

Black Dragon of Amber

Book Two: The Road to Amber

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Dedication:

For my four legged friends who mean more to me than most people. My life has been saner and kinder because you were in it.

For my brothers Michael, Mark, Christopher and Charlie and of course, you, Chris. And for you, Lindsay because I said I would make you a Princess.

O to be a dragon,
A symbol of the power of Heaven-of silkworm
Size or immense; at times invisible.
Felicitous phenomenon!
O To Be a Dragon, Marianne Moore

Lift up the heart of a true friend by writing his name on the wings of a dragon.
Chinese Proverb

Never laugh at *LIVE* dragons.
J.R.R. Tolkien

Go and catch a falling Star;
And bend it with a swimmer's fears.
The Star that grows on sinking sands
The Star that swims beneath the tears.
Catch the one that floats afar,
And bind it with the Star that lands

Beneath the Seven Stars that dance.

Dance the Seven Sisters in the skies
Raise the mountains laid to rest,
All the stars are now just one;
Between the Scarlet Queen and None.
Upon the wing the black bird flies
To bring the dragons back he must
Before the sun sets and the fire dies,
He rules the Pride, his will be done.

Dragons fly with fearsome grace.
Fly, winged beast of Ancient flame
With grace and beauty through the skies.
Jeweled scales that burn with fame,
Rulers of the Heavens as your world dies,
With tooth and claw and fired death,
Till the hero comes and lays to rest
Your awesome power with his blessed breath.
Dragon Prince, my promise this;
Commanded by Star Stone and eye
The Dragons home where none may bide
But Dragons and their very Pride.
So vows the Dragon Prince and his.
The Riddle of the Seven Stars.



Chapter 1

The Borders of Amber were secured; after an entire morning of following her boundaries on lofty thermals, I returned to the Castle. Seen from above, it resembled a five pointed star and pentagram. My keen dragon eye could even discern the fluttering of her pennants that announced King Random; two of the Princes and my father were in residence. I sighed, (which in a forty-foot dragon came out as a belch of near flames) and spiraled in to land gently on the rooftops.

Somewhere inside, it rang a special bell activated by a sensor plate that let the guards know that it was me and not some other fiercesome creature come to wreak havoc on the realm. There were no others, not in all the Shadows or any of the accumulated wisdom of my uncles and aunts could recount of another dragon.

I hadn't always been a dragon. Once, I had been a teenage boy. Not a normal one but then, are any teenagers ever considered normal?

I grew up on the run, homeless, with an Irish gargoyle for a caretaker and friend. Part mother, part bodyguard, he saved me from many situations that I couldn't have dealt with myself. I had a human body once. But it was taken from me. Taken until I offered it up as a sacrifice to save my father and granduncle's realms.

I died there. In the castle of Amber. But it seems, not totally. I woke up in this black scaled, diamond hard rad body of a real fire-breathing dragon.

"Oh stop admiring yourself," Ghostwheel sneered. I turned my head around to stare at the glowing manifestation of the intelligent artificial computer mind that my Dad had created when he lived on Earth. My Dad? He was the king, great lord, ruler of the Courts of Chaos. Sort of like the opposite end of Amber. Where she was order and light, Chaos was Entropy and well, Chaos.

I was stuck with Ghost because he, it was the only thing that could hear me. I hated the three-way communication but it was all I had.

"Go turn into spare toaster parts," I told it and sulked. I was hungry, too. I'd seen fat cattle grazing below but because I'd promised the King I wouldn't take from his subjects, I'd not eaten. Later, I'd have to make a special foray out for a deer or two dozen. It took a lot of fuel to keep the Dragon furnace going.

I smelled human. Whipped my head around and watched Roelle and Marcus trying to sneak up on my blind side.

"Darn it," she said. "How can you see us?" I blew a sulfur-scented snort that lifted her skirts and hair. I eyed her with pleasure and ignored that my air had blown near half of Marcus naked. "Raven!" She shouted. "You did that on purpose!"

Not that I hadn't seen Roelle naked before but it was always an enjoyable sight. I wasn't likely to have sex anytime in the near millennium. Neither human nor Dragon. I wasn't even sure *how* a dragon had sex.

Wheel buzzed me. It was like an electric shock—less than a Taser but more than an electric fence. Annoying more than painful. I swept my tail around and whacked him. Sent him flying off the roof and out into the blue sky. I hoped he went far enough to land in the sea. Roelle climbed on my shoulders and held my head spikes, lifting my head up so that we could see over the entire

realm. Of course, I could see much further than she could even with one eye.

Marcus sat near my hind leg and the heat of his body felt odd—almost mystical. He was the main chef's son and was always underfoot in the Palace. At one time, we'd thought he was going to be a soldier but the war changed that idea. Instead, he studied magic tomes and was learning to be a magister. Not a magician, those were the silly dudes that did card tricks and pulled rabbits out of hats.

He smelled odd. Meaty. Powerful. I took a deep smell and started drooling. He made a disgusted sound and pulled out a bag that smelled of beef and pork. "Here. I brought you the parts of today's dinner."

I swallowed the tempting morsel bag and all. Both of them watched me expectantly. The flavors hit my stomach in a burst of heat that spread all the way to my toes. Roelle and Marcus jumped off me and stood back.

I shivered. Shook. Opened and closed my wings. Thumped my barbless tail on the roof regardless of the damage to the ceilings inside. Howled. Screamed at them and fell over. My head rose on its ten-foot neck to thump on the stones twice before I subsided. A ripple of magic flowed over me.

I felt Roelle's hand near my heart. Her touch was exquisite agony. "Raven? Oh gods, Marcus! What did you do? Is he alive?"

"Yeah, Marcus," I grunted. "What did you do to me? Did you poison me? Do you want Roelle so much you would kill me to take her? Like I'm really a threat to any male out there in this form. Like I could collect girls and put them in with my rock collection?" Two stunned faces stared at me. "What?" I sputtered. "You try to kill me and I'm the villain?"

"Raven, it worked!" Marcus shouted and grabbed my face. By the horns. I blinked and nearly pulled him off his feet.

"What worked?"

"The spell! The magicked beef hearts!"

I shut my mouth when I realized he'd *heard* me. Stupidly, I said, "you can hear me?"

"Yes, yes, you idiot!" He yelled. "But turn it down. You're loud enough for the dungeon dwellers to hear you."

"We have people in the dungeons?" I cocked my one eye on the stairwell to observe a battalion of Black Dragon Guards running onto the roof in full battle gear. Impressive, it took only four minutes for them to kit up and run up five flights. King Random and his general were with them as well as my grandfather, Corwin.

"What the hell's going on, Marcus? The roof collapsed in over twenty rooms! Several people are hurt! Raven, is he okay?" They ranged around me, hands on their weapons. I was slightly pissed at the show of mistrust. After all, they'd been named for me.

"I fell off my perch," I said in a whisper. At least for me it was a whisper. Everyone took two steps back as my voice boomed. Hey, it even sounded like me.

"Marcus, what have you done? Where's Ghost?" The King demanded. His red hair and blue eyes were fairly crackling with intensity.

“Sorry, my Liege,” I said sincerely. “No one was seriously hurt?”

“No. Scrapes and bruises. I fell off the...commode and bruised my—,” he stopped. “Marcus?”

He dipped his knee. “I found an old, really old treatise Melangine brought back from K hafra and found a reference to a spell that made dumb beasts speak with the tongue of man. No offense Raven, so I tried it out.”

“On anything other than Raven?” Random asked.

“Well, no. It was good only for one shot,” he explained. “It needed the blood of a gargoyle and a harpy. I only had enough for one dose.”

“How long does it last?” I butted in.

He shrugged. “Didn’t say. But Raven, it hints at other things.”

I opened my eye wide and then my mouth. “Tell me.” He swallowed. Although I had never hurt him, the size of my cavernous mouth, forked tongue and dagger-like teeth made him nervous.

“It speaks of turning creatures into men.” There was silence and then an excited babble of voices. Of course, I could shout all of them down at once.

“Like what?” I asked over them.

“A shadow realm only hinted of where you can become human again,” Marcus whispered staring everywhere but at me. I swallowed and felt ashamed that I had accused him of trying to kill me so he could have Roelle to himself. “I want you to have every chance of becoming human, Raven,” he continued.

Random laid his hand on Marcus’ shoulder. “Marcus, show me this text. Raven, the stable master has two steer set aside for your breakfast. Murphy has patrol duty so you can relax. Don’t go anywhere.”

My grandfather added his own admonitions and the entire troop left the same way they’d arrived only without the urgency.

With equal parts of hope and dread in my heart, I leaped off the parapet to land neatly in the stable yard where two fat cows were eating hay.

I used to be squeamish about killing them but now, I merely bit off their heads and swallowed the rest daintily. Sated, I spent the rest of the day perched on the headlands of Kolvir.

Chapter 2

Somehow, I squeezed into the somewhat large tower room in the East pentacle. I had to be careful where I planted my rear feet and front legs, as there wasn’t much room left for Roelle and Marcus. It’d been a major feat to sneak around and join the pair without Random or the rest of the castle knowing.

Random and Corwin knew something was up, he had set a new pair of guardsmen on my tail and it wasn’t until I flew off in a huff that I was alone. For five minutes. Then both Ghostwheel and Murphy attached themselves to me. I only succeeded in escaping them by hiding under the waters of the sea until nightfall, coming out at dark and then sneaking up the backside of Kolvir

using my talons and tail to climb. I didn't like to fly at night, as that was when the enchantment that let my Dragon body survive was the weakest. I had to fight the constant urge to coil up and sleep. Plus, my blind eye made seeing difficult as I had lost almost all depth perception. Marcus helped once I was out on the ramparts of Kolvir; he placed a minor spell on me that made me a shadow that only a first rate magister could see. Roelle was with him and helped drape a gray cloth around me that he explained muffled the noise and smell of me.

"I don't smell," I protested offended and he shook his head.

"Well, Raven, you don't stink but you do smell a great deal like smoke and sulfur."

"Especially after you snort," Roelle said helpfully. "And you do smell like rotten eggs," she added.

Sulking, I let them push me into the room and Marcus had one more surprise for me. As I stepped over the threshold, sparkles of blue dust covered me, tingled and abruptly, they became as large as giants. I blinked. They grew in size but the room remained the same.

"I shrank you, Raven," he grinned and Roelle carefully cradled me in her hands. My voice squeaked were once it'd boomed.

"Can you still hear me? Is this permanent? I'm not much threat to anyone like this. Except maybe a mouse."

"It's only temporary," Marcus assured me. "You'll revert as soon as you speak the phrase 'gigantum alternus'. But don't say it in here or you'll blow the walls apart. This way, we can smuggle you out of here."

"Smuggle me where?" I asked.

"Khafra."

"Khafra? We're almost at war with Khafra!" My squeak was nearly a Dragon shriek.

"Quiet, Raven," he hushed and slammed the room's oak door. "Why don't you tell the King, the Castle and the Realm of Amber what we're planning?" Huffing, he went to the corner cabinet in the austere tower and pulled out a wizard's safe. Its enchanted gargoyle locks opened to his password but not before trying to bite him. Inside, was a thin pamphlet made of Griffin hide, bound by silver wire and written in the blood of elves. Only a few spells were legible although my Dragon sight and knowledge knew more than he'd deciphered. The pages gave off an aura that was...unsettling, almost evil. It had the stench of Chaos and the Logrus, of old power best left forgotten.

Marcus turned the page towards the middle of the book and pointed out the complicated spell. From what I could read, I picked up the words 'body', 'receptacle, sacrifice and replace'.

"Marcus, it calls for a sacrifice. I won't take another's life to gain back my own."

"You can read this?" He returned.

"Better than you can." I perused the texts and was able to pull out the general meaning. It was a recipe for disaster but it also gave me a glimmer of hope.

Just when we were settling down, someone's heavy hand knocked at the open door in a manner that would not be denied. Roelle scooped me up and tossed me into her waist pouch where I clung screeching a shrill protest. There were all sorts of odd bits and pieces in there,

some of which were squishy and gross. She thumped me through the cloth and I grumbled in protest but quieted so I could eavesdrop.

“Have either of you seen Raven?” The familiar voice of my head keeper demanded. Rinlon Preel, the soldier who had served my former master Jurt. Jurt, my father’s half-brother and Random’s enemy. Rinlon had saved my life and stood just outside the tower room in his 6 feet of unbridgeable sense of duty.

“I saw him, flying around here yesterday and the king said he was in cahoots with you.”

“Cahoots?” Marcus hooted. “I’ve been up here studying my homework with Roelle.”

Rinlon must have pushed his way inside; his voice was suddenly much closer and louder. “King Random has a very important mission for him and after he’s through with that, Prince Corwin needs him. Where has he gone? Do you know?”

I could feel Roelle shaking her head. Marcus said, “I think he was hungry. He said something about going hunting.”

“He said?” Rinlon asked. I chewed a hole in her bag so I could see.

“Haven’t you heard? Marcus found a way to let us speak directly to Raven and he can speak to us,” Roelle said happily. Inside her pouch, I mumbled to myself. Rinlon’s sharp ears heard me.

“What was that?” He barked. He ran to the window and looked out expecting to see me flapping my wings or hanging off the roof. “Raven! If you’re here, the King wants you in the courtyard immediately!” He waited and snorted. “I know you three are up to something. I can feel it in my bones. Marcus, Roelle, the boy’s seen enough unhappiness and hardship to last 3 lifetimes. Don’t entice him into anymore.”

I pinched Roelle’s fingers. Dragon snouts were very beaklike and in my miniature size, I was quite capable of inflicting a painful pinch.

“Ouch!” Roelle cried and slapped the bag, knocking me into a glass vial of something stinky like toadswort. It made me dizzy.

“Peww,” Rinlon gagged. “What is that? Goblin farts?”

“Toadswort for mothballs,” she answered sucking her finger. “It does reek. I better go dump out my bag.” She leaned out the window that was over the head of the cliffs and emptied the bag, me included. I zipped off in circles as if I was drunk although that was another cool thing about Dragons—we could drink whole hogsheads and not get drunk.

Rinlon chased them all out of the tower and I followed at a discreet distance. No one screamed or pointed at me. If they did see me, they assumed I was a bird. I confess it was easier to maneuver my way to the palace and I could go places I hadn’t been able to before.

Zippping down the main corridor, I just missed flying up my grandfather’s tail. He whipped around, his hand on his sword, Grayswandir. He looked menacing, not the handsome laid-back Prince I knew not so well.

“Who’s there?” He announced and tingles of magic lifted my wings. I hovered silently in the shadows over his head. “Damn,” he muttered. “I’m feeling Shadows.” He shoved Grayswandir back into its scabbard and departed towards his rooms. I continued towards Roelle’s room.

She had a small suite of rooms off the Queen’s, as she was one of Vialle’s ladies-in-waiting.

Born and raised in Rebma, Amber sister city under the ocean, Vialle's suite had a decided aquatic theme. Pale green and turquoise, restful and calm, Roelle's was quite nicely done to complement the Queen's.

I made entry through the transom window and perched on the canopy top of the huge bed covered in a quilt of scarlet and gold dragons. In fact, the entire room had a dragon motif except for the portraits of Random, Vialle and Roelle's parents, the Baron and Baroness of Loest. Even stranger, a half-finished portrait was on an easel next to the balcony doors and covered with a sheet.

Curious, I flew over and tugged at it. With my mouth agape, I stared at a portrait of me, half-human, half Dragon in a setting as if I were a knight saving a damsel.

The door slammed and Roelle yelled at me. Startled, I let go and nearly tumbled to the floor. She swatted at me with her empty bag. I was curiously agile but furiously defensive, protesting all the way, as I dodged her increasingly accurate swipes. She connected and slung shot me across the room to bounce off her mirror. Cracking into a thousand pieces, I was carried to the floor in a barrage of little glass daggers. They hurt. I lay there, stunned, in pain and bleeding. She threw herself to the floor on her knees and carefully picked me up. My long neck and head hung limp. "Oh beards of Hernin," she whispered. "Raven. I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?" She carried me to her bed and gently began to pull up the splinters, applying healing lotions to the cuts. She was crying as her hands filled with my blue blood. "Raven, what have I done?"

"Get Marcus," I whispered, trying to pull out a particularly deep dagger that had pierced my chest.

"Can I leave you?"

"He's near. Just yell out the window for him." I closed my eye and concentrated on calling him, too. The urgency in our summons brought him at a run and he came into her room without knocking. After one look at me, he pulled out his magister's bag concocted a healing potion that he carefully poured down my gullet and on the wounds. I felt dizzy and then sleepy.

He ordered Roelle to make me a nest and gently placed me on a bed of soft wool. "He needs to rest and let the potions work. Roelle. Tell me what happened?"

Shamefaced, she explained and to his demand, she showed him the portrait under the cloth.

"I see," he commented and placed a chair under her doorknob. "We need to sit with him tonight. In case the spell reverts and he grows larger." He peered in at me. "Raven, how do you feel?"

"Sleepy," I muttered wanting to stretch but it hurt too much. She stroked my chest with her finger and the rhythm relaxed me further. I yawned a puff of green smoke that escaped me.

"Sleep, my Dragon Sprite," she murmured. I closed my eye, dreamed that I traveled through the deep Forest of Arden with my hand tucked into hers, that I ran on two strong legs, and was wholly human.

In my dreams, I remembered the taste and feel of a woman's lips and the play of human muscles, mortal frailties. Although in my Dragon scales and bones, I was one of the most powerful creatures known in existence, I wanted my old form back with a passion I'd forgotten since I'd roamed Amber's skies.

In the morning, I opened my eye, stretched and flapped my wings to stir the air, waking my two erstwhile guardians and friends.

“Marcus? Roelle?” I asked climbing to the top of the chest and perching on the rim. “Are you awake?”

“Aye,” both agreed.

“I’m in.” I told them to their stunned faces. I was equally stunned when they explained they had no idea I needed convincing to join them on this quest.

The first thing I wanted to know was whether Marcus could spell me back to my original size as being bird sized was a definite danger. I missed my forty-foot splendor.

We exited Roelle’s room (with me tucked inside her bag once more) to commandeer the north tower and Marcus put me back to normal. My wounds were gone with them, the soreness and redness. I flapped my wings and soared up into the skies, rapidly disappearing from sight.

Chapter 3

Before I had traveled a league or found breakfast, I was dive bombed by a particularly ugly stone gargoyle and I didn’t mean ugly as in appearance although he was that, too. Murphy had found me and he was in a vicious mood. Brought on no doubt, by my disappearance and lack of response to Random’s summons.

He had the power to make my existence miserable even in this form. Although I could dispatch him with one bite, he wasn’t afraid of me. He landed on my back, reached forward to grab my eye horns and steered me back to the Castle. His heels dug into the muscles where my wings joined my shoulder and using them as spurs he goaded me to drop heavily into the bailey. I was so pissed I didn’t check to make sure it was empty first and nearly squashed a pair of practicing armymen.

Murphy thumped the back of my head and he used his stone form to do it. It hurt. Rather than admit pain in front of the guards, I turned my head around and snarled. He wasn’t impressed at my show of teeth and I wasn’t about to break any on his stone fists. I sulked.

“Good boy,” he said flatly and dropped to the ground reverting to his gray humanlike skin and form. He was still ugly but in the way that a beautiful sculpted piece of art could be hideous as well as beautiful. “You dismiss your Liege Lord’s summons, Raven?” He asked in his gravelly voice. “Have you so little respect for your father? Your grandsire and great uncle?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Murphy. I remember Royal protocol. Look, I was busy elsewhere. I was on my way as soon as I could. You know I only move about during daylight hours.”

“I’ve seen you at night, flying over the realm,” he pointed out.

“It’s not the physical me.”

His mouth dropped open. “You speak!”

“Oh yeah. Marcus found some kind of spell and fixed that. I don’t need Ghostwheel.”

“That’s good. Merlin is having some issues with Khafra and has sent Ghost to spy. I’ll be taking over for him.”

“Great,” I said dryly. “Do I get to piss on my own?”

“Do dragons pee?”

I lifted my leg and left a huge puddle in the bailey’s sand that stubbornly refused to drain. I would have pissed on him if I thought I could get away with it. “What’s this secret mission that the King wants me to do?” I asked.

Murphy grinned. “Secret mission? What gave you that idea? He wants you and me to fly out to the Graylin Peaks and survey the mines for bandits.”

“Graylin Peaks! That’s a week’s journey even by my wings!” I protested.

“We’d better get going then.”

“Murphy, I can’t,” I started, thinking furiously. “I can’t be that far away from the Unicorn’s Bower at night for a week, let alone the time to fly out and back plus however long the actual mission would take.”

In truth, I had not been away from the Castle or the woods for longer than a night’s journey. I wasn’t sure what would happen out of reach of the Unicorn’s magic. Her magic kept the dragon’s body alive and me in it.

“Oh,” he said thoughtfully. “Well, let’s go ask her.”

“Huh?” I asked stupidly.

“You can talk to her, right? She’s your mum? Let’s go ask her.”

I heard the approaching footsteps of a group of people and one I recognized among all others. I turned around (carefully) and bowed to the Queen and her husband, the merry red haired, short jokester called Random. Vialle kissed me on the snout, her aim unerring even though she was blind.

“Raven, my dear. How are you?”

“In the pink,” I said but refrained from smiling as imagining that was a scary sight. She laughed and I caught the image of a great terrible lizard bedecked in pink scales.

“Your Majesty, surely not a lizard,” I protested, cringing. With my luck, she’d sculpt me in that shape and I’d become a household staple like a saltshaker.

“Raven,” Random snickered and then frowned. “Murphy, I thought you’d be getting ready for your trip to Graylin by now.”

“Seems there’s a problem, your Majesty,” Murphy started his gray eyes narrowed and suspicious. I don’t know how he knew when I was up to something, but he always did. I couldn’t get away with anything.

“Raven says he can’t leave the environs of the Grove for more than a day.”

“Oh.” They exchanged looks. “Perhaps the salt mines? There was talk of a riot. Perhaps the sight of a Black Dragon will quell their larcenous desires?”

“We’ll see to it, Majesty.”

“After that, the Dresden Plains need to be fired. Perhaps Raven could see to that as well?”

For the next two weeks, the King and Murphy had something for me to do every day. I wasn't exempt from their chores until it was time to lay my head down at night and sleep. I was not sure why dragons needed to sleep unless it was because my magical body needed to replenish its 'whatever' but as soon as the sun went down, the urge to hibernate became a powerful compulsion.

I didn't get to see Marcus or Roelle. Not even when it was time to eat. Murphy made sure I ate on the wing or in the forest. There was no shortage of deer and he showed me plains of huge creatures like buffalo but with horns as large as a Texas steer. Colored piebald and tasted like chicken.

I expelled so much fire that I actually ran out and developed a craving for blue stained dirt that I honed in on with my dragon radar. It was found in several spots on the mountain slopes; after I gorged on it, I belched flames and farted explosions of pure methane that ignited at the slightest spark. Luckily, dragons don't get heartburn. I called it bluestone and Murphy named it firestone although in texture, it was more like dirt. It tasted like candy and I ate it until I was suddenly sick of the flavor.

I was supposed to ask the Unicorn if I could leave Amber's borders but every time I sank into sleep, I only slept. I didn't roam her bower, as her companion- it was almost as if she were avoiding me. I was afraid of her answer, afraid it just might be true and I would not be able to leave with Marcus and Roelle.

I'd heard that she was going home for a month as the last of her seven brothers was being married and that Marcus was going as her escort. Along with a select group of guards and King's emissaries. Random was very conscious of his duties to his barons and lords and would never slight them by sending only a gift. I wanted to send something but had nothing. No dragon hoard, gems, or booty.

"Murphy?" I turned to the gargoyle perched on a rocky outthrust somewhere to the south of the Forest of Arden. I'd been pulling up two hundred foot trees for Julian's ship builders and was tired. Amazed that I *could* get tired. Of course, I *had* denuded a good portion of the woods.

"What?" he asked lazily. He wasn't tired. He'd spent the morning on my back, letting me do the work, the flying, lifting, hauling and the stacking, etc., etc., etc. while he sat on his ass pointing.

"I want to send a gift to Roelle's brother for his wedding."

"So?"

"I have nothing."

"You have this," he flicked at my scales. Black and hard as diamonds. "Four would be enough for a shield. A Dragon Shield would be a wondrous thing to a young knight. And you shed them frequently."

"I do?"

"Haven't you seen the pages scurrying round picking them up? And the Dragon Guards all have armor with pieces on their mail. It is a great honor to own one of your bits of dandruff." He mocked me and I scratched at my jaw with a hind foot, nearly knocking him off the rock with my tail.

“I thought more like a gemstone that he could sell,” I mused. “But scales would work, too. I wonder if I could pull one off.”

Delicately, I inserted a clawed finger under a nicely curved piece on my flank that was nearly as large as a shield itself. Arrggh. It was like pulling off a fingernail. Maybe not. “I think I’ll wait for them to fall off,” I mumbled.

“Dragons molt only a few times in their lifetimes, Raven. They would be extremely vulnerable in that state. Easy to kill. Your major scales-those over your breastplate and organs would be the last to fall.”

“How do you know all this when even I don’t?”

“I’m a gargoyle, Raven. First cousin to a dragon on our world.”

“There are no dragons on our world,” I said bitterly. “Not here, not on earth or anywhere. I’m destined to be alone forever.”

“Feeling sorry for yourself, Raven?” he questioned. “Perhaps, you have too much time on your hands. Julian asked if you could lend a hand with the harbor. It needs dredging and I told him you would be happy to help.”

“No,” I said softly. Then, more loudly. “NO! No, I’m not dredging the harbor, I’m not cutting down ship’s masts and I’m not burning off last year’s grass and weeds! I’m a bloody *Dragon* for God’s sake, not a fricking plow horse!”

I flew off back to the forest outside the castle and went to the Unicorn’s Bower to sulk. Once inside, not even Murphy could enter and I was blessedly alone. Since it was still daylight, I did not sleep nor was I bound by her enchantment.

She came to me, delicate, ethereal but all the same deadly, that sharp spiral horn ready to impale any threat.

“Mother,” I spoke and she sat back as she heard my voice as well as my thoughts. “Mother, what are the restrictions placed on this form?”

She dissolved and became the human woman I barely remembered from my childhood. “Raven, you are partially correct in your assumptions. Darkness is always a hazard for you as that is when my power wanes most and you are weakest. But your Dragon body is born of the Pattern as well as the Logrus so wherever it exists so do you exist. You will be able to function in darkness if your desire is strong enough. Where is it you wish to go?”

“Marcus has found, maybe, a way for me to become human again.”

“You were never human, Raven. You were born of Chaos and Amber. You only lived on the shadow earth but are not of it,” she returned softly.

“I want to be human, mother,” I said thinking of Roelle and her kisses. Of the portrait of me in her bedroom. I turned my agonized eye towards her face. “There’s not even hope for me as a Dragon! I’m one-of-a-kind! I can’t even find a mate!” She hugged me and to my surprise, her arms went around my chest, her head was tucked into my chin.

“I hold you here, Raven,” she soothed. “Here, you’re forever as I created you, as perfect as you ever were.”

“But, I’m not alive!” I cried out and left her. The moment my body left her bower, I became

the Black Dragon again.

Chapter 4

Midweek found me hiding from everyone, not an easy thing to do when you're a forty-foot Dragon. I solved the problem by convincing Marcus to shrink me down again so I could escape everyone's attention. I found out when both were leaving for the trip to her brother's wedding and sneaked a place among her things. The palace was in an uproar, after two days of my absence both Murphy and the King were frantic. Even Vialle could not hear my heart beats. As a bird sized Dragon, they must have been as rapid as a bird's.

To our dismay, Murphy ordered the wagon train emptied and searched even when Rinlon pointed out that there was no way I could hide in it. He even sent a magic diviner to test the animals to see if I'd been magicked to look like a horse. As if.

After a further fruitless day of searching, the party was allowed to leave with Murphy flying guard overhead. I stayed hidden until he left us after another day's travel. By the second night, I was dizzy from thirst and hunger. Barely managed to claw my way out of the barrel of oats that the wagon carried for the horses.

My ears heard the squeaking of mice below me and I set about hunting down a score of the tasty tidbits. At least in my smaller size I was more able to feed myself. Thus fortified, I zipped around the campsite stretching my wings.

The party consisted of two wagons, three drivers and four grooms to care for the two teams. A squad of guards, Roelle, Marcus and a valet/body servant for her. As if she needed help with her hair and toilette but she was, after all a Baron's daughter and would be treated as such. They had erected two tents, one for Roelle and the other for gear, cooking, saddles and equipment with the men sleeping under their own bedrolls. Which made it easy to reach Roelle but harder to associate with Marcus.

He was hugging one of the four campfires and doing most of the cooking. It was an orderly camp and even though Amber was safe from bandits and skullduggery, the Sergeant-at-arms had a patrol marching around the camp's boundaries. Between the bows, swords and pikes, I doubted anything but a Chaos Demon or Dragon could get through our lines.

I flew in the tent's smoke hole and nearly suffocated myself. My coughing fit brought the guard to Roelle's flap to inquire if she was all right.

"I swallowed wrong," she told the young soldier and let me land on her forearm. I folded my wings neatly alongside my body and preened. She brought me over to her cot where the oil lamp glowed and hissed.

"Where have you been? Marcus and I were worried sick. No one's seen you in three days," she whispered.

"I was hiding in the barrel of oats. Dry and dusty, too. I nearly died of hunger and thirst," I complained.

"Have you eaten?" She pointed to a bowl of stew and I picked through it pulling out the chunks of rabbit. Marcus' rabbit stew was delicious. I ate until my belly bulged and I burped.

"You little hog," she laughed. "You're going to bust open."

“You should try going without food, Roelle,” I snapped. “I did. Many times, my master starved me into compliance.”

“I didn’t know, Raven,” she said sadly. “You never told me what happened to you, you never had time. I asked your father and Prince Corwin but both of them told me to ask you, that if you wanted me to know you would tell me.”

“It was horrible, Roelle. He did things to me no human should have to experience.” I shut my memories on that segment of my life for that person no longer lived. “How do you plan on leaving your father’s estates and traveling to Khafra?”

“We thought you could Trump us there.”

I flew up to the roof vent on the thermal from her stove. Studied the inside of her tent, which was set up almost like a mini cabin. She even had a portable commode whereas the men had to make do with the woods. She’d packed light for herself but the wagon train was loaded with wedding gifts and would make a tempting target for any bandits. She was dressed in sensible riding breeches, leather jerkin and vest and I’d seen her wearing a fur-trimmed cape on the frosty mornings.

“Where are we headed?” I asked. Even though I had flown over every inch of Amber, I didn’t know the lay of the land. I knew vaguely that her father’s barony lay somewhere to the west over the Beautiful Mountains, the direct opposite from the Forest of Arden.

Roelle got up, went to a leather satchel that was draped over a chair and pulled out a neatly folded map on vellum. She spread it flat on her table and used the bowl of stew, her oil lamp and a shoe to hold it down.

“We’re here,” she pointed to a valley on the far right and I could just see the borders of Amber’s city. Arden was just a few trees at the far left of the map. “The Plains of Argose separate the first ridges of the mountains. The river Aar that we’ll cross at Dindeen. The towns of Argent, Vanadium and Elthold. The Marketplace and the Horse Clans. Lastly, the Barony of Loest. It’ll be a two-week journey unless we push it.”

“I can’t Trump us there because I’ve never been, haven’t seen it or even own a set of Trumps,” I answered her first question at last. “I don’t have any pockets in my Dragon suit.”

She laughed. “So I see. Nor in your birthday suit. Don’t worry, Raven. We’ll figure out how to fix you.”

“I hope so, Roelle,” I sighed and searched for a safe place to sleep. Scooted up onto the tent flap when someone knocked on the tent pole. The flap opened to reveal Marcus with his cape over his shoulders.

“Come in, Marcus,” Roelle said rolling her eyes. He threw himself into her chair and babbled away until she told him to be quiet so she could finally understand him.

“Where is he? I know he’s here, I sensed the magic he leaves behind. I’m worried; I haven’t seen him in days.”

“Raven,” she called and I flew down to land on the table in front of him. He noticed the map.

“Oh. Were you showing him the way to Khafra? It’s not on this map. Where have you been hiding, Raven? Have you eaten? Where are you staying? You can’t let anyone see you or they’ll

send you back.”

“Marcus, no one can send me anywhere. Have you forgotten I’m a dragon?” I returned hopping from foot to foot.

“You’re a pint-size Dragon, Raven,” he pointed out. “And not exactly scary or omnipotent at this size.” I bit his finger and he yelped, knocking over the lamp, which I caught before he could set the place on fire.

“Idiot!” I hissed and blew a flame hot enough to scorch his shirt. “Great partners in crime, you two. I’m lucky if I make it out of the district. Now, I’m going to sleep. Try not to burn the tent down, incite a riot or spell my whereabouts to the guard.”

“Where are you going to sleep, Raven?” Roelle asked.

“Someplace warm.” I snuggled my way under her covers to the foot of her cot, turned a few times and made myself a nest. I heard Marcus’ grumblings, Roelle’s light laughter and shut everything out as I slipped into a delicious languor. I didn’t make more than a mild protest when two cold feet stuck themselves onto my back. I wasn’t too long after that my body heat rapidly warmed her to toasty. She didn’t move much and I slept tightly wound into a coil so that I resembled nothing so much as a ball of black scales. Not that anyone would catch me sleeping.

I woke before anyone else. Except perhaps for the two guards whose turn it was to patrol. Just before the sun rose and too early to be called dawn, I pushed my way up past Roelle’s spread-eagled form and went hunting for breakfast.

I was large enough to take down birds and small enough to worry about owls but even though I saw them, my smell or strangeness warned them away. I dined on mourning dove and woodcock, even a smallish turkey although I had to struggle to lift it.

Coming back to camp, I watched from a branch atop a lonesome pine as they began to stir. First up were the teamsters, feeding and caring for their stock. Next, the company clerk who whipped up the fires and began breakfast after putting tea and coffee onto boil. Last, to stir were the soldiers who had pulled first guard duty. I was surprised to see both Marcus and Roelle up at first light. He busied himself with chores, carrying water buckets, kindling and buckets of oats before he went to help cook.

