her heart beating so fast he could feel it as he held her. "...she said I need to leave now for the cave of symbols and stop him."

"Where did she get this body from? I don't see her—but this damn sure isn't *her* body! What is this magic?"

"I don't know!" Atorra cried. "I don't know anything of what she did! But—I think I need to go."

"Need to go? You're in shock," he said. "You're in no shape to go anywhere. What was she thinking? Is she dead?" He looked around the room, wildly. He didn't feel her presence, saw no sign of her, nor any sign of Atorra's Fanarlem body. "Amira went with her. She must know what happened."

"I don't have time to ask why," Atorra said, and her red, swollen eyes grew resolved. "Lady Kirska sacrificed herself. I don't understand how, or what happened exactly, and...I'm very scared, but I also know that something very wrong is happening right now and I don't have time to think about any of it yet."

Whatever Lady Kirska had done, Atorra looked like herself—only real. She had the same fair hair, although it was much longer, like any Miralem lady's would be. She still had large eyes, and a sweet face, very young—almost too young for anything she had to do. Somehow that seemed more obvious now. And she was still small; her body had slightly more curves but felt just as slender and insubstantial in his arms. He didn't want to let her go anywhere, but she was gazing into the distance, determined.

She is the Queen of Songs, and she can't help it.

"We'll fly on Dirjet together," he said.

"If something happens to me...the people will still need you," she murmured.

"If something happens to you...I think we're already in a mess bigger than I can solve," he said. "So protecting you is more important to me. I'll let you go, but you have to let me go too. We do this together."

She looked up at him with pure relief, despite her attempt at bravery, and nodded. "Thank you."

"Whatever happens," Harrai said, before either of them moved, "know that I loved you before, and I love you now, and I won't leave you unless the goddess herself tears me away from you."

"I love you, Harrai..." She clutched him so tight for another moment and she was just his wife, his very frightened and traumatized wife, and he had to fight all of his instincts to pull away from her, no matter how high the stakes.

But just as she was the Queen of the Songs, he was the King of Dragons, and they both knew what they had to do.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO



JARLAN

THE CAVE of symbols felt different now; it seemed to breathe, or perhaps to be holding its breath. Jarlan, too, caught himself forgetting to use his lungs as he followed Lord Dresedel into the cave. Dosskarja couldn't fit inside and so it was only the two men, but Dosskarja's presence was still close.

Jarlan felt watched. He didn't want Dosskarja to sense his thoughts and know he was afraid, that he still didn't trust Lord Dresedel one bit.

Well, I'm not a trusting person, that's for certain.

He found it impossible to believe that the man would give up this power. No one could really refuse power, could they? As much as Harrai claimed to hate being king, he never entertained the idea of refusing.

"Step into the circle," Lord Dresedel said, hanging back near the entrance.

"What will I need to do?"

"Nothing," Lord Dresedel said. "I know how to break the seal. You just need to be ready to receive the power. The one that will be the most tricky is the third and final seal."

Jarlan nodded. He looked at the circle where Atorra had channeled the voice of her former self and been so terrified by it, at the symbol that had stirred from its ancient sleep and glowed from within. It was dormant now, but if Lord Dresedel said he knew how to awaken it...

Jarlan wanted to ask more questions, to confirm. But there seemed nothing more to ask. Dosskarja had vouched for the Black General, and he

had chosen Jarlan for this power and brought him here.

This is it. This moment is all mine.

Jarlan walked into the circle.

His heart was racing so fast, even though he had always been good at managing his emotions.

I will be the one to become a dragon, and have all the power.

I am not going to give this up for a flirtation with a doll.

Or...any other reason.

Harrai, Grandmother, the whole rest of the family...they don't care about me.

Lord Dresedel stood at the entrance to the circle and clapped his hands together. He slowly unfolded them. A shard of smoky crystal was between his palms. Ajna-irin, the rarest and most powerful type of crystal in the world. A large cluster of ajna-irin was what the Daramons captured in the War of the Crystals; only the Keeper of the Dead held a larger example of ajna-irin than the one stolen from Otaré in the war. Jarlan was unsettled, seeing what was quite likely a piece of that treasure. It had all happened so long before he was born, but Lord Dresedel was there to put his hands on the loot.

Lord Dresedel started to prowl the room, crystal in hand. Unlike most sorcerers, he was utterly silent. But as he walked, holding the shard of crystal up like a beacon, the symbol started to slowly stir once again. Lord Dresedel gestured, tugging and twisting his hands in the air, almost like a fisherman battling his catch. The symbol stirred reluctantly, but with every flick and tug of Lord Dresdel's fingers, it glowed brighter.

The ground under Jarlan's feet warmed and the air started to charge with the power.

A voice spoke, and Jarlan wasn't entirely sure if it was in his head or out loud.

Ahhh... The voice was slow and deep, like it had stirred from an eternal sleep. *Is this the prince?*

"I bring to you Prince Jarlan, of the House of Norgai," Lord Dresedel said.

The prince...I see. I assume you have been told of me...and what I will do to save my people.

"You are...Kurala?" Jarlan asked.

Yes. My name was Kurala. I have lingered long in this world, haunting my bones, haunting my castle... I could not leave, knowing that my people were trapped in this dreadful alliance, and that someday...the time would come for it to shatter. But I have slept. I no longer remember what it is to live and breathe. I need an avatar. Someone who can handle my power when needed. I have no wish to take over your day to day life, but I will give you everything you need to stir your dragon blood and rule as the true king of dragons.

"I—I understand, yes," Jarlan said.

And then you will subdue the bitch who enslaved us and make her ours.

Dosskarja cut in to Jarlan's mind, *Jarlan, we will not harm Atorra. She will bear your first hatchlings and then you can make your own choice for a mate.*

But the hatred in Kurala's voice still resonated.