Roelle’s maid tried to help her dress but she sent the woman away to do her own needs. When I was sure she was alone, I flew down to land on her arm.

“Good morning, Raven,” she greeted and stretched. “Are you hungry?”

“Good morning, Roelle,” I said enjoying the sight of her supple body in linen shift, bare feet and unbound hair. She looked fresh and dewy, heavy eyed and sensual. I wanted desperately to kiss her. She planted a feathery touch on my chest before I could blink. “That’s for keeping my feet toasty warm last night, Raven. I’m starving. Care to see what’s for breakfast?”

“Cold rabbit stew, probably,” I grinned, my heart as light as a wizard’s promise.

“Do you mean to show yourself?”

“You think they’ll recognize me or think I’m some strange forest bird?” I countered.

“Wait until we’re a week out. It’ll be too late to return you by then. You can ride on my saddlebow under my cloak. Or do you prefer to fly?”

“Let me scout around,” I decided. “I can keep an eye out ahead for you; make sure we’re safe from any bandits. Although, the roads have been safe for months since Murphy and I decimated that band of highwaymen.”

“You and Murphy have made Amber safe for all her travelers,” she agreed.

“Are you excited to be going home, Roelle?” I was surprised when her face fell and she hesitated.

“You know my youngest brother is the last to marry.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I fear that my parents will set their sights on me next,” she whispered. The thought twisted my stomach. I did not like the idea.

“Who? Anyone in particular?” I knew such marriages were usually for political gain and arranged. Although no one would force her but her parents could make her life miserable if they so choose. Vialle’s marriage to Random had been arranged. Just lucky that they’d fallen in love. I wanted that for me, I wanted to experience everything that someone my age would have been destined to experience. All that had been taken from me from me almost at my very birth.

“Roelle, no one will make you marry anyone you don’t love. I swear it on my Dragon blood and bones,” I bowed and such was the magic of that vow that it rippled forth throughout the tent, the camp and the clearing. Everyone felt it and as the sounds of the camp ceased, Roelle turned frightened eyes on me.

“Everyone will know magic is done here, Raven.”

Marcus bolted into the tent. “Raven? Did you do that?” More faces joined him before I could fly off and surprised voices raised in tone. They proclaimed Marcus as the wielder of spells assuming he had conjured me to his whim. I let him take the credit; it was as good an explanation that I could’ve come up with and so I rode on the wagons, on Roelle’s saddlebow and flew rounds to help the soldiers.

Chapter 5

The trip was pleasant enough, our pace restricted to what the draft team could pull in one day. Some five leagues in all. We could take time out at evening to fish the streams and walk the laybys off the main road. Marcus and a guard remained close while Roelle picked herbs to dry for her apothecary jars.

Some nights, Marcus cooked for us. His fresh brook trout with wild fennel was divine and I ate enough for two grown men. When they complained that I hadn’t left much for them to sample, I went fishing and dropped four fat trout at their feet. That shut them up. I took to supplementing our meals with turkey, pheasant, rabbit and woodcock caught in my taloned hands.

The week passed quickly and I enjoyed the time spent without the constant supervision and the myriad chores that my keepers had kept me occupied in doing so that my mind had no time to brood.

Roelle’s mount was her favorite, a pale rose-colored gelding that took my fluttering, coming and goings with equal aplomb. I was resting on the saddle when the first people started to walk

into sight, sharing the road with us. Farmers and the like on the way to market.

They studied the men's livery and recognized it, which brought smiles to their faces. They were obviously glad to see Amber's military presence. In fact, they said so chattering with the guard and asking many questions especially when they saw me. I kept quiet. It was bad enough that they saw me at all, let alone heard me speak. I wasn't exactly an everyday item.

Offers came to spend the night in town at one of the many comfortable inns and to sample food cooked inside instead of out. I thought that maybe they were hoping we had goods to sell. Roelle just smiled and said we were on our way home for a wedding.

I was nearly as excited about seeing another village instead of trees and woods that I fairly buzzed like a beecatcher. We came into town on a road that met at a cross junction, cobblestoned and guttered so that the rain drew off to the sides and kept the lane dry and mud free.

Flowers had been planted in half barrels along the way and for the last mile into town. The village itself was pretty with neat little two story cottages that met over the avenues and connected both above and below. Trees were part of the sidewalks, which were bricked or cobblestoned. In short, it resembled those quaint Swiss villages seen on our travels through Europe. It smelled good, too. Fresh baked bread, cinnamon rolls and pork roasting on a spit.

Our guide drove the wagons through to the hostlers and put the animals up before he took us all to a charming inn whose curtains blew in the slight breeze.

Roelle chattered happily saying she couldn't wait for a bath and to wash her hair. Marcus rolled his eyes and ask if I wanted to visit a few taverns. Remembering the last time we'd done so, I hesitated.

"Oh come on, you're a Dragon," he pouted. "What could happen?"

I looked at the curious crowd that were eyeballing me and climbed up to hide in the folds of his hood. "Okay then, Roelle. We're off for a pint or two. When you're done bathing, let's go eat."

"As if you'll be sober enough," she snorted and entered the doors of the Jolly Maiden. "Meet me back here at dark," she called out from the second story window. "Our rooms are 2B and 2C."

"Got it, see you," I called and pinched his ear.

"Owww!" He complained. "What did you do that for?"

"Stop being a baby," I said and he stomped off to find the nearest tavern. The crowd of kids followed us right inside pestering Marcus with questions about me. Was I a pet? What was I called? Were there more of me and how much did I cost. Would he sell me? What did I eat? One little girl wanted to know if I was dangerous. Marcus answered all their queries patiently and lied on every one. Unfortunately, he made me even more rare and exotic than I already was. The only thing he didn't tell them was that I could talk or that I was a human stuck in a Dragon form or was a real Dragon. He told them that I was a wyvern, a recent hatchling from the shadow called Hades. This was where parents told their children they would go if they misbehaved. The land of goblins, orcs and shadow creatures, which they were well aware, were real, as Eric had opened Amber up to them. Demons drawn in by shadow storms caused by a blight on the Primal Pattern, they had wreaked havoc on the peaceful villagers until my grandfather Corwin had staged an ill-

fated coup. No one had seen anyone or anything like it since Random had been crowned and the Pattern rebuilt.

The inside of the Vigilant Vintner looked like an ordinary Irish bar with comfortable leather benches, booths, tables and a long granite countertop behind which stood the bartender. She was a lady, buxom and with a no-nonsense manner. She had arms like Popeye's; I wouldn't wager I'd win in a wrestling match. She greeted Marcus and shooed all the kids out as she tossed a beer bottle down the counter top towards him. He caught it deftly and I crawled out of his hood.

"Pink wine for my friend," he ordered and she just nodded pouring a wine glass full. I buried my head in up to my horns and inhaled. Sweet, fruity and full of bubbles, I drank half the glass in one swallow and savored the rest. Marcus sipped at his beer and sat at the bar on one of those tall stools that had always annoyed me. When I was younger and short, I could never climb on without Murphy's help.

"Your friend have a name?" She asked and Marcus turned his attention from the small crowd in the bar. Most of them were townspeople with a few farmers and some soldier types minus any uniform insignia so were probably mercenaries for hire. Although, there were slim pickings in the area, no skirmishes and no highwayman left after Murphy and I had decimated the brigand bands.

"Raven? He's a wyvern, a hatchling from a clutch I found last spring. They're like a miniature Dragon, more like a lizard really. Cute pets but their temperaments are a bit difficult," he returned. I hissed at him and burped. With so much wine down my throat, it came out a puff of rose scented smoke.

"Oh how cute," she cooed. "He blows smoke rings. Is he for sale?"

"No. We've been through much together. He's like my...brother," Marcus stated. Three of the mercenaries stared at him but their interest flagged when Sgt. Pire walked in the bar with two of his squad. His eyes dissected the occupants and judged them before he stood at our side and ordered a beer. He spoke softly so that only Marcus could hear him.

"The creature's attracting all the wrong attention, son. The Lord Mayor wants to see it." He stared at me, a thoughtful look on his face and I kept my good eye towards him. "Tis passing strange we haven't seen hide nor hair of Prince Raven before we'd left Amber, is it not, Marcus?"

I swallowed the rest of my wine, belched and fell over as if I were drunk. Marcus reacted quickly, scooping me up and covering me. "Poor thing, he can't hold his liquor," he stuttered. "I'd best get him back to his cage."

"Where did you get the creature, Marcus?"

"I conjured him from a spell, Sergeant. The same one that I used to make those rabbits turn into flying cats."

"It's a good thing you've made progress, boy. Can you imagine pigs flying? Still, the thing looks like Raven, just in miniature. You haven't done something you'll regret, have you Marcus?"

"No, Sgt. Pire. Never. I would never hurt Raven or Roelle. I swear by my heart's blood," he said, his face as open and honest as his heart.

The Sergeant stared at him for a beat and then said, "Good. For if you did, Marcus, I would have to kill you." With that, he ushered Marcus out and back to the Inn where we spent an uncomfortable hour in the dining room eating under the watchful eyes of the Sergeant and Roelle's companion.

I had perked up as soon as the fresh air hit me and flown away to both of their protests telling Marcus I was going hunting for my own dinner. I had in mind a nice chicken on the wing and figured I could snatch one or two hens without causing too much of a commotion.

Pleasantly full, I flew back over the town and felt that dragging sensation that told me the sun was soon to set and I need to be somewhere safe and secure.

Roelle's room was lit and I could hear her singing. When I flew in, she was in her bathtub washing her hair. She smelled wonderful and was a sight to make me drool. Rosy cheeked and pink, covered with soft foamy bubbles, white shouldered and soft rounded arms with the rest left to my fevered imagination. I sighed and it conveyed longing, dismay and despair. She acted as if I were no more than her pet dog. "Hi, Raven. Did you have a good time? Ready for dinner?"

She climbed out and wrapped herself in a plush towel while Lily, her companion helped her into a robe and dried her hair. I crawled up the bed skirts and buried myself in the comforter suddenly exhausted and despondent. She cradled me. Her hands were warm as they stroked me and beads of pearly water dripped onto my scales.

"What's wrong, Raven?"

I was desperate to tell her and afraid to. Instead, I said, "I'm far away from the magic of the Unicorn's Bower. I'm afraid the enchantment will fade and with it, me."

"Oh Raven. Do you want to go back? If you're in danger, that's what we should do."

"Roelle, I—" I paused. "I would rather cease to exist than know I can never hold you again."

"No, Raven. As long as you are live, there's hope for you. After all you've lived through, I believe that Fate will reward you with your deepest wish." She kissed me gently on the head. "Sleep, my Prince and dream of those days when we were only mortal." I obeyed her, barely heard her leave the room but was aware when she returned to join me on the bed where we slept until the dawn.

Chapter 6

We spent only a few hours past dawn in the village, just long enough to restock those things we'd used up already, like oats and fodder for the horses. I stayed close to Roelle and Marcus and our trip passed quickly. From the town, several others followed us on the road. After two days in our company, they left us at the fork, which Sgt. Pire said went to the next largest town on Roelle's map. Good-sized, it had a port on the River Wick that led to the Golden Sea where most folk left for Erebnor and Cabra. Having spent months at the lighthouse, I vaguely knew its direction. I was glad to see them go, they'd been entirely too interested in both the wagon train and me. Of course, anyone thinking to take on the King's guard and a dragon had to be insane.

We finally pulled into the Barony of Loest in the late afternoon. I saw a respectable manor house too small to be called a Castle and yet too large to be anything but an estate. Four stories and built of rose red stones, it sat against a mountain outcrop somewhat reminiscent of a fat

mushroom. In a charming way. A moat and a drawbridge surrounded it and throngs of people lined the roadway up towards the gates. I was surprised to learn that the mountain split behind the place and opened up into a nice little village protected on all three sides by the rock walls. Good-sized farm holdings were inside the canyon, a village of over a thousand with a lake large enough to serve the entire system and a river that came up from under the mountain walls.

A perfect place to defend against a much larger army. Later, after I had met Roelle's family, I had flown over the escarpment and realized that only a determined and trained elite force could climb in and attack from up there. So they were relatively safe from all but Chaos demons.

Her brothers and parents came out to greet her. Hugs and handshakes were given all around even extending to Marcus and the Sergeant. I learned he'd come from the neighborhood and was sorely missed. At last, we were ushered inside the house and her parents turned to me.

"What is it, Roelle?" The Baron asked, eyes alight with wonder. "We heard you are great friends with the Black Dragon. Is this his fledgling?"

Marcus answered for her. "It is a fledgling wyvern from a far shadow, Sir Rouen. I conjured it with a spell and it is bonded to Roelle or me. With anyone else, it would simply fly off and revert back to its world."

"Is it dangerous? Intelligent?" Her mother asked.

"Very intelligent and not too dangerous. I have impressed upon him not to hurt any children, pets or livestock while he is here," Marcus added.

"Good. Will you see to his food or shall we?"

"He feeds himself. In fact, he is the best mouser and vermin catcher you've ever seen. He sleeps with Roelle at night and toilets himself like a cat," Marcus explained and I hissed threatening to pinch his nose. "He's a bit bashful, too," Marcus laughed. I followed behind as we were escorted into the house nearly as grand as my grandfather's San Francisco mansion. We parted ways from Marcus as Roelle went towards one of the tower rooms that she told me had been hers. Servants and children came out to greet her, leaving hugs and glad cries behind. Once her door finally closed on the feminine room of brass bed, cedar chest, cherry wardrobe and blazing fireplace, she threw herself onto the mattress to stare up at the carved ceiling panels. There were unicorns, fairies, elves, sprites and other fanciful creature staring back.

"Your parents and family are nice, Roelle," I said tentatively. I'd seen all seven brothers at the castle and remember the youngest from there. He'd looked happy and very glad to see his sister, inviting her to meet his fiancé later.

"They are," she said briefly. I could tell she was worried.

"What's wrong, Roelle?"

"Did you see the collection of boys?" I had noticed the unusual amount of young men there to greet us but hadn't thought any more about it.

"So?"

"It's my parents' way of hinting to me it's time I chose someone for myself," she said unhappily.

"Anyone you like in particular?" I asked carefully and she sat up to throw a pillow at me. I

dodged it.

“Raven, how could you? You know how I feel about you!”

Sighing, I shook my head and landed on her knees. She cradled me in her palms and brought me to her cheek resting my blind side against her delicate skin.

“Roelle, as long as I’m in this form, there can’t be anything between us. You know that and as far as we know, I’m stuck this way... forever.”

Her eyes blazed brighter than my own. “I refuse to believe that, Raven. Marcus will find a way to help us. I know that. I went to the wishing well and asked for my heart’s desire. It showed me you, Raven. *You*, not the Black Dragon but *you*. Not *you*, the teenage boy who died but a mature, noble adult in a suit such as Prince Corwin wore standing between your father and grandfather. I believe in that vision and you should, too.”

A servant knocked on her door to announce the evening meal would be served in an hour’s time and her lady’s maid would be up to help her dress, as it was formal. Roelle rolled her eyes and within minutes, a veritable horde was inside preparing a bath, clothes and toilette for a noble’s daughter. I observed the whole proceedings from my perch upon her blanket rack with both hind legs wrapped tightly on the wooden bar. Sitting up like a pet monkey.

Her people watched me out of the corners of their eyes, curiosity making them bold. They asked many questions about me and she answered politely. When asked what presents she had brought from Amber, she waxed eloquently and they were suitably impressed. She did not have any idea what my own gift was, only that Murphy had carefully and secretly packed it into a chest marked ‘for the bridegroom from the Black Dragon’. That crate had been especially fussed over by the guards to ensure it was protected and secured.

When she was done dressing (and it had taken nearly an hour from start to finish), she was breathtaking in a powder blue gown with a trailing skirt, lace sleeves and square neckline. Her hair was up in loose curls with a king’s ransom in jewels woven through it and gigantic pearls on her ears. A choker of blue pearls wrapped her neck and she had hung from it a delicate seashell carved by the Queen. Random had given her a black onyx diadem shaped like a dragon with wings that she wore on her forehead. I swallowed, in awe at her beauty and poise.

“Wow!” I said unable not to and the crowd around her gaped at me.

“It speaks? Roelle, Lady Roelle, it speaks?” One of the older women gasped.

“Like a parrot,” she said swiftly. “It repeats what he hears. Good morning, my dear.” She prompted.

“Morning,” I said and wiped at my snout as I’d seen an Amazon Gray do. “Morning, morning, morning.”

“Pretty boy, aren’t you, Raven?” She cooed.

“Pretty boy.” I rolled my one eye and flapped off following discreetly behind as they escorted her to the Grande salon where they dined and en famille. If you considered forty people family. Everyone was introduced to each other. We ate a meal fit for a king and the ladies retired to do those things ladies did while men smoked, drank and bullshitted. I remained atop the corbels of the huge hall hiding on a gargoyle’s face that reminded me of Murphy. I eavesdropped I admit, because I was nosy. Most of the conversation was about Amber, Court, me and whether Roelle

had an eye for any young man. Marcus was never considered because he was only a chef's son. Which pissed me off because he was honest, caring, and hardworking, just as worthy as any so-called noble's son. The discussion turned to Khafra and the unrest that was starting between Amber and Luke, Khafra's newly crowned King. It seemed he was a friend of my father's, he'd known him since his college days. I wasn't sure what the conflict was over – whether it was between King Luke and his subjects or some other claimant to the throne or against Amber and Random. I did hear that they had sent a present to Roelle's brother's wedding. His name was Lambrecht by the way and she had told me he'd been called Lamby until he beat the last one to call him that. I'd asked if it had been her and she frowned at me.

“When I was twelve,” she muttered. “Not since then. He pulled out my hair.”

Dinner was over and the socializing quit about midnight before everyone departed for the respective bedrooms. It took me a while to track Marcus down, as his status wasn't obvious. On Ro's insistence, he'd been given a room inside the house and not with the soldiers or servants. In fact, he was two doors down from Ro's companion. I found his door shut and wasn't sure which window was his from the outside so I climbed up the molding to hang halfway up and thumped my legs on the door.

“Who is it?” He called.

“Raven.”

“Oh.” I heard him rustling and presently, he opened the door to scoop me off it before he shut it behind us. His room was small, neat and done in oak mellowed to a golden finish with a snug bunk, chair, table and running water in a small privy. He had oil lamps and one small window that faced the valley with the villagers reside in. No balcony for him. Still, it was more than a maid's garret. The fireplace was busily burning the bluestone I used to feed my flames. Every so often, a chute opened and poured more onto the flames. It was modern considering Amber was a near feudal realm. The room was toasty and he was in his long handles with his hair wet.

“Shower,” he said grinning. “With hot water.” He showed me and I was surprised at the modern conveniences. The Baron was quite modern, even had flush toilets and sewage pipes. “His eldest son designed it. After seeing Amber and the Castle,” he explained. “What's up?” He had picked up a few of my sayings, too.

“Just checking to see if they're treating you properly.” I said. I cocked my head as I heard the squeaking of a mouse. Before I could even think about it, I ducked, caught and ate it. Marcus blanched.

“Well, it tastes good,” I defended. “It's not like I can eat pheasant under glass anymore.”

“I drew the line at watching you bite off a cow's head,” he shuddered.

“Yeah, well my meat doesn't come wrapped in plastic and pink Styrofoam,” I retorted.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. When is this wedding? And when are we leaving for Khafra?”

“The wedding is this weekend. I thought maybe you had some ideas how we can get to Khafra. I know you told Roelle you can't Trump there. What if you had a set?”

“Marcus, you didn't!” I said astonished. Corwin would kill him.

“Let’s say I could get a set,” he hedged. “Would you use it?”

“It wouldn’t help, Marcus. There’s no trump for Khafra in any sets that I’ve ever seen.”

“But there is a set with Luke’s portrait on one,” he grinned.

I gaped. “You stole my dad’s set?”

“Well, he wasn’t using them,” he protested laughing. “So, I thought we could.”

“You have a plan?”

“I thought we’d stay until just after the wedding and when the couple leaves for their new estates, we’d offer to go part of the way with them. Once out of sight of the party, we could trump us all to Khafra before anyone could do anything to stop us,” he offered.

“Best to do it right after the ceremony when everyone is busy with the new couple and gifts. No one will be paying attention to us,” I suggested.

“Sounds good. Are you comfortable at this size? I can turn you back –”

“No,” I decided. “The sight of my forty feet of Dragon body would race home to the Castle and before you know it, Dad, Granddad and King Random would all be on the doorstep. As it is, I’m already a sensational topic around here. They heard me speak.”

“Oh no! What did you say?”

“Pretty boy, good morning,” I snickered and flew off to hear him laugh at me. I knew he’d get the whole story from Roelle.

Chapter 7

The wedding was held outdoors to accommodate the immense crowds that had journeyed from hundreds of miles away to participate. Gaily patterned tents bedecked the fields and woods so thickly that it seemed as if the forest was attired in silk. Flowers and ribbons were everywhere and the contestants were dressed to rival an Emperor.

The bride was a lovely young lady with summer green eyes and ebony hair; she wore a simple gown of white lace with green roses in her hair.

Lambrecht looked regal in a blue suit with plain gold braid (he was a captain in Amber’s cavalry) and he wore a smile as bright as a shiny new medal. The two were married by a High Bishop of Amber’s only official religion (the Unicorn) and were promised long life, great wealth and a happy marriage. They danced, drank and ate like every wedding I’d ever attended and I learned the lineage and history of his bride. Her name was Lynette, she was the youngest daughter of a well-to-do merchant Lord from one of the Golden Treaty Shadows and Lambrecht had met her when she’d come to Amber with her father to discuss the revised treaty with newly crowned Random. She didn’t look more than nineteen, just about Roelle’s age. Luckily, that had been before my time so she’d never seen me as Raven or the Dragon.

After a big meal and dancing to wear it off, the wedding party was seated in a small gazebo and the gifts were carted in. I was surprised at the amount and the variety of the gifts. Each one was joyously and gratefully accepted from a chest of new linen to a dozen sapling fruit trees. Random had sent the Sergeant with his trained men as the start of a newly married Lord’s Armory and the weapons to match. Last to be unpacked was my crate and as soon as the writing

on it was read, anticipation made the air as thick as London fog.

Carefully and reverently, the young husband opened the silk wrapped package to hold up a medium-sized shield. Plain, black, it shimmered in the sunshine like a diamond. There were a thousand gasps. Some of awe, some of envy. His eyes filled with tears and I saw both Marcus and Roelle turn to look for me.

“Roelle,” he stuttered, at a loss. “Such a gift is priceless. Did you ask for this?”

“No, dear brother. That is the kind of...creature my Black Dragon is,” her eyes were suspiciously bright.

“I would hug you, sister so that you can convey my heartfelt thanks to your great friend.”

“He knows, Lambrecht,” she whispered. “He knows.”

He kept it at his side the rest of the evening and at last light, I went hunting down the valley back towards the roads. Taking only a small bird, I tore to pieces and ate neatly before returning towards the mansion. I spotted a fluttering form on the ground and dipped low to check it out. As I landed, I saw a rabbit flopping on its side; it's back obviously broken and unable to crawl away. I wasn't hungry yet I wouldn't leave it to suffer.

With one clawed foot, I held it down and used my front legs to put it out of its misery. Rather than leave it, I hooked my hind legs, mouth in its pelt, and struggled up. I heard a zipping sound on my blind side and saw something shoot off to my left. Nets converged on me. I flapped harder, tried to spit out the fur but the net collapsed forcing me to the ground.

I dropped the rabbit and tore the lines with talons and teeth but before I'd gotten very far, men ran out of the dark and pinioned me. I bit several, actually tore off fingers but I was weakening as the sun had gone down. I started to say the words that would've transformed me back to my original size but one of them wrapped a leather thong about my snout while another tied my legs and hands together pinioning my wings. I shrieked and cursed them yet all that emerged were incoherent mumbles.

They dumped me in a sack and thumped it several times until I was dazed. Slung me over a shoulder and presently, tied me onto a saddle. My keeper mounted and we galloped a twisting winding way through the forests until I could no longer remain conscious. I slept, unable to do anything else.

When morning came, I opened my one eye to find myself lying on my back, still tied and muzzled inside the steel barred cage. It smelled as if the last occupants had been chickens and were none too clean. I was thirsty, hungry, and incredibly angry. Struggling, I twisted and turned trying to get the rope off me.

In the morning light I could see the faces of the men who had had abducted me. Clean-shaven, well dressed and not your average brigand or thief. These looked like professional men, soldiers or mercenaries.

“What are you, little Dragon?” He mused. “You must be hungry. I know you eat meat or you wouldn't have gone for the rabbit.”

I waited for him to remove the snout thong to feed me. Once freed, I would speak Marcus's phrase and teach these idiots a thing or two about dragons.

Instead, he pulled out an eyedropper, stuck it into the corner of my jaw and pushed in a meaty broth of rabbit and beef juice. I swallowed eagerly glad to quiet the demon monster in my belly.

“Good? More?” I found myself nodding. “You’re quite the smart little fellow, aren’t you? I heard that about you. Also, that you can speak. Are you related to Random’s Black Dragon?”

“Take off the muzzle,” I said and he stared at me.

“Dieterhof, I swear it spoke. I can almost understand it,” he said over shoulder.

“Well, we don’t need it to conjure any spells. Can you feed it; keep it alive until we reach the rendezvous with it muzzled?”

“I suppose. It takes food by eyedropper; it’s sort of like feeding a wild tiercel.” He poked at my ribs with an index finger. “He’s fleshed properly, not too much fat or too thin. Pretty thing, isn’t he?”

The other men snorted. “Have you seen Jason and Rowley? They don’t think so, minus their fingers, a nose and then, there’s Ben. He’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Your ‘pretty thing’ slashed his throat with those shiny claws and nearly disemboweled him, also. I heard the boy say he wasn’t dangerous but I beg to differ. He’s clearly a wizard or warlord’s fighting creature. Here.” He tossed over a small hood and a bag of leather closed with a thong.

The man holding my cage caught both by dropping the cage but it didn’t hit the ground. It jerked to a stop and swung on the end of the chain to revolve around a small clearing in the woods, an obvious skulkers lair. There was a rude hut built of fat sticks so that it provided a clear view between them and a small campfire that lit only a two-foot circle and probably couldn’t be seen more than a few feet into the trees. The men were dressed in good clothes, not rough or torn as if they were homeless or vagabonds. Their weapons were also expensive and up to date. Someone was paying them or they had a rich customer in mind.

He opened the pouch and I smelled something that sent a pang of fear up my backbone. It was filled with a powder that Roelle had once pointed out to me – a combination of deadly herbs that caused a mind to detach from the body so that another could control the intended receiver.

“No!” I shrieked and managed to roll over. I tried desperately to yell the words to release me from this toy Dragon form but couldn’t open my mouth wide enough to get my tongue around the consonants. He hesitated and the other men closed ranks to stand shoulder to shoulder with him. His eyes were round.

“It speaks! That was clearly a word. Say it again. Do you speak? Do you understand me?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I panted and drool dribbled onto my chest. It sounded more like ‘eth, eth, eth’ but they understood me. “Pleth, et e o. ‘Ant eathe.”

“Do you have a name? Are you an enchanted creature? Not a human spelled into this form?” He paused. “Do you breathe fire?”

“Orel,” I managed trying to say Corbel the name my master had given me. “No, no, eth.”

“Hmnn,” he said and threw a pinch in my face. Yellow glitters drifted over me, falling softly towards my eye, nose and snout. Desperate, I managed to snort a feeble puff of smoke and heat

blowing most of the stuff away but some landed on my chest and legs. Crawling. Crawling up towards my face. I smashed my head against the bars trying desperately to escape the yellow slime but he grabbed me by the horns and puffed more right into my eye. The world spiraled away. Everything I ever knew was lost in the great gray void, which had no up or down, day or night, no reference at all. I knew who I was but I didn't care. I drifted, lost in a limbo where nothing existed but my loneliness, my loss and my despair. I lacked even the will to die let alone live.

When morning came, I blinked slowly and sat up inside the rude little chicken hutch. I was no longer tied like a roaster but the gag was still on. Slowly I raised a front leg and pulled it off to yawn and stretch my jaws. Several pairs of eyes watched me. I was cold and shivered, stoked up my furnace and blew a stream of flames at the fire causing it to blaze into a bonfire. Heat reached me and I turned my backside to it soaking up the warmth. They sat up and watched me. The one I had heard called Dieterhof was the leader and he came forward with my rabbit in his hand. "Hungry?"

"Yesss," I hissed and opened my wings. Like my forty-foot size, my wings were and the largest part of me and. He pushed the rabbit through the bars and I tore it apart, enjoying the taste of flesh but alas, no blood. There wasn't a scrap of hide nor hair left when I was done.

"Water?"

"Wine, if you have it," I said and he brought me a wineskin. I stared at him until he poured me a tankard, which I emptied swiftly. I was parched and didn't stop until the skin was emptied.

"Your name?"

"Raven," I burped and slowly closed my eyes, settled back on my haunches and rested my forearms on my belly. I felt mellow.

"Named for the Prince?"

"I am the Prince." My statement brought utter silence.

They packed up after that, caught me up, rebound me and carried me inside his cloak on his chest. The warmth of his body and the motion of his horse lulled me to sleep with dreams that haunted me yet did not let me escape them into wakefulness. They rode hard and long as if they expected others to follow them. I heard and saw nothing from inside his cloak. He smelled of sweat and horse but also, something else. An elusive whisper of a sharp tang that seemed familiar. I spent hours trying to unlock its puzzle.

Days passed. We rode. We stopped. He fed, watered and toileted me. I spent hours in the cage at night and confined in woolen folds during the day. I spoke little and merely existed. They met no others nor did they ride the main roads, preferring to travel the forest paths now made safe by King Random's patrols.

Finally, we emerged onto a broad lane bordered on both sides by a serpentine fence made of locust poles and exes. Knee-high grass grew beyond until the meadow reached the tree line again. Cow like creatures grazed within and when they saw us, they lifted their horned heads and lowed. Bells around their necks rang out a rough melody.

Dust on the lane stirred under their horses' hooves. I stretched my neck out from under his cape and stared. The sky here was a deep, even lime green and the trees had a strange orange tint

almost as if the leaves were already changing yet I saw not one hint of green anywhere on any tree. The grass wasn't green, either but a deep maroon and the sky made my entire captors look faintly greenish and ill.

"Where are we?" I asked dully.

"Borderlands between Amber and Khafra," Dieterhof stated.

"How?"

"Our employer gave us a bit of magic to aid us," he answered briefly.

"Who? Who aided you?"

His eyes watched me carefully. "The King, King Luke." I was silent digesting why my father's friend would want to kidnap me. I had no answer that left me with anything other than unease.

Chapter 8

Next, we were aboard a ship sailing up the coastline on a three masted schooner. They had boarded the horses in the hold and paid for two cabins as they carried me inside a smaller birdcage just large enough for me to squat but not lie down. It was kept covered constantly as long as we were around people and for the most part, I hadn't seen daylight in days. He was careful about feeding and watering me. Every three days, he repeated the yellow powder forcing it down my throat with a bolus even though I didn't fight it.

The cabin was small, barely big enough for one man and it held a bunk, a metal stove to produce heat and boil a kettle. There was a chamber pot, a small porthole he kept locked and covered with a rag. In the door was a bloody big iron key. His cabin connected with the other man's and the rest of his crew slept in the hold or on deck.

He let me out once he locked us in and I wobbled on all fours as I felt the rocking motion of the deck. "Where are we going?" I asked and my voice came out like the squeak of a catbird. I cleared my throat and felt very odd. Almost insubstantial. I felt lighter, too. He frowned and poked me in the ribs, it hurt. He scooped up several pieces of black lint.

"You're shedding scales and you're thinner. Do you need to eat more? Are you hungry?" My appetite was gone. I hung my head between my legs and let my wings drag on the floor. "What ails you, Raven?" He seemed concerned and he called the other man in. I learned his name was Owfan but that Dieterhof was the leader.

"I'm too far from the Unicorn," I answered.

"And?"

"The spell that animates me is weakening. Soon, I'll be no more," I answered understanding that I had traveled far from my safety zone and Amber. I worried suddenly about Roelle and Marcus, if they had made it home or more frightening – that they would try to find me.

"You'll die?" Owfan asked sharply.

"I'm not really alive," I returned sadly. "This body is only a magic spell."

"Who are you then? What are you?"

I hesitated and knew that I should lie. Was amazed that I could even contemplate such an

action. "My name is Raven. I am what is left of the Prince of Chaos."

"You died. Were buried, I attended your funeral and saw you lie in state. I saw the Black Dragon, too." He paused astonished. "He, too, was blind in his right eye." He turned to Dieterhof. "Could it be? We have the great Black Dragon of Amber in our hands? Tell me the truth; are you one and the same?"

"Yesss. But it will avail you nothing if I cease to exist."

"We can't take you back to Amber," he shook his head. "Mayhap, one of the King's Witches could heal you. His mother is a learned witch and can transform things. Can you turn yourself back into your larger self?" At my nod, he asked puzzled, "why haven't you, then?"

"Because you didn't tell me to."

"Can you fly? Carry the two of us? To Khafra?"

"I'm not sure," I said uneasily.

He scooped me up, kicked open the door and carried me up to the foredeck to the utter astonishment of the crew who stopped what they were doing to watch us. He laid me on the deck and stepped back. "Do it," he said but tethered me by the neck with a leather thong.

"When I change, that will either break or strangle me," I said lifting my head to sniff the air. The wind snapped the sails and I wondered vaguely whether the ship was large enough to hold my weight. He cut the thong and freed me.

"Gigantum alternus!" I chanted and in seconds, I was back to my regular size. Scooting my head down, I shoved the two onto my back and leaped off into the skies to follow the coastline up. After their initial terror, the two relaxed enough to enjoy themselves. I enjoyed the flying and being back in my own body but I sensed a physical weakness that had not been there before. My Dragon wings made short work of the distance that the ship traveled in the same time. Shadows followed me, the long shape of my wings and body proclaiming that 'here be dragons'.