He could hear the hatred in Lorsen's voice, but it was on the other end. The one who had been subdued and owned and forced.

Grandmother had cast him aside like he was unimportant. When he behaved, no one cared, and when he was cruel, he was punished. But when he was with Lorsen, he wanted to try again.

And Atorra had given him a second chance.

As if she understood. Or perhaps it was just her nature.

If the Queen of Songs had ever hurt or enslaved Kurala, it was thousands of years ago.

If he let Kurala's soul in, if he invited that ancient hatred to share his eyes and hands and breath, he suddenly knew that it would become a part of him. He would not see Lorsen anymore, and he might not see his brother. But he would see Atorra, and he would hurt her, and the shame he felt now would have to be banished. There would be no turning back from the darker side of his nature anymore.

My prince, don't worry about Kurala. This is about saving those of us who live now, Dosskarja said. *I will be with you at every step. I will advise you, and you will be a beloved king.*

The symbol glowed from the wall, the mark that had killed his parents, and the rest of the cave was shadow. All of it blurred as his eyes watered, the symbol slowly burning into his retinas.

I can't do this, Dosskarja. I'm sorry.

"I can't do it," he said aloud. "I don't want to be the king of the dragons. I am flattered—honored—by the offer. But I can't do it."

Dosskarja hissed a soft curse, that Jarlan heard through the cave entrance. *You break my heart, prince. I thought you would want this. I thought you had the strength, the will...*

Jarlan thought Kurala or Lord Dresedel would say something.

They didn't. Lord Dresedel nodded, dispassionate. "You are young," he said. "You can go home to your family."

Jarlan stepped out of the circle. He certainly didn't feel any better. He was watching something horrible unfold; he knew each step that would happen, deep down in his guts.

As soon as he left the circle, Lord Dresedel stepped in. The symbol flared, and the crystal in his hand pulsed with it.

So it shall be, Kurala said. *You have made your choice, son of Norgai.*

Lord Dresedel's arms spread, and then his back contorted as if with sudden pain, before his whole body spread again. The crystal left his hand, floating above the circle. Lord Dresedel's feet followed suit, drifting away from the floor. The room thrummed and the symbol flashed, and outside, rain began to lash the little outcropping and Dosskarja's scales.

Lord Dresedel let out a small groan of pain, and clutched his head, as two black horns sprouted there like the first buds of spring.

The vivid glow of the symbol died back. Lord Dresedel's feet struck the ground. And then he walked past Jarlan, leapt onto Dosskarja's back, and the two of them left Jarlan to the storm and the lonely, ancient darkness of the cave as they flew away to the east.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE



ATORRA

HARRAI'S HAND was at her waist as they flew. As soon as they gained altitude, she started to shiver. It was summer now, but all the warmth seemed to stick to the ground. Her skin prickled with goosebumps and her teeth chattered.

Gone was the exhilarating feeling of the wind ripping all through her.

Now she felt like it was drying her eyes and stealing her breath and paralyzing her.

Harrai took both of her hands in his now, and his hands lit with warmth that he sent into her core. Magical heat.

"Atorra...," he said. "When this is over, if you want your old body back, we'll make that happen even if we have to order it up from scratch."

"But you need heirs," she said flatly. "You've needed this all along."

"Forget the damn heirs!" he shouted into the wind, furious.

He was furious.

She hadn't realized that until now; that he had been keeping it together, because they needed to act, but now they had a long flight.

"If you don't want children, you won't have them," he said. "I don't even know that I want children! What do I know about children? I know my father was far more of a king than he ever was a dad, and I know that they both died, and I know that I never had any choice about anything. I said it before and I'm even more sure now. I won't do that to you. And I don't want you to have the dragon born. If we ever did decide to have children, I

want them to be *ours*. And no one else's. But maybe we won't. Maybe it'll just be you and me."

His arms wrapped fully around her and she leaned into his touch, as he told her everything she wanted to hear—

And he wants the same thing I do.

"I feel the same way," she said. "Just the same. But..."

"No buts," he said. "I don't care. If my grandmother decided to sacrifice herself so you could have children...I still don't care."

"I still don't quite understand how she..."

"I don't either," he said. "She knows more about ancient magic than I do. How do you feel?"

"So strange...and vulnerable. I always thought Fanarlem were vulnerable. I know we're not strong. But now I feel like my body is working so hard just to make everything happen, all this breathing, and I feel the cold and the heat and the discomforts so much more... But—it's not unfamiliar. Every time Lady Kirska put me in a trance and I remembered my past lives, I felt what it was like."

"Did she plan this from the beginning? Why wouldn't she have told me?"

"Maybe she didn't know if she could pull it off. Maybe she just knew you'd be upset. I don't know." Atorra shivered again.

"Like I said before. I mean it. I'll get you anything you want. Goddess, she did the same thing to you that was done to Lorsen. Changing you without permission."

"I think...I need more understanding of it before I decide. But...it helps very much that you would say so. I know you would probably prefer—"

He cut her off angrily. "I just want *you*. With as much happiness as I can manage. I don't care if you're flesh and blood. I don't care." He pressed his cheek to hers, and the warmth of his body held her close and safe. It felt like a small miracle, a light in the darkness. "Do you think you're ready for whatever we find at the cave?" he asked. "Are you sure you don't just want to turn back?"

"I still feel like I need to do this. I don't know if I'm ready because I don't even know what's going on, but...I have to hope that the Queen of Songs will know."

And that I don't lose myself to her.

She would have to hope that this was her anchor. Harrai's skin against hers, his hand holding her, the way he had started to laugh more often.

They were stronger together, and he was the only king she wanted.

Suddenly, Dirjet veered to the right, snapping Atorra to attention. Harrai tensed.