After a few hours, they actually fell asleep and I dropped lower to nearly skim the surface of the water. I could see dolphins following me, leaping out of the water to flirt with me. I dipped my head and neck into the water and trolled for fish catching schools of them and filling my guts.

The sun was a blazing orb under the greenish sky when I saw the beginnings of the city spread out along the three sides of the harbor. Beautiful, full of spires and as fancy as a Disneyland Park, it was aglow in the setting sun.

The Castle was impressive and built along the lines of the Minoan Palace at Knossos. Dieterhof set me down in a courtyard and all hell broke loose. Guards appeared from everywhere armed to the teeth. The horses in the stable yard panicked and tried to climb out of their stalls, over their grooms and kicked everything to pieces. I folded my wings up as both my riders dismounted and attempted to calm the wild-eyed soldiers. Finally, I shouted them down and curled up, my muscles trembling from sudden exhaustion. I fell over, just missing a cart loaded with hay and a startled boy with blond hair.

"Raven?" Dieterhof asked tentatively. "Raven, can you hear me?"

My eye tracked a tall image coming towards me dressed in blue jeans, of all things. I watched

him dully as he came closer, ringed by armed men.

“The Black Dragon of Amber,” he spoke in a tone of voice that told me he had spent time in California. “Is he dead?”

“Luke,” I managed and he sat back surprised. “My dad...Merlin...Says hi.”

“What?” He prompted but as the sun died below the horizon, I went with it.

I was vaguely aware of something moving me. A hoist of some kind lifting me up and onto a flat surface that rolled. The smell of sand and sage, softness under me that was heated. The smell of blood and meat, fresh water and magic hovered in the air. I slept uneasily with images racing across my mind’s eye and under my eyelids. It made my heart pound in sudden fear until I bolted upright and awoke just as the sun rose from behind a black wall.

I looked around. I was inside an amphitheater, lying on heated sand. Near me were the carcasses of a cow, several deer as well as hogs. A huge metal tank of fresh water and a hogshead of some kind of liquor lay next to that. I wished I was hungry but the thought of eating did not tempt me.

A woman stood near the entrance to this arena dressed in a scarlet robe. She was pretty but older with masses of auburn hair and deep colored eyes. I knew instinctively that she was the king’s mother—Jasra. A witch and a powerful one.

“Your power wanes the further and longer you remain away from Amber,” she said and I found myself agreeing. “So, it is true. You do speak. Tell me, son of Amber, why have you come here?” She came close enough to touch me, skirting the carcasses.

“I came because those two told me to.”

“That is not all the story,” she hissed and laid her hand on my horns, pulling my head down to stare into my eyes. Her touch was ice cold. “Your father turned me into a coatrack and I never forgave him for that,” she returned. “Would you like to suffer the same fate?”

“Mother!” Luke’s voice rang out over the sands and she let go. My head felt to the ground with a thump. I didn’t care if the two wanted to fight over me. Nothing seemed to matter to me anymore.

“He is not eating,” she observed. “And has lost much weight.”

“So I see. What’s wrong, Raven?” He seemed to be concerned over my welfare.

“The magic that keeps me alive and in this body is weak away from Amber,” I replied listlessly. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Me? I didn’t.” He turned to Jasra. “Mother? Did you order this?”

“If you control the Black Dragon, you control both Amber and the Courts and you control Merlin and Corwin.”

“I’m not at war with either Merlin or Random,” he said.

“No, but you hold an uneasy alliance with both and there are factions who want you off the throne. With him, you can keep your seat secure.”

“And how do you propose to force a Dragon to obey me? Especially how do you plan on keeping him alive?”

“There are magic spells that I can try,” she shrugged. “As for his compliance, I gave Dieterhof the yellow pollen of the Atarax tree. As long as he breathes it every three days, his will is subservient to ours.”

“They fed it to me,” I said dully. “Forced it down my throat.”

She sucked in her breath. “You *ate* it?” Her eyes were round. “Those idiots!” Without another word, she threw her cape over her head and disappeared in its swirls.

“Raven?” I opened my eyes. “How is Merlin?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him in several weeks. Maybe months. I’m not sure how much time has gone by since the wedding.”

“Wedding?” He sat on my hind leg and ran his hands on the scales. They were dulled and dusty. He studied my talons and the tail where once had been a deadly barb but some soldier of Amber had hacked it off with a broadsword.

“The wedding of Captain Rouen to Lynette of the Golden Treaty alliance. Berengen, I think.”

“I sent gifts,” he mused.

“Something spectacular, I believe,” I returned. “Would you go away, I’m tired.” I closed my eyes again but he persisted.

“How did you survive, Raven? I know you were buried and laid to rest in Corwin’s Cenotaph. I sent flowers and condolences.”

“I died,” I said flatly. “My body had been terribly used and abused. It could not survive. Nor could the Dragon form that Jurt gave me. The Unicorn gave me this form created out of the magic of Amber and the Pattern but it only exists close to her magic. Sort of like a battery running out of juice and the recharging station is too far away.”

“My mother will think of something. If we save your life, will you help me?”

“What do you want?” I sighed. He told me and really, I had no choice but to do as he asked.

Part II-Chapter 9

Marcus and Roelle met on the dance floor, pirouetted and clasped hands. Both were out of breath, sweaty and aglow with exertion and the joy of the occasion. On impulse, he leaned forward and kissed her. She flushed. “Marcus,” she started and then ducked. “Have you seen Raven?”

“No, not for the last few hours. You haven’t seen him either?”

Now, both of them stopped moving causing a logjam in the flow of bodies on the floor. They decided unanimously to go in search of him. Several pairs of eyes watched them disappear, her parents and Sergeant Pire as well as the Captain. Marcus went first to the stables where he knew the mice pickings were plentiful. Asked the grooms if they had seen him and was told he’d been spotted heading towards the forest.

Roelle joined him, her skirts held high and in a pair of pattens from the barn. “No one’s seen

him,” she gasped and both grabbed a lantern while Marcus conjured a whych light.

“Here, you two,” the Sergeant’s voice stopped them in their tracks. Captain Lambrecht joined the growing crowd.

“Roelle?” he asked his sister. He’d thrown a cape over his wedding suit.

“Captain,” Pire greeted.

“Sergeant. Marcus. What’s going on?”

“We can’t find Raven,” she cried.

“Raven? Oh, the little dragonet.”

“No, Lambrecht, Prince Raven. The Black Dragon. He’s really the Black Dragon and he’s missing,” she returned frantic.

“Roelle, if that’s true, what could hurt him? He’s a huge... Dragon.” He tried to reassure her.

“He’s not powerful as when he’s bigger, Lamb, he’s just a little thing. Big enough to kill a rabbit but nothing greater!”

She ran into the woods calling for him every few yards. Soon, they followed calling out for the dragon, ranging further away from each other with only Marcus worried about losing his way. He edged closer to the Captain figuring that he knew his way through the forests.

Gradually, they all converged on a clearing deep in the woods and near a hidden pathway that the Captain explained was an old smugglers trail. In the clearing, they found evidence of a bait trail and signs of a scuffle.

Marcus made the lights glow brighter until the Sergeant could read the spoor.

“Something was tied down here. Rabbit fur. Some blood. Something else struggled; there are gouge marks in the earth. Pieces of netting. Men’s boot heels and horse hooves. Six men and six horses.” He tracked them down the lane, his jaw gritting tightly. “Tell me without lying, Marcus. What were you, the girl and the Prince up to?”

“Nothing,” he started and Pire reached out, grabbed him by the throat and lifted his body off the ground.

“Will you stand there when I tell King Random, Prince Corwin and King Merlin that you did nothing to cause the Prince to be taken?”

Marcus’ face whitened and his Adam’s apple bobbed in terror. Roelle put her hand on Pire’s corded forearm. “We were going to sneak into Khafra to find a special treatise that hinted we could get Raven his body back,” she said and there was a pregnant pause.

“The boy’s been rather gloomy lately,” Pire mused. “That’s one of the reasons Rinlon asked me to keep an eye on him. Captain, have you a way to speak to the Castle swiftly?”

“I can send a hawk with a spell,” Marcus offered. “Or—” he hesitated. “I have Merlin’s Trumps.” They gaped at him. Even Roelle. “I’m not sure if I can use them, though. I think their magic applies only to those of the Blood of Amber.”

“It’s worth a try,” the sergeant said. “Who will you contact?”

“The Prince. He’ll be more coolheaded,” Marcus decided.

“You mean he’ll think twice before he runs you through,” Roelle snapped. “Call him, then.”

“Here? Now?” Marcus asked and at their nods, he reluctantly pulled out a thin wallet from inside his fine shirt and opened the leather pouch to reveal the beautifully drawn, exquisitely painted deck of Trumps. Corwin stared up at them smiling enigmatically, in black and silver, his silver rose at his throat and his hand on the hilt of Grayswandir. The cards were cold, icy to the touch and burned. Marcus swallowed and endured it for the sake of his friend. To their surprise, the drawn figure moved and astonishment clouded Corwin’s features.

“Marcus?” His mouth moved and he reached out a hand. “Pull me through.” Marcus reached, grasped the warm living hand of Raven’s grandsire and he was abruptly standing in front of them. “Speak,” he said to Pire but his eyes stayed on Marcus and Roelle. All of them started at once and Corwin held up his hand. “Sergeant Pire,” he prompted and the look in his eye was deadly.

The Sergeant cleared his throat nervously. “My Lord Prince, we were only aware of the dragon’s presence three days into the trip. I saw a small beast, no larger than a King’s falcon, black and Dragon featured. These two thought they kept it hidden but I saw no harm in allowing them to think so. It was obviously too small to be the Prince.”

“Marcus?” Corwin asked.

“I found a treatise that hinted at a cure for Raven’s problem. I told him. Roelle told Raven we wanted to search and we needed his help. He agreed. I used a minimax spell to make him small. He liked to use it so he could hide from Murphy and the guards,” he said defiantly. “He can’t ever get away and be alone.”

“He broods too much when he’s alone, Marcus. We do what we do because we want to help him,” Corwin said.

“Then help him. He wants to have a mortal body, he wants be able to hold a girl. Kiss her. He wants to be human again!” Marcus shouted, nearly crying. “It’s my fault this all happened to him! If I hadn’t pulled him with me to the tavern—”

“You didn’t force him, Marcus. He chose to go. He chose to give up his life for Vialle and Amber. Where is he now?”

“Taken. By mounted men. They rode off to the east on this path which leads to the coast where they can pick up berths on any number of ships,” the captain offered.

“Where do you think they’re taking him?”

“There were men—mercenaries in the tavern back at the last village,” Roelle said. “Very interested in us and asked lots of questions about Raven. They followed us for two days.”

“And then?”

“They turned off on the road toward Lynn,” Pire told them. “I suggested they not accompany us and their leader took the hint.”

“What did he look like?” Corwin demanded.

“Shorter than you, dark-haired and gray eyed. Looked like he might be from a desert clime, dark skinned and weathered. Clean-shaven, clean garments and well-oiled weapons,” Pire said closing his eyes as he brought up the memories. “Rode a big gray gelding, star and two rear

socks. Sword was on his right side. Two daggers in his belt.”

“Keen eyes, Sergeant.” Corwin’s eyes fell on the Trumps and snatched them from Marcus’ hand, thumbed through them until he reached Random’s.

As they watched, the King turned around and spoke. “Corwin. Have you found him?”

“He’s been snatched,” the Prince said dryly.

“Snatched! How do you snatch a forty foot bloody big Dragon?” Random laughed.

“He wasn’t forty foot, Random. More like three. His friends shrank him and hid him in the wagon train. Send Murphy through. We’re going after him.” His eyes flickered to Roelle and Marcus. “You think you can perform this spell if you find it?”

Marcus shrugged. “I’ll try. I owe Raven that.”

“Have Murphy meet us at the Baron’s. We’ll need horses, equipment and a guide.”

“Where are they taking him?” The King asked. “Are you going to tell Merlin?”

“No. Not yet. He’s in a delicate bargaining position with several shadow realms. Especially with Luke and Jasra.”

They saw the gargoyle step forward and Corwin reached for his hand, grasping and pulling the gray winged creature from Amber’s Castle to the clearing in the woods. In the lanterns and Wyche lights’ glow, his eyes burned red and demon-like. He glanced around for the dragon and was grim when he did not see him.

“Take us to your father, Captain,” the Prince politely asked. The entire group marched back to the festivities. In their absence, the Baron (being the sound and sensible man that Random knew he was) had efficiently ended the party and organized things so that procedures for whatever option would materialize could be put instantly in place.

The Captain’s new bride was waiting in the study with the Baron, Baroness and his Captain of the Guards along with Sergeant Pire’s squad. They greeted Corwin without much surprise but were somewhat shy about the gargoyle who was sending dark deadly glances at the two youngsters. Roelle’s family bowed and shook hands. Corwin was abrupt in his explanations so that within minutes they were preparing a rescue party.

Murphy said, “I will fly and seek out his trail.”

“Can you sense him? You couldn’t be fore,” Marcus reminded.

Murphy snarled, “no thanks to you, boy. I meant the trail of the men who took him.” He leaped for the window, his wings unfurling as he smashed the glass and leaded casement to pieces. Corwin shrugged apologetically.

“Sorry. He’s a bit upset over the boy. I’ll see to it your window is repaired. Marcus, you’ll be paying for that. Baron, we’ll need horses for the trip.”

“No problem,” he returned. “The stables are full. Take your pick.”

Within a half-hour, they were kitted, saddled and back on the road. They did not follow the wood trail but the Captain took them on a shortcut that intersected the lane near where it emerged on the main pike. Overhead, Murphy flanked them, his shadow a presence that urged them on. Marcus rode at Roelle’s right side, his face narrowed and grim.

“Who do you think has him, Marcus?” She whispered. “And why hasn’t he said the spell to make himself bigger?”

“I don’t know, Roelle. Maybe he can’t talk.” The redhead chewed his lips. “Or he’s unconscious. He’s so small compared to what he usually is. This is all my fault.”

She didn’t say anything and their horses’ hooves droned a beat, it’s too late, it’s too late, it’s too late until he thought he would go mad.

Chapter 10

They rode through the night, Murphy’s eyes and the glow of a moon lighting the way continuing until first light when Corwin called a halt, puzzled. There had been no sign of anyone camping off the road and only horses of exceptional stamina could’ve ridden this far without stopping to rest. He sent Murphy out to look for any signs of a hidden camp and was doubly surprised when the gargoyle returned with negative news. The entire group suffered major disappointment.

Even with Corwin’s help, it took the party three days to reach the port city of Lever. They rode in; weary, dirty and silent as Murphy took them to an Inn near the harbor. A youngster with dark hair in tight curls took their horses to the stables and promised to look after them. The host met them at the postern gates and welcomed the party to a private room that he said was spelled so that none could overhear and that the Baron had sent a message that his son would be needing accommodations. Corwin warded the room once he’d left and slowly pulled on his gloves and cape.

“Marcus, you and Murphy will wander the marketplace for news of our quarry. Captain, you and Sergeant Pire make the rounds of the taverns. Roelle, you and I will go see the mayor of this fine town and put a flea in his ear.”

“A what?” She asked but followed behind as they found their respective rooms, food, drink in that order.

Marcus’ red hair was easy to spot as he trolled the busy crowd in the marketplace. Of course, Murphy drew more of the attention being over six and a half feet tall, gray skinned, gray eyed and so dour looking. People moved out of his way as if they feared he carried the plague.

He heard Marcus asking if anyone had seen an odd bird, or a creature that looked like a baby dragon. Or mercenaries inquiring about berths on a ship. Murphy shook his head. Really. The boy had no tact and would never make a spy.

He slid silently up behind him and the pair the boy was asking, blanched and stepped back.

“Mercenaries are in short supply, here,” the man stammered. “No work for ‘em. If there are any, they hang out at Dirty Bob’s.”

“And where would that be?” Murphy smiled and the sight of his wolf-like teeth made the man shiver in fear. He could smell piss and wrinkled his nose. The man was so terrified that he’d pissed his pants.

“Down Egret Lane off Bloodstone Alley,” he stammered. Murphy turned without another

word as he followed the man's pointing finger. Marcus hurried after him.

Egret Lane was a common enough street, wide enough for the dray wagon to unload huge casks of beer and liquor and pretty enough that the businesses had flower boxes on the windows. Most were painted in greens and yellows with maroon shutters and doors. The lane was iron hard cobblestones with gutters that drained the rainwater into the sea. The roofs were all thatched and smelled fresh. Just beyond its environs, you could smell the salt air and hear the lonely cries of the curlews and gulls.

There were a few pedestrians but most disappeared as Marcus and Murphy stepped further into the darkened end of the street. Here, the buildings leaned close together with hardly any room between them. Drab colored, they stank from years of brine and bird shit. Even the footing was slick with it. The air was curiously still and when they turned the corner, the lane split off. To the right was Bloodstone Alley, to the left Gutters Street. Neither looked savory. The faint shapes of tall masts could be seen through a heavy mist on the street side.

Murphy's wings unfurled and he drew his talons forth like daggers. "Marcus," he grumbled. "Stay behind me."

"Fat chance," Marcus said and lit a Wyche ball so that the daylight positively ate the shadows. In complete brightness, they trod carefully down the alley until they found the noisy inn called Dirty Bob's. There was sand on the flagstones and it crunched annoyingly under their feet as they pushed their way through a crowd of men dressed from tars to beggars and merchants to thieves. Surprisingly, no one tried to pickpocket them and the barkeep slid two ales down the bar towards them. He was a tall man, nearly Murphy's height with shoulders that looked as if he could toss a bull. His wrists were surprisingly delicate and his face was nearly as ugly as Murphy's. His eyes were deep maroon that flared as he stared at Murphy.

"Anademonaesis," he said flatly. Murphy swallowed the tankard in one gulp, his eyes never leaving the others.

"Belionphorous," he countered and set the tankard down on the bar.

"Are you here for me, Anad-?"

Murphy interrupted him. "Call me Murph. Or Murphy. I haven't used the other name in 800 years."

"Oh. I go by Bob." Marcus snickered and Murphy slapped him on the back of the head but he held the front of the boy's shirt so he didn't go flying backwards. "Forgive my human friend. He has a big mouth and a small brain."

"Hey!" Marcus protested and Murphy shook him.

"We're looking for something," he continued as if Marcus was just an annoying mosquito.

"What?"

"A black dragon the size of a small dog."

"No. Not here. There have been some rumors. I had heard some people brought a mysterious caged creature onto a ship bound for Khafra and the Palace but I've also heard that war is imminent between Amber and several shades close to us."

"What ship, Bob? When did it leave?"

“Yesterday. On the morning tide, there were a dozen ships that set out, Murphy.”

“I am not here for you, Bob. When I died, the feud died with me,” Murphy said and the barkeep looked relieved. Marcus stared.

“You died?” He gaped.

“Over a thousand years ago on earth. The unicorn gathered my ashes and made me into the gargoyle, bonded me to Raven’s life. As Bob here was bonded to his charge. How is your charge, Bob?” Murphy’s tone was sarcastic.

“He died,” Bob said flatly and Murphy turned on his heel, dragged Marcus with him and left the bar. The Wyche light had dimmed, allowing the shadows to creep back and clothe the alley. Marcus stumbled trying to keep up with Murphy’s long strides and before he had time to gulp, the gargoyle lifted him into the sky was flying back towards the inn.

“Who was that?” He shouted.

“Once, he was a gargoyle like me,” Murphy answered. “He sold his stone form to become human and in doing so, let his charge be murdered. So now, he is condemned to remain in the flesh until he wears out.”

“Yeah? How long is that?”

“It is now over four hundred years.” Marcus shut his mouth and concentrated on not losing his stomach as flying made him seasick. They met up at the inn and all had the same tale, mercenaries with a secret wrapped in a cloth had stayed for one night and disappeared with their horses onto a ship headed for Khafra’s capital. Four men and six horses.

Corwin sighed. “I spoke to the mayor. He says he knows nothing and I believe him. Not many men can stare down the length of Grayswandir and lie. Marcus, you said before you can track his magic aura? Can you feel anything now?”

Marcus closed his eyes and cast his senses out, felt the solid presence of the Black Dragon yet could not feel Raven’s essence in it. “He’s alive,” he said hesitantly. “I can feel that, something’s blocking me.”

“Which way?”

“Northeast, I think.”

“We’ll spend the night. In the morning, we’ll see about booking passage to Khafra,” Corwin decided.

“Prince Corwin,” Marcus stated. “Why don’t you just call King Luke and have him bring us all there?”

“Because I don’t trust Luke or his mother, Jasra,” Corwin denied his lips thinning. “She doesn’t like me anymore than I do her.”

“I believe it involves a coatrack,” the Sergeant grinned and wiped it off his face as the Prince frowned.

“Anyway, it’s not a good idea to let anyone know we’re in Khafra. Get some rest and eat. We’ll leave in the morning. I’ve managed to contact an old friend who will let us board his ship.”

They went to their respective rooms with Murphy guarding the girl because he never slept and

she knew what Raven had felt to have the stone man underfoot as a constant presence – like having a huge boulder poised over one’s head. Only the gargoyle’s rest was peaceful.

In the morning, they met for breakfast in the warded room where they ate fitfully and quickly. After that, Corwin took them to South Harbor where the smaller less reputable ships were docked yet the atmosphere was pleasant and none of the bustling dock workers or sailors were cantankerous. The ship the Prince stopped at was called the *Jolly Roger* and only Murphy’s eyes rose at the skull and crossbones. He shot an inquiring look at Corwin who explained, “I did him a favor. He’s from your shadow, Murphy. Wanted adventure on the high seas, where a man could make a name for himself.” He shouted and presently, a tall sturdy man with a weathered face appeared on the forward part of the schooner between the four masts. His eyes were brilliant blue in a tanned face and there were a hundred wrinkles around his eyes and wide lifted smile. His teeth were brilliant white.

“Corey!” He exclaimed and leaped over the rail to land neatly on the wooden docks. He moved like a supple wildcat, balancing on toes and fingers. When he stood up, he was as tall as Murphy but more slender. He pulled Corwin off the horse and hugged him, slapping him on the back.

“Roger, do I have to check my pockets?” Corwin laughed. The man grinned sheepishly and handed back the Prince’s wallet, rose and dagger.

“It’s good to see you Corey, but what are you doing here?”

“War’s over. Been over for three years,” Corwin said.

“I know. Business is down.” Without turning, he yelled for a sinnett and a curly headed boy dropped from the canvas to land next to the Captain.

“Sir?” The boy asked, spooking the horses.

“Take their mounts to the hold and make sure they’re comfortable. Corey, bring your people aboard. We’ll discuss your fare in my cabin.” He studied the group before he bowed to the Prince and Roelle. “Gargoyle, hmmm. Well, we can always use you for ballast.” With that, he led them up the boarding ramp.

Chapter 11

Marcus spent the morning roaming the docks, climbing the sails and generally getting underfoot where he drove the sailors nuts with his antics. To appease them, he went through his repertoire of spells. He kept them amused until the Captain ordered them back to their duties. Corwin sought out the ship’s master and both went into the master’s cabin where Roger Carron threw off his jacket and handed the Prince a goblet of fine brandy.

“How are you, Corey? Really?”

“Good, Rog. I’m free to come and go at the Palace. Random is safe and secure. Merlin’s doing okay and I’m a grandpa.”

“No! Really? When did Merle get married and have a kid?”

“He didn’t. Raven was born of Chaos and Amber. His mother was a woman from your Shade, Irish/American but something else. I suspect she had something to do with the Unicorn. She died

on earth but before she did, she created a gargoyle and bonded it to the boy.”

“And?”

Corwin told him the story, carefully edited but enough to know that the boy was the Dragon and the Dragon was gone. Roger slowly sipped the hundred and fifty-year-old brandy that he was known for importing from Khafra to Amber and rolled it on his tongue.

“This would bring a small fortune in New York,” Corwin said.

“The import fees would be a mite prohibitive. Look, I had heard rumors that Captain Dieterhof and his second Owfan were paid to obtain a rare prize that was coming to Khafra via the Barony of Loest.”

“Really. Who is behind this rumor?”

“I heard it was the King,” he said bluntly. “In fact, I toyed with the idea myself; it’s worth a fortune to make a man an Emperor.”

“Would you incur the wrath of Amber to keep it?” Corwin’s voice was steel.

“You know me better than that, Corey. I sent the wench off with a flea in her ear.”

“A wench?”

“Tall girl. Good-looking and red-haired. One step above a common tart. She tried to bribe me with more than money.”

“It’s a good thing you turned her down, I suspect that was Jasra, Luke’s mother. If you had, she would have sucked your spirit out your... mouth.”

The Jolly’s Captain swallowed. “Succubus?”

“Worse. Witch. She turned me into a coatrack, once. How long will it be before we reach Khafra?”

“If the weather holds, two or three days. Unless—do fair winds and fine sailing lay under your belt, Corey?”

“No. Sorry, Roger, I’m at the whims of Mother Nature just like you.” Corwin shrugged and retreated to his cabin.

Marcus sat with Roelle in the small cabin set aside for passenger meals (not that the *Roger* was a passenger ship being used more for goods and the occasional smuggling). The two had long since invented a solitary unspoken language that only three of them knew and both were employing it now right under Murphy’s unsuspecting nose.

Roelle stood up. “I need to use the chamber pot,” she announced and the gargoyle nodded and rose to follow her. She returned in minutes and Murphy stared at Marcus who was busily working on his fingernails with a knife and looking completely innocent.

“Ready for bed?” He asked and when she nodded, Murphy escorted her back to her cabin where he took up guard duty at the door. Back in the galley, Marcus stood up and raced out to the head where he knocked on the door and hissed Roelle’s name. She came out smiling.

“Worked, did it?”

“Yep. Your mirror image is in bed and mine is still paring my fingernails. What are we going

to do?”

“You tell me. We’re stuck in the middle of the blasted sea on a ship, stuck here until we reach the shore. Don’t you have a spell or something?” Roelle asked exasperated.

“Lots of them. None powerful enough to get us where we need to go,” he returned. “I can make us invisible, shrink us, make us larger, put out a fire, and call up a school of fish–.” his mouth hung open. “Hmmm. I wonder.”

He dug into his pockets and drew out the odds and ends that accumulated in his magister’s bag of tricks and pulled out a whalebone. Cupping it in his hands, he blew on it as he pulled two hairs from Roelle’s head and a feather off the deck.

“By hair and bone and feather thin,” he chanted.

“I bring the gift of sea and wind.

Come blow great beast of wave and water

Be our way to reach our friend.”

The water churned and out of it rose a huge, green-scaled head dripping seaweed and water. Its eyes were emerald with a yellow glow deep within and as it reared up; it unfurled wings as large as the ship itself. It was not a Dragon but a winged giant eel and its teeth were terrifying. Before either youngster could blink, the great head had taken them into its mouth, dived over the ship and disappeared back into the water with nary a ripple.

“Roelle?” Marcus’ voice came out of the dark and he strained to keep it from quivering.

“Marcus?” She seemed calm as if she had no doubts he could handle this. He lit a Wyche globe and held it aloft. They were clearly in the creature’s mouth sitting on its tongue. They could see the sharp serrated teeth, the tube to the stomach, which was closed, and the great vein that throbbed with the animal’s heartbeat.

“Why hasn’t it swallowed us?” He asked as they felt the animal’s undulations.

“You called it, Marcus. It’s taking us to Khafra like you asked,” she said calmly.

“It swallowed us alive, Roelle!” He yelled.

“How else would he carry us? We can’t breathe water or do you have a spell for that, too?”

“Well, actually,” he admitted sheepishly, “I do.” They sat together, holding hands and were amazed that the air inside the creature’s mouth never soured or became stale. Eventually they slept.

Bright sunshine woke them. Beaming directly on their faces, warming their joints and drying their clothes. Marcus woke first and shook Roelle. Both of them sat up to stare at the sandy beach and dunes that advanced into a line of tough grass. Hills started behind the dunes but they were misty and far-off. There were no sign of any habitations nor of their transportation.

“Well,” Marcus said ruefully. “At least we didn’t turn out to be lunch. Ready to go walk?”

Both of them were covered with brine, itchy and smelling of seaweed and salt. Not unpleasant but a definite tang. They climbed the dunes and headed towards the sun, which seemed to be

lowering towards the west. On the other side of the dunes, they could see the beach and the curve of the cove that was a gentle 'C' shape. Far off in the distance was a deep maroon line of bushes splotted with bright orange flowers. There were figures gathered around in an activity that Roelle finally deciphered as some kind of harvesting.

Marcus told her to hurry as he spotted the high water mark and suspected that they would be underwater when the tide came in. Ripples were growing closer to their feet as they climbed higher. It took them the better part of an hour to reach the pickers and they were aware of the pair long before they reached them. Most were women and some youngsters but all were stout, dark with nimble fingers that plucked leaves with a skill that left Roelle breathless.

"It's star anise, Marcus. Really rare, a potent painkiller that's worth a fortune in Amber."

The oldest woman wearing a green kerchief over her hair grinned. "You know your herbs, Missy. Be ye lost?"

"Shipwrecked. Are we far from the city?"

"Oh, poor wee babes," she cooed. "Would you like something to eat and drink?"

"We'd be grateful. We can pay. Can someone give us a ride and directions? Where's the nearest village?" Marcus added.

"Tilliver be just a wee walk from here across the bay. You be in Manga Island, one of the Barrier Isles that protect the Capital. You're lucky one of the giant eels didn't get you. They congregate near shipwrecks. Like vermin, they are." She handed over a wineskin that hung from a thong down her back. Roelle hesitated and then took a sip, trusting in her apothecary skills to detect any unwanted additives but it was cold, sweet spring water. She handed the skin over to Marcus and he drank deeply.

"Thankee, Mistress?"

"Peggotty's the name, lad. You are?"

"Marcus Ainsletter and Roelle Rouen."

"Lady Roelle, I'll be thinking," Peggotty said. "You'll be wanted to send a message bird to your kin and let them know you're alive. Come along, we'd best be getting back anyway. This whole flat will be mucky underfoot in another hour. Like quicksand." She set off at a rapid pace and every one of the others followed. Each looked enough like the other to be extended family. She led them at a merry clip down the sands towards a line of small sculls where they climbed in and sat. Patiently waiting.

Before too long, the tide had come in and lifted the boats. Where once they had walked on damp sand, now was a good fathom of water beneath. A pair of women operated the oars and to a soothing ditty, rowed towards the distant hills. The rocking of the boat, the lulling chant and the rhythmic sound of water had both of them asleep long before the group reached the mainland.

The old woman woke them only as the boats pulled up to the broad docks. Roelle sat up from where she was leaning against Marcus and rubbed her eyes. She saw a village made of cut and dressed stones with red tiled roofs and painted walls. Color was everywhere and broad marble slabs made a clean street and sidewalks. There were little cafes with outdoor tables and chairs and inner courtyards covered by feathery trees that provided shade. The smell of licorice

pervaded the air and the sea breeze made wind chimes dance melodically.

“The village of Tilliver. If you stand and squint that way,” she pointed north, “You can see the lights of Khafra’s Capitol.”

“What is it called?” Roelle asked softly.

“Topaz.”

“Topaz---that’s a yellow stone-like Amber.”

“The new King renamed it. Come on, we’ll get you cleaned up, fed and a message sent for your kin.” She helped the girl climb onto the dock and saw to it that Marcus was awakened and followed. The town had a village square, bordered by stone walls and pleasantly grassy with large shade trees. In the center, that was a graceful fountain spewing blue tinted water.

They skirted the green to tread down a lane laid with red brick and two storied cottages that were part business and part residential. Most of the inhabitants came out to greet the party and ask questions about the pair. Peggotty joshed them about their curiosity but didn’t answer one query. At last, they reached the bottom of a dead end street that backed up to a huge rock wall, at the door of a little one story cottage painted deep blue with red shutters and doors.

Peggotty opened the door with her palm and the lights flickered on to reveal three rooms-a kitchen, parlor and bedroom. There was no upstairs except for a small platform reached by a ladder made of wooden steps and rails. Jars, urns and bottles were everywhere and Roelle recognized the scents.

“You’re an Apothecary?”

“Herb woman,” Peggotty corrected gently. “The baths are out back. All you need are out there in the rooms. Come in when you’re done and I’ll have food and drink for you.” She held aside the tapestry that covered the back door and both of them went through it.

Chapter 12

Corwin kept his anger in check when Murphy came out of the cabin without Roelle or Marcus. Both were gone and had obviously not been in either bed. After a fruitless search by their whole party, they knew the pair weren’t on the ship.

“What do you think they did, my Lord?” The Captain asked.

“You know your sister best. What would she do?” The Prince returned.

“Roelle would dare anything, risk all for her friend,” her brother said softly. “You said the boy’s a Mage in training? Perhaps he made a spell to transport him to the Capital?”

“My Lord Prince?” Murphy said and turned into his flying form. “I will search for them.”

“Go, Murph. Keep hidden if you can,” the Prince offered. “I’ll see what I can do about speeding up this tub.”

The gargoyles launched themselves into the air and in mere moments had become as small as a bird. Corwin went in search of Roger Carron.

Marcus and Roelle admired each other. Freshly bathed in hot springs in the private bath inside the cliff wall that ringed the village, they had luxuriated in the twin rooms for an hour emerging clean, wrinkled and weak kneed from the heat. Fresh clothing lay on the stone benches with new footwear. Marcus' were sturdy boots, thick brown work pants, and the linen blouse with a leather vest covered with pockets that laced up the front. In his pockets, he found his wallet, coin purse and magic trinkets all untouched. Roelle's garb were soft blousy pants that were almost a skirt, leather boots that hugged her calves and off the shoulder pink blouse that tied in front and had a black lace up vest. There were light cloaks made of a green leathery substance which she knew suddenly was from the skin of the giant eels. The inside was lined with silk and smelled of fresh herbs.

Smoke drifted up from the floor and dried her long hair. She left it down. Marcus met her in the short hallway that connected the two bath chambers and took her hand. "Ready?" He smiled. She nodded and both of them went back into the cottage to greet the old woman. She was busy in the kitchen, cooking on a giant stove with a metal top, half of which was grated and the other solid. Sizzling on the flat side was an enormous fish ablaze with colored scales and covered with herbs and butter. It smelled wonderful and both of their stomachs grumbled. Marcus could feel his mouth drooling.

Beside the fish were clay pots bubbling with other things that smelled equally delicious. Peggotty handed them each a deep green bowl painted with black geometric designs that were oddly compelling. "You can eat here or in the parlor," she said.

"What is this?" Marcus stirred the bowl with a pewter spoon.

"Oyster stew, sautéed ocean trout and marinated Leek roots."

Marcus shoveled the food in and uttered not one word, testament to how good the fare was. "My dad the chef," he mumbled. "This is delish."

Peggotty pushed him towards the parlor where there was a round table of Cherrywood Elm that shone with years of waxing. Four different chairs were around it, she watched as lad, and lass chose one. Marcus took the Mage's chair and Roelle the wicker Healer's. She sat herself in the Wise Woman's bench seat knowing that the last chair; the Warrior's chair would remain empty because he was far away from the pair.

There was silence as they ate until the spoon scraped the bottom of the bowls. She rose, went to the kitchen and opened the hatch cover in the wall to pull out a pitcher of cold milk and several mugs. Roelle rose to help her and this surprised the woman. She had the thought the girl would be more accustomed to being waited on.

"Let me help, ma'am."

"You're a lady," she said bluntly. "Why would you want to?"

"Because I was raised to be helpful, because if the son of a king could offer up his life for me, I could do no less," Roelle said sadly.

"You seek a spell. A strong, dangerous and difficult spell. A transformation spell. Would it not be easier to seek another of its own kind?"

Roelle studied her face and wondered how the woman knew or was implying. "He is one-of-a-kind," she whispered and Peggy put an orange flower still unopened in her hand along with a

pouch that was stuffed with the leaves that they had been plucking.

“Star anise,” she said quietly. “Guard it well. Not only is it extremely rare and costly, but worth killing for. You will need it for the spell.”

“Where will we find the book?” Roelle asked her heart in her eyes.

“There is no book, lady. There are clues to its riddle in books, one of which is in the library of the Palace and under the tutelage of the former Queen Witch. It is said that the articles of the Book of Life hold such a ritual but it is Black Magic and carries a heavy price.”

“A blood sacrifice, yes we know.”

“Are you willing to pay that price?” The old woman asked fiercely, and her eyes blazed with an unholy fire.

“If I have to, I will,” Roelle said quietly and calmly.

“And the boy will perform this ritual spell?”

“He has been studying towards that end, yes.”

“Even if it means his life, too?”

“I can’t answer for Marcus but I believe he would, also.”

“This friend of yours must be someone to know,” the woman laughed. “I would like to meet him.”

“Perhaps, you will.” Roelle followed Peggotty back to the table carrying the mugs, the herb and flower tucked into her pocket.

Jasra was alone with Dieterhof in a tavern not far from the palace armory. There were many off-duty soldiers drinking, gambling and enjoying the barmaids yet not one had noticed the tall good-looking redhead as she entered the common room to search out the Captain. Even he did not see her until she threw back the hood of her scarlet cape and her features melted to that of the former Queen.

“My Queen,” he stammered and she tightened her grip on his throat until his eyes bulged, the whites became blood streaked and leaked down his cheeks.

“You idiot!” She hissed. “You fed the Dragon the powder? I warned you not to do that. I said; blow it in his face only. Do not let him *EAT IT*. Do you know what you have done?” At his frantic shake, she answered, “You bonded the Black Dragon of Amber to you for all your lifetime. To *you*, not *me*, you pathetic fool. Now, I must kill you to take back control of the Dragon.”

With horror-filled eyes, he watched her plunge a red dagger into his belly and draw it up. Saw his bowels fall out onto his lap steaming, disgusting as the thin tissues burst their contents onto the floor. The smell of shit and digested food filled the air. The occupants of the tavern cried out as they saw a man standing on his tiptoes with his guts writhing yet nothing held or touched him that they could see. She cut out his heart and as the last light of life left his eyes, packed the gory organ in a cloth, flipped her cloak over her head and disappeared.

The cape was more than disguise, invisibility and protection—it was also a means of transportation. Within seconds, it had carried her to the black arena where the Dragon slumbered on the heated sands.

He barely raised his head when she stepped out of the cloak's folds. His nostrils flared at the strange scent of bloody meat. Almost tempting his flagging appetite. "My Lord Dragon," she said in her sweetest voice and he opened his one to stare dully at her.

"Jasra," he groaned.

"I bring you a potion that will aid you."

"As if I could trust you," he returned.

"Does it matter? Without my aid, you will die. With it, you just might live," she returned.

"Better I die then betray my father or Amber."

"A dead Dragon is no good to me or to anyone. Eat or I will force it down your throat," she snapped.

Raven sat up and towered over the little female. Snorted a faint puff of scented smoke. "Think you can make me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I can." She blew the yellow Atarax pollen in his face and watched calmly as the deadness rolled over his form.

"Mistress," he sighed.

"Eat this, Dragon, I command you."

Obediently, he swallowed the human heart and blinked. Howled, a long mournful cry that echoed back at them from the ebony walls and brought the King's Guards running. "What have you done?" The head Praetorian demanded and Jasra smiled thinly.

"Dragon, do you hear me?" The creature panted in its distress and dug its claws into the hot sand floor leaving gouges as deep as a man's height. A wheelbarrow's full of sand went flying as its tail thrashed the ground and knocked over a dozen men. Six managed to rise, the rest were dead or broken.

"Aye, Mistress," it cursed and she threw herself atop its shoulders to grasp the horns above its eyes. The creature was warm; the horns felt slick and faceted like a diamond. She stroked the sides of his neck. He was truly a beautiful deadly creature.

"Kill them, kill them all," she said simply and the Black Dragon did with tooth and claw until not one man was left standing. "Will you eat?" She asked and felt the shudder that racked the emaciated frame of the beast.

"I cannot," it whispered. "I cannot eat of the flesh of men."

"You already have done so, Raven," she said in a sneer. "You swallowed the heart of the man who stole your will and your body. Now, up. I would have you fly me to my home." She kicked him in the ribs and with a great bound he leaped, his wings opening to catch the heated air above the sand.

Arrows mocked them; hit him on the chest and legs to bounce off. He circled the arena just as the King and his archers arrived, with them, pikes, and lances. Though they threw them with

unerring accuracy, none penetrated his rock hard scales. He caught dozens in his talons and threw them back at the soldiers, killing many with their own weapons.

“Flame,” she ordered. “Burn them where they stand.”

“I cannot, Mistress,” he said. “My flame is fed by the blue soil called firestone. I have been too long away from it. Also, I find I am weakening. My wings cannot keep us aloft much longer. To whence do you want me to fly?”

She cast a spell and wind developed under his wings that pushed him in the right direction. Heading for the distant mountains behind which their sunset and with her spells and aid, he managed to struggle on.

Chapter 13

Jasra goaded the Dragon with voice and magic, kept him aloft and flying almost to the very ramparts of the Castle upon the Blood Range that she had stolen from her mentor. And murdered.

The Black Dragon simply heaved a huge breath and fell out of the sky to crash through the dense treetops breaking branches and trunks as it plummeted to the ground. He managed to encircle one front arm around her slender waist and tucked her into his body close to his chest. Protecting her even as he took the brunt of the fall. It seemed as if they fell forever and when the stop came, it was abrupt and sudden. Trees and branches continued to crack around them, leaves fluttering much more gently to the forest carpet.

The ground was damp and mushy. She knew the area was marshy and the crown trees liked wet roots. It made travel through the woods difficult. Slowly, the ordinary noises of the forest crept back and she pushed the scaled leg off her flesh. She found only a few scratches and bruises on her own body; the Dragon had shielded her from the worst of the damage.

“Dragon, wake up,” she said and poked at his eye. Remarkably, he opened it and stared blearily around. “Are you broken anywhere? Bleeding?” She laid a seeing spell on him and saw that indeed, he was broken in too many places to count. Conjuring, she wove the spell to fix the broken bones and torn flesh but could do nothing yet to fix the flagging core of his strength.

“How am I going to get you to the Castle?” She mused. “You’re too big to move and there’s no road here anyway.”

“Shrink me,” he said trying to stand but failing as his weakened muscles revolted. Tears dripped from his eyes and she was astonished as they fell to the ground and became diamond hard gems of such purity that they gleamed ice white.

“Do you know the spell?” He told her what he remembered from Marcus’ recitation. “Ah, simple.” She repeated the spell and the great Black Dragon shrank to the size of a small eagle. Carefully, she picked him up, wrapped him inside her cape and walked. The area around the Castle was warded and she could not transport herself into the tower without first crossing the boundaries. She struggled to climb over the fallen trunks; the boulders covered with slippery moss and cursed the delicate and fancy sandals she had worn in the Palace. Totally unsuitable for a romp in the forests.

“This sucks,” she grumbled under her breath. “I have no clue which way to go.”

He pushed his way out of the cape's folds and sniffed the air. His body, which normally felt hot to the touch, was nearly ice cold. "That way," he mumbled pointing with his head towards her left hand. "I can smell habitation."

"Habitation?" She grunted sliding across the fallen Cherrywood that would've brought a small fortune had it been close to a town or sawmill. The land sloped upwards and she followed a ravine that cut deep but it was devoid of moisture. Tree trunks bisected it but they were small and it was obvious that great torrents came down this place and ripped loose whatever was within. The rocks were round and polished in shades of brown, sepia and off-white with the look of hardened granite. The very same rocks that had been hewn by magic and stonemasons that had created the keep.

"How do you know which way to go, Dragon?"

"I can smell your sewage and feel the presence of magicked wards above us," he announced. "What are you going to do to me, Jasra?"

"Queen Jasra."

"And I am the son of a king," he retorted. "So what?"

"Why were you coming to Khafra, Raven?" She slipped, nearly dropping him and she stopped as he let out a small bleat of pain. "If you eat of the flesh of man, Dragon it will strengthen you so that you will live."

"I'd rather die," he spat and hissed.

"You're rather unrepentant on the Atarax pollen, Dragon. I find you a less than willing slave."

"You bind me to your will but you don't own me," he returned and shivered in her hands.

She stared up at a giant wall of rock that went up further than she could see. The moment she rested her palm on the slab, she could sense the magic of rune stones that held the Citadel together and understood, finally how the Castle had obtained its name. And she could smell a sewage pipe. Unfortunately, (or perhaps not) it was too small to enter, even for the mini Dragon.

"How do we climb it?" She asked. "It's impregnable and designed to be unreachable."

"How do *you* get in?"

"I usually transport myself through my cloak which carries the runes that allow me to breach the wards." She unwrapped him and was dismayed to see that he was bleeding and her cape was more blue than red. Wrapping it around both of them, she threw the hood up and the sensation of whirling through the void assailed them. She hugged the limp Dragon to her chest and slipped out into the tower room that held her witchcraft, startling a maidservant and a guard.

"Mistress!"

Jasra laid her burden on the table, tossing everything to the carpeted floor. The others came round to stare at the creature.

"Bring me the Healer and my elixirs. Hurry!" She ordered, placing her finger over the area where the Dragon's heart should be. She found a slight pulse but no breathing.

When the healer named Bremer arrived at a jog trot, he found Jasra breathing into the creature's mouth. "Let me help, Jasra," he took over from her, allowing her to concoct potions as

well as spells. The next fifteen minutes were frantic and finally, the two sat back with a sigh of relief as the little dragonet's chest rose and fell evenly.

"He's stable," the healer said and studied not the animal but the Queen. "What happened?"

"Do you know who or what this is, Bremer?" She asked instead, striding the tower room. In her absence, the staff had kept it clean, changed the bed linens and washed the windows. Not one item of her sorcery had been moved or touched. Her bed was between two walls and the fireplace, which was burning fiercely this high in the mountains. The walls were honey colored Wychwood, spelled to protect the occupants and impermeable to outside conjurations.

"It looks like a dragon. Is it hatchling? Where did you find it? It's beautiful."

"It is a full-fledged, forty foot Dragon, Bremer. Shrunk with a minimax spell. He is the Black Dragon of Amber, bound by its magic and because he is far from the source, his power has faded. He could not sustain his flight here and fell to the forest. If you look southwest, you can see the damage done in the canopy. He's broken in many places."

"I saw. His legs, arms and ribs. His heart is struggling but maintaining its rhythm. The fractures are holding together but he needs blood."

"Do you have an elixir that will help him?"

"What have you used to gain his compliance?" Bremer knew the history between Jasra and Corwin.

"Atarax," she said briefly.

He nodded and his hands were gentle as he manipulated legs and arms, stretched the thin wings out to their full-length and worked the bones. Scales fell off in his hands. "He's cold, he needs heat. Janess, bring me heated blankets and one of those baskets you use for your cats."

The maid, a pretty girl with yellow hair and blue eyes bobbed a curtsy and ran for the doorway to return in a minute or so with the requested items. Together, they lifted the Dragon into the bed and covered him with the wool blankets.

"I thought perhaps the heating bottle," the girl offered and Bremer gave her a grateful smile.

"The very thing, thank you." He slid the hot leather bottle underneath the fragile body and covered him. "We need to warm his insides as well. Beef broth with brandy, Janess. Can you do that?"

"My Lord, Mistress?"

"Go, Janess," the Queen Mother said and the girl flew to her task.

Bremer turned back to the Queen. "What is his name, Jasra?"

"Raven."

"He is Corwin's son?"

"Grandson. Merlin is his father."

"The Prince that died?" He looked puzzled. "How, then does he live?"

"Through Amber's magic. His human body perished when he killed Jurt. Only later did this form return. He is here I think, to search for the Seven Stars."

“The Seven Stars...how would he have heard of that?” The Healer turned his graying head to his Queen’s face and was not afraid of incurring her ire. It was hard to be frightened of the woman whose diapers you changed and kissed away their hurts.

“Because I leaked its rumored existence to his friends to lure him here,” she returned calmly placing rune stones around the sleeping Dragon. “Is it safe to leave him, Bremer?”

“I have a string on his heart and lungs that will warn us if they falter. Between the two of us, he’s covered with enough spells to see him through this crisis. He’ll sleep the rest of the night through and probably for the next three days. I suggest you do the same.”

“After a bath and a hot meal,” she sagged as the fear and worry left her. “I have to let Ryan know what has happened.”

“Ryan?” Bremer rose and went to the double doors carved of the rock of the Citadel and hinged with steel fallen from the skies. The doors opened, heavy, silent and smooth with just one finger shuttling behind them like the vault doors they were. Goblin faces chased each other in the living rock as she countered the locking spell.

“My partner in this endeavor.”

“Why have I not heard of him?” he asked as he followed her down the spiral staircase to the warmer kitchens.

The healer made sure the Queen ate, drank and was resting comfortably before he returned to the tower with the maid. She waited with a tray containing beef broth, a brandy decanter and hot mulled wine. The smell of warmed spices and bay leaves made a homey feel to the top of the stairwell. The door locks opened to his muttered password, the goblin faces of the enchanted locks ignored even though they could be frightful. They entered the room together and Bremer checked the black creature’s heart and breathing.

“Sir Bremer, what is it?” The girl asked, setting the tray down.

“It is a wounded Dragonet. He can breathe fire and those claws are anything but ornamental so don’t mess with him unless one of us is in here. He can and will slit your throat, disembowel you or bite off your fingers. Or nose. Treat him as you would any wildcat or eagle.”

He filled a baster with the hot soup and carefully inserted it into the corner of the dragon’s mouth. Slowly and patiently, he fed the creature until he had nearly emptied the bowl of soup laced with brandy. The Dragon swallowed and did not fight, it seemed resigned to being fed even though it did not want to eat or drink. “I am Bremer. Are you hungry?”

“Where am I?” The Dragon lifted his head and Bremer saw that his eyes were bright golden yellow and that he was blind in his right. He had an endearing quality of turning his good side towards the speaker.

“In the Citadel. Jasra’s retreat. Your name is Raven?”

“Are you my jailer?” His voice was that of a youngster certainly not that of a mature warrior.

“How old are you, Raven?” He was curious and held up the bowl of rich stew he’d brought up from the kitchens.

“I died when I was seventeen,” he eyed the bowl and fished into it, pulling out chunks of meat. “Actually,” he said cheeks bulging. “I prefer it live and bloody. Mice, chickens and doves.” He

sat up and winced. “Ahh,” he moaned in a long drawn out hiss. “I hurt.”

“Yes. Here,” he held out a small blue bottle filled with a faintly oily liquid that smelled like pine trees. “It’s poppy elixir and will help the pain. Take it.” Obediently, the Dragonet swallowed, holding the vial in his front talons. He blinked slowly. “You’ll want to sleep, Raven. Let the potion work,” Bremer said and helped the Dragon back into the basket, covering him up.

Chapter 14

The ship slid slowly into the berth on the lower harbor of Topaz, the capital of Khafra. Corwin could see the massive construction process going on to make the ports more modern and safer. What surprised him more were the lights that lit up the entire area so nowhere were dark corners or dangerous alleyways.

The harbormaster sent an inspector to visit the *Jolly Roger* and from his glad smile, it seemed he knew Roger Carron well. He shook hands and took the bills of lading from the Captain.

“Horses? Passengers? Not your usual fare, Captain Carron,” he said.

“Oh don’t worry, Magnum, I brought a load of brandy and ales, too. Got to keep the Palace supplied. How are things?”

“Touchy. Your passengers have papers?” His eyes scanned the small group and knew them for soldiers even though they were not dressed as such. “Pay-for-swords?”

“No, they’re not mercenaries,” Carron said. “Bodyguards.”

“For whom?” Corwin noted with amusement that the man’s grammar was proper.

“The Lady Rouen. Her father sent her here to marry and the...chit took off. They’re here to track her down. This is her brother, Captain Rouen and his personal bodyguard.”

“And this...Gentleman?” The Inspector asked studying the Prince.

“My friend Corey. I’ve known him for years; he’s a tracker, one of the best.” Carron handed over papers the first of which Corwin had any inkling. The man inspected them slowly and handed them back.

“Good. Just a perfunctory see-through of your hold and you’re free to go, Captain Carron.” He stepped back, shook the master’s hand and disappeared into the hold. Carron hustled the group down the boardwalk and into the surprisingly modern and clean city that bore a decided resemblance to that of a seaside community along the lines of Herculaneum. Minus the ash. Everything was painted in bright colors with lots of marble and mosaics, fountains with running water and greenery. Even central parks and open courtyards. They passed the marketplace and it was reminiscent of the old Turkish bazaars with awnings and narrow walkways covering hundreds of stalls where vendors plied everything from tealeaves to miniature lizards.

Pire and Rouen’s eyes swiveled back and forth at the incredible array of commerce and the hustle and bustle of the market. Every so often, they caught Corwin sneaking a glance up at the skies, which were a soft, misty green. He was looking for Murphy. Carron led them down a side street and into a small villa where their horses were already stabled. A woman and a young boy greeted them; from the boy’s dark features, Corwin knew it was the shipmaster’s son.

“Corey this is Melowinne and Jason, my son. Melly, these are my friends Corey, Captain

Rouen and Sergeant Pire.”

“You are welcomed to our home,” she dropped a curtsy and stood, slightly taller than the average woman with a faint greenish cast to her skin, dark hair and amber eyes. She was quietly beautiful, her poise and grace evident in every movement. Both she and the boy wore a short tunic with loose pants beneath and lace up sandals. The climate was temperate, almost tropical and no one wore heavy clothing.

“You are a... Lord?” The boy asked, watching Corwin’s hand on his pommel. The child looked to be about seven although nearly as tall as his mother was but with Carron’s dark looks and bronzed skin.

“He is a Prince,” Carron said softly, ruffling the boy’s hair. “So treat him properly.”

Melowinne bowed deeply. “I suppose you want to keep their appearance and identities quiet, husband?” At his nod, she smiled widely and her teeth were as beautiful as her smile. “I will show you the house and you may choose your own accommodations.”

She led them into the covered porch area and inside the rooms built around the courtyard. There were pools, heated baths, cooking areas, a library and a replica of an old English study.

Corwin picked out several of the smaller chambers near the stables and away from the main living areas much to her surprise. These rooms offered quiet and more than one way to escape being trapped.

They settled in and as soon as it was dark, Corwin stood outside atop the building’s marble roof and watched the sky. He’d only been there a few minutes when something large dropped lightly to the roof beside him.

“My Lord Prince,” the gargoyle greeted and folded his wings. He crouched as if he were more comfortable and looked very much like his fellows on a Gothic cathedral.

“You ever miss Notre Dame, Murphy?” The Prince laughed softly thinking he was no Esmeralda.

“No. My home is where Raven is,” he said simply. “Though he released me, I am still bound by a force I have no name for nor understand.”

Corwin gripped his shoulder. It was rock hard, literally. “It’s called love, Murphy. Did you find any sign of him?”

“Yes and no,” he sighed and climbed down to join the others in Corwin’s room where they greeted each other with quiet eagerness. “I found a dead mercenary. Gutted while he stood on tiptoes in a tavern yet no one saw the cause. His heart flew out of his chest and disappeared before he fell to the ground. I found a disturbance in the black arena where something large had been carried in and tethered. Many dead soldiers – broken and bitten. The king was running around ordering the mess cleaned up and for a hunting party to leave by morning.”

“Heading where?” Corwin asked his jaw clenching.

“North. To something called the –”

“Citadel,” Corwin finished. “Jasra’s Keep. Where she studied until she killed her teacher and where she turned me into a coatrack. Where I left her, safely confined or so I thought.”

“How do we get there?” Pire asked.

Corwin laughed grimly. "We hire on as guards."

"Thank you so much for all your help," Roelle told the herb woman. She kissed her on the soft wrinkled cheek and the woman smiled.

"Be careful and beware of the redheaded witch," she added. "She means you harm. The city has many dangers but less now than before. Our king has a good heart even when he is at war."

The pair set out on the path the old woman said would take them to the capital and that it was an easy walk of an afternoon. Roelle's eyes were constantly on the floor and fauna. She recognized many of the same plants as in Amber and yet there was a wide variety of others of which she had no knowledge. Some looked familiar but were of different colors and Marcus said that the sun's greenish tint might have had something to do with that. Role picked up his hand and held it. His heart thumped in his chest and she felt the sudden oscillation of it under her fingers. "You're a good, true and loyal friend, Marcus," she said quietly and he turned away at that dreaded word.

It's not fair, he cried to him himself. *I want to be more than your friend!*

"Marcus, I---," Roelle started and then dropped his hand as she hurried ahead. Her first sight of the Capital made her stop at the beauty of the buildings as the sun rose behind them. Other merchants traveling in came from the star junction of roads that merged from the four points of the compass, to join the main Avenue that led straight to a large central marketplace surrounded by white marble buildings with broad colonnades of steps. Both of them could read the script on the facades and saw that they were official government offices, the Harbor Master's, Market and Commerce, the Bank of Khafra, Coastal Guards and Admin Building. What surprised Marcus more was the magnificent library next to the Council office.

"That's where we need to look, Ro," he said excitedly.

"First, we need to find out where they've taken him," she protested.

"We don't need to, Roelle, I already know," he shook his head. "Listen to the people around you—they're all talking about the Dragon that the king had tethered in the arena." He was right; they heard the locals discussing the sightings of the King's construction crew hauling something huge, black and moving up to the Black Arena where the former Queen had performed her blood sports reminiscent of the old Roman entertainment.

"Let's go see him first," she said. With a lingering glance, he cornered a woman and asked directions. He was told that there were tiny carriages that would take them out to the arena for a small sum. Marcus searched his pockets and pulled out his purse to heft the substantial weight. "We've enough if we're careful and I know my father has an account in the bank here. Of course, if we need to use that, they'll find out and let the king where we are."

The pair walked to the street corner and waited for the little wooden carts that carried passengers and were propelled much like a bicycle. Their driver was youngster, a lad with curly blonde ringlets and blue eyes. "Where to, gents?" He asked even though it was clear that Roelle was no male.

"The arena."

"Hop in. For the two of you, it will be two royals."

“Royals?” Marcus asked.

“Where you from?”

“Loest,” Roelle cut in.

“Amber folks. You have Amber coin? The cost is two talers.”

“Oh. I have those,” Marcus agreed and dug the coins out of his pocket. He helped Roelle into the rickety basket seat and followed. The boy pedaled furiously, twisting and turning through the streets at a pace that was faster than a trotting horse and more exhilarating. Unless of course, you had ridden on a Dragon. After a few minutes, they emerged onto a broad thoroughfare lined on both sides by tall poles that were in the process of being pulled down. The wide avenue ran for miles and there was an ugly faint stench that lingered. Roelle saw the boy swallow convulsively.

“What is this?” She asked frightened.

“The Avenue of the Skulls,” he said grimly. “Or, it used to be. King Luke is tearing the gibbets down. What you smell is the scent of death. The very stones and soil reek of the millions that died.”

“Jasra?” Roelle whispered.

“Not just her but the men she left in charge. The Black Arena saw many a death spectacle.”

“Is that why they took the beast there?”

“You heard about it? No one’s seen it, just rumors and stories. Even the soldiers who unloaded it won’t say anything. My name’s Evril.”

“Mark and Rowe,” she returned.

“What are you doing here, from Loest and Amber, I mean? Why would you want to leave the best Kingdom in all the Shadows?” They couldn’t answer him.

Chapter 15

Go and catch a falling star,
And bend it with a swimmer’s fears.
The Star that grows on Sinking Sands
The Star that swims beneath the tears.
Catch the Star that floats afar;
And bind it with the star that lands
Beneath the Seven Stars that dance.

Roelle and Marcus stood in the entrance to the great black coliseum and stared in dismay at the empty space. Nothing disturbed the vast expanse of bare sand except for a hundred or more city inhabitants who had come to view the newest spectacle only to find it just a rumor.

“There’s nothing here,” one disgruntled man said. By his clothing, he looked to be a city guard; he was in a uniform that resembled police the shades over. “No blood, no bodies, nothing.” He kicked the sand and his sandaled foot disturbed a black speck that went flying. Marcus snatched it before anyone else and closed his fist around the sharp octagonal shaped

rock.

“Let’s go,” he said to Roelle. He handed her what was one of the dragon’s slipped scales, and both of them exited the arena to find the boy still waiting. “There’s nothing here,” he said disappointed and the blonde nodded.

“I could’ve told you that,” he grinned.

“Why didn’t you, then?” Roelle asked, rolling the scale in her fingers. She tucked it into her purse.

“Because I wouldn’t have gotten your fare. The beast flew off yesterday morning.”

They gaped at him. “You saw him?”

“Him?”

“You saw it?”

“Sure. It almost squashed me when it fell over down on the parade grounds,” he grinned. “Nearly shit my pants.”

“Where did it go?”

The boy pointed north to the distant mountains and they could see a faint shimmer as the sun glinted off a shiny object. “The Citadel. Where the Red Queen Sorceress lived and no one’s ever gone there and returned alive to tell about it. You want me to bring you back to town?”

“To the library, please,” Marcus said and rolled his eyes when the cheeky brat asked for two more talers.

He dropped them off in front of the library but not before Roelle had asked him about rooms to rent and was told about a nice rooming house three streets over called Mamma’s Inn. He also told Marcus he would be their personal guide and driver for a crown a day, which in Amber terms would buy a whole donkey, but to Marcus it was no more than mere pennies.

“Tomorrow? Same time?” He called before he rode off in search of other customers.

By now, it was near lunchtime and both of them sat on the lower steps of the colonnade to pull out the wrapped package that Peggotty had given them. They ate in the quiet bubble of their own company, grilled fish on sourdough buns and covered with a rich sauce. Finished it with the water-filled wineskin. There were people coming and going up the broad steps and most of them greeted the pair with open smiles. When the older man with gray hair and long robes hurried by with a distracted air, Marcus grabbed Roelle’s hand and jerked her to her feet. “C’mon,” he urged.

“What?”

“That is the librarian, or I’m a monkey’s uncle,” he said using one of Raven’s pet phrases. He followed the scholarly looking man into the portico.

“Slow down, Marcus,” she complained trying to finish her sandwich. She stuffed the remains into her pocket.

The inside was dim, quiet and filled with shelves upon shelves rising as high as the arched ceiling. Marcus had never seen so many manuscripts, not even in Amber’s Library.

They were smaller rooms off the side, chairs and lamps that lit only at a hand's touch. Neither of them had spotted the one that the older man had scurried into but as soon as they stuck their heads into one, a youngster dressed in the same attire as the librarian stood up and approached them.

"May I help you?" He questioned.

"I am a mage in training," Marcus explained. "My teacher sent me here to find an answer to a spell he found in a treatise."

"So—Magic and Spells," he said. "Column Delta, tier 2700 through 2999." He pointed towards the back wall lost in the dark recesses of the building. Both noticed that the columns that held up the Grecian style roof were labeled with what Raven called Roman numerals and Greek letters. Delta, MMLCC and MMCMLIX.

Under the appropriate column, they found shelves covered with scrolls, manuscripts and books, bound books, pamphlets and vellum. That particular location went from the floor all the way to the ceiling. Both the roof and the walls were lost to their sight high overhead. Roelle found a moving ladder that let Marcus access the upper levels but he had no clue where to start. The library clerk came out of the reference room to stare at him on the ladder.

"Where do I begin?" Marcus asked helplessly.

"Name of this spell? Wizard or spell maker?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know the ingredients?"

"Don't know," Marcus said hopelessly.

"What's it do?"

"Transformation spell. I found a scroll on a study of archaic spells written by Ozyandias," Marcus snapped his fingers remembering the name on the few pages he and Raven had deciphered.

"Ah. A master sorcerer. Those are kept under lock and key so idiots can't tamper or damage them. You'll have to ask the librarian to see those," the clerk said. "Those are the Star Riddles."

"Can I see the librarian?" Marcus asked and the clerk frowned.

"Make an appointment tomorrow and we'll see. Are you with a reputable wizard or mage?"

"Oh yes."

"What's his name?"

"Dworkin," Marcus gulped and hoped that the name of the King's grandfather wasn't known outside of Amber and from the clerk's lack of response, it seemed so.

"What's his bent?"

"Huh?"

"Chaos or Order? Black or White Magic?" The clerk rolled his eyes as if Marcus was ignorant. "Or, you could go to the Academy of Science and Sorcery."

Marcus perked up. "Where is it?"

"Do you know the street to the arena, the Avenue of the Skulls?" He asked cheerfully. At their twin nods, he said, "That's where they all wound up. On the poles, dancing their last spells courtesy of the Queen and her generals. Especially the one she called Ryan."

"Ryan?" Roelle asked.

"King Luke banished him; he was the brains behind the war. Strange looking man—he was nearly 7 foot tall with white skin and dark hair. Blue eyes and very strong. His hands were very strong; he carried some strange weapon at his side that never worked." The boy demonstrated and because neither of them had ever seen a handgun, were as puzzled as he. "Didn't matter, though. He used it to club people and he had a huge knife that he liked to gut or slice throats with." The clerk shuddered. "I was glad when the king shot him."

"Shot him?"

"With a mechanical bow and arrow. One of the new war weapons King Luke found in this very library."

"There are no sorcerers or teachers left alive in the city?" Marcus despaired. It would take a lifetime to search the archives and records of this place.

"You could try the Palace. Maybe the king would grant you an interview and let you in their library." He snickered looking over the commonly dressed pair. "Good luck with that."

Just as they turned to leave, the librarian approached. "Oh, there you are, Stacks. I need you to reach tier 200 and bring me the scroll for medicinal riddles." The older man surveyed the two young people. "Oh, hello. Stacks helping you find things?"

"Well no," Roelle chirped pushing Marcus back. "You see, our master sent us here to find an obscure treatise on a transformation spell. We can't find it nor can...Stacks. I'm afraid he wasn't much help. Maybe we can help each other. I know herbs and potions."

He smiled condescendingly. *"I have a face but cannot see, take me to knit bones free. I bring good dreams to you and me; I am the flower that grows near sea."*

Roelle smiled. "That's too easy. Sunflower, boneset, chamomile and star anise."

The librarian shut his mouth. Snorted. Mumbled under his breath. "My name is Lykian, Head Scholar and Librarian. Newly appointed to the job as the former Presidia of the city killed all of my superiors. Maybe I can help you. Stacks, bring these two...?"

"Roelle and Marcus," she offered taking his hand to grasp it lightly.

"Take them into my study room, bring tea and crumpets and then meet me in the old Pandemonium."

"Yes my Lord. Come this way, please." Roelle and Marcus followed the clerk a long winding way through the columns to reach a doorway situated at the beginning of a long corridor that descended at a slow angle. Cold self-lit torches lined the high brick walls and kept illumination at a soft twilight. They could not see the ceiling above them. Emerging into bright sunlight that nearly blinded them, both exclaimed at the tiny courtyard surrounded on all sides with marble columns and walls yet the sun shone straight in. Flowers and small trees were abundant as well as grass under their feet. It even had a spring that bubbled up into a fountain. A fountain of a

Unicorn. Books were scattered everywhere, scrolls tumbled on the table, were on chairs and benches in piles stacked haphazardly that looked as if they would fall with the slightest whisper of wind.

“Do you have to clean this mess up when it rains?” Marcus gaped. It would take a dozen servants the better part of a half day to clean them.

“It doesn’t rain in here. There’s a spell on the oculus above that diverts rain to the cisterns. Find a place to sit and I’ll bring tea. Don’t touch anything.” With that admonition, he disappeared.

Fifteen minutes dragged by which if you were an inquisitive teenager was a long time to keep your nose out of things. Luckily, whenever Marcus found his hand stealing towards a moth-eaten parchment, Roelle kicked him. He was rubbing his shins and scowling ferociously when the clerk returned with an enormous copper tray loaded with a teapot, cups, a plate of cookies and hearty sandwiches. The smells set Marcus’ stomach to growling and Roelle’s, too.

“Toss the stuff on the table to the floor,” Stacks ordered groaning as they hastily swept the triangle shaped table free of impediments. He laid the tray down with a heartfelt sigh of relief just as the librarian returned pushing a cart loaded with tomes. You could hear him coming long before he arrived by the noise of the squeaky wheels that preceded him.