"I sense them!" he cried, and while Atorra's telepathic abilities were still a little behind, now she felt Dosskarja's presence coming closer—fast.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR



ATORRA

IT's Dosskarja and Lord Dresedel, Dirjet said. *But the prince isn't with them, at least not that I can tell.*

I don't sense Jarlan either, Harrai agreed. *Dosskarja might be bringing Lord Dresedel back to us. But what is Jarlan up to?*

Atorra tried to call out to her wing. *Dosskarja! What happened?*

My little queen, Dosskarja replied. *Something is different with you as well.*

I—I was turned into a flesh and blood girl by Lady Kirska, although I don't know how.

I can tell you how, Dosskarja said. *Come to me. I'll fly under you, and catch you, and everything will be explained.*

But...why are you still with Lord Dresedel? Where is Jarlan? What happened at the cave?

That is also a tale, he said. *But I'll explain everything. I swear on my ancestor's bones—I won't hurt you.*

She could see him now, his purple scales a subdued color under the gray skies, but all the more beautiful for their subtlety. Of all the dragons, she thought Dosskarja might be the most impressive, and he had always been kind to her. But she could see Lord Dresedel on his back.

Lord Dresedel works for me, Dosskarja said.

He does? One of Lord Jherin's great four and he's working for you? Why would he do that?

He might be the Black General, but he is still mortal. He is thinking of larger purposes now. And he dreams of dragons. Let me tell you everything, my queen!

Dosskarja was about to sweep beneath Dirjet, and Atorra looked back at Harrai. "He wants to talk to me. He says he'll explain everything, including what Lady Kirska did."

"Then, go ahead, and we'll stay very close," Harrai said. "The second you get into any trouble, we'll be on top of it."

Atorra leapt, feeling her body fly straight for Dosskarja like a magnet as his telekinesis pulled her right to his back. She landed as neatly as if she had hopped down a short ways. Lord Dresedel steadied her.

She jerked forward, away from him. "Don't touch me, please."

"I apologize."

Dosskarja was flying quickly downward, veering around a jagged bit of mountain and a stand of trees, and then down to one of the river beds. Then Atorra realized it was actually the same cave where they sheltered before, on their way back from the cave of symbols. She hadn't realized they were so close to the spot.

The moment Dosskarja landed, he lowered his head all the way to the ground and tucked his limbs in around him, as if becoming one with the landscape. He went completely still.

"Dosskarja? Are you all right?" Atorra looked back at Lord Dresedel to see if he had enchanted her wing somehow.

It was the first time she'd gotten a good look at him, and now she realized he had black horns exactly like Harrai's.

As she studied him, his eyes glazed and he slumped forward, going unconscious.

"What—what is going on? Lord Dresedel?" Atorra scrambled off the dragon's back, moving awkwardly as she adjusted to this new body. It was, she must admit, extremely responsive, even though she must look like a baby deer for now. She felt like she was made from muscle instead of bone, with new strength in her thighs and shoulders as she clambered down. She was about to call Harrai when Lord Dresedel's head rolled back up, and he smiled down at her.

I apologize. I wanted to talk to you...man to woman. Dosskarja's voice was in her head, but it was coming from Lord Dresedel.

Dosskarja's eyes opened, reptilian slits in a circle of gold, and a slow grin of teeth. He didn't seem like Dosskarja anymore.

"You—you switched bodies," Atorra said, taking a step back. "Why? What's going on? I don't have any problem talking to you as Dosskarja!"

But she was afraid she had an idea.

Harrai and Dirjet flew above them, and Dosskarja took flight to meet them. Atorra watched with dawning horror. Lord Dresedel, in the dragon's body, seemed to know exactly how to move, while she was still figuring out her new legs despite them being quite close in size and shape to the legs she'd always had.

"What is he?" she asked. "He's not a Daramon at all, is he!?"

Lord Dresedel is a Daramon, but what you're looking at now is also Kurala. The last free king of the dragons.

"Tell me what happened and tell me fast," Atorra demanded, her eyes tracking the purple dragon, whoever he was, before snapping back to the Daramon body standing in front of her. Hopefully Harrai could handle Kurala and Lord Dresedel for now.

Dosskarja held up an open palm and took a careful step closer to her, like he was trying not to scare a skittish animal. *Queen of Songs...*

"Stay there," she said. "And tell me."

We are dying, Dosskarja said. *That is the blunt truth with which everything must begin. Every time your people go to war with the Daramons, we lose numbers, and while generations may go by between wars in your minds, this is not true for us. And yet, we cannot abandon you —because we need your magic, Queen of Songs. I am far from the only dragon who has felt we must...* He faltered, looking greatly troubled, and it was strange to see this expression on Lord Dresedel's face.

"You want to be independent from us," Atorra said. "You don't want to sacrifice yourselves to protect us anymore..."

*It's not a want, so much as a need. Lord Dresedel came to these lands an impostor, but he may have been a blessing instead. In his investigations, he found the lost palace of Kurala, and broke one of the seals that binds his spirit. We sensed that something was wrong, and the last king and queen flew toward the resultant storm—losing their lives to Kurala's power. After this, several of us older dragons investigated the matter on our own. I led the effort. I encountered Lord Dresedel and had many long conversations with him, and also, with the spirit of Kurala. I learned the truth about the

legends. As the ancient beasts of old fell, you—you, my queen—chose to become one of the people, to walk among them and tie your fate to them. It was an alliance of mutual protection, a promise that you would always return here and give your magic to the dragons and the people alike. Kurala and another faction of dragons were furious at you for this, and tried to kill you and King Norgai. But you killed Kurala, and bound his spirit so he could not be revived, nor spoken to by the living, nor send you curses from the grave.*

Atorra really wanted to say that this all sounded quite beyond her. Curses from the grave? It was like something she would read in a story, but... *I've gone past that point now. I am the story.*..

"So I was the last queen of the dragons who was actually a dragon," Atorra said. "And I chose to take on the form of a Miralem and live with them forever. And in the process of this agreement, I also forced the dragons to defend the Drai people even if they go extinct doing it."

Yes. And I want to break that pact.

Atorra glanced back as she heard a dragon roar outside.

"And so you woke up Kurala, the dragon I killed, and let him take over your body?"

Not my body. Lord Dresedel has allowed Kurala a tether to his body. I only wanted to speak to you like this, today... My queen...it is our destiny that you and I should spend this night together. He tried to come closer again.

"No," Atorra said. "We aren't doing that anymore."

Kurala wants to see you subdued or killed, Dosskarja said. *But that is not what I or the other dragons want. Kurala doesn't have a body. He is still dead.*

"You aren't a little worried he'll run off with yours!?" Atorra cried. Outside, rocks tumbled and crashed. She had to get back out there to help Harrai.

I want to protect you, as my mate, Dosskarja said. *When Harrai and all the other Drai scorned you, we dragons welcomed you. You have always been my queen.*

"Harrai and I were strangers when I came here," Atorra said. "But we're not strangers now. You know that, Dosskarja."

But...you were always meant to have your children with me.

"Harrai doesn't ask for me to have babies with anyone. That's why I've come to trust him. The truth is, I don't *want* this anymore. I don't know what the first Queen of Songs was thinking, why she imagined she would want to do this forever. I've seen my past, and I know I was taken from families and homes and married to men I didn't always love and forced to have children. I guess I was the one who consigned myself to that fate, but...I'm done now. This is the last time. I don't want children and I don't want you to find me next time."

Atorra had not planned to say any of this; if she had been asked last week at dinner she would have sworn that protecting the dragons was still more important than what she wanted.

But now there was only the truth.

This would only end if she ended it herself. They would always want her, they would always hunt her down. Whatever she had promised three thousand years ago, she had changed.

And after so long that this kingdom didn't even have records of her origins—was it unreasonable to ask for that much?

Do you abdicate your position, then? You would allow Kurala his throne, and the dragons their independence?

"The dragons can have their independence!" Atorra said. "I don't want to force anyone into anything; I don't want subjects or slaves! And if those dragons choose Kurala to be their king instead of Harrai—then—I let them be free! You can make your own choice, Dosskarja. I'm sorry if it wasn't the choice you were hoping for."

Dosskarja's eyes briefly widened. **I—I am sorry*,* he said. **I hoped I could offer you a better life.* A mate who loved you from the beginning, and a kingdom where you receive only respect.*

"I truly do appreciate your kindness and support," she said. "But my life is...is back there. With Harrai and Lorsen and Tashaya. I know you wanted something else for me, and Lady Kirska wanted something else, everyone wanted something—" She remembered. "You said you knew what Lady Kirska did."

As soon as you arrived, my queen, she was determined to find a living body that could house your soul.

"Whose body!?"

*She made a call among a network of healers and necromancers, looking for the body of a Miralem girl that was near death but not yet gone.

Comatose.* Atorra's guts twisted as he continued, *She felt that by sacrificing herself, while drawing in your magic, the body could be saved without your being undead, which would obviously not have served her purposes. I assume she had it shaped first, to resemble you as closely as possible.*

"But—what about—"

Atorra choked on her words as her stomach roiled and heaved, though there was nothing in her stomach—at least, as far as she knew. Now she knew this body was someone else.

"This was someone else!? This was a dead girl's body!?"

Nearly dead. Lady Kirska went to the greatest lengths imaginable to give you a real body, one that could—

"Yes, I get it. Have—fucking—heirs! And she never asked me, never cared what I wanted, and you knew and you didn't tell me either. And that's why I will never be at your side." She ran from the cave.

She was grateful for the truth, because now there was no doubt in her mind.

She wasn't here to free the dragons, but she wouldn't stand in their way if they wanted to free themselves.

She had come here—the Fanarlem girl, the barren doll, the broken queen—to break this cycle and free herself and the king she had come to love.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE



Harrai

HARRAI KNEW the moment he landed that the dragon in front of him was not Dosskarja. Something had taken him over, utterly changed his movements and the look in his eyes.

Harrai stood firm as the dragon approached him, ready to transform himself again at any moment. Dirjet was behind him, but he had insisted on keeping her there. He wouldn't see her hurt when he could fight himself.

"You're Lord Dresedel, aren't you?" he said.

I'm more than Lord Dresedel. I am also Kurala, the last true king of the dragons. And I know you have never wished to be king.

"I might not wish to be king, but I wouldn't be the first and I won't be the last. I am the king, nevertheless, and I'm prepared to defend the title."

The dragon snorted hot steam. *I was going to offer my powers to your brother, but he refused. Both of you are certainly the result of your diluted, inbred blood line, aren't you?*

Jarlan refused? Harrai faltered. If that was true, and Jarlan wasn't here...

"Did you kill my brother?"

No, he wasn't worth that sort of trouble. I just left him in the cave to ponder his rather stupid decision. I am trying, you see, to give Norgai's descendants and his queen a place.

The dragon could not entirely hide his animosity when he said 'his queen'. Whatever he said, he posed a grave danger to Atorra.

But Jarlan was still back at the cave. Not far. *Dirjet, leave me to this fight and go fetch my brother,* he told her, hopefully managing to keep his telepathic speech private.

Of course, she replied. *If you're sure you can handle him. I don't like this one bit! I can't believe Dosskarja would...*

I can handle him. He broke off the channel, not wanting to risk being sensed and intercepted. Dirjet's mind brushed his with one last sense of assurance, and then she flew off as fast as she could.

"What do you want?" Harrai asked. "For me to abdicate?"

I don't care if you are the king of the Drai people. But the dragons deserve dragon rulership. I want you to relinquish your horns, and I want the Queen of Songs.

"You know I'm never going to give you any of that."