“I oiled that thing a million times,” Stacks grumbled. Marcus offered to fix it with a spell and the clerk looked shocked. “Hell no,” he sputtered. “None of us would hear him coming!”

Roelle snickered and the three of them shared a chuckle, teens against a grown up. As he entered the courtyard, there was a flare of magic that Marcus felt as if the room was aware of the presence of spells and magicks entering. Lykian pushed the cart near Stacks and the group settled down for an elegantly composed tea party that was anything but a nerve-racking interlude for the pair. They were able to relax for the first time since Raven had disappeared.

Chapter 16

Corwin looked at Pire and the Captain. All three had been accepted promptly into the ranks of Luke’s soldiers, especially when they demonstrated their sword skills. Lambrecht was clearly skilled at archery, handling the short mounted bow with a speed and accuracy that astonished the Prince.

“My sister is even better,” he said proudly. He pulled at the loose, baggy trousers that were the newly designed uniform of the ‘Army’. Maroon and yellow, streaked much like the surrounding foliage, no fancy buckles, and gold braid or stylized animals. Just his name painted on the breast pocket and his rank on the shoulder. Patches of a snarling cat. A web belt with a flat buckle that contained a lodestone, garroting wire and a sharp blade. Pockets everywhere, which the pair liked because it made it handy to carry knives, flints and the other assorted paraphernalia that got lost in saddlebags or bedrolls. Boots that laced halfway up the legs and were as comfortable to walk in as well as a good heel for riding. Although, secretly Rouen loved his cavalry boots.

“I see the influence of Luke’s shadow life,” Corwin grinned. “Uncle Sam in Khafra. Although maroon and orange camouflage just doesn’t look *right*.” He sheathed Grayswandir while the pair practiced with the shorter blades issued to them.

No one had ordered them to quarters or to practice, they milled about with the other new

recruits until a sergeant bellowed at them to follow. “Hopeless morons,” he muttered under his breath as his eyes lit on the three. “You, there. What your name?”

“Corey.”

“You ever lead a squad?”

“Yes,” the Prince answered, leader of a failed coup against his brother Eric.

“Pick out ten men you think will stay on a horse, can track and aren’t afraid to die when they come up against a witch, a dragon and a sorcerer.”

“Pire, Rouen,” he pointed and chose seven more judging by the cut of their shoulders, eyes and weapons.

The Sergeant brought the group to the long low building shaped like a stables and on three sides of what looked like a sand arena. Men-at-arms were practicing inside working at the butts, shooting arrows and hand-to-hand combat. All stopped to watch the new group approach. The Sergeant sent all the men save the new squad to the last barracks. “Those are yours. There’s a corporal in charge, he’ll get you sorted out. The rest of you, we’re going to meet the king.” He turned on his heel and marched back towards the palace. After a moment’s hesitation, the newly formed squad joined him.

The palace was quiet and well-guarded. They were stopped and challenged at least ten times giving the trio ample time to study their surroundings. The palace was built in an open courtyard style, an inner ring that was guarded by five outer rings. They never made it past the third ring and were asked to wait in a large chamber that was cool, painted a pale green and had many potted plants lining the walls. Murals of dancing maidens and flute playing boys painted on the stucco. The ceilings were carved plaster and featured sea creatures from real to fanciful. The doorways sealed with strings of white beads that chimed when someone went through them.

The men stood at attention. Instinctively Corwin had managed to pick out all the ones who had seen some military experience. They knew instantly that the man in the well-worn uniform was a high-ranking officer. He scanned the squad quickly and then spoke to the Sergeant.

“At ease, men. Sergeant Gleener, you may wait outside.” The sergeant saluted and back stepped into the hallway.

The officer was tall with white hair still thick, piercing light blue eyes and only one arm. He was handsome with thick laugh lines at his eyes and others bracketing a mouth that had a tendency to curve up at the corners. “I am General Cathorian, head of King Luke’s new army. You men have volunteered for a special, important mission for the king.” He eyed Corwin. “You’re the Captain? What campaigns have you fought in?”

“Montalvo Bay, Wyvern’s Pass, the battle for the Lighthouse at Cabra,” Corwin named the major battles for Amber’s throne and the General reared back in surprise.

“A noble war well fought. You must have the luck and backing of the Unicorn,” he said. “Not many survived those. I fought at sea in Magnesia.” That was the sea battle between Eric and Julian at the end of the war. Not many had survived that encounter, either. “Your men will leave tomorrow morning for the Citadel.”

He pointed to a map laid out on the table showing the bay, the port city of Topaz and a vast expanse of forest, some plains and mountains that rivaled the Rockies. Some said plainly that

their elevations were unknown and warned of wyvern nests, harpies and other dangerous beasts of the air. The scale suggested that it was a week's journey to the foothills if the forests weren't impenetrable.

"Flying legions tried, magic was tried. In the end, it was only betrayal from within that breached her walls, by the Red Witch herself. She turned on her mentor, Jax and slew him. The king wants us to do the same but this time, we have to rescue and retrieve a dragon."

"He's mad," one of the men, snorted. "Ain't no such critter!"

"Oh, there is," General Cathorian, said. "I, myself have seen it. Giant, black and it speaks. I believe it is the Black Dragon of Amber and our king wants it back. Those of you who are afraid may opt out but know this, if you stay and win, each and every one of you will reap such wealth as to be a royal Lord yourself."

"Can't spend good coin if you're dead," another mumbled.

"If you do not wish to join, you may leave but you will serve elsewhere until your term is up," the General added. Four men walked out leaving Corwin, Pire, Rouen and three others, two were brothers and the third an able swordsman.

"Can any of you track?"

"I can," Corwin said briefly. "And I know a few basic spells, protection mostly. Swords and hand-to-hand. My friend is a Sergeant-at-Arms and the other a mounted archer."

"Where are you from?"

"Loest and the parish of Phelan," Corwin said naming the district near Amber and across the sea from Arden.

"I've been there. The view from the lighthouse on the headlands is breathtaking."

"Yes, it is but it's not in Phelan," Corwin said dryly at the General's attempt to test him.

"Do you know Orlean of Phelan?" The General sighed. "I miss that Amberian brandy that he served in his tavern."

"Good news then, General. Captain Carron of the *Roger* has brought in a shipload of it."

"Wonderful. I'll see to it that some is delivered to the Palace. Now, Sergeant Gleener will see to your equipment, horses and the like. Mess hall is open until first moonset. I would suggest you get your affairs in order and then, some rest. We leave at dawn, first light."

"We? You're going with us?" Corwin questioned.

The General gave him a wry look. "Of course. Since I'm the only one with Dragon experience."

"Do you know how to control the beast, General?" The Prince was curious.

"No, but I've fought one before. I was at Cabra, also." The General stared at Corwin for the blink of an eye and said, "Dismissed," walking out before the men did.

Roelle and Marcus had followed Stacks' directions to the inn just around the corner from the

library and found it clean, comfortable and cheap. The innkeeper was a tiny woman as wide as she was tall with webbed fingers and orange hair. Her eyes and skin were burnt orange and she smelled of the same heavenly scents as those emanating from her kitchen. She took the pair up to their single rooms and held the door open. "Bed, wardrobe, hot and cold water closet, dresser, table and chair," she announced. "Fireplace runs on bluestone or oil. You want oil, it's four taler more a night as I have to get the boy to carry up the kettle. Rooms come with breakfast and dinner, lunch is on you or for another taler, and I can make sandwiches and beer. No gambling and no wenching in the room. There are establishments for that on Doxsee Street. No boys in the rooms either," she said to Roelle. "You be wanting a lady's maid, that be extra, too. Weekly rates are cheaper than days. Monthly rates are the best. We have the best food, ale and quiet in this quarter."

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"We don't know how long we'll be here," Marcus shrugged. "Maybe a week and maybe just a few days." He gave her enough for three days and she was satisfied. Marcus shut his door and stretched out on the thick mattress covered with down blankets. Tucked his hands behind his head and thought about what the librarian had told them.

He pondered the star riddle, with Roelle's aid they had partially decoded some of the rhyme but couldn't get any further until they read the original papers that were locked in the Palace archives. Since they heard that King Luke was mounting an expedition to track Raven down they thought they had a better than average chance to break in and find the scrolls.

Marcus had no desire to risk Roelle's life so he did not tell her when he was leaving; he simply got up in the darkest part of the night, dressed in his darkest clothes and climbed out on the roof via his window.

Topaz was laid out in a grid system built around a central hub so all roads led to the Palace. Most of the main thoroughfares were still busy, early morning deliveries of goods, drunks and off-duty soldiers coming and going. If it was true that a modern city never slept, the same could be said of Topaz.

Marcus was a Mage-in-Training and he had several spells that could mask his presence. The trouble was, another mage (or sorceress) could feel those spells and know another wizard was approaching. He used instead a stealth charm that masked his physical body and let him climb the rooftops like a ghost. His own natural skills at climbing the heights were only enhanced so it was with some shock that he looked up and saw the gargoyle flying silently overhead. He froze on his perch of what was the Palace East wing of the outer ring. Silently and unmoving, he watched from under his hood as Murphy circled in long lazy spirals before gliding slowly off. He let out the breath he had been holding and waited for ten minutes more just to ensure it wasn't a trick.

The marble under his thin-soled slippers was cool and slick. He wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on the folds of his cloak before he stepped off the cornice and onto a downspout.

Once back on the ground, he was lost. There were a maze of buildings with thousands of rooms, corridors and gates, all of which were guarded by tall heavily armed and stalwart men.

'Like cut out cookies,' he grumbled. 'All cut from the same mold.' He wasn't worried about them spotting him; he was more concerned about tripping a ward or rune across a doorsill. Still, Marcus and Raven had spent nearly six months wandering Amber's palace grounds together and had never been caught. Luckily, he had the foresight to ask for a map of the Palace and had made

a copy as well as memorizing the route he needed.

The archives were kept close to the Queen's old suites, heavily guarded but Marcus was nothing if not ingenious. He researched the old papers on construction and found several hidden ways on a three hundred-year-old blueprint that wasn't on the more modern versions. To Marcus, that meant secret passages. The only problem was finding the entrances on the other end.

As he slipped down one hallway painted in a dull red that showed blackish in the dark, he felt the tingle of old magic and paused at a pedestal on which rested a particularly ugly figure of a man in torment. Behind it was a tapestry and when he lifted it, he saw a blank wall with a strange crack. To the touch of his hands, it slipped inside itself and opened to reveal a narrow tunnel. He didn't hesitate but climbed in and heard the door grind shut.

The darkness was absolute, the silence heavy. The air smelled of age and dust. He lit a Wyche ball and squeezed his way down trusting in fate and the luck of Unicorn.

Chapter 17

The Healer Bremer was the only person that I saw besides Jasra and the servants. All of them tiptoed around me as if I were some deadly disease that would poison them in some horrific manner. As if I could care less if they did anything to me.

Bremer bullied me. In my more lucid moments, this amused me, the fact that an old man could bully a forty-foot Dragon. Jasra wanted me to transform but the Healer had forced her to reconsider, citing reasons:

- 1.) He needs less food at this size.
- 2.) He can be cared for inside the keep.
- 3.) It takes less pollen to keep him under control.
- 4.) It's easier to treat his wounds at this size.
- 5.) Finally, he can be destroyed easier if need be.

Not that I was an agreement on any of them but my attitude was that of despair and detachment.

Jasra had warded the tower chamber with a major spell that had taken her two days and three nights to perform. She hadn't allowed me to be in the room, nor the healer. Instead, we had been banished to his room, lower on the first floor of the tower. It was a round room filled with herbs and potions, smelling very much like Roelle's Solar and Apothecary. He had many books in there, too. I felt a pang of nostalgia and wondered where my two friends were.

"Raven, how do you feel?" Bremer asked. He'd carried me and the basket up the fifteen flights to the top and placed me on the perch built just for me. I didn't know why they treated me like a hawk; I would've preferred a stone outcrop to sprawl on. I felt different. Stronger. Spread my wings and preened. Felt the fire deep in my belly and smoke puffed out through my nostrils. I roared. Or at least, I tried to. It came out more like cat's growl.

"Relax," Jasra said and smiled. I settled down, all four talons clinging to the perch and tightened my grip. The hawthorn stick crushed beneath me and broke in two. My wings kept me aloft, three feet of thin membrane and sharp spined bone flapping furiously. Dragons were

aerodynamic gliders, not birds.

“I would say the spell was successful,” Jasra gloated. “Dragon, find a place to roost.”

I settled to the floor and walked over to the fireplace, climbed the stone with claws and feet to perch upon the slates of the mantelpiece. I looked down at the four corners of the room.

“What did you do, Jasra?” Bremer was curious.

“I brought a piece of Amber here and planted it inside this room. As long as he’s in here, he can draw on the magic of the land and remain strong. I’m not sure if it will extend beyond the tower but I believe it will. How do you feel?” She turned to me.

“I feel hungry, mistress,” I replied and opened my mouth to show her my teeth. “Strong and hungry.”

“Do you think you can fly and carry me, Dragon?”

“No. My bones still ache from the last flight. I need more time to heal,” I replied.

“You may hunt the Citadel for your food. Take what you will.”

“Anything, Mistress?”

“Anything. Human or animal. Vermin, bird or pets.”

“I do not eat of the flesh of humans, mistress,” I shook my head.

“If I order you?” She insisted.

“I would become a mindless beast that no one could control.”

“But you have the eaten of the humans, Raven,” she said coolly. “I fed you Dieterhof’s heart.”

I said nothing, just barely felt the sudden pang in my stomach at the horror of the thought. To consciously eat of humankind would turn my mind into a thing, no longer vaguely human. I would become one of the Chaos Spawn.

I wished desperately for help from my father. “I can’t,” I whispered. “Even you could not bend me to your will then. I would burn, ravage and destroy this whole Shadow until not one human life remained. Only me and a pile of ashes.”

“So you say,” she snorted.

I fixed my eye on her. “Read the Grimoire of the Blighted Void and you will learn why there are no more dragons.”

I tucked my head under my wing and went back to sleep. For once, my dreams were unknown nor did I visit with my mother in Amber at the Unicorn’s Bower.

“Wakee, wakee,” Jasra chirped and banged on the wall so that it startled me awake. I nearly fell off the mantelpiece and screeched at her; she stood back and admired my voluble curses. “Are you done? Good, it’s time to test my potion not my patience.” She gestured and I felt myself bound, a hood on my face and leather straps around my rear feet. Hooded and jessed like a falcon. Though I struggled, I could not remove them.

Carefully, she folded my wings against my body and carried me... somewhere. I heard the door

open and close, she mounted stairs and though my senses were awash in sounds, scents and even a kind of sonar, I could feel and see nothing. “Speak your words, Dragon,” she ordered.

“The hood and jesses?”

“They’re spelled to grow with you.”

“I can’t fly if I can’t see,” I pointed out.

“True. But trust me.”

I snorted. Smoke puffed from my nostrils. “Gigantum alternus,” I said and in the space of that blink, I was back to my regular size. I felt Jasra climb onto my back and where there had been a hood, now was a harness onto which she could hang. My head rose and I stared in awe.

I was literally on top of the world, on a mountain crag covered with snow and on a tower that rose some twenty stories above that. Murphy had taken me to the Hoover dam and I’d been amazed at how full size semi-truck trailers looked like matchbox toys but here, even with my Dragon eyesight, I could barely discern houses. Rivers looked like thin ribbons of blue.

“Can you fly?” I stretched my wings, arched my back and moved everything finding nothing other than soreness as if I’d overextended the muscles. I leaped and nearly unseated her as I dived off the flat roof. I caught a thermal immediately and she laughed in sheer delight. Gestured, spoke a spell and I was suddenly blinded. In panic, I dropped a thousand feet before she pulled me up. “Listen,” she said urgently. “Listen to the sounds that are coming into your nostrils and the skin on your wings!”

I could feel the tingling and the moment I shifted over to that sense, images appeared inside my head; like infrared pictures. I could actually *see* the images given off by everything that produced heat. When I gave off ultrasonic squeaks, they pinged back at me and my brain interpreted the clicks into decipherable pictures. “Like a bat’s sonar,” I was amazed.

“Like what?” She asked guiding me into a broad turn.

“It’s what they use to find food, each other and home. Echolocation.” I could see the heat signature of a large beast below me and recognized the two hearts and four stomachs of a snow ape. “I’m hungry,” I announced and felt the pull of firestone below me.

“What do you eat in this form?”

“Anything I want. Is there any creature you do not want me to eat, Mistress?”

“Nothing.”

“There is a clan of snow apes below. Do you care if I eat one of them?”

“Well, they are part of the defense of the mountain. Perhaps not.”

I shuddered to think of anyone foolish enough to try to sneak past those critters. They were 600 pounds of pure mean with teeth like a great white. I could kill one but I sure as hell wouldn’t want to take on more than one at a time.

Scanning, I banked towards a gap in the mountain and dropped into a small valley lined on both sides with silver Firs. They were the only trees hearty enough to survive above the frost line. An eagle buzzed me and I ignored it, locking onto a herd of Ibex only these were four times larger than I had ever seen with horns like a Texas steer.

They scattered as I dropped on them but I didn't even miss a beat as my rear talons picked up one a piece, spearing them through the heart with my main claw. The rich smell of blood and meat made my stomach growl and I yelled a roar that echoed down the valley setting off a series of avalanches that made the ground tremble.

I could've eaten on the wing but Jasra told me to set down on the small outcrop of blue granite just outside the valley. I glided in, let go of my meal and grabbed the rock with claws and wingtips. Folded my wings straight up in the air so that she could dismount and when she stepped nimbly off, wrapped them around my prey.

She watched me tear them to pieces and swallow whole without chewing. I offered her the heart and liver but she declined. When the edge was taken off my appetite, I scratched at a boulder, turning it over to unearth a sizable deposit of firestone into my gut and the special chamber that processed it until it was full. Burped and picked at the offal stuff between my teeth.

"Finished?" She asked sarcastically.

"No, Mistress. That was just a snack. I'll have to eat a dozen stags or two cattle."

"Horses?"

"Well, no. I don't like to eat horses. I like horses," I protested.

"I didn't realize dragons were so picky," Jasra sneered.

"Well, I'm not really a dragon, Mistress. I'm really just a teenage boy. Or I was before I died."

"Really? Tell me," she ordered and I told her my story. "You murdered your master?"

"Yes, Mistress. I had to. He was going to hurt my dad and grandfather and the King. I couldn't let him do that and I couldn't live with myself after I killed him. So, we died together."

"If you try that on me, Raven, I won't make you suffer. Instead, I'll go after your father, your grandfather and your uncle. I'll hurt everyone and everything you love."

I reared up and spread my wings, opened my mouth wide and the sun glinted off my very large teeth. "I cannot harm you, Mistress; I am bound to you by the powder and your spells."

"You do not give me your mind," she pouted.

"No. Just my will. My mind is my own and unless I become wholly Dragon, it cannot be yours. Of course, if I lose the spark of intellect that makes *me* Raven-the Dragon, I become Raven-the beast and no one can control me. If you think to try that, read your archives back to the time of the Dragon wars—they nearly destroyed both the Courts and Amber. There have been no Dragons seen since then, over a millennium ago."

"Are you ready to leave?" She asked changing the subject.

"I must eat more. Will you stay here while I hunt?"

"Am I safe?" She countered.

"Safe from all but wild dragons," I returned. She laughed and told me to go. I left her there, returning only after I had eaten my fill.

Chapter 18

After a meal of epic proportions, she mounted up and had me fly north towards a Kingdom that had little commerce with Khafra as the huge Mountain range separated the two kingdoms and was nearly impassable for an army to travel over. There were no passes through or at least, none that *she* knew.

“Don’t worry. I have a plan,” Jasra said. I studied the mountains, they rivalled the Himalayas and because I was bound to protect her, I told her that she could not breathe the air that high because it was too thin for human beings.

We flew straight up the sides of the peaks until I could sense a difference in the air and found it a struggle to fly myself. Jasra had spelled a bubble of air at lower pressure around herself but I had no such luxury.

It was bitter cold and even I felt it. Once I reached the top of the world and went over it, the descent was much easier on the other side. The terrain was different; the land was gentler with more cultivated areas, broad plains that were thousands of hectares planted with crops that resembled corn, cotton and wheat. The forests were sculpted into geometric shapes and separated the land into grids.

I saw hamlets, villages but only a rare few larger cities. The homes and businesses were made of a red stone and brick, rarely higher than five stories. I saw no castles or manor houses and in the cities, the buildings reminded me of old Manhattan lofts and factories. There were a preponderance of churches, all built like Gothic Cathedrals. There was a plethora of greenery everywhere, whereas on the other side of the range, the flora was in tones of orange, maroon and red; this side looked more normal to me.

My shadow skimmed the ground and the people that were outside looked up and pointed. I could see the wide ‘O’ of their mouths. Jasra laughed, almost a giggle and said, “Burn them, Dragon. All of them.”

I banked, tilted my head down and lit the grass to the sides of the lane. People scattered, only a few had their pants cuff catch fire and Jasra berated me.

“I told you to burn them!” she screeched.

“I did,” I defended. “I burned them.”

She thumped me on the neck and it hurt. Almost as if, it had pierced below my scales and bored into the flesh beneath. I moaned, shook my neck and veered off just missing a tall silo shaped structure.

“Owww!” I yelled. “That hurt!”

“I can do more,” she threatened. “If I tell you to burn, I mean kill, destroy them until nothing is left but ashes! Do you understand me, Dragon?”

“Yes, Mistress,” I panted, the fire still eating at my neck as if encircled by a ring of agony.

“You’ve managed to scatter them all inside their homes. Burn this village to the ground,” she ordered. I did so, laying a swathe of flames from one end of the town to the other. Once there was nothing left but a column of smoke, she sent me on towards the far horizon.

We flew over more plains, more villages until we came to a grim city built against the backside of a smaller mountain range. Atop one of the flattened peaks was a garrison. From its topmost tower fluttered a flag with a broken cross against a red and black background; it reminded me of a swastika but the X was backwards such as the American Indians used.

“Good. Ryan is here. Put me down as close to that Tower as you can without destroying any of the Keep,” she ordered.

“Yes, Mistress,” I said and landed just south of the Tower on the stretch between two buildings on a flat walkway. Immediately, guards attacked us. I reared up, spread my wings and blasted them to charcoaled flesh before a loud voice ordered them to desist. We saw a tall man with dark brown hair, piercing blue eyes and a military uniform that was clearly of US origins.

“Jasra!” He exclaimed and made as if to start forward but stopped when I threatened him with hissing and a clashing of teeth.

“Ryan,” she put a hand on my neck as she slipped off.

“Jasra?” He said again and approached me.

“It’s all right, Dragon. Ryan, this is it, this is what will bring my son and the Realm of Amber to heel. Down, Raven.”

I dropped to all fours and she conjured using the spell to make me miniature. I was once again hooded and struggled as a hand caught up my jesses. I felt cloth wrapped around a forearm and then was handed over to a man’s brawny grip.

“Amazing. A real-life Dragon. It’s only a myth on our shadow, Jasra,” his voice was smooth and I recognized a faint accent.

“Georgia,” I said and turned my ears towards his voice. “You’re from Georgia?”

“How do you know that?” He returned surprised. He started walking and we entered a long hallway. I could see the heat signatures of many men surrounding us and flapped my wings in agitation.

“Settle, Raven,” she ordered. “I am in no danger here.”

“Yes, mistress,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Raven is from your Shadow Realm, Ryan. Have you a secure place to keep him?”

“Like a cage? What if he gets big again?”

“Not unless I command it so. You’ll be getting reports in from Bainbridge Shire of massive destruction. I had my Dragon burn the village and surrounding countryside to the ground,” she said gleefully.

“We can stash him in the Eyrie, I suppose,” he said doubtfully. “Or do you prefer to keep him close by?”

“I want him within sight but contained. Have you a trap for wild cats about?”

“Mistress,” I protested. “I do not need to be caged; I will not leave unless you will it.”

“I am displeased with you, Raven and you will be punished by confinement in a cage and no food tonight,” she returned calmly.

I sulked beneath the hood. We traveled deep within the ugly brick and stone building and I heard doors of metal closing around us, a sinking sensation realizing that we were descending in an elevator.

“Your wounds are healed, Ryan?” She asked and her voice sounded different—more feminine and sensuous. I was pushed up against the wall and heard the sounds of two people kissing. Smelled the sudden release of pheromones.

“Hey, you two. Get a room,” I said disgusted that they were making out in front of me. Gross, even if I couldn’t see. He wrapped his hand around my snout and squeezed, I slashed at his arm with my front claws and was thrown to the floor of the cage by the leather jesses. Blood splattered on me, human, rich and steaming in the light of my infrared sense.

Jasra was pissed and put a spell on me that flattened me to the ground. All I could do was flap my wings into the grated floor and screech. “Cease, you flying lizard,” she spat. “Or I will cut your tongue out and blind you in the other eye. How dare you lay a hand on my consort?”

“It’s no more than a scratch, Jasra,” he soothed. “Don’t lose your temper and kill the beast. We need him, remember? Perhaps he’s jealous of the attention you give me.”

She stood, her breath coming in heavy gulps and I could feel her heartbeat racing. She enjoyed the sight of me in pain and subservient. Just like my former master, Webster. He too, got his thrills from torture and misery.

“It seems I need to readjust his Atarax dose, he is entirely too free with his actions,” she spat.

“Did you bring any? It’s in short supply this side of the range.”

“Don’t worry; I’ve enough for a lifetime.”

The lift shuddered to a stop, someone on the outside of the gate doors opened it and Jasra kicked me out onto a hallway of cool tiles. People scattered out of my way. Some were armed guards and others servants. She ordered one to take my leathers, carry me to the bedchamber of the man named Ryan, and tie me to the wardrobe’s legs with the chain and collar she gave him.

I felt cold, icy metal encircle my neck and my stomach shrank in horror. It was spelled with a black magic that burned as well as confined.

“It cannot hurt you as long as it is hooded and tied; I have also bound its mouth closed. Take it away; we will be in the War Room,” she told the man servant that held my leash.

I was dragged on a chain like a reluctant puppy and heard their departing footsteps leading off in another direction. I shivered in both fear and anger that I, such a powerful creature had been reduced to a tethered hound. I felt it when the sun went down, my whole body shook as I fell into sleep and a well of depression. My stomach growled in emptiness and because I was hungry, I got little rest that night.

The pair came back hours later smelling of food and lust, I had to endure the sounds and smells of the two mating. Her cries and his groans were uglier than the images in my head and made me want to scream loud enough to drown them out. Jasra got up once during the night to use the restroom and she made sure she kicked me both coming and going. At one point, she broke my hind leg and my cry of pain made her giggle. I spent a miserable night holding my leg off the ground as tremors wrecked my frame.

When daylight came, he was staring over the edge of the bed at me, my hood in his fingers. “What are you?” He asked studying me. I could not reply as she had bound my mouth shut. I lay on my good side, keeping the weight off the broken limb. Getting up, he walked over to me and squatted. He was over six ½ feet tall, very naked and very well endowed with muscles to match.

“Stand still,” he said and drew out a knife I knew was called a K-bar, one of those wicked commando blades used in all kinds of murders. I backed up between the wall and the wardrobe hissing as loud as I could with my mouth-taped shut.

“I’m going to cut your gag, stay still,” he ordered and stepped on the chain so I couldn’t move. With one stroke, he severed the leather tied around my snout and waited. Prompted me. “Your name?”

“Raven.”

“What part of Earth Shadow are you from?”

“Ireland by way of New York City. How did *you* get here?”

“How did you?”

“I Hell rode and Flora started me,” I explained.

“I met Jasra through Luke on earth, Los Angeles. Followed her from a bar and wound up in Khafra. She was... flattered and my knowledge of Physics explained a few things. Have you been to the other end of the Realms?”

“You mean the Courts of Chaos?”

“Yes. It must be a fascinating amalgam of the Laws of Physics and Einstein’s Theoretics.”

“There are no laws that work in Chaos,” I said.

“Are you born of Chaos since you have another form?”

“I was born in Ireland.”

“Maybe so but Jasra said you’re the son of Merlin and the grandson of Corwin. Luke never mentioned you.”

“Merlin never knew I existed until I was seventeen,” I returned sadly. “And for just a short while at that.”

“What do you mean?”

I cocked my head towards him. “I died when I was seventeen, Webster killed me. The Unicorn captured my spirit and put it inside this body, which is only a spell construct. I’m not alive and I haven’t been for two years.”

“Will you obey Jasra’s commands?”

“As she commands me, so shall I obey,” I answered.

“And me? Will you obey me?”

“If she says so.”

“I do say so, Raven,” she came off the bed around him cloaked in the living robe of red flame that was her hair. I swallowed; she was breathtakingly lovely and sensual until I realized that she

was producing pheromones to entice me. They did not seem to bother the man for his eyes did not even widen. She kissed him on the shoulder and they coupled before me, forcing me to endure a scene of such intimacy, power and raw lust that it disgusted and sickened me. It reminded me of the abuse I had endured at Lucian Webster's hands. I couldn't drown out the noise and the smell of it; all I could do was close my eyes and turned my head away. No one took an interest in my broken leg and I was forced to suffer with it until she deigned to notice.

Chapter 19

The first night's march brought the small squad to the beginnings of the forest of Bunmuir. Corwin who had seen both Arden and the redwoods of California was amazed at the size and variety of the trees. The undergrowth was as thick as any southern jungle and he understood why the General had muttered about an impossible task.

"Are there trails through here?" Corwin asked and was told that there were certain routes that all travelers followed which made it easier for the bandits to waylay solitary merchants. They made a dry camp just inside the perimeter and tied the horses to the trees. Corwin walked the campsite with Pire and set up a ward so that nothing could approach without warning.

"Murphy?" Pire asked. "How will he keep track of us? The canopy is too thick to spot us down here."

"He's scouting ahead and will be waiting for us at the first clearing. He'll join us at night," Corwin replied. "I've never seen a wood this thick." He asked one of the other squad men about the local fauna that inhabited the trees and was told the usual—wolves, dire beasts, wyverns, wild cats, feral dogs and ghouls. Maybe an occasional demon cut loose from some wizard and further in, snow apes and cave jackals. Those had a nasty habit of cracking an unwary man's skull and eating out their brains. Not to mention the normal bears, wild boars, stags and elk whose tempers were as ugly as a hog's.

Then, there were the brigands who haunted the fringes off the trail and lived off the infrequent travelers who had to pass through to reach the other side of Khafra's border. The only other option was to take a ship around but that involved a journey twice as long as the trail through the forest and was equally dangerous because of pirates. King Luke's new reign hadn't quite eradicated the threats of pirates at sea and at his borders.

"Wait," the corporal, sighed. "We haven't seen anything yet."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Corwin said and returned to the campsite.

Marcus sneezed. And froze. The sound echoed dully in the long corridor yet nothing moved. There was only a faint stirring of the dust as he moved through it. Though he had only been inside for a half hour, it felt like a lifetime. Pausing to bring up the mind picture of his map, he looked at both sides of the wall to run his hands along its surface searching for a hidden door or latch. He found one and slowly pushed back a small wooden cover that let him peer into a room. Lights from a lamp showed him a narrow angle and from that little slice, he could see a couch, a desk piled with papers, vellums and slates. The fireplace was shooting sparks up the chimney and against the metal fire screen.

The desk was huge, made of a strange metal and glass with tubular legs. A box sat on top that

admitted a bluish light and the screen flickered as if the images were moving. Occasionally, a chime seemed to come from it.

Bookshelves covered an entire wall and there was a rich piled carpet on the floor. He pushed harder, the panel flipped open, and he sprawled forward onto his hands and knees. The carpet kept him from scraping anything but the Wyche ball fell out of his hands to roll across the floor where it stopped at the toe of a pair of boots. Marcus looked up into the dark saturnine face of a man in his 30s, dressed in blue jeans, T-shirt and a suit jacket. There was a strange device on his wrist that Raven had called a watch.

“Uh, hello,” Marcus stuttered. The man stepped forward and grabbed him by the back of his shirt to lift him up dangling off the ground.

“You’re a little large for a wall rat,” the man said. “Who are you?”

“Marcus,” he stuttered, his fingers moving in a spell.

The man shook him. “Don’t try it; you’ll only backlash it on yourself. What are you doing in here?”

“I came to steal something so I could sell it. My mom’s sick and my seven sisters are starving,” Marcus lied.

“The penalty for stealing from the King is amputation of your hands, boy.”

Marcus gulped. “I wasn’t planning on stealing from the King.”

“I am the King,” Luke said and propelled the boy towards a huge, overstuffed chair. Marcus fell into it more than sat and looked frantically about for an escape route. Luke removed his bag and went through it, finding his wizard’s bits and pieces, his tools and the map. His fingers closed around the last item and pulled it out. The light glinted off the diamond hard black scale.

“Ah,” the king said drawn out. “Where are you from, Marcus? Amber, perhaps? Although, I doubt Random would send a child spy to Khafra.”

“I’m not from Amber,” Marcus protested.

“Where then? Topaz, Braeden, Berengen, Moravia?” The King named all of the Golden Treaty Alliances and not a one was Marcus familiar enough to claim he was from.

“Are you a spy, boy? Tell me the truth or it’ll go worse for you,” the King threatened.

“I’m not a spy,” he returned hotly. “I’m here to help a friend.”

“A friend being?”

“Roelle. She ran away from her father and an arranged marriage. I thought if I could steal enough we could sell it and have enough for a farm somewhere. Or an Inn, I’m a very good chef.”

“You’re a lousy thief,” Luke said and called out. In seconds, two guardsmen entered at a run and snapped to attention their eyes riveted to the teen. “Take this boy to the holding cells and see if you can get any information out of him. Don’t kill or maim him and be careful, I believe he has some wizard’s training.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” they saluted and Marcus was dragged off to the dungeons. He did not attempt to struggle or fight, most of his spells were still on the King’s desk. Idly, Luke picked up the black scale and turned it over knowing immediately what it was. What he couldn’t figure out was why Random had sent a teenage boy to attempt to rescue the Dragon.

Roelle woke before dawn, a sick feeling in her gut. Throwing on her clothes, she sneaked out the hallway and down to Marcus’s room at the top of the stair. No one answered her knock so she slipped the door open as Raven had taught her and entered the darkened room.

The bed was empty but mussed as if someone had slept briefly and Marcus’s dark clothes were gone as well as his pack and things. She cursed softly under her breath knowing that he had gone without her in an effort to shield her from risk. There was nothing she could do until he returned. She spent the rest of the night huddled under a blanket in his chair and when the smells of breakfast cooking rose to the upper floors, she returned to her room to dress. She hovered in the doorway to the dining room and did not see him. Found a spot next to an old farmer and a young maidservant spending the next hour toying with her food. Still no sign of Marcus. Worried, she went back to the library and found Evril with his bike.

“Morning,” he said cheerfully. “Just you?”

“Marcus is missing.”

“Where did you lose him?” He stood on the pedals, frowning.

“He went to the palace and broke in, I think,” she started. “Can you get me inside?”

“If he got caught stealing, they’ll chop off his hands for sure,” he returned grimly. “The Queen’s man would have hung him. What was he after? Gold, jewels?”

“A scroll.”

“He risked his life for a piece of paper?” Evril was agape at the idea.

“It’s a very important piece of paper,” she defended. “A friend’s life, his very existence waits on it.”

“How much is it worth to you? I mean, how much would you pay for it?”

“Why? Do you know something that can help us?”

“Maybe. Meet me here in two hours.” He pedaled off and was gone in the early morning crowd of people on their way to market, work or worship. She saw that there were a great many soldiers out on the streets and that they were questioning everyone but especially children. Roelle disappeared into the sanctuary of the library.

Marcus sat on a metal cot that hinged off the wall when in use and folded neatly back into it when not. He was fascinated at the simplicity of it and the relatively clean and comfortable cell. True, the walls and floor were stone but he wasn’t manacled to it and he had a cushion on the cot. Also his own chamber pot that flushed to remove wastes. He spent some time playing with that and the guards watched him indulgently.

“Our King has brought some new ideas with him,” the younger Dales man said. “Lucky for

you. See that rust colored stain by your foot?" Marcus looked down. "That's the blood from the last occupants who pissed off the former Queen. She had both hands, both feet and finally his head removed. And he didn't have no fancy pot to piss in." Marcus swallowed and waited. He knew a few spells he could perform without the regular components but suspicious if he tried without the proper protection, he'd be fried. No one had searched him and he still had several lock picking slats in his boots. He couldn't use them while he was being watched.

He knew when shift changed; he heard the handing over of keys and exchange of gossip, the different voices of new men. It wasn't long after that a jangling individual approached his cell and motioned for him to get up and stick his hands through the bars. Where he was promptly manacled. Two more guards opened the bars, unlocked him, pushed him out and placed wrist cuffs and anklets on him. Punched him once in the belly so that he fell over breathless and then dragged him down the stone corridor that was the cliché of all dungeons – dark, guttering torches, dank, smoky and with a hulking figure waiting in the light at the far end. He could hear screams and clenched his legs together so he wouldn't pee his pants. Resolved not to say anything about Raven, Roelle or the quest.

The man at the end was a giant of a brute, even larger than Murphy. Marcus had heard Raven's nightmares and knew what a Thrud looked like and he was very much afraid that this hulking beast was one. His courage faltered as he was dragged into a torture chamber and locked into a four-point restraint on the wall.

"Oh Unicorn," he whispered and barely heard the guard tell the torturer.

"No maiming, no limb tearing and no killing, the king ordered," the guard said and with a squeamish look on his bland face, hurried out of the room. It wasn't too long after that, screams that curdled the blood echoed down the halls and the other prisoners in the cells prayed fervently that they weren't next.

Chapter 20

I didn't like carrying the two of them, he fidgeted and she was cruel, using me to show off. I burned and killed so many of her enemies that it numbed me. Finally, she had me set down on a vast plain that surrounded the city of Minsk and the leaders came out to surrender. Ryan's army was vast but he only used smaller shock troops. I was astonished to learn that many of them were Marines from shadow earth that he had managed to transport here and like Amber, none of their automatic weapons worked. Nothing explosive would detonate. They had mastered instead, crossbows and ballistas and the like. But it was the devastation wrought by me that made the city elders give up.

Minsk was the second-largest city on that side of the range and ruled by a King. His War Generals had advocated battle but after I destroyed half their legions in one blow without a scratch, they had ceded defeat.

They rode out on golden horses, the King and his last Ministers, his Generals and the Crown Prince who was no more than a boy. I was suddenly frightened at the look in Jasra's eyes when she spotted the golden haired youth. His face was pretty enough to be a porcelain doll and I could see he was afraid but hiding it. I rustled my wings and Jasra jerked the chain she kept tethered to my neck collar. The party stopped some distance away from me, their mounts skittish and terrified at my scent and size.

“Get down and walk,” she commanded and they did so, the King with evident pain in his knees and back. At his side, a worn sword bumped him. Even from this distance I could see the nicks and dents on the steel edge. The General stepped forward as if to protect one or the both of them.

“Caldor, General Amaranth,” Ryan stated. “Unconditional surrender are the only terms we will accept.”

The King nodded, his visage worn and weary. His son had his golden looks and sea green eyes with dark lashes of almost feminine allure. Both were dressed in deep purple tunics, navy wool breeches and high boots. Silver spurs, usable swords and a belt of golden links. The boy carried a bow and a quiver full of arrows hung from his saddle.

“You can have everything in the city, Jasra,” he said wearily. “Just don’t burn any more of my people with the vicious beast.”

Jasra laughed. “It’s not the beast that’s vicious, Caldor,” she sneered. “But me. Raven-.”

“No,” I said and backed up. “No. I won’t kill a child, not face-to-face. You can’t make me do this.” I reared up and hissed at the child’s mount sending the terrified horse galloping off as if its tail was on fire. In seconds, it was gone and one of their soldiers went after them. When Jasra tried to send hers, I swept them aside with my tail. She beat me with the chain and as it struck my scales, the magic infused in the links burned me, burned holes through to my flesh. She pinned me to the ground with lances so that I was like a bug on a mounting board. I cried out in defiance and she slew the king herself. She stood over me with his blood dripping from his own blade and his head hanging from her hands. “Raze the city,” she commanded. “Hang the Royal family, the Generals and the Officers. The treasury is yours, Ryan. Take slaves if you wish but I don’t want one brick standing on another once we leave here.”

“The Dragon, Jasra?” He asked.

“He’s beginning to be more trouble than he’s worth,” she spat.

“You need him against Random’s forces,” he reminded.

“I need him obedient,” she retorted. She paused. “There were rumors that a talisman of power was in the hands of Caldor’s family. Find it.”

“What does it look like?”

“It’ll be something like a crown or collar. Perhaps a necklace with an odd stone and it’ll be in the treasury with other important items.”

“What about the Dragon and the child?” Ryan asked.

“Neither one will get far.” She opened her bag and pulled out a twist of paper which she popped into my face. I breathed deep of the yellow pollen and felt my will falter under the influence of the drug.

Before night fell, I saw Jasra’s men come back and heard their whispered conversations over the campfires. The Army had camped outside the fallen city, most near my prostrate form as if they feared the darkness more than me. She did not feed me, nor shrink me and the lances that skewered me to the ground were magicked, draining more of my spirit than I could replenish this far from Amber’s soil.

She had soldiers drag human corpses near me as if to mock my hunger pangs but not even if I were starving to death would I eat of humans knowingly. Cannibalism was one taboo I would not break.

They mocked me all through the night and I was unable to rest, unable to do more than thrash my tail on the ground. Dawn brought the Red Witch's man to my side and he held his blade casually in his hand as he stared down at me. "Are you ready to yield, Dragon?" He asked quietly.

"I will not kill anymore," I whispered. "Though you end me for it, I will not kill anymore."

"You have no choice, you must obey the will of the spell or perish."

"Then I will perish."

"She will destroy all that you care for."

"What do you care?" I retorted. "You're as bad as she is."

"I do not want her to die, Dragon and if she persists in this revenge scheme, she will die. Random or Luke will grind her into the ground even with you under her control. If I turn you loose, will you flee this place?"

"I cannot flee, I am bound to her side unless she releases me. Or—" I paused.

"What? Or what?"

"She dies and breaks the bond."

"Not gonna happen. I'll see you dead first," he promised. He grabbed the chain and twisted it so that my slack was down to inches. He ordered the soldiers to pull out the lances and showed them how to twist them between the upper joints of my wings so that I was unable to open them, tied all four legs together and last, muzzled me.

Using a team of horses (six in all) they dragged me to the front entrance of the city Gates and attached the chain to a massive steel bolt embedded deep into the bedrock of the mountain. There, they left me. Like Cerberus tethered to the Gates of Hell.

Every day, the soldiers threw more bodies over the walls in front of me. Men, women and children. I burned their corpses in a funeral pyre those I couldn't reach and dug graves for those that I could. For each and every body, I made a mark on the wall of stone so that somewhere, someone knew of her atrocities.

Slowly, I starved to death as my mind fractured over the need to obey her and the desperation not to give into that need.

Eventually, I became too comatose to move and the soldiers grew bold enough to use me for an outpost. Riders came in from other villages with messages of surrender to Jasra. Once they heard of Caldor's death and Minsk's destruction, many folded. Her armies grew immense and many came to see the Dragon that she had humbled.

Even children no longer feared me, they clambered over me pulling at my scales and horns. Some tried to pry scales loose but their knives broke on my hide. Unless one was lucky enough to find a spot where Jasra's magicked lances had pierced. Those areas had not healed and were vulnerable.

I had been lying on the door sill of the main gate for three weeks when I smelled something that just managed to pique my curiosity. I opened my eye (covered with the third eyelid so the brats couldn't damage my eye) to stare at a youngster dressed in an old cloak. He was holding the reins of a large pony that an old man was riding. He was blind, gray-haired and filthy. As were both of them.

"Let us pass," the boy said and flipped his hood down. I saw sea green eyes, fair skin and brown curls that looked as if they came from a pigsty. Smelled like it too but I recognized those eyes and his scent, even under the filth. Standing before me was the child that had escaped Jasra's wrath and his companion was one of Caldor's Generals, no less.

"Go away," I hissed. "If you're caught, you're dead."

"You risked your own life to save mine," the child shrugged.

I gaped. Which in a Dragon was a scary sight as it exposed my teeth to all. He was not a 'he' at all but a *she*—Caldor's daughter and the last of his line.

The soldiers that remained near me laughed at my feeble display of arrogance warning her that although I might be feeble, I was not toothless. That she was in danger.

"He does not eat humans," she retorted. "If you knew your Dragon Lore, you would know that."

"Dragon Lore? What do you know of Dragon lore?" I recognized this guard, he was one of those that had served between Ryan and Jasra. I wondered what he had done to merit babysitting duty with me, ignoble task at that.

"I come from Lehte, we study the Creatures of Chaos there," she returned. "This man is one of the last teachers left alive. He fled from the war only to meet it head on."

"Well, get going before the Dragon mauls you. Although, I doubt he has the strength left." The soldier stepped close and poked me with his sword, jabbing at the spots where the lance had skewered me. Over the weeks I have been tied here, they had discovered where I hurt most and mocked me. Fresh blood stained the tip of his point. I barely moved.

"It's starving to death," she said in horror. Looked around but I had incinerated the last batch of corpses even though I was nearly out of flames.

"Tegan, get down please," she said and pulled the old man's robes. Before I could blink, she'd cut the throat of the pony and blood splayed across my face nearly blinding me. The fresh scent of blood and meat roused me and instinctively, I snapped, devouring the beast in two gulps.

The soldier yelled and went after the pair with his lance but I managed to grab both of them tossing them behind me and covered them with my wings. "Come get them if you dare," I hissed standing up to my full height. Smoke puffed out between my teeth and nostrils but only I knew the emptiness in my fire pouch.

"I thought you said you wouldn't kill humans," the guard stuttered and backed up.

I roared and he nearly fell over. "I won't eat you, fool. I never said I wouldn't kill you." I lunged and he ran so fast that he never saw my forward movement become a full-fledged flop onto my belly and face. Behind me, the pair climbed over my splayed wings to approach my head. I felt the edge of a wineskin slip between my gums and rich, raw red wine slid harshly

down my throat. Enough so that I could feel my tissues absorb it. Mundavian red from the border of Moravia. I opened my eye and stared into the girl's face.

"Who are you?" She barely heard my whisper. She laid her hand just above my eye ridge and I saw the tattoo of a star on her wrist.

"My name is Lyndseye, it means the Lost Star. What's yours?"

"Raven. You better turn around and run before he brings his buddies."

"We came to rescue you, sir Dragon."

"Prince."

"What?"

"Prince Dragon. My father is the King. I'm sorry I ate your horse. I like horses but I was so hungry. I am so hungry, I could eat a horse. Another, I mean. Are there any more? Horses? I won't eat you, you know. I can't. It would be like eating myself. My kind. I'm not really sure what kind I am anymore. You should run. And the blind dude, too. Know what it means to be blind. Blind in one eye."

"Hush," she said and did things to my collar. "We have only a little time to free you. It will be dark soon."

"Can't free me. I'm chained to this rock and to the Red Witch. She spelled me," I explained.

"Linz, he's delirious. Are you sure he's strong enough for this?" The blind man spoke and I looked at him. His eyes were now a sharp, piercing green laser.

"He has to or we're all doomed. Prince Dragon, I gave you an antidote to the Atarax pollen but it will only work for short while. We have to be away before that."

"Shrink me," I thought and thought I said it. Spoke again and this time, she understood me. She said she was no mage or wizard but the spell was a simple one and I told her how to reverse it. She stood over me and said the words twice, catching me in her hands as I dwindled to the size of a finch. Carefully, she bundled me inside her hat and tucked me into her bodice next to her heart. I could hear the reassuring thump of it and the heat from her body dragged me down into a warm dark place.

Chapter 21

Evril poked her in the back, no mean feat when she was leaning against the wall of a bookstore as she waited for his return. He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the shop. It was filled with books, scrolls and magazines, tables and chairs to read at of which several were occupied with scribes transposing letters for clients who could not read or write. They barely looked up at the pair. "He's in there. Got caught by the King and in the King's own study. Fine thief your friend turned out to be," he said disgusted.

"Will they...hang him?" Roelle's face was white.

"No. Nor chop his hands off. Our King Luke expressly forbade it. Still, they put the torturer to him. So far—hey, are you all right?" Evril caught her as she fainted, dragged her to the nearest chair (which was occupied but he dumped out the rear end that was in it) to place the girl as comfortably as he could. Ordered one of the clerks to fetch the bookbinder and some cold water.

Roelle came to only seconds later to find a crowd of worried faces surrounding her and Evril patting her cheeks with cool cloths.

“My bag,” she muttered, ashamed at her weakness. “Ammonia spirits work better.” She dug into her pack to pull up the vial of orange glass, unstopped it and took a whiff. The pungent odor of ammonia cleared all of the heads and stuffy noses, too.

“Sorry,” she muttered and the bookbinder patted her hands.

“Bad news?” He asked kindly. “Evril always did have a knack for delivering it badly. I’m Evraign, the idiot’s uncle.”

“Roelle. My...friend was caught in the Palace.”

“And you asked Ev for help rescuing him?” At her open-mouthed stare, he shrugged. “I can help you more than he. I have plans and papers on all the Palace buildings. We were with the resistance before our King Luke defeated Jasra.”

“Oh,” was all she said.

They were deep into the forest and on their fifth day before the company reached the first clearing. It had been rudely hacked out of the wood with axes, and comprised only about an acre in size. Grass had just barely begun to grow and the horses cropped it down to near dirt in minutes. Weathered stumps were all that remained of the trees and new saplings had started to encroach on the edges. Old campfire rings dotted the center but there were no structures of any kind, not even a rude lean-to.

The squad could have continued but both the General and Corwin decided to camp giving the men and horses a break from the monotony of trees, trees and more trees.

Gregg dismounted to take care of the horses, Petrus went in search of water and Pire established guard duty for the night watch. One of the two brothers was the cook and his twin started a fire so the other could whip up surprisingly good camp fare.

The General whose name was Cathorian, sat by himself most of the time. He gave his disability no special favors, brushing and saddling his own mount, even managing to shave every morning. This day, Corwin sat next to him on a stump and handed over a cup of the rich dark brew they called kava and he knew as coffee. Here, they spiced it was salt and cinnamon, not cream. It was strong enough to make a man’s hair curl. He took the proffered cup and sipped nearly burning his lip. It was bubbling hot.

“Nothing like good hot kava,” he sighed. “So, tell me how did you convince Random to let you sneak into Khafra?”

Corwin sputtered, hot coffee. “How did—?”

“I saw you fighting at Cabra. It’s hard not to recognize one of the Nine Princes of Amber, my Lord,” the General shrugged. “What’s the Dragon to you?”

“My grandson.”

“But the Prince died!” All of the Shadow Realms knew that Raven, Prince of Chaos and grandnephew of King Random had died in defense of the Queen and Amber.

“He did. Yet, he still lives on in some fashion.”

“The Black Dragon. A curse?”

“Not a curse to us who love him. He wants to be human again, to have a human body. He thinks it’s possible so he took off with two of his friends. Rest assured, General Cathorian. We, that is Random and Amber have no interest in Luke’s throne, just in retrieving Raven and returning home. Not an invasion, a coup or war with Khafra.”

“We wondered. There were rumors that Amber had sent spies to infiltrate Khafra and the Palace. We suspected that the former Queen was behind it, she seeks to control Luke and failing that, depose him. Do you know the man Ryan Secrest?” Corwin shook his head. “He is the main force behind her battles. Some say he came from a faraway Shadow Realm where techno...logy reigns.” He stumbled over the word. “He has weapons that do not fire here and made others that our people have never seen before.”

“You’re a half-dozen up on his realm with hippogriffs, harpies, wyverns and dragons,” Corwin laughed. He sobered. “What are you going to do about me?”

“You, Captain? I’m going to order you to track the beast down, subdue and return it home,” the General bowed, rose and retreated to his tent leaving Corwin alone to search the skies.

Murphy dropped in on a rush of cool misted air as if the sky was threatening rain only there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Several guards spotted him and rushed up, swords drawn but when they saw the Captain conversing easily with the winged creature, they relaxed. When introduced, all they did was nod in acceptance. After all, what was a gargoyle compared to a Dragon?

Marcus drew in a long shuddering breath of pain and tried to ignore his whimpers. He wondered how Raven had endure years of it when he had spent only an hour hanging from his wrists. He had expected blood and broken bones, torn flesh, eye gouging but all he had to show for the incredible pain he felt was faintly loosened skin. Still, he had not said one word about Raven, Roelle or why he was there.

“Stubborn boy,” the torturer said in a guttural clip. “Talk or I’ll make you bleed. Pull out your fingernails and burn off your balls.” He reached down for Marcus’ sac and cupped them. Marcus swiveled and tried to kick the man’s away hands away but succeeded only in hurting himself. “Nice pair you got there, boy. Fancy grilled oysters myself. They taste right nice sautéed in butter and garlic.” He went back to work, stopping only when his victim was unconscious in the chains. Called the lackeys who took him down and dragged him back to his cell to throw him on the floor where he lay in his own vomit.

The guard checked in on him, reported to the duty Sergeant who went up the chain of command to the King. It took hours before the report made it to Luke’s desk and another day before the king read it. When he finally opened the note, he cursed and threw on his coat as he hurried down the hallways. His bodyguards fell in beside him, glancing at each other before they followed. His destination was the dungeons.

Evril, Roelle and Evraign huddled around the centuries-old blueprints of the Palace as he studied the surprisingly modern sewage system that linked the upper and lower levels and

especially the dungeons.

“If he’s in this section, we can access it,” the bookbinder said and swallowed. “These are the condemned cells.”

“Surely they won’t kill him?” Roelle whispered. “Not for stealing?”

“If they think he was here to harm the King or as a spy, yes they would,” Evraign said slowly.

“But they’ll torture him first. We have to move fast. Ev, pack our bags and we’ll leave at first moonrise. Until then, we can memorize the maps. Lock the door, we’ll close early so that we have time to get ready.”

“Won’t it be suspicious if you’re closed?” Roelle asked.

“It’s a minor feast day and I usually close half day,” he shrugged. “It’s the Feast of the Fallen Star.”

“Fallen star?”

“A comet or something that fell hundreds of years ago and opened a doorway to Amber. One of the old Kings bound the core of it and made it into a State Relic. It’s in the Treasury or was. No one has seen it in two hundred or so years.”

“What’s the riddle of the Seven Stars?” Roelle asked.

“It’s a legend about seven objects that confer great power on a spell and how to activate it. Why?”

“Is that what your friend entered the palace to steal? If he tells them that, he will die.” Evraign stated. There was nothing else for them to do until wait for nightfall.

The moons, three in all rose at equal intervals at night, marking the hours of ten, twelve and fourteen. Precise enough to set a clock by and as the first shed her olivine light on the landscape, the trio left the shop by way of the back gate and exited onto the rooftops. No one but a few stray cats saw them tread quietly on the flat roofs of the residential section and descend to the outskirts of the slums where the sewage plant was located.

The smell wasn’t bad and the building in pristine shape. When asked, Roelle was told that not only was magic used to return the waste to clean water but also something called science that the King had overseen.

Beneath an old janitor’s cubbyhole was a door that led to an ancient staircase. By the amount of dust on the concrete floor, they knew no one had been inside in years. The staircase dropped to a room where tubes of clay sprouted from the ceiling like mushrooms. Some were cold and others warm yet none leaked or were wet with condensation. A soft mist hung near the ceiling and when Roelle lit one of Marcus’ Wyche balls, the vapor hissed against the surface. Lighting up the distance like a lance, the light shone a far way, an interminable length of pipes and hallways branching off the main corridor.

Evraign stated, “we stay on the main sewage line until the eighth left-hand turn and after that, it’s always a second right until we reach the main passage in the dungeon.”

“A regular subway system,” Roelle said and explained at their blank looks. “It’s something my friend used to say.”

“Used to? Has he passed?” Evril asked.

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?” But she would not explain further. It took them nearly 2 hours to walk the tunnel system because it was not a straight shot and several of the passageways had collapsed in the intervening centuries. Twice, they stumbled over skeletons that had the patina of ancient bones covered by scraps of cloth which time had bleached all colors from its threads. One even had the rusted metal of an old cuff on one ankle with a short chain attached. When Evril lifted the last link, it had been smashed open. “I wonder who they were,” he whispered and Roelle’s eyes discerned that it was a woman from the shape of the pelvis and not an old woman. Her spinal processes were still clean and undamaged by arthritis.

“Before Jasra, there was Alexander the Terrible and before that, the Impaler and a dozen others who treated Khafra like a slave colony. It’s only since Luke’s taken over that we’ve seen peace and prosperity. That’s why this thing with Amber worries the people so much. They don’t want war with Random or her allies but they don’t want to be a satellite state, either,” Evraign sighed.

“King Random has no interest in going to war with Khafra,” Roelle swore. “Nor King Merlin.”

“Merlin?”

“The ruler of the Courts of Chaos. He and Random are allies and related. They share a common bond.”

“You know a lot about the politics of Amber,” the bookbinder said.

“I’m from Amber,” Roelle confessed. “We’re here to save my friend’s life, nothing else.”

“Let’s hope we’re in time.”

Chapter 22

Luke lifted the boy’s head off the concrete floor, put his finger on the pulse point in his throat and ordered the guards to bring the Royal physician. Gently, he lifted the boy up onto the cot and went over every inch of his body checking for broken bones and wounds. “Did he say anything?” He asked the interrogators.

“Oh unicorn and he cried for his mother,” the man said.

“I told you not to maim him,” Luke said, his jaw clenching in anger.

“I didn’t, sire,” he protested. “No broken bones and nothing torn or cut.”

“Why is he unconscious, then?”

“Well, I questioned him. Can’t question a prisoner without causing pain. Pain makes some nits pass out.”

“He’s more than ‘passed out’, Geller. He’s unconscious with a fast heart rate and pounding pulse. In shock. What’s his name? Did you get that, at least?”

“Marcus, he said his name was Marcus,” the torturer shrugged. “He mentioned a girl and a bird. That was it.”

“A bird?” Luke’s interest rose.

“A crow or something and Roelle.”

“Roelle. He mentioned her before,” Luke snapped his fingers. “Isn’t there a barony near the border on the Golden Coast called Loest?” He turned to his bodyguard.

“Yes, sire. The Baron Rouen of Loest.”

“Didn’t they just have a wedding there?”

“I heard that the youngest son got married and that the King of Amber sent gifts. One of which was a Dragon shield.”

“Dragon shield?” Luke remembered the black scale that he had found in the boy’s pocket. Made a decision and spoke. “Take the boy to the Seashell Room, put a guard outside his door and send Arianas to see to him.”

“Yes, sire. How are we to treat him?”

“As if he were visiting royalty. He may be one of Random’s nobles, although he doesn’t look it. Send a squad through the city and look for a noble woman, young and blonde with lavender eyes, if I remember the look of Loest’s kin.”

“At once, sire.” The guard gestured and another man gathered Marcus in his arms, threw him over his shoulder and followed Luke back into the Palace.

Marcus opened his eyes slowly, carefully and thought he was dead. Nothing hurt and his body was softly cuddled in an incredibly comfortable bed. He smelled clean and fresh, and felt silk and satin under him. Someone leaned over, lifted his eyelids and he jerked in fear.

“Easy, boy. No one’s going to hurt you,” a strange voice said. “I’m Doctor Arianas. I’ve treated you and given you some pain medicine. How are you feeling?”

“I’m not dead?” Marcus gaped and sat up so fast he nearly brained the physician. He placed his hands on Marcus’ shoulders and pushed him back against the pillows.

“No, son. Not dead. You’re in the Palace in the Seashell Room.”

Marcus stared. The entire room was done in motifs of sea shells, the bed was shaped like a conch shell and the chairs like clams. The colors were muted and peaceful. “What? I was in the dungeons—.” He started, perplexed.

“I know. I found you there in rather poor shape. Your... testicles were rather...bruised.” Marcus shivered and grabbed them. “Don’t worry, they’re not damaged. Although Geller has been known to rip off a man’s equipment.”

“Please,” Marcus said brokenly. “Don’t talk about it. Why am I here?”

“King Luke ordered it,” the Doctor said.

“But why? I didn’t say anything, did I?” The boy was terrified.

“Nothing but your name and the girl’s. Is it true that you come from Amber?”

“How did you know that?” he turned wide eyes on the doctor.

“I didn’t. King Luke suspected it. Who are you?”

“Marcus Ainsletter. I’m nobody. Not a spy, just a common thief.”

“Oh, certainly not common, Master Ainsletter,” Luke said entering the room with his bodyguard. “I know who you are, Marcus Ainsletter, son of Amber’s top Chef, friend to Raven, Prince and compatriot of Lady Roelle Rouen, daughter of the Baron of Loest.” Marcus shut his mouth. “Want to tell me why you’re really here?”

“Nothing to do with you, sire,” Marcus gulped.

“Perhaps to retrieve the Black Dragon?”

“Black Dragon?” He stuttered.

“It seems he has invaded Khafra and is helping my mother Jasra with her scheme.”

“No! Not willingly! Raven would never do that!” he protested and shut his mouth like a snapping turtle when he realized what he had said.

The King patted him on the hand. “Don’t worry, Marcus. You haven’t said anything to incriminate anyone or thing. Really, I’m not your enemy and I don’t want to hurt you. Just tell me why you’re here.”

“I told you. I came to steal something so I could help a friend.”

“Roelle? She doesn’t need money, she’s a Baron’s daughter and works for the Queen.”

“Her father wants her to marry,” he blurted out. “And---.”

“He doesn’t approve of you, a chef’s son?” Luke prompted, amused that on Amber, an important Chef like his father wasn’t considered nearly as high as a rock star was on Shadow Earth.

“Just a cook’s son,” Marcus said, his lip twisted and the King saw the look in the boy’s eyes.

Oh ho, he thought. *Unrequited love?* “She loves someone else?” he asked sympathetically and knew he was dead on when the boy paled. On a red-head’s complexion, it looked awful.

“She can’t---he’s not---it’s not possible,” Marcus moaned. “This is all my fault!”

“The Dragon? She’s in love with the Black Dragon? Marcus, look at me. Maybe I can help. My mother is a Witch, in more ways than one, but she might have a spell that can help. Is that why you came, to steal something to help the Dragon?”

“It’s all my fault,” Marcus moaned.

“I swear on the friendship I have with Merlin, Raven’s father, that I will aid you, Marcus. I’ll swear by the Unicorn, too if you want although I don’t believe in it.”

“You’ll swear on the blood of the Dragon?” Marcus returned and the air chilled as the power of that vow whipped through the room and the hair on the back of their necks lifted and prickled, the air shimmered and there was music trilling in the background. Both Pattern and Logrus waited.

“I swear,” King Luke vowed as he felt the faintest touch of magic brush him on the forehead, lips and heart.

“You and your kingdom are bound in blood to honor this or curses will haunt your legacy,” Marcus stated. He looked suddenly exhausted. “I came to find the documents alluded to in a

treatise from a wizard called Ozyandias that mentioned a transformation spell. Something called the Riddle of the Seven Stars.”

“Why?”

“Because the Dragon is all that’s left of Raven, Merlin’s son and he wants to be human again so that he and Roelle can be...together.”

“How noble of you, Marcus,” Luke admired sincerely. “A real Tristan and Isolde tragedy. Or, more like Lady Hawke.”

“Huh?” Marcus said.

“Never mind. This realm isn’t ready for Hollywood yet. Great chick flick, though. You’d be Mouse. Ah well, you want to see the scrolls. Laister, bring me that scroll I have in the bookshelf under the yellow Rose medallion. It’s in a white birch case.”

“Aye, sire.” The bodyguard hesitated.

“Go, Jess and Ellis are outside the door and the boy’s no threat to me. As he vowed, it protects him from me and me from him.”

“Aye, sire,” Laister bowed and slipped out the door.

“Uh, any chance of getting something to eat or drink? No one’s fed me since I was down there,” the boy said.

Luke nodded and pulled a cord hanging from the bed pole. It had little bells dangling from the end. In seconds a quiet woman dressed in gray uniform with white cuffs and collar, apron and sensible clogs entered, curtsied and waited.

“Jenny, please bring Marcus something to eat and drink. Wine, tea—?” He looked at Marcus.

“Blue’s best?” He grinned.

“Blue’s best. Two, please. Bring me a sandwich also. I missed lunch because of you, young man.”

“At once, sire.” She disappeared as quietly as she had entered.

Both the guard and the food arrived at the same time. Luke saw that the young man was torn between the need for sustenance and knowledge so he stepped in. “Eat first, that way nothing will damage the parchments. They are rather old and a State Relic,” he ordered. Marcus dove into the pile of sandwiches, some of which he had never tasted before.

“Whas this?” He mumbled around a mouthful.

“Corned beef on rye with sauerkraut and Thousand Island dressing. Fried crab on sourdough. Tuna melt, pastrami on rye.”

“Gods. Have to get the recipes for my dad.” He swallowed the enormous mouthful with half a bottle of ale and burped.

“You might want to quit before you make yourself sick, Marcus,” the king warned. “Your stomach might be a bit touchy.”

“Good idea. But leave the plate for later.” He exited the bed to hobble over to the table where the King had laid out the scrolls and Marcus’ wizards’ bits and pieces. Unrolling the thin sheet

with careful hands, he saw the archaic writing that he and Raven had seen before. Read the riddle:

Go and catch a Falling Star
And bend it with a swimmer's fears.
The Star that grows on Sinking Sands,
The Star that swims beneath the tears.
Catch the one that floats afar,
And bind it with the Star that lands
Beneath the Seven Stars that dance.

"Do you know what it means?" Luke questioned.

"I can guess. It would help if Roelle was here," Mark said. "She's better at puzzles than I am."

"Where is she?"

"The Inn, Mama's Inn. I left her there."

"Laister, send a man to find her. No rough stuff, tell her the King and Marcus request her presence and help with a riddle."

"Yes, sire." Once again, the guard trotted out to do his King's bidding. Marcus studied Luke.

"Do they obey you so promptly because they fear you or like you?" He asked frankly.

"A bit of both," he shrugged. "They're waiting to see if I'm any better than my mother."

"Are you?"

"You're still alive and with both your hands, aren't you, Marcus?" He pointed out.

"Oh yeah." Both fell silent and Marcus went back to eating.

Chapter 23

Evraign was the first one to push open the rock wall into the cell corridor with a groan of grinding stone and dust that filtered through the feeble beams of the dungeon's light. Roelle hastily pinched off the Wyche globe as they stood four feet from the open door of the condemned wing. Silently, they examined the cells, careful not to be seen by any of the occupants but surprisingly, they were all empty and had been for some time. Only one had seen recent use and had been newly renovated. Roelle cried out, a soft sibilant moan as she spotted fresh blood and Marcus' shirt scraps.

"He was here," she whispered. "Where would they take him to...?"

"There are no scaffolds left in the city. Nor an executioner's block," Evril denied.

"What do we do now? We can't search the Palace for him. He could be anywhere, he could be dead," Roelle stopped. They were completely unprepared for the sound of a man behind them clearing his throat.

“Roelle, I take it? Marcus said you would probably come looking for him. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to him.”

They saw a tall, older man dressed in physician’s robes and instinctively trusted the sincere face. He smiled. “He’s fine, he’s with the King. If you’ll just come this way.” He pointed out the door and down the hallway. With one drawn-in breath, Roelle exited first and the trio were escorted up from the dungeons to the Palace proper.

When Marcus saw Roelle, he leaped from the chair completely ignoring the King and everyone else. The two grappled each other, both in tears and babbling so fast no one could understand them. Not even themselves. Finally, when the tears had dwindled, Roelle heard him say that he loved her.

“Marcus,” she whispered. “I thought you were dead. Or worse, your head and hands chopped off!”

“Nope. Got them all, see?” He wiggled the named appendages. “Sire, this is Roelle Rouen, of Loest.”

She curtsied low before the man in faded blue jeans and T-shirt. Not surprised at his attire as both Random, Merlin and Corwin were given to the style. “Sire. But, Marcus-?” She looked up at the King as he introduced all of them to each other. Held a chair out for her at the desk where scrolls and documents were piled in a haphazard mess.