Not willingly, no...I suppose not. The dragon's eyes slitted and he drew himself up, hunching his back—generating fire.

Harrai knew the negotiations were over. He transformed, for the second time in a single day, into the form of a dragon—his birthright, as the king of the dragons, and one he knew he must now defend with his life.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX



Harrai

HARRAI HAD BARELY FELT his body finish the shift before Kurala lunged at him, spreading his jaws to unleash fire.

Harrai leapt upward, spreading his wings and using his telekinesis to propel him higher, faster. He felt the flames brush his scaled legs. Fire wouldn't hurt a dragon—only the eyes were vulnerable, and even then, nothing short of a direct blast would do much damage. But Kurala knew that his opponent had the instincts of a Miralem, and he was trying to rattle Harrai.

Harrai soared, and if anything had him shaken, it wasn't the fire—it was wondering what was going on with Atorra inside the cave. But she was growing stronger all the time; he trusted he would feel her distress if she needed him.

It was true; he never wished to be the king. But in the moment, he relished his strength. This was his own little shard of ancient magic; he could be a man one moment and a dragon the next, a feat of shape-shifting unheard of anywhere else in the world.

King Harrai, of the House of Norgai. It had never meant much until today. Norgai and his queen, watching him from the window. They were just a legend.

No. That queen was my queen. My wife was Norgai's wife. And I have Norgai's blood.

Harrai had spent all his life training to be king and then serving as king, fulfilling all his duties, but the one thing his elders never seemed to notice was how empty it all was without anyone to love and protect. He loved Dirjet, but she was so strong on her own. He could look forward to the hatchlings, but he'd be a hundred years old when they emerged. Other than that, Grandmother and his tutors and advisors had kept him on his pedestal, drawing him away from the shambles of his family.

It's no wonder that when I first saw Atorra, I didn't know what to make of her. She didn't fit my ideal, and I had no idea how to love anyone as they are—complicated, messy, vulnerable, surprising.

She brought out everything that was complicated and vulnerable in me too. And now I want this power—I will embrace any tool I can use to help her.

Kurala was flying up to battle him in the sky, and Harrai maneuvered around him, keeping the upper hand. He'd never seen dragons fight, but in their ancient paintings and sculptures, they slammed each other into the rocky outcroppings. Kurala twisted in the air, trying again and again to catch him off guard.

Harrai managed to keep up, but he was well aware that this wasn't his usual form.

It's not Kurala's either, though, is it? At least not for a very long time. He's been a bound spirit, and he tied himself to a Daramon.

Right—Lord Dresedel is in there, too.

The Daramon had kept quiet, but sharing a body was not the same as merging two souls. He was in there. He'd probably been drawing on Kurala's power to block Harrai's telepathy before, but Harrai had also been trying to slip into his mind unnoticed. Always a tricky business.

Now, he didn't have to be careful. He blasted Lord Dresedel with pain.

Kurala threw up a defense too late. The dragon screamed, convulsing mid-air before he recovered.

You can't pull that trick twice, he growled, and Kurala shot back at Harrai.

Harrai blocked his mental attack—easily. Kurala's powers still felt hindered. Harrai could feel the strain even as the dragon tried again, roaring with frustration and shooting a fire ball in Harrai's direction, attempting to bombard him. The fire struck the rocks, catching a dead branch on one of

the mountain evergreens and shooting off a quick blaze before it died down again.

Harrai flew over Kurala and tried to grab at him, snapping at one of his wings. But Kurala was able to slip away before claws or teeth could catch at him, and they were back in the same dance, maneuvering around each other. Kurala whipped his tail at some loose rocks, a few of them pelting Harrai before he veered sideways.

Harrai dodged, blasting him again telepathically. Kurala huffed smoke, then abruptly turned and barreled at Harrai straight on, knocking him down toward the steep and rocky mountain slope. Branches snapped against his scales, but a dragon's armor was truly something. He wondered how bruised he'd feel when he changed back, but for now—his whole body took a jolt, but he didn't feel so much as a scratch.

He lunged back, using his telepathy again to make his enemy feel the pain while he knocked Kurala down to the ground, snapping a tree right in half beneath his body. Kurala growled and lunged at Harrai, catching his arm between his teeth and pulling at it with all the force in his jaw.

Now Harrai screamed as he felt his shoulder yanked out of joint. He blasted Kurala again, using the pain as fuel. *You want to hurt me? Fine, feel every bit of it.*

Kurala roared, and they tussled briefly, no one landing any good strikes, before Kurala cut loose and took flight. Harrai took off after him; his shoulder was still shooting pain, but his wings worked just fine.

Kurala flew between a narrower passage in the mountains, getting farther from the cave, farther from Atorra.

He's trying to lure me out of range to help her, Harrai thought, and he tried to steer them back. Kurala flew onward.

Too far. Harrai finally broke off and flew back toward Atorra. He kept expecting Kurala to make a sudden turn and come up behind him, but that didn't happen.

He wouldn't leave Lord Dresedel's body and Dosskarja's spirit back there to fight us alone. Or...would he?

Maybe he doesn't care what happens to Dosskarja. Maybe the general doesn't care if his own body is killed.

Harrai was skeptical of that—Daramons were notoriously vain and he couldn't imagine Lord Dresedel would want to give up the ability to walk among men, to go to Lord Jherin and brag about what he'd accomplished.

He was a bit of an odd one, though. Harrai wondered if he should send his body up in smoke the moment he got back.

As he flew in, Atorra was running from the cave. She saw him and her face lit up with relief, but then she stopped to catch her breath. She bent over, clutching her chest, probably freaking out over the unfamiliar sensation.

Atorra, it's all right, he said. *Kurala flew off—for now. Just answer me one thing—Dosskarja betrayed us, didn't he? He aided Lord Dresedel in awakening Kurala.*

"Yes," she panted. "And he lied to me... He let *this* happen." She waved her hands at her chest.