Evraign joined them adding to the pile and within minutes all of them were engaged in a lively debate over the meanings of the Star Riddle. Only Roelle stood apart, trying to analyze her feelings. When she had thought Marcus dead or dying, her whole heart had seized with no thought on whether Raven was alive, what he was doing or how he was faring. Her heart had broken when she contemplated the image of Marcus gone from her life or his broken body. She studied him and the warm glow that filled her as she saw his pale face, red hair and green eyes made her pulse skip. When she thought of Raven, she felt a cooler, calmer love as deep and as precious. But different. Somehow, what she’d felt for the Dragon Prince had changed. With renewed hope and vigor, she entered the conversation with the words that stopped the arguing in its tracks. “I know what it means. Or some of it, I think,” she said and they questioned her.

The Garrison was in an uproar that morning. At first light, it was seen that the great Black Dragon was gone with only the body of a guard laying where he had been amid the tracks of a large pony and several other people. The chain that bound him to the rock was still there but smashed some three feet from its collar. Of the enchanted collar, there was no sign.

Jasra surveyed the scene, her lips thinned so that she looked anything but beautiful. “Someone helped him escape, someone with magic ability.”

“Can you track him, Jasra?” The Lord of the Garrison, Ryan asked.

“Anywhere in this Realm, Ryan,” she vowed.

“Where do we start looking?” Behind her, the massed ranks of men shifted nervously. An escaped Dragon not under her control worried them immensely. Many of those that had tormented him were frightened when they considered he might return to wreak vengeance.

“He’s too weak to have flown anywhere and no one has seen anything large enough to carry

him off.”

“Is he still alive? Perhaps he died and his form went back to Amber,” Ryan suggested.

Jasra hesitated. “Perhaps.” She went inside herself, cast out her sense and tried to find the Dragon. Could not, could barely sense the aura of Amber that she had created in the Keep. It was fading and with it, the life essence that kept the Dragon spirit viable. “He’s no longer a threat or an asset,” she announced. “We’ll have to take on Luke and Random by ourselves.”

“Can we?” Ryan smiled crookedly.

“If I can find the power behind the spell that created him, I can,” she snapped. “First, we have to solve that damn riddle.” She turned on her heel and flipping her cloak over her head, transported herself to the Keep.

With Corwin’s help and Murphy’s aerial reconnaissance, the small group managed to reach the face of the escarpment that sheltered Jax’s Keep. They had even succeeded in keeping all their members although something had eaten two of their horses. Murphy took up the slack carrying both Pire and the Captain as they had given up their mounts.

Strange hoots and whistles drifted down from the crags above them. The men huddled together in fear and the horses went crazy in terror and were hard to control. Murphy was the only one unaffected. Corwin asked the General what was known to frequent the mountains.

“The usual—great wolves, cave bear. Snow apes and ice giants,” he was told.

“Murphy, scout a way up and check it out. Captain, Sergeant, set up an early warning line so we know if we’re being watched. Be careful,” Corwin ordered as all three went to do the prince’s bidding.

Murphy’s flight up the sides of the cliff wall was swift and silent so he was able to observe the creatures making the strange noises. What he saw did not alarm him, after all he had fought demons and other unnatural creatures. And he was made of stone, a match for any living beasts. Still, the sight of these giant snow apes made him uneasy.

They saw him too and were puzzled at his lack of fear as he flew over them without concern. Leaping into the air, several attempted to catch him but a swift blow from his rock hard fist convinced the other creatures that it wasn’t a good idea as the corpse fell back to the crevices it had jumped from.

They communicated with each other in some fashion and seemed to have a rudimentary intelligence. The higher he flew, the more of them he counted until he reached the top of the parapet and the grim massive Keep.

It rose out of the mountains as if it was born from the primeval heaving outcrop of the very stone of the earth, as if it’d not been created by man but nature.

The inside was not empty, the gargoyle observed many servants but of the redheaded woman Corwin had described, he saw no trace.

Landing on the tower’s top, he hung from the roof ledge upside down and peered into the windows. He saw the runes and sigils but being a magic creature from another Shadow Realm it had no effect on him so he was able to open the sealed glass and enter. Tucking his wings close

to his body, he transformed to his human form and searched a large, rather impressive feminine retreat. Finding traces of the Dragon, he sniffed the air and caught the faintest whisper of the boy's blue blood. Hesitated and spoke as he scented a human, "don't move or I'll hurt you."

An old man dressed in healer's robes slid from behind the window drapes and stood, his hands out and empty. "I won't," he said slowly. Curiosity got the better of him. "What are you?"

"A very pissed off man," Murphy growled and his fangs lengthened.

"You're no man," the elder one stated.

"I am a gargoyle," Murphy snarled and reverted to his imposing stone, winged seven foot monster with red eyes and fangs, gray skinned and leathery wings. "I am here for my master. Where is he?"

"Your master?"

"Don't tempt me, old man," Murphy hissed. "The Dragon. Where is he?"

"Dragon-Jasra has him," he answered quickly. "She took him away."

"Away where? Is he hurt? How does she control him?"

"He fell. North of here, fell out of the sky and broke many bones. Nearly died. Jasra and I healed him, kept him alive. He obeys her under the control of the Atarax pollen."

"I should kill you," Murphy started and the old man stood still.

"I can help you find him," he offered and the gargoyle laughed derisively.

"We are bound. I will find him through all the Blood of Hells with or without your help. Because you saved his body, I won't kill you but—if you are still here when I return, I will tear your limbs apart and throw them to the snow creatures that hunt the slopes below." Murphy turned, leapt out the window and returned to the camp below.

Gregg poked another log into the fire, making the small blaze even larger so that their small cave was well lit as well as the forty feet out into the wood line where the trees thinned and the mountain began. Corwin had entered the cave with Grayswandir in his hand, made sure it was empty and held no surprises like backdoors, hidden passages or cave creatures. Murphy had scanned it for other traps both magical and mechanical. From the smell, they knew it had once been an animal lair but the cave was small, empty and safe. The gargoyle suggested that the presence of the creatures above had scared off or killed the former occupants.

The General twisted his lip. "Snow apes, probably. Jasra likes the beasts. She had a whole squad of them trained and ready to invade Amber."

"Why are you here, General?" Murphy asked out of the darkness where he sat upon an outcropping of rock. All that could be seen of him were the piercing red of his eyes.

"Jasra and I were once...close. I defended her against the King and now, am no longer trusted. Our King sent me here to prove my loyalty or to die. In either case, he means to win back the Dragon."

Chapter 24

The girl in the rags put me inside her bodice and I nestled against warm flesh that made my

chill abate somewhat. The thump of her heartbeat calmed me down but the rush of blood beneath her skin made me faint with hunger. My stomach that had been so long without food was suddenly awake and growling.

“Hush, little one,” she said and kept walking. I wanted to stick my head out and see where we were going. Instead, I fell into that half sleep/almost coma that had been so close to death. I was content to die, now that I was no longer tethered to a rock gate in a prison.

Hands on me. Poking, probing. Hot and cold fingers. Things that hurt. Stroking my throat and prying apart my lips. I tried to bite the fingers but I snapped my jaws on empty air and then, delicious warm meat juice was slowly dripped down my throat. Swallowing convulsively, I ate. Ate until my belly was so full it hurt yet the feeling dissipated after only a few seconds so that I craved more. It tasted like beef but more—as if imbued with the magic of the Unicorn.

I opened my eye and saw the two. An old man who was no longer old and the boy that was a girl. She was holding me in her hands wrapped in a cape and the warrior with her was feeding me through a cut-off straw. We three were inside a small cave from which stalactites hung and dripped water. The fire glittered off to the right marking a long tunnel.

I could hear the groaning of the earth and its breathing as the air whispered around us blowing eddies of smoke. Smoke wreathed her hair like a saint’s halo. He bore a resemblance to statues of saints I’d seen in Ireland.

“Awake are you, my Lord? I’ve been pushing this nasty concoction down your throat for days.”

“Days?” My voice was like a chipmunk’s. I was no longer the size of a finch but more like a falcon.

“You were nearly gone, Sir Dragon,” her voice was young, childish like a voice trembling on the brink of the change.

“Too long and too far away from Amber,” I sighed. All I wanted to do was fly home but I wasn’t sure if I could even lift my body into the air. I reached up to my neck and felt the confines of Jasra’s collar. Still there although the chain was missing. “Where are we? How did you get here? I remember eating a horse?”

“Yes. Poor Pansy. She gave her life to save a Prince. We’re in a cave near Scilla.”

“Scilla?” I vaguely remembered that name from a map Marcus and I had studied.

“It’s a bandit stronghold where the survivors from Secrest and Jasra’s war have congregated.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“General Imperious Legate,” she offered. “One of the few left from my father’s commanders. This is Commander Tegan, my bodyguard.”

“There’s a resistance?” I tried to sit up and observe my surroundings but she had to hold me upright.

The General or whatever snorted. “Some resistance. It’s a bunch of defeated peasants with pitchforks and big mouths. Not a warrior or a wizard amongst them.”

“What do you expect me to do?” I asked wearily. “I am bound to her will. I cannot harm her.”

“The antidote I gave you will lessen the effects of the Atarax pollen over time. You’ll feel better.”

“You don’t understand, the yellow stuff is not only in my blood but in my tissues. Besides, the longer I am away from Amber’s soil, the faster I will fade away.”

“Do you feel like you’re fading, Sir Dragon?” She smiled.

I took stock. Hesitated. In surprised fashion, answered, “Well, no. I feel sort of...okay.”

“We’ve been feeding you the antidote mixed in with meat and soil. Not just plain soil but the soil of Amber.”

“Amber’s soil? How did you get her soil here?”

“It is part of the Riddle of the Seven Stars,” she answered. “Part of a fallen star that one of my ancestors found and made into an amulet. It fell from the skies of Amber to this realm and created a huge water filled crater called the Lake of Fears. My great-great swam down to the very center of the lake to retrieve the glowing ball of rock that was the comet. Brought it up and made it into a cup. The bowl inside will fill with a fine-grained soil that can be used to heal a wound, seal a breach in a wall or explode when lit. I gave you the last cupful it produced.”

“Where’s this cup now?”

She pointed to my belly. “You ate it all. It disintegrated when you finished your last meal.”

“Is there enough room in here for me to transform?” I asked. I felt the urge to spread my wings and belch fire. I wanted to fight, destroy and wreak havoc on my enemies.

“It’s not a good idea in here or outside. Anyone sees you, we’ll be cornered,” he said. “If the former Queen finds you, she can take control of you again easily enough. You’re still bound to her unless she is killed or you surrender.”

“So, what do we do?” I asked again. “Can you get me home?” I stopped. “I need to find out if my friends are here and that they are okay.”

“Friends? Are there more of you?” Her eyes widened the thought of more dragons.

I shook my head. “No, just me. One of a kind.”

“Linz, can you transform him into a donkey? We could get out of the area safely,” her bodyguard suggested.

“Maybe. The spell that makes him smaller can be tweaked to other creatures, I suppose. Would you be willing, my Lord Dragon?”

“Call me Raven. You can make me a monkey’s uncle if it gets me back home.”

She smiled and laughed. “I fear you would make an unappealing monkey, Sir Raven.”

I struggled and she put me on the cave floor where I pushed out of the cape to stand on all fours, extending my wings and stretching them. I blew tiny smoke rings and the campfire flickered in the passing of the air. The crystal spires that hung from the ceiling and grew from the floor glistened as if we were in a cave composed of diamonds, sending sparkles of all the colors of the spectrum dancing back and forth. It was a ballet almost like the northern lights and as

beautiful.

I rested at their insistence, eating, sleeping to wake again and eat again. Each time, I felt stronger and more alert but I knew something was missing. I had an urging to fly back to Jasra, almost like a feeling of homesickness. I was ashamed of myself, it was almost a sick craving, a fascination in me that needed to be humiliated and tortured.

“No!” I shouted coming awake and startling the two. She was sewing some rags together and he was sharpening their weapons. Both were seated comfortably on a stone slab set across two broken stalagmites like a bench.

“What is it, Sir Dragon?” Lyndsey asked leaping to her feet.

“Bad dream,” I mumbled and stretched. The firelight bounced off my scales and made strange moving shadows on the crystals. I wanted out, I wanted to hunt and to fly. “How long are we going to skulk in this cave?” I bitched.

“Not much longer. I went out to back track and found some signs of his men searching near here. Eventually, they’ll find this cave,” he said.

I gasped. Fell over, my stomach churning, my bones and blood boiling. My heart skipped, started up sluggishly and then raced back to normal. He caught me in his hands and held up my neck. “What’s wrong, Sir Dragon?”

“Jasra just destroyed the last piece of Amber on this world!” I managed to say. I should have been obliterated by the act, yet I felt substantial, real, not a fading construct.

She soothed me. “Amber is in you, Raven. As long as you are you, a part of Amber is with you. It’s time, Tegan, for us to try that spell.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Raven, Prince Dragon, I’m not sure if it will hurt. If it does, I beg your mercy. This is a true spell, not an illusion for any witch, wizard or spell diviner would be able to see you as you truly are.”

“Are you a witch, Princess?” I asked feeling my strength come back.

“Not a witch nor wizard be. I am born of a long line of magic users, a comet seeker and an elemental spirit. So I can touch upon magic more than most wizards or witches but am not yet strong enough to challenge Jasra or her consort, Ryan. He has knowledge of the...energy of magic which he either boosts for Jasra or negated on my father and his wielders.”

“It was a stalemate, then until I showed up,” I said unhappily.

“Yes. No one has ever seen a dragon before and we did not understand how to fight one. You are like an...elemental force of nature—like Fire and Wind.”

I nodded my head. “Put me down, please.” He did so. I stretched my wings, leapt into the air and headed for the ceiling that was far above us. I spent the next hour exploring the confines of the cave, the tunnels and the labyrinth within. I could not get lost, between my hearing, infrared sense and homing sense, I knew exactly where they were in relation to me.

They were waiting for me, packed and standing at the entrance to the long tunnel. She had a small lantern her hand and a flail made of coarse horsehair.

I settled to the ground and sat up on my rear legs, turned my good eye towards her face.

“Ready?”

I bobbed my head. “Will I be able to communicate with you as a horse?”

“Not a horse, Sir Dragon but a donkey. If you were a horse that an old man and a boy had, most would think it stolen. Will it demean you to be a donkey?”

“No. I’ve been called a jackass before. And a mule. Are mules common in this realm?”

“Yes. The peasants own them freely. A good mule is prized but not worth more than a good donkey.”

“Make me a mule, then. I’ll be larger and faster in case you had to run. Do you have racehorses here?”

“Of course. We breed for speed,” Tegan said.

“Make me a mule with that kind of cross,” I suggested. “Because no matter what you transform me to, I’ll be black and a black donkey isn’t common.”

“So be it.” She made a series of gestures and passed a flail over me. I felt shrinking and lengthening, realized abruptly she hadn’t answered my question about communicating but that was now the last thing on my mind. I was assailed with such strange sensations—like pain but not, like hunger, fear, flight and the urge to roll, my legs doing a tattoo on the sandy rock floor. Just as quickly as the second between a blink and a sneeze, I looked down at the lady and on eye level with the soldier. Opened my mouth to speak and heard only the obnoxious bray of a jackass.

“What a beautiful mule,” Tegan admired, stroking the flat of his hand down my neck. “But look, he’s blind in his right eye and the other is yellow. Not a mule’s eye at all, my lady.”

“No matter what form he takes, he remains true to his origins, Tegan. I’m sorry, I can’t do anything about the eye or the collar.” She hesitated and then placed a cloth halter and lead around my neck. I started to ask about the collar and she answered by wrapping the metal with the rags.

“This too remains with you, my...I’ll call you Raitt. It wouldn’t be good to call you Raven, it’s not a common name here.”

I used to be called Corbel, I thought but she couldn’t hear me anyway.

“Raitt is the name of a black bird with yellow eyes. It is a fierce fighter and smart. Some people have caught them and trained them to mimic speech and to hunt. They won’t eat carrion like a hawk but only fresh kills. They live in the mountains and are nearly the same size as you in your mini Dragon form. It’s probably a good thing you hadn’t met one.”

Tegan laughed. “I’m not sure a raitt could be called a match for a Dragon, even in miniature. I’m going to load our gear on you, Raitt. Is that okay?”

I bobbed my head up and down and both of them laughed. I never realized before what a pain it was to carry an unbalanced load on an equine back until I had to do so. Tegan repacked me twice before he was satisfied and placed the Princess on my back.

“Arg,” she complained. “He’s so boney. I didn’t realize he was that thin.” Her legs wrapped

around my barrel and she was careful not to kick me in the ribs.

Tegan looked doubtful as he took the lead. "It's good, Raitt?" I pawed the ground and nearly dragged him forward in my eagerness to escape the confines of the cave. "Here, now. Wait for me. It looks odd if the ass is leading the man," he joked and I slowed my steps until he was in front of me.

We took the narrow right-hand tunnel and my equine nose picked up the scent of grass and burned wood, fresh water and swampy marshland. It took only a few moments to exit the cave and we stared out on a scene that could have been straight off of the English moors. Rolling hills covered with dry brown grasses, rocky outcrops of bluestone and marshy areas where reeds abounded. In the distance, I could see and smell the remains of a burning village.

The cave we had been sheltering in wasn't a cave at all but a mine with a narrow overgrown path that skirted its entrance and led both to and away from the village. I couldn't see the Garrison nor knew how far we were from it.

"Ready, er... Raitt?" I nodded and ambled off following neatly on his heels.

Chapter 25

Jasra reached the retreat and blew through the doors in a fit of rage. Her servants cowered and ran, well aware of the danger when she was in that mood. Even Bremer did not stay to witness her ire as she destroyed the careful spell she had spent days creating.

As the last of her rune stones blew up, she stood in the center of the pentagram, her chest heaving, her hair writhing wildly so that she seemed the elemental Fire.

Slowly, the rage left her and satisfaction crossed her face. "He is dead or dying," she announced. "And Amber is no longer protected by the Great Black Dragon. Oh, come out, Bremer you old fool."

The physician slid out from under her bed with a sheepish grin. She helped him to his feet.

"What did you do, Jasra? Where's the dragon?"

"Caldor and his Generals are dead, his city in our hands and the Dragon made it possible although he seems to have trouble obeying orders even under the influence of the Atarax pollen. I chained him to the front gates of Minsk and am slowly starving him to death."

"Starving? I thought you wanted to use him to defeat Luke and Random?" Bremer sputtered.

"Why? You think I have no chance against the forces of Amber? I made Corwin into a coatrack once, old man and I can do it again. Besides, just think of the anguish when I tell his mighty Lordship that I murdered his grandson."

"Jasra, it's not just Corwin and Random you have to deal with but Merlin, King of the Courts. Can you handle the power of the Logrus and the Pattern?"

"I am as powerful as the Dragon, I have his energy to draw on," she said. "I destroyed the spell that fed his continued life here. If he isn't dead yet, he soon will be. We almost have Caldor's Talisman and with it, part of the Seven Stars."

"Almost?"

“It’s hidden in Caldor’s treasury but I haven’t found it yet. Even torturing the king, his generals or his family, he wouldn’t reveal it to me.”

“What did you do with his child, the Crown Prince?”

“He escaped. The Dragon frightened the brat’s horse and it took off. I have men searching for him now.”

“Perhaps the child has the talisman. What does it look like?”

“How would I know?” She retorted. “It’s supposed to be some kind of fallen star or comet. Probably a rock of some kind.”

Bremer hesitated. “Jasra, some...thing came by here, looking for the Dragon.”

Her whole body tensed and she whirled on him. “You just tell me now, old man? Who?”

“Not who but what. A winged man made of stone and gray skinned with fangs and red eyes. He called himself a... Gargoyle.”

“I’ve never heard of such creature. Is it native to Amber?”

“He didn’t say, he just said he was looking for his master. Jasra, he’s dangerous.”

She laughed. “More dangerous than the Queen of Khafra, the Red Witch? We shall see.” She warded the room against such a creature but Bremer stopped her.

“My lady, he walked across your wards without even acknowledging them and the snow apes told me he killed one of their kind with one blow of his fists. Your magic doesn’t work on him.”

“Perhaps I should take him instead of the Dragon,” she mused. She gave him a mirror, round with a handle. “Look into this and call my name should he return,” she told him. “I will come immediately. Now, I’m returning to Ryan and Minsk. Be careful, old man.” She threw her cloak over her head and disappeared.

Bremer stared at the spot where she had been until the servants came back almost as if they were filling a vacuum made in the fabric of reality. They considered themselves lucky, no one had been killed or maimed by their mistress’ tantrum.

“She’s mad,” Bremer whispered to himself, frightened for the first time not only *for* Jasra but *of* her. He turned to the servants. “Gather your belongings and leave. Go to your villages if you can. Leave by way of the underground passage I showed you. Take lanterns and foodstuffs for at least a week. I’ll cover your retreat. Whatever you do, don’t exit on the mountain or the snow apes will attack and kill you.” They scurried to obey him, not a one willing to face Jasra’s return. Bremer locked himself in his lady’s bedroom and waited for either her return or that of the gargoyle.

Corwin, Pire, Rouen and the General stared at the faint trail that Murphy had found on his aerial surveys. Although not sheer, it was still a dangerous and precarious way up. They had left two of the men to guard the camp and the horses but all of them knew that if the snow apes attacked, two men could never hold them off.

Surprisingly, they reached the floor of the massive, grim Citadel without one single attack. Corwin stood in front of the warded gate and studied the spells put on it to keep out everything

from dust to demons yet when he placed his palm on the magic enhanced portico, the door slid quietly open.

With a savage grin, he entered the stone paved bailey to stare up at the outer ring of the Castle's defense. Narrow corridors of stone were interspersed with arrow slits every eight feet and a walkway on the top of the wall where defenders could throw down death and destruction should enemies breach the wall. They climbed a staircase that wound both up and around heading for the inner keep.

Doors were open everywhere and items laid out, left abandoned as if everyone had simply dropped what they were doing and fled. For each room they passed through, they found no one, not even a cat or a dog. It wasn't until Murphy took them to the tower that they found a human.

The old man stood up as the group entered the room, wards and all. They flared briefly as Murphy pushed through them but as before, they had no effect on the earth magic of the gargoyle.

"You," he stated and Bremer smiled nervously.

"My Lord. General."

"Bremer. You're still alive?" The general said flatly.

"No easy task considering Jasra's temper. What you are searching for is no longer here. In fact, if I were to believe Jasra, he is no longer alive."

Both Corwin and Murphy jumped at that. "What do you mean?"

The old physician explained. "She brought him here, sorely wounded and weak. I treated and saved him but he remained weak. Fading. He said that the energy that kept him alive was weakening this far from Amber. Jasra created a haven with Amber's soil and essence in this room."

He pointed to the remains of the spell on the floor where the basket lay that had held the Dragonet. "She flew him over the Sentinels to Secrest's Garrison. Burned and destroyed all the villages and went after King Caldor of Minsk. Took that city, too. She ordered the Dragon to kill them all, including Caldor's son, the Crown Prince, a lad of only ten summers. The Dragon refused and she punished him. Tied him to the gates of Minsk and slowly starved him. She told me he had escaped and was dead or dying even before she destroyed this spot." He held out the mirror. "I was to warn her when you returned, gargoyle."

"Where are her servants?" Cathorian asked.

"Gone. I sent them all away."

"That's why the snow apes didn't attack us," Corwin stated.

"No. I penned them all so they could not do harm," Bremer shook his head.

"Why?" Corwin asked.

"Because she will only lose this fight and will die if she does not cease," the old man said simply. "I do not want her to die. I would rather see her as a coatrack again."

Corwin snorted. "I'd rather be dead. So, you don't know where Raven is?"

"He is dead, Prince Corwin. Without the source of Amber's magic, he could not have survived

this long.”

“I won’t believe it until I see his bones,” Corwin snarled. “Murphy?”

The gargoyle’s eyes flared crimson and he lifted his head, flaring his oversized nostrils. “I can smell faint traces of Amber, I can sense the heartbeats of the apes below us. I can hear the cries of eagles but, my Lord, I cannot find a trace of the Dragon!” With a cry of despair, the gargoyle flew out the window and disappeared almost before the pieces of glass and casement hit the floor.

“Will she come back here, Bremer?” The General questioned.

“I think not, General. I think she left us all for this Ryan wizard. I can feel the strings that tie this place together unraveling. For a thousand millennia, Jax’s Tower has stood but when she destroyed her Amber spell, it destroyed the magic that kept this place upright and standing. I’m not sure how much longer it will hold together. I would hurry and leave. There is a passageway through the mountain but I’m not sure if it will stand when the Keep falls.” Even as he finished speaking, they found felt the foundations tremble and the Tower shifting. Corwin sheathed his sword and thumbed out his pack of Trumps. Chose one and all of them stepped through emerging in the library of the Lighthouse of Cabra.

“What about the others?” Cathorian asked undaunted at the method of travel.

“It’s a one-way trip. I don’t have a trump for the Citadel or the cliff and this is the closest port to Khafra,” Corwin explained. “We need to get to Minsk.”

“Minsk! It’s half a year’s journey by sea and two years overland!” Cathorian exclaimed. “By the time you get there, it’ll be too late for you to do anything!”

“Not with Murphy. We can fly over.”

“Prince Corwin,” Pire protested. “You can’t go alone against an army! Even a gargoyle can’t fight an army!”

“I’ll get one of my own if I have to,” he swore. “I’ll find out where Raven is and I won’t stop until I have him back whether it be his bones or scales.”

“Will you call Merlin?” Pire asked quietly. “And the King?”

Corwin sighed. “Random needs to know what’s going on in Khafra and over the Sentinels so yes, I will tell him.” He paced. “There’s a boat docked below. You can use it to take you to Khafra or Amber. I’ll wait here to find out what Murphy is doing. He knows to rendezvous here. Pire, get the Captain back to Loest and then to Amber. I have a strange suspicion the Army is going to need you.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Pire herded the Captain out the door.

“General? Do you plan to return to Khafra and King Luke?” Corwin raised an eyebrow. “Or, we can find a position for you in Amber’s army.”

“Not a General, I suppose? But then, I’m not truly a General in Luke’s forces, either,” he said bitterly holding up the stump of his right arm.

“I never asked,” Corwin said curious. “How did you lose your arm?”

Cathorian looked at him with grim humor. “A Dragon bit it off.” Corwin stared and then burst

into laughter.

Chapter 26

My first day as a jackass with easy. Boring, but easy. We walked. And walked. Walked until noontide when she jumped down, kissed me on the cheek and both of them set about making a spot to eat noon meal. I wandered off to the side cropping at the grass as if there was no tomorrow. The equine instinct was stronger in me than in the dragon. No need to tell me not to wander away. The smell of roast meat drifted my way and stirred a forgotten feeling in my gut.

“There’s water over the ridge, Raitt,” she said. I could smell it, too and trotted eagerly towards the scent. I found a small stream bubbling up out of a hole in the ground and the marks of other creatures that had drank from it. She followed me over and emptied the water bags that I’d carried, filling it with fresh.

“You are well, my... Raitt?” She asked smiling.

I lifted my head from the pool and water dribbled onto her shoulder as she kneeled near me. I wished I could speak. I wished I had two arms and a mouth. I wanted to kiss those luscious lips. Wait. How old was she? As the boy, she looked to be no more than ten and even now that I saw her up close, I couldn’t say for sure how old she was. Pushed against her chest with my head and copped a feel with my horsey lips. All I felt was a leather jerkin and no boobs. She pushed my head away, slapped me on the neck and laughed. “Behave yourself, Raitt. What is it you want?” I stared at her and blinked. “You have such beautiful eyelashes.”

Rising, she walked next to me back to the camping area. I saw that it had been used before and by others for the same purpose. There were many old rings of fires in the small lay-by.

We had walked our way off the moors and away from the burned villages and farmsteads to enter woodlands so thick that I wondered how anyone had cut a trail through. Yet there were small clearings such as the one we were in that provided both shelter, grass and water.

“We have to be worried of bandits,” she murmured. “The people that the Red Witch and the Lyon have displaced have taken to robbing travelers to survive.” She kept one hand on her bow and the other on the water bags. I would have carried them for her but she didn’t bother to load them atop me.

I watched her walk. She didn’t hit the ground like a child but more like a dancer, surefooted and deliberate. She moved her body not like an awkward kid unsure of her legs and arms but more as an athlete. Her eyes too, held a worldly sadness that told me she was far older than a ten-year-old child. I wished I could see her in a long dress with her hair down on her shoulders dancing in the warm glow of a thousand candles.

At the fire, Tegan looked up and smiled. “Eat your fill, Raitt? We’ll be going on in a quarter of an hour.”

I wondered how they told time here. I had so many questions and couldn’t ask any of them. I wanted to know if she would let me be a Dragon at night so I could speak or was I forced to remain an ass until she decided to release me. I wondered what would happen if I needed to become the Dragon and how she could release the spell if she was hurt, unconscious or we were separated.

I pawed the ground and drew lines in it, brayed until I caught their attention. The novelty of me attempting to write my questions in the dirt amused them. And it took a long time to dig it out. My main question was how I got back if I needed to.

“Go back where?”

My Dragon form. I pawed the letters on top of the other ones making a jumbled mess but she understood.

“In an emergency, the spell will revert so you’ll be back to your normal form or one of us can cancel it with a special word. Tegan knows it but you can’t or it won’t work. Don’t worry, you’ll be okay and so will we. Tegan and I have managed to stay out of the witch’s way for a while.”

Where? I wrote.

“We’re heading for Alameth, a port city that is far enough away from the war to be little affected. We can contact a friend of Tegan’s and get passage to Khafra. I will present myself to the King and ask for assistance.”

How far?

“Several days ride if we push it but if we’re in a hurry, there will be those who will want to know why. Don’t worry, Raitt. Tegan knows what he’s doing. He was a bandit before he became my bodyguard.”

They let me eat for another twenty minutes before they repacked and mounted. Truth was, I nearly cropped all the grass in the little meadow by then anyway.

Tegan put my hoof down and stared at the Princess. “If this keeps up, he’ll have to be shod, Linz. His hooves are splitting and cracking. He’ll go lame. Especially on these rocky lanes.”

We had traveled nearly a week and were deep into the rocky outcrops of the Highlands. I could smell the faint tang of salt water and knew the sea was close, perhaps another day’s journey. We had climbed mountains and valleys, skirted sand dunes and burned villages, bypassed centers of city living making do with their hunting skills rather than entering and purchasing food. In all our time on the road, we’d seen only a few other travelers and their message was all the same. Flee, for the Red Witch was killing everyone in her path with the power of the Dragon’s Flame.

At night, I heard them talk around their small campfire. They talked about the port we were headed towards, how bright and beautiful a city it was, a neighboring state to her father’s kingdom with a world-class wizard and Council protecting it. She wanted to stop and seek aid, Tegan said it was too dangerous and too close to Minsk. They told stories, mostly for me, I thought. I learned about her great-great to the tenth or whatever, that he had braved the depths of Fear Lake to rescue the Talisman. I had suspicions that it might’ve been a comet from Amber’s influence and possessed some of the Pattern’s power. Now, that power was inside me but I had no idea how to use it.

It wasn’t until we actually stepped foot on the first paved road I had seen in our travels that we encountered a veritable crowd of travelers. Coming down out of the forest, we came up over a small rise and saw it—an arrow straight highway with carts, wagons and fancy vehicles all pulled by various beasts from horses to things that looked like hippos but with extra-long legs. And people! So many of them and so many different, *odd* humans. I saw the usual varieties but also

some I had never dreamed could exist. But then, *I* was a Dragon and had seen Unicorns.

Guards accompanied some, and ringed what was clearly caravan of goods. Linz and Tegan paused on the crest and studied the passing congestion. Clearly more were going to the city than out of it. I raised my head and stared towards the end of the highway. I could barely see the amber glow of a large city complex lighting the twilight sky. At least we'd have light from the other traffic to guide us, Lyndseye's Wyche balls were running low and torches were a pain to keep lit.

I pawed and pulled at my lead which by now was merely scraps of thread. "Whoa there, Raitt," Tegan said and laid his hand on my neck. "Now's the dangerous part. Just because we're among a crowd doesn't make us less of fugitives."

He did something to his cloak and was suddenly a feeble old lady and Linz became a pus ridden, ugly old man with warts and a set of dewlaps that flopped as he spat. I sat back in alarm and nearly fell on my...ass.

She laughed and her voice was the same, pure as a castrato. "Oh, the look on your face, my Prince! Priceless! Don't worry, no one looks at tinkers."

My back suddenly grew heavier and I grunted as Tegan climbed up between the little bit of our remaining gear. She took my lead and led me down the slope to wait for a gap in the flow of traffic.

We slipped in behind a fancy barouche pulled by four massive animals that looked like Friesians but were shocking pink. They sneered at me and tried to lash out with a hind foot but their driver popped a whip. Hit me on the shoulder and I jumped sideways, nearly falling.

"Keep your damn mule away, tinker!" the driver bellowed. "And your leprous bitch!"

I opened my mouth to roar and spout flames but was greeted with a bray instead.

"Easy, Raitt. Serafins are very aggressive beasts. They'll mangle you if you press them. See how everyone gives them a wide berth?"

I did. There was a bubble around the carriage as well as several guards gathered close to the vehicle. Queasy, my stomach lurched as I recognized them as Thrids, the ugly, apelike creatures that my former master had used as bodyguards and shock troops. My legs trembled under me and he felt it. He used his voice and hands to soothe me. "Linz, his eye?"

"Rolling, stark terror, Tegan." She gripped the sides of my jaw and pulled my head into her chest, murmuring wards to me that eased the terror I was experiencing. She smelled of sweat and dirt, of old campfires not like a pampered Princess but she smelled real, honest and faithful. I relaxed my gritted lips and teeth to nuzzle at her shirtfront as she scratched the bony part between my eyes and tugged my forelock.

"It's okay, Raitt. It's just the Sheriff of Ryemoor seeking refuge, too. He won't hurt us, we're beneath his notice. Ready?"