**I see*.* He turned to the cave and started generating fire in his core, feeling the blaze quickly building—quite a strange sensation, like he had a fireplace inside his body.

"Dosskarja..." Atorra said his name with grief, but she didn't stop Harrai. He opened his mouth and flooded the cave with fire. If Dosskarja knew it was coming, he made no attempt to fight back.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN



ATORRA

Atorra watched the cave fill with flames so bright and hot that she had to rush back behind Harrai's body to protect her face. They filled the small cave where she had spent the night trying to sleep with Lorsen next to her, damp inside and out, with Jarlan keeping watch and Sairi's wing over Tashaya. She knew no one would survive the fire in that small space.

Dosskarja...losing his life while trapped inside Lord Dresedel's body...

She was still utterly furious at him, and now she had to mourn him at the same time. It choked up inside her throat, but tears welled and came loose. They wouldn't stop. Stars above, but flesh and blood people were so leaky!

When the flame was spent, Harrai waited a few beats. There wasn't much in the cave to burn, as Atorra knew. A moment later, the heat was already dying back against the cool mountain winds, and Harrai returned to his true form. He moved his shoulder and winced.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine."

He pulled her into an embrace, and they shook against each other wordlessly. His fingers tangled with her hair. She had so much to talk to him about, but right now she needed this. Raw, physical comfort.

As she felt the shakiness start to die down, Dirjet came sweeping down, with Jarlan on her back. He leapt to the ground, and seemed unhurt, but his

mouth was twisted and his eyes were distant and angry, while his brows skewed toward apology.

"You okay?" he asked them brusquely. "Atorra—what—what happened?"

"We're fine," Harrai said. "It's a long story. You fine?"

"Yeah. Good." He added, "I'm the same idiot."

"Kurala told me," Harrai said. "And—I'm glad to hear it."

Jarlan shrugged.

"Grandmother is gone," Harrai said. "Jarl...I don't want to do things the same old way anymore. Just so you know."

"Me neither," Jarlan said. "I don't have much choice. I just—I couldn't do it. I thought it was all I ever wanted, and...I couldn't do it. So...I'm stuck and you're stuck with me."

Harrai went up to him and sort of tried to hug him. It was undoubtedly the most awkward thing Atorra had ever seen, a pat and then a slap and then over before it began. Jarlan punched his arm, and it seemed like he was attempting to reciprocate the gesture in some way, but he'd struck Harrai's hurt shoulder. Harrai just hissed and backed off.

"So what happened here?" Jarlan asked, gesturing at the cave.

"Dosskarja let Kurala and Lord Dresedel take over his body while his soul was in Lord Dresedel's body," Harrai said. "If...that even made sense."

"He wanted me," Atorra said. "He double-crossed everyone. He was in on your grandmother's plan to give me a real body, but he was also working with Kurala."

"Yeah, I was privy to some of this plan of theirs," Jarlan said, but he started walking to the cave entrance, clasping his hands together like he was offering a blessing. "Dosskarja...I don't know. He was just trying to save his people."

"He went too far," Harrai said. "Aiding a Daramon general, letting him have that kind of power, and awakening an old enemy of the queen..."

"You did the right thing," Jarlan said. "I'm not saying you didn't. A king has to be willing to make aggressive decisions. I've been telling you that all along."

"Yeah...maybe I should have been more aggressive with the Daramons earlier on," Harrai said. "I never imagined anything like this."

"But...are you sure he was in here?" Jarlan's voice echoed, and Atorra poked her nose into the cave after him. She could still feel the heat within

the walls.

"I don't see a trace of a body," Jarlan said.

They all looked around, and it was hard to argue that anything in the cave could be the remains of a body. Atorra saw the spot where they had made a fire, and the charred remains of the branches they laid down for beds.

That was it.

"Did he...have a teleportation stone on him?" Jarlan said slowly, arching a brow at Harrai. "I know they're rare, but if anyone would...the Black General..."

"We need to get back to the castle—now," Harrai said.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT



TASHAYA

TASHAYA'S EYES FLUTTERED OPEN.

I'm alive. I'm still alive.

She felt an initial rush of relief, seeing her familiar bedroom and the warm light and Sairi in the chair beside her bed. He was sleeping, eyes closed, head bowed, but looked ready to snap alert like a guard. One of the healers was heating water for tea over the fire and softly murmuring a prayer with a crystal in her hands.

But Tashaya couldn't even seem to speak, and barely to move. She was so weak. The mark on her chest burned, like she had just been branded.

Icy fear slid down to her toes, and a chill made her shudder beneath her piles of blankets, but it didn't touch that heat.

It's coming for me.

She was terrified, and she was alone. It didn't matter if Sairi watched over her. He couldn't protect her from the death that awaited her. She would lose all of this, the cozy room and this beautiful man who had just made love to her so sweetly. The unfairness of her lot in life felt like too damn much. But she was too weak to cry, to ask for comfort. Even her telepathy didn't want to stir.

Her eyes wanted to close. But she fought it. It could be the last time she closed her eyes.

Sairi, wake up. Please wake up. At least let me...let me hear a caring voice...

Her breath was shallow. Maybe I will go to the spirit world safely, once I leave this body and this mark, and maybe my parents will have waited for me there.

She would have to comfort herself. No one seemed to notice she was awake, and when she parted her lips, her mouth felt dry and her voice was nonexistent.

"Water...," she managed to whisper.

But the healer was lost in her soft prayers and the burbling of the tea kettle was louder than Tashaya.

Suddenly, there was a bump outside, a quick shout, a thump.

The door opened. The Black General walked into her room, and sprouting from his head were horns, just like Harrai's. They didn't look like a headdress; they came right out of his dark curls. He waved a hand and the healer slumped to her knees and then all the way to the floor.

"Lady Tashaya," he said. "Also of the House of Norgai. And marked... marked by Kurala. Do you know why he has let you live?"

"No..." Her voice came out like a sob. She was so helpless, and goddess help her... This was her worst fear. Maybe she was dreaming. Maybe she was dying and having nightmares along the way.

"You have dragon blood as well."

"Just—just a little..."

"Well, of course. It's just a little. But you are a worthy queen."

"Queen? No... You didn't hurt Atorra, did you?"

"No," he said, his voice husky and intimate. "I can heal you. I can take away the mark. But, my lady Tashaya...I really don't want you. I know this is all very dramatic at the moment, because I don't have much time. I certainly don't have time to woo you. And it seems as if your heart is already with someone else. I bet all you dream of is being able to respond to his courting like any healthy and vibrant young woman. Dancing the night away. Making love until you're beyond spent and the sun is rising." He placed his hand on the crown of her head.

A little wave of energy went through her, and the fog of weakness lifted. She could breathe properly, move properly.

"All I need from you is to bear the dragon born," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to rape you. I will heal you and give you one night of pleasure; I will be gentle, it is only business. I will cherish these children and raise them well, and you will be healthy and powerful and free to live

as you please. You will have your whole life ahead of you to argue with your Sreyelan about whether your babies should have wings or not."

Tashaya flushed angrily. "Give you my firstborn children!? Sleep with you?"

"You were cursed as a baby by Kurala the dragon," he said. "And I think you know by now that no one can heal you. Not the best healers in your realm, and not even the Queen of Songs. Only I can do it, because I have Kurala's power, and he won't allow me to do it unless you give him what he wants. What he really wants is Atorra. He wants to hurt Atorra; he wants to rape her and make her his prisoner and force her to bear his children. But he isn't mad at you, Lady Tashaya, and if you get him the child he wants, I think he will calm down in that regard, and your friend will be safe."

"And—and who is Kurala?"

"Kurala is the dragon that the Queen of Songs imprisoned thousands of years ago. Kurala is the voice that you hear sometimes."

"I see..." She glanced at Sairi, who still slept deeply. She wondered if it was natural, at this point, or if Lord Dresedel was keeping him asleep.

"I know I am your enemy," Lord Dresedel said. "But I am an honorable man, and like any Daramon, I still know that women can't have healthy children unless they are cherished and treated with care. I'd like to help you. But I don't wish to keep you, rest assured. I am far too busy for a wife, in any case, and you are quite young."

Tashaya certainly didn't want to give any of her babies to this man.

And she certainly didn't want to sleep with him either.

But...she believed him. At least, when it came to all of this.

"And they will be...your children? Or Kurala's?"

"They will be Kurala's children," he said. "In the same way that the dragon king of Drai is the son of a dragon. Kurala does not have a body. His magic will be passed to them through me. All of the...business of it...well, we will leave him out of that."

There was no way to sugar coat this. Her choices seemed to be death, and leaving Atorra to be hunted by Kurala...or to agree to this bargain. Having the children of this...Kurala. Whatever he was, exactly.

The dragon-born of the shadow.

I dreamed of being able to have the dragon-born in Atorra's place. I would have jumped at the chance. Even knowing it is a difficult pregnancy,

I also know you come out of it more powerful.

She wondered what it would be like to have the children of this enemy dragon.

But children were not their parents.

And when she imagined what Atorra would tell her to do, she knew Atorra would rather that Tashaya lived, and got to have her life with Sairi. Supposing he wasn't too upset by this. But then, he was a Sreyelan, and he had been raised to expect that women would make their own choices apart from men. She couldn't imagine he would scorn her for this.

I would have months to figure out what to do before the babies were born, she thought. If I'm well, we can figure out a way to defeat Kurala before he ever has a chance to see his children.

"Okay..." She swallowed. "Okay, I'll—I'll do what you ask. Just one night. Gentle, but also, you know, fast."

He smiled a little, almost uncomfortably, like he would rather not be involved with anyone this young and nervous. "Whatever pleases you. It's only the end result I need."

"I will do it, if—oh—!" He scooped her out of her bed, tossing the blankets off of her, and whisked her out of the room and into the courtyard, where Dosskarja swept down. Lord Dresedel leapt onto his back in one smooth, enchanted motion, and it was only after they flew away that Tashaya heard the guards start to shout, as if they had broken out of a trance.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home with me," he said. "Where you will be well protected."

Goddess! I've made a terrible mistake. But it seemed quite likely that he never meant to let her choose in the first place.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE



ATORRA

Atorra tried to reassure herself on the interminably long flight back. He can't just unlock the third seal with the whole army there, and the court sorcerers, and the dragons— Unless one of the other dragons is on his side...

But Dirjet felt strongly that they were not. All of them had compared notes along the way, and the plot seemed clear. Kurala was going to want nothing more than to break the seal beneath the castle, loosening the last thread of his power.

When they returned to the castle, the news was almost worse.

He didn't try to break the seal.

He took Tashaya.

Tashaya was gone, whisked away right under everyone's nose. The guards were prostrating themselves with apology.

"Where is Sairi?" Atorra cried next, because surely he would have been first to give the news.

"He went after her," Master Peitir said. "He would not be deterred by the dangers."

"Fates! He'll get himself killed." Atorra felt light-headed. Harrai steadied her.

"Let's get you a little something to eat," he said, although she didn't want to eat.

All anyone really knew was that Kurala had marked her, and Kurala could heal her—that, and he had taken her very far away. Master Peitir traced her whereabouts off the eastern coast, heading for Nalim Ima.

Lord Dresedel was taking her back to his home, to Lord Jherin's palace.

There was no easy solution to any of this. Master Peitir seemed like all the news had broken him, and he wandered around the main hall murmuring about Daramons and dragons and how could they ever make a plan together!? There was no greater betrayal, beyond anything he could have ever imagined...

And in the midst of all that was a new round of staring and murmuring when the court saw Atorra, but now it was different. She was one of them.

A part of her wanted nothing more than to order herself a new Fanarlem body, just like the old one, except nice and fresh, and consign this body to a grave where it belonged, but the fact was, the entire kingdom was lacking an expert Fanarlem maker. She wasn't about to take time away for that until Tashaya was safe.

And she did remember how strong she felt when she climbed down from Dosskarja's back. In some ways, Fanarlem were superior; they had more endurance, fewer needs. But for raw strength, they could not match flesh and blood.

While a memorial service was planned for Lady Kirska and Master Peitir tried his best to pull himself together, Harrai called for a meeting in the council room, with Atorra, Jarlan, and Lorsen.

"This is the first meeting of the royal circle." He paused for just a beat, as if to give anyone a chance to abstain, but no one did—in fact, Lorsen leaned forward a bit eagerly.

"For my entire rule, I have been following the advice of our elders," he said. "My grandmother served as regent when I was a child, and my council was made up of the same people who served my parents. But our situation has changed radically. I'm certainly not going to toss aside the wisdom of my elders entirely—but I don't think it's helped me or this kingdom to give them the first and last word on what a king should do. There was a time when you and I were friends..." He looked at Jarlan. "And then there was Lady Tashaya, my first cousin, tossed aside due to her illness and inability to keep up with the council. We used to be a family. Lorsen, you are Atorra's sister as far as I'm concerned."

"I'm honored to be here," Lorsen said, in a low voice. "And I won't disappoint you."

"I'm not worried that any of you will," Harrai said.

"Oh, please, don't lay it on too thick, Harri," Jarlan said.

"I'll lay it on as thick as I want," Harrai said. "The fact is, I know you could have had power to match mine; you could have been a rival dragon king. That is no small thing. And I know you're not a coward."

Jarlan's ears reddened slightly. "I hope not."

"And Atorra...I know what you chose. I want to honor all of those choices, and I want to try and find some way to ensure that future generations will honor them too. That your soul will be left alone, to be something new."

"Yes," she said. "I do want to be free. But...I hope there is some way to do it without causing a complete catastrophe."

"I have to believe there is a way." He put his hands on the table. "We have some difficult choices ahead. The kingdom still stands, and the castle rests on the final seal. Many of the dragons are not on Kurala's side, while some are, and we don't know yet how many. The people are nervous. War is on the table. And helping Sairi to rescue Tashaya is imperative."

"If I know this is the last time I'll ever be the Queen of Songs, I can give it everything I have," Atorra said. "And if we're all together in this, we can share the power as well as the burdens and the decisions. We all have a stake. I hope we can help the Sreyelans, and the Fanarlem, as well as the Drai people and the dragons. It just feels so much better if we're all together."

"Goddess...such an optimist," Jarlan said. "But...as the eternal malcontent of the table, nevertheless—I'm willing to give it all a chance."

"I'm on standby to whack you if it doesn't work out," Lorsen said, with the smallest smile. "I hope there is some adventure involved."

"I don't think you need to worry about a lack of adventure, Lor!" Atorra said. "I'm terrified that we'll have too much."

Harrai finally took his seat, leaning back in his chair and picking up a pencil to fiddle with. He had never looked so handsome, she thought, dressed simply in black like he preferred, relaxed but ready, and his horns seemed to sit a little lighter on his head.

"Let the first meeting of the Royal Circle officially begin," he said, tapping the pencil against the table.

For one strange moment, she was aware of living so many lifetimes, of being such an ancient soul, and how young and vibrant he was. Of course, he had surely been many other someones, but he never had to think about it. She wondered if he had ever been hers, if he had ever been the king in some past existence. She hoped so, but she also didn't want to know.

She wanted him at her side, to love him as if she had chosen him, to love him as if they would never have another chance.

THANK you so much for reading!! As I submit this file, I have just started working on the sequel. I don't know yet when it will release since it's going to be another long one, but in the meantime I have also started a Youtube channel where I talk extensively about the history of this world, my writing career, the creative life, and nerdy stuff! Come join me!

A history of this world and how it was created <u>is a good place to start if</u> <u>you enjoyed this story!</u>!

You can also read the sequel as I write it at my Patreon, as well as hop in the Discord and chat with me about whatever!

https://patreon.com/user?u=34222724

And of course you are always very welcome on my Substack:

https://lidiyafoxglove.substack.com/

and at my Facebook group!

https://www.facebook.com/Lidiya-Foxglove-1702249670069437/

MORE ROMANTIC FANTASY FROM LIDIYA!

The Cursed Souls Trilogy

Velsa and Grau's story is a tale of a loving marriage between a Fanarlem concubine and a Daramon sorcerer. Grau knows Velsa's soul isn't cursed, but what must be sacrifice for them to live in peace?:

Book One: The Sorcerer's Concubine

Book Two: <u>The Sorcerer's Wife</u> Book Three: <u>The Sorcerer's Equal</u>

Also available in audio!

Doll Girl Meets Dead Guy

A cozier standalone about Sorla, a Fanarlem baker, and a grumpy soldier from the Ven Diri tribe (the "magical world's goths" as I call them). Dorr was brought back from the dead but without much will to live—but her pastries are the one thing he can taste.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lidiya writes quirky fantasy novels and fairy tales, has an entire wall of manga in her bedroom, and works at a bookstore in the mountains in a town fit for a Ghibli movie. She has four weird cats and buys organic hot cocoa mix in bulk.

Patreon for extras:

https://patreon.com/user?u=34222724

Mailing list:

http://eepurl.com/c9-XsX

Facebook hangout:

https://www.facebook.com/Lidiya-Foxglove-1702249670069437/

Contact: fabulousfrock@mac.com

(I am terrible with email but I try to answer business inquiries at least =P)