We entered the city through the West Gate and were not surprised to see that it was heavily guarded and fortified yet no one stopped to question the refugees.

The City of Alameth set on a hill overlooking a bay shaped like a dog's bite with fierce cliffs and jagged headlands being the teeth. The entrance was its tongue. Beyond the breakwaters, the

green of the oceans were as mysterious and changing as any ocean I'd ever seen. The smell of salt, the cries of the sea birds, tall ships masts and the buildings reminded me of Boston. There was even a capitol dome and a huge magistray shaped like the buildings on the Green. Steeples, too of the many churches that catered to the religion of magic and witchcraft.

Even though we weren't checked for papers and ID, we were funneled by the guards towards the poorer section of town. High, narrow brick shelters with close, winding alleys. Little light made it down here and the sun was almost gone.

Tegan had dismounted and walked close to both of us, his cloak swept back and his hand on his sword. In these tight alleys, her bow and arrows were at a disadvantage.

I knew that my senses were more acute than their so when I smelled men up ahead and could not see them, I stopped. Instantly, they did also. The next big flutter of my nostrils triggered a low grumbling whicker. I smelled oil and steel, faint sweat and eager anticipation. There was an ambush planned ahead for whomever came this way and were easy pickings.

I didn't know if an old Tinker man and wife with an obviously fine mule would justify the effort and expense but then, I didn't want to find out.

I charged, taking them both by surprise and the moment I reached the cross alley, four men in cloaks and blades flew out at me. Lunging for my lead line, one leaped and caught it only to fall flat on his face as the fragile rag disintegrated in his grip. I whirled on my hind feet in a perfect rollback, kicked with both heels and brained him. He died without a word.

Tegan and Linz joined us and before I had the chance to do any more, were engaged in a sword fight with the other three.

She was no ten year old, she fought with the grace and skill of a warrior. Under her rags, she had concealed a slim blade like a foil and it glowed very much like the flame from my dragon breath.

"You're no tinker!" their leader gasped as she pulled the blade out of his lungs. He collapsed at her feet next to the one Tegan had massacred. His dying eyes locked on mine. "Dragon spawn!" he whispered and the third man gasped and ran.

I ran after him, ignoring their shouts to return. He ducked and twisted down alleyways and although I was as fast as a TB racehorse, I couldn't get up any speed. He managed to outturn me on the slippery cobblestones and I lost him.

Lost myself, wandering down lanes and alleys as complicated as the market streets of the old bazaars. Had to resort to my nose to track the spoor back. When I returned to the ambush site, even the bodies were gone. No sign of Lyndseye or Tegan. I brayed and the echo mocked me.

Chapter 27

Retracing my steps back to the front gates wasn't an idea I ruminated on. I knew that a loose animal in the city limits wouldn't remain so for long. Someone would attempt to catch or claim me. In fact, several street urchins had run after me trying to corner or catch me. So far, I'd managed to stay out of their reach. Clever little devils, though. Some of their traps had been ingenious.

I followed my nose which eventually led me to a park where I could at least eat. I kept an eye

on the other park goes but they were busy with their pursuits. The Park was huge---nearly the size of Central Park and had the same layout. A Zoo, Sheep Meadows and rocks, fountains, jogging and bridle paths. Even the same rock sculptures of animals only these were straight out of the fantasy library and not real life. At least not real life on Shadow earth. I wandered, amazed that it was almost a mirror image of a place I knew well enough to hide in.

Luckily, I could eat grass. It might have been more of a problem finding food if I were still a dragon.

“Mummy, look!” a bright-eyed youngster screeched. I looked up from a mouthful of clover to stare at the smartly dressed girl and her mother or nanny. “It’s a horsey.”

“Loose. Some peasant must have turned it loose to graze free,” the upper class woman sneered. “We should call the Watch and have them haul it away before it dumps on the grass. Filthy beast.”

I turned my ass’s ass and dumped a load at her feet. She squealed and slashed at me with her belt. I threw her a disgusted slobbery snort and trotted off into the bushes to hide.

I’d searched for the pair as far as the scent trail had lasted losing it about halfway back towards the Gates. So many other people and animals had overlaid it with their effluvia that it became a muddled mess I could not read.

I had no clue where to go to find them or meet up with the pair. All I knew was that Tegan’s friend could get us passage to Khafra so must have something to do with the docks. A mule wandering on the wharves alone would attract too much attention. I was bound to wind up in someone’s stable. All I could think of to do was hang around the ambush site in the hopes that they would come back to the same spot to wait for me.

So that’s what I did. I stayed in the Park grazing until dark and then sneaked back hiding in dark corners when I spotted any people.

It was a well-traveled alley, leading to a neighborhood of garrets and inns that catered to poorer farmers coming in for market and broke sailors off the ships. There were several hostleries and stables at the near end of the lane which continued out of the city to what were fields and pastures for livestock.

Finding something to drink was no problem either. There were drinking fountains and water troughs for the working draft animals and a few streams in the Park. Also, I found drinking stands where either children or adults could bend over, push a lever and drink. Having seen water fountains before, I knew how to use them. Unfortunately, I could push the lever down with my lips but I had nothing to hold it down while I drank.

Looking around, I spotted a pile of stacked bricks and picked one up to lay it carefully on the lever to wedge it down. Water flowed continuously, filled the basin but I still had to wait as I drained it faster than it could refill. When I was done, I removed the brick replacing it on the pile.

Wandered around this small square just off the alley where we’d been separated. There was a green grocer on the right corner next to a laundress, she had huge vats boiling away out front and every so often would stir the mess of clothing. Next to her was a fishmonger and the smells of each cancelled the other out. Urchins were everywhere, on the street, hanging off the second story balconies. I saw pickpockets everywhere and managed to blend in as long as I stood next to

another tied up animal. No one noticed unless I was the last one left at the hitching post and I made sure I was gone before then.

I slept in fitful snatches during the daytime, hidden in the bushes or behind the rocks in the Park. I'd tried to hide near the Zoo but mule meat must have been a delicacy to the carnivores because they screamed bloody murder the entire time I remained down wind. Some of them could have given the dragon a fight.

I heard rumors and gossip. It was amazing what people would talk about when they thought they were alone. I learned that the king or head Premier of Alameth was called Jasprene, a Duranian merchant Lord by nature and not inclined to warfare. He had ruled in an uneasy alliance simply by being so far from other kingdoms who might covet their trade routes. His army was small though deadly, each and every one a wizard as well as a warrior. They were called the Knights of the Broken Sea, were able to call up wind and wave, sea creatures and demons of the deep. With them at his command, not many had dared to challenge him and those that had were quickly defeated.

I danced around the fountains, my heart heavy. I had no idea what to do, I couldn't even unspell myself so I could turn back to Dragon and fly home. I heard a whistle and stood still, my thin tail brushing against my flanks. It wasn't much use on flies but thankfully, this realm didn't have that blasted torment.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a line fly through the air and ducked just as three lassos hit me. I screamed. Darted away to hit the end of the rope and flipped onto my neck, rolling over. I lay there stunned as six sets of people came from all different directions and at the other ends of the rope.

I'd seen the ones on my left but my right had been blindsided. Making it to my feet I kicked, nailing two of them. I chewed on rope and parted one more before another set landed on my rear feet snagging them together. I fell down, struggling to rise with my front ones.

"Holy Hells!" One of the men sputtered. "You were right, Hennan. He is a devil. Uncut, I'll wager. Looks like racing blood bred. Smart creature, too."

They approached me with a halter and I fought desperately, one hind coming free just as they flipped the rope around my front. I fell again only this time I landed awkwardly against the pile of bricks and the sound of my hind leg cracking hit like a pistol shot. I collapsed in shock, barely felt my heavy head hit the ground.

"Shit!" All six of them stood around me, looking down at my trembling and heaving body. "Well, look at the bright side," one of them drawled. "We can sell him for meat."

"You idiot!" The taller spat. "This mule was the fastest thing to enter the city in a hundred years. Polydon saw it running and clocked it. Also, it's as smart as a man. You saw it figure out how to open the water fountain. How bad is the break?"

Another leaned down and touched the dangling leg. "Broke clean in two, Elvan. No blood but I doubt it can get up. Kinder to cut its throat."

I groaned, trying to move but between the shock and the ropes, couldn't. The man who had said I was meat slipped the halter on my head and tightened it. "He's blind in one eye, Elvan. That's the only reason we trapped him like we did. Shall I put him down?"

The leader hesitated and stroked my sweat dampened neck. Made a decision. “No. Go get Mallei and tell her to bring her potions. Renn, you go get Avram’s cart and his gelding. Hurry. Jens, give me your cloak.”

“What are you going to do, Elvan?”

“We’re going to see if he can get up. Does anyone have a staff?” He took the proffered wood and broke it in two, wrapped my leg and splinted it. Had them untie me, flipped me over so that I was on my good side and pulled on my halter. I lay there, refusing to move.

“Come on,” he encouraged. “Get up, Prince of Mules or I’ll cut your throat right here. I’m giving you a chance.”

“Broken legs in horses don’t have a chance,” one of them muttered.

“This is no ordinary mule,” he shook his head. “There hasn’t been a mule like this in a hundred years. Not since before Khafra fell. Come on, my beauty. Get up or it’s the stewpot for you.”

I heard the swish of a woman’s skirts and she was there. Took one look at the scene and squatted near my head stroking, her fingers exploring the swelling bones that were clearly snapped in half below my hock. She lifted my lip and pressed my gums, looked at the men and ordered them about. “Renn, hold his neck straight. I’m going to give him a shot of painkiller and then put him down. Elvan, he might fight when the needle goes in. If you have to, twitch his ear.”

“I doubt he’ll move an inch, Mallei. This is no ordinary mule. Please, don’t put him down, can you try to save him?”

She looked up astonished. “Elvan, his leg is in two! I can’t save that!”

“Please, Mallei,” he begged. “You have to try.”

“It’s a mule, Elvan. Not a Knight’s charger.” She ran her eyes over me. “Although, he is a fine mule.” Looked between my legs. “Uncut, too. Who leaves a mule uncut? And why?”

“He’s more than a mule. He’s almost... human.”

She snorted. “Unless he gets up, I can’t help him.”

He went on to tell her about my fountain episode and a dozen more than I thought I’d kept hidden but they had obviously been watching me for days. I felt a sharp sting and then a blessed coolness went through my body taking the pain away. I decided not to struggle, to let them put me out of my misery. It was the easiest way out for everyone.

“His eye’s dulling, heart slowing. That took care of the pain. Give him a few minutes and try to get him up again,” she said briskly.

“Should we whip him?”

She sneered. “Whip a mule? He’ll either kill you or sulk. He has to decide on his own and not even the fires of Dragon’s breath will move him unless he decides to.” They waited. I floated somewhere. Realized I was dreaming of flying the golden skies of Amber with Murphy on my back. A pleasant way to end it, I thought and curled my lips back. Someone tugged on my head and put my front feet out under my chin. Someone else hugged my rear end.

Oh, I blinked. *You want me to get up*. I lunged, struggled but something was wrong with my hind end. The minute I made it to all fours, I screamed as broken cannon bone grated inside my skin. I hobbled on three legs, turned my head around to stare. A crowd of men stepped back warily watching my hooves. A woman stood at my shoulder with her hands on my sweat drenched neck.

“Oh, what a pity,” she murmured. “He must be 16.3 hhs. He looks like a cross between an Andusian Jack and a Celanese race mare. A truly magnificent mule, Elvan. You say he’s been wandering loose in the city? No owner and no ownership brand. Now that he’s up, do you plan on walking him to the clinic?”

“No,” the man said. “Jens and Hennan are bringing the cart we used to transport cattle. We can load him in that and hang him in the harness.”

“Good idea. You think you can load him?”

The man’s lips thinned. “I’ll bet you he’ll walk right in.”

Chapter 28

I didn’t remember much of the next few days and what I did were disjointed memories of being doctored, fed, and poked with more needles. Lying on a deep bed of sweet straw with blankets piled on top of me. A woman spooning gruel down my throat and mixing plaster near my legs. Sometimes, I stood for days and other times, I lay down only to struggle to my feet and only with human help. I existed somewhere in a void where I thought I had ceased to exist, almost as if the human part of me was gone.

The two hung over the stall door often and conversed. Mostly, I ignored it until I heard the despair in her tone. “I just don’t know, Elvan. It’s like he’s given up. I can barely get him to eat and he hasn’t passed any manure in days. The leg isn’t healing, either. Are you sure you don’t want me to put him down before he gets too bad? I don’t like to see him suffer.”

“No. Any other animal, yes. Not this mule. There’s something special about him, Mallei. He’s a Prince of Mules.”

“That would be a good name for him, Prince,” she suggested.

“No. That’s too common. He deserves a better, more unique name.”

“How about Raitt? He looks like one of those crows.”

I raised my head and my neck hurt. Though the voice was different, the name was when I remembered.

“You like that name? Raitt? Raitt, it shall be,” she said and patted me. I nuzzled her pockets for the apple I could smell in there. Delighted, she pulled it out and held it. “You want this, Raitt?” She smiled and I nodded. She laughed. “What if I eat it?”

I shook my head no and snatched for it before she could react. My teeth crunched the sweet apple to bits and I lifted my lips in a sneer before I hobbled to the corner. Staring at my leg, I saw it neatly bandaged with hardened plaster from hoof to nearly hock and the other three legs wrapped in cotton padding and bandages. All four were swollen but the broken one ached the worst. I smelled the cast as the man worried. “He won’t tear it off, will he?”

“No, Elvan. Raitt is as smart as you said. I believe he knows we’re trying to help him.”

“I believe he knows what we’re saying. Are you still thinking of gelding him?”

I backed into a corner and bared my teeth at them. As if a broken leg wasn’t bad enough, they had to threaten me with that!

“Mules are sterile, no point in keeping him for breeding,” she shrugged. “But he can wait until he...either makes it or not.”

“He ain’t studdy,” Elvan noted. “Not like a stallion at all. I saw him go by mares in full season and ignore them.”

“I admit, sometimes I feel like I’m doctoring a person not an equine. I wonder where he’s from and who he belongs to. Surely someone is missing him. Did you post any notices?” Elvan looked guilty. “Did you steal him, Elvan? From some Lord or refugee coming in? If you bring the City Watch down on me, I’ll—” She burst out.

“No, no!” He denied. “We saw him wandering in City Green Park for a week. Followed him to Cooper’s Alley and planned a trap. The rest you know.”

“If he’s stolen, it’s from some rich Lord who’ll pay big rials to get him back, you can be sure. You might hang for this, especially since you broke his leg. He’ll not race again, not on that. He might have been good for breeding if he was a stallion.”

“He certainly seems to like apples. I’ll bring you a bushel. Does he take his medicine?”

“Yes. Surprisingly. Usually, I have to hide it inside a treat but he’ll take it from my hand,” she admitted. “I have him on boneset and flegicinn, he seems to be tolerating that and his fever has gone down. No infection, either.”

“Does he get up on his own or do you have to force him?”

“He needs help and sometimes, he just tries and gives up. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was in mourning, Elvan. You’re right, he’s so smart it’s uncanny.”

I snorted and wondered how they would have dealt with Wilbur from Charlotte’s Web.

They left me to see to their own dinners and I hobbled over to the Dutch doors to hang my head out. I could see a bright alley between two rows of stalls. Smelled cows, sheep and horses. Goats, chickens and even hogs. Just like every farm, there was a menagerie of animals only I’d heard him call it a clinic. Wondered if she was this Shadow’s equivalent of a veterinarian.

I saw a youngster come out of the stall with a wheelbarrow loaded with straw and dung. He saw me and his eyes grew round. “Cor,” he said. “You’re a big one! You’re up, too.” He came close and opened my door, asked me politely to move so he can maneuver the wheelbarrow and proceeded to pick out my stall. I stood nearly in the open doorway in shock, reached down, grabbed the handle in my teeth and shoved it out of my way. Three legged, I lunged for the aisle and was headed for freedom.

I made it all the way to the barn doors only to see a high fence around the barn enclosing it inside a paddock but built more like a stockade. Easily ten foot high, I could only have cleared it if I were a dragon.

The boy ran out after me. “Oh Lord, O Lord,” he begged. “Please, Raitt. Let me catch you before Mistress Mallifer finds out I let you out. Please don’t hurt yourself! Please let me touch

you!” He circled me, his hand out, in it a shiny red apple. Like bribery would work. “Come on, boy. Easy does it. If Mistress Mallei finds us, she’ll beat my ass with a whip so I can’t sit down for a week. Easy there, handsome.” His voice had an almost hypnotic tone and I found myself leaning towards his hand and the juicy apple only to pull back when I realized what I was doing.

I grumbled low in my throat, decided I would wait a few more days before I would attempt an escape so I casually hobbled around on three legs to put myself back into the stall. Leaned on the wall and used it to lie down, tucking my legs under me. The boy followed, his mouth agape as he latched the stall door. Came in, hugged me around the neck and gave me not only the apple but handfuls of clover and grass he’d picked fresh.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Raitt,” he said, his face so sweet I almost felt sorry for him. He kissed me on the forehead, scratched my ears and unlatched the top door leaving me in darkness.

The days passed. I wished I could’ve said in boredom but I wasn’t that. I ate, drank and slept. Moved when they told me, stood still as they brushed me and just existed. I almost forgot I was anything but a mule until the day when the Army officers came.

Mallei opened my top door and stood silently as a strange man in dark blue uniform with lots of gold braid leaned in. His eyes widened and his smile was broad. “We’ll take this one. Sergeant–,” he turned to the noncom behind her.

“You can’t,” she said calmly and he stiffened.

“By order of the Council, all equines are confiscated for the war,” he started. “You’ll be compensated.”

“That’s not what I mean. He’s lame, three legged. He broke his right rear. I still don’t know if it will heal or he’ll have to be put down.”

“Bull. You’re the tenth owner that’s told me the same story. Sergeant, lead the Jack out here.”

As soon as the soldier entered the stall, I lunged for him with my teeth and threw him over the stall door. Fell and struggled to get up and only succeeded when Mallei came in and helped me. Stood on three legs, holding the cast off the ground and in pain because I had fallen on it. Instant sweat darkened my hide.

The officer’s eyes glared as Mallei took his hand and placed it on the pulse in my jaw. She held my mouth closed, warning me not to bite. He could feel my racing heart as the pain grew.

“He’s not gelded either and would be too much of a hassle in the lines, even if he were sound,” she added softly.

“How did he break his leg? Why are you trying to save him, or was it a spiral fracture?” The officer seemed interested and had a keen appreciation of equines that showed through.

“Racing. He fell and snapped the cannon in half. His owner wanted him put down—I convinced him to let me try and save him. He’s a rare breed cross, a fine mule.”

He turned my head and stared at my missing eye. “Too bad he’s blind in one eye.”

“It makes him skittish to be handled on that side. Not a good trait for an army mule,” she said helpfully.

“Never mind this one,” he told the sergeant. “But we’ll take the bay mare and the chestnut

gelding.”

“They belong to Lord Livermore,” she said and the captain shrugged.

“We’ve already been through his stables and taken all of his animals.”

She shrugged herself and stood there as they led off every able-bodied equine on the place. The boy who cleaned stalls for her crept in and stood at her side, tears falling silently down his face. “Mistress Mallei, where are the horses going? Will we see them again?”

“I fear not, Juniper. They have been confiscated for the King’s Army. The only reason Raitt was not taken is because he has only three legs.”

We saw Elvan again, late that week. He was dressed in an Army uniform but did not look happy or proud. He told her he had been drafted and had not tried to escape because there was no place left to run to. The Red Witch’s Army was bearing down on the city of Alameth and no ship would take on any more passengers. Besides, if he was caught deserting, he would be instantly hung or shot.

“How is Raitt doing?” He asked, leaning over the stall door. I was eating grain held by the boy, he had mixed apples and cinnamon in it with a bottle of ale. Sort of like a sour mash. I could slurp it up and pretend it was good wine.

“His appetite is good, his coat is coming back and his eye seems brighter. He near tore a chunk out of Captain Macy’s Sergeant but he fell when he did it. I don’t think he did any more damage but he still won’t put that hoof to the ground and you can see the muscles in his right haunch have shrunk. No fever, he passes manure and seems generally content. I’m going to remove the cast in another week to put on a smaller, lighter one with a brace in it so he can transfer his weight off the heel and into the upper thigh.”

“Keep him safe, Mallifer. I have a feeling he’s a very important piece in this war.” He kissed her. “And you, Prince of Mules, you survive this war and you owe me. Right?”

Slowly, I nodded my head yes before I pawed at the straw beneath my feet. “I told you, Mallei, smart as a human. I’m scheduled to leave tomorrow morn. I know you can’t leave but be careful. If the city falls, they’ll not take him for a mount, they’ll kill and eat him.”

“What can we do, Elvan? He can’t walk, let alone run. And I can’t hide him,” she protested.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mallifer. The world is changing and not for the better. We need a miracle, we need a Great Black Dragon like the stories of old to rise up and slay the Red Witch.” He kissed her, patted me on the forehead once more before he left us, his new sword clanking against his metal water container.

Chapter 29

Mallei never left the gates unlocked, we had all sorts of strangers coming into the yard even over the fence until she took to leaving a big cur dog roaming free. People were desperate for any animal to get out of the city as every available ship had left and those entering the harbor were warned before they reached the docks.

The Watch kept the streets in check mostly, except at night. She had decided to leave the heavier cast on longer because it was more of the deterrent to any thieves who wanted to try and

steal me.

I had thwarted a few that made it into the stall, kicking and braying with such fuss that both Juniper and Mallei ran in carrying pitchforks and a bloody big knife that could qualify as a short sword. By now, most of the neighborhood knew I was the three-legged mule that couldn't walk. Wasn't worth much and luckily, food wasn't in short supply so I wasn't on anyone's grocery list for roast. She was waiting for me to heal well enough that she could smuggle me out of town to the head of the Danverse River where a farmer client had a barge that could take us to safety in the mountains.

She had changed the cast twice, checked the bones with gentle fingers and prodding. All the hair had sloughed off the surface of the cannon bone and there was a huge knot of calcium where the bones had fused together. The tendons had shrunk, pulling the toe up so that even if I wanted to, I couldn't force the toe of the hoof to the ground. It still hurt but not that bone deep ache like before.

Jasra had broken my same hind leg as a Dragon but converting to my regular size had healed that injury without a trace. I wasn't so sure that this one would, I feared it might have been left too long.

I wondered what the phrase was that allowed me to transform back to Dragon. I could fly Mallei and the boy to safety and then search for Lyndseye and Tegan not thinking how stupid it was to risk the appearance of the Dragon with Jasra's expected arrival. I knew the moment I saw her, I would crawl back to her like a sick puppy.

Mallei had sent Juniper to the market to procure an order of herbs and baled hay for me. He came back sooner than expected and found her in my stall, checking on the progress of my leg. "Mistress," he panted hoarsely. "The Witch! The Watch saw the Witch's scouts coming this way!"

Mallei straightened up from my hoof and pushed her hair back off her forehead. She had a smudge of dirt on her cheek and wisps of straw in her hair. "How far? Are the Knights mobilizing?"

"A day's ride back, they said. The Knights are on the way to engage them at the Line."

The Line was a magic barrier that protected the city from wildfires, evil minded wizards and sorcery. I wouldn't bet my lunch that it would stop Jasra and certainly not his earthborn soldiers.

"Do you think that our guards will stop them, Raitt?" She asked me and I shook my head no. "Tell me the truth, Prince of Mules. Are you an enchanted human in this body or just a really smart jackass that can mimic understanding?"

I pushed my way out to the courtyard where the sand was soft and freshly raked. Carefully because I was still on three legs, I dragged my hoof in the sand, making large letters and words.

YES. DRAGON. ONCE BOY.

"Oh my!" She flayed her hand to her mouth. "Your name?"

RAVEN. PRINCE. AMBER.

"You were the Black Dragon? How do I revert you? Do you know the spell? Did Elvan steal you? Are you a wizard?" She ran out of breath before she ran out of questions. It took a long

time for me to spell out the answers until Juniper retrieved a board and a pencil. He called out a letter and I nodded yes or no until we had spelled out my story. By the time I was finished explaining, I was exhausted and sat down right in the yard.

Mallei fussed over me, having Junie bring blankets and straw to bed around me leaving me where I had collapsed. She even brought me a bucket of water and fresh pulled grass from under the fence. “Juniper,” she ordered. “Gather up clothes, food and whatever means the most to you. When you’re done, leave the cages open on all the animals. Leave the back gate open and the door to the feed room.”

“Yes’ sum,” he scurried off and she curtsied, making me snort.

“I’m going to pack, too... Raitt. We’ll leave at first dark if you think you can walk. I’ll give you something for the pain and I think it’s time for us to try that new walking cast.”

She hurried into her cottage leaving me to rest. I lay my head against the stacked bales of straw and dozed. Come eventide when the sun slipped behind the top of her fence so the light faded abruptly to an eerie darkness, Junie and Mallei entered the courtyard where I lay. Her whispered words brought me to my feet where she briskly removed the cast asking me to try and extend the toe to the ground. I did, stretching the muscles and tendons were immediately, the leg began trembling.

Her fingers ran up both sides of the bone massaging the muscles and ligaments under the thin skin. “The bone seems solid, Raitt,” she continued to call me by my new name. “I’m going to put the new cast on it so you can walk without stressing the bone. You shortened the tendons and muscles from lack of use. The only way to fix that is to just use them.”

She rewrapped the leg in cotton and strapped the two shells together that were reinforced with steel like a finger splint only this one was designed for equine limbs. Really, she was a genius when it came to adaptive devices for injured animals. “Does it still hurt, Raitt?”

Tentatively, I put the limb to the ground and felt my weight on the thigh bone and toe without stressing the cannon bone itself. Hobbled forward on all fours like a lurching caterpillar but at least I could walk. Not like we had a choice. Juniper watched from the back gate, a pack on his back and hers at his knee.

“Ready?” She asked and handed me an apple. I bit into it, the taste and the center oddly bitter. “Sorry. It’s a slow acting painkiller. I thought it would be better than a shot. This way lasts longer. I’m sorry, I need to lead you so it doesn’t look so suspicious.”

I snorted and pushed her with my head. Slowly we left the yard behind emerging through the back gate onto a small path between two alleys that skirted a green where several sheep grazed up to the tree line. Her little animal clinic was on the very outskirts of town and the anonymity of the forest was not far away. But, she didn’t take us that way. Instead, she turned left on a dirt track that animals had made following the ridge above the road.

There was no moon so no shadows and not enough light to pick our way should the going get rough. Mallei told me to walk as slowly as I needed and they paced themselves to me. She warned me of uneven ground. “We’re on the towpath,” she whispered. “It was the fastest and easiest way for you. Also, the most dangerous in the daylight as the Watch could see us leaving.” She went on to explain that no one was being allowed to leave the city by ship or horseback, wagon or cart. Only those on foot and anything deemed to be of use to the war effort was

confiscated.

“We have to be quiet,” she whispered. “If they find you, they might take you away even with your leg.”

My gait was an uneven hitch but we were moving, almost as fast as she could walk. At first, I just kept going until after one hour, I was reduced to counting a hundred steps and then resting before I could do a hundred more. I wasn't in pain, just weak. Wasn't sure if we had even managed more than 3 miles.

“It's not much further, Raitt,” she encouraged and gave me another apple. I tasted the same nasty bitter center and spit it out. “It'll help,” she said. “It's a stimulant too.” Grimly, I kept putting one foot in front of the other until I smelled the river ahead. I could hear the lap of water against the shore and the sleepy chirruping of frogs.

“The fort is just another quarter-mile,” she said and lit a small candle that barely illuminated her face. She looked tired and frightened. I swore I heard Junie's knees knocking. Pushed them both with my head towards the water.

The barge was beached on the narrow shelf of a gravel bar, tied up to a huge stump with a rope as thick as a man's forearm. A small lantern hung from a swinging arm over a rude cabin. We could hear a grinding noise as someone inside turned a wheel, sharpening some kind of steel object. It ceased when Mallei whistled like a nighthawk. In the doorway, a tall man's shadow blocked the light. In his hands he carried a sword and a crossbow, both readied for instant action.

“Gordy?”

“Mallei?”

“Yes. May we come aboard?” She waited in the darkness pinching out the candle.

“Just a sec. I'll have to drop the gangway.”

“Are you alone?”

“Near as. Just me, two old folk and some kids from the city. Everyone else has already split.”

We heard the sound of a heavy bit of wood hit the water and splashes nearly reached us. He swiveled a lantern to fall on the gangway and us. His eyes widened. “Blimey! You got a horse!”

“Not a horse, Gordy. A mule with a broken leg I'm treating. Can you help us?”

The barge owner/pilot came down the ramp to stand next to her. “Jiminy! He's tall. Will he load or do we need to push him in?”

“He'll walk on like a gentleman,” she smiled. “He just needs a little help.”

He held up my rear end on one side while she steadied my head and shoulders. The ramp was wet but not slick, it had ridges designed to catch livestock's hooves and give a secure grip. The barge itself was set deep in the belly with a guard rail at chest height for animals. It had a very short draft for river work.

“Will the tide come in before daylight?” She asked nervously as he pulled up the ramp securing it.

“Another hour or so,” he grunted as he maneuvered me into a standing stall in the center of the barge. I sat down, front feet first like a cow and he watched puzzled. “He sure don't act like any

mule I've ever seen," he stated.

"That's because he broke a leg and I've been babying him since. Animals get smarter in close proximity to humans, Gordy." She patted my neck and slipped me another apple. "Rest, Raitt. We'll be moving out to sea and down the coastline as soon as the tide comes in. If they do come after us, they'll look down river not up."

She threw my lead over the tie bolt but didn't latch it, made sure I had food and water before she found another empty stall near me where she curled up under her cloak. It wasn't long before I heard her soft snores and Juniper crept in to lean against my own solid bulk as I pushed over to make room. I sniffed him all over, he smelled of sweat and fear, apples with just the faintest hint of cinnamon and vanilla.

I wanted to sleep, too but was nervously awake, twitching and starting at every odd noise. I knew that her friend Gordy was on duty but somehow, that didn't make me any less paranoid.

Chapter 30

The tide coming in woke me. I hadn't thought I'd be tired or secure enough to fall asleep but that's exactly what I did, waking only as the barge lifted to begin a gentle rocking. Of course, it triggered my seasickness. Even as a mule, I was prone to mal-de-mer. Trouble was, I vaguely remembered from equine morphology that they could not throw up and stomach upsets caused colic, a fatal condition in quadrupeds.

I struggled up and brayed anxiously careful not to step on Junie who was sound asleep between my legs. He woke, sat up and smacked his head into my breast bone with a cry of pain. "Ow!"

Mallei came running over, her hair down and in her shift with her cloak thrown over that. She looked younger and softer. Pretty. "Raitt, Juniper, are you both all right?"

The boy climbed to his feet using my legs and leaned against the wooden partition that separated the stalls. "Fine. I just whacked my head into his belly."

"You're lucky he didn't kick you, although, I'm not sure if he can. He'd have to use the bad leg or stand on it."

Gordy stuck his head down in the hold. "You can come up if you want, Mallei, we're out of sight and sound of town and any guards."

I backed up to follow them and Mallei told me to stay put as the deck would be slippery when wet. I grumbled but saw the sense in it even though I didn't want to stay below in the dark where the motion was worse and made me even queasier. I heard other voices atop greeting them as both joined the pair. It sounded like children and a small herd of them bolted down the ramp to goggle at me. Street urchins by the looks and Mallei went after them, warning them not to approach me as I was hurt and grumpy.

"Where's 'e hurt?" The ringleader asked, a chubby cheeked lad of eight summers with greeny gold eyes and dark hair. He was missing two fingers from his right-hand and I recognized him as one of the crowd that had hung around Cooper's Alley.

"He's got a broken leg," Mallei said softly. "Poor old mule. He'd be stew meat or taken by the Army if he wasn't lame."

“Why you messin’ with him? He the same one I saw in the park? Cor, he was fast. Smart, too. He outfoxed every trap we done him.”

“How did you get here, Leos? And the other kids?”

“Some old gent and his wife told us to get out of town just ahead of the Red Witch’s Army. If you go on deck, you can just see the City starting to burn.”

Mallei and I both bolted for the deck and even three legged, I beat her there. Staring back down river, I could both see the lighted glow of something huge burning and smelled the scent of death and destruction. Two old people joined us, the kids and the pilot as we watched Alameth burn. “So much for the Knights of the Broken Sea,” she muttered. The old woman turned to her and stared at me, her mouth hanging open.

“Raitt?” She asked, unbelieving as she took in my impressive height and bulk. She threw her arms around me and hugged my neck, her fingers reaching for the collar hidden under my mane.

“You know this mule?” Mallei gaped.

“Yes! We lost him in Cooper’s Alley, put reward posters up but when the Council confiscated all the equines, we feared he was lost forever!”

“I’m sorry to tell you but he broke his right rear. I’m pretty sure it’ll never be right and he’ll be permanently lame.”

She paled and almost fainted. Mallei grabbed her, leading her over to a bollard and seated her. “He could have been put down!” the older woman cried. The man who was her age or older squatted near my leg to run his fingers down the cast.

“How long ago? And how bad was it?” His voice was sharp and stronger than he would seem.

“Nearly 6 weeks. Broke clean in half. You know this mule?” Mallei asked.

“I should say yes,” he grinned. “Don’t I, Raitt?” Before my eyes, the old fart changed to Commander Tegan which would make—Lyndseye. I brayed at the top of my lungs and tried to reach her as tears streamed down her suddenly young face.

“Raitt! My Prince! You’re alive!” She threw her arms around my neck again and in my joy, I reared taking her with me to fall on the slippery deck just missing her. Only Tegan’s quick grab for my halter and Mallei’s shove kept me from hitting the boards.

“You idiot!” She yelled. “Break that leg again and not even the gods can heal you!”

“Oh, I think the gods are finally on our side,” Linz smiled and whispered a power word in my ear. Suddenly, I was back in my mini Dragon form and the leg brace clattered to the deck with a thud. My questions befuddled the air, I didn’t think I stopped for breath until I nearly passed out. Wisely, all five of them let me sputter to a standstill. Of course, three of them were in sudden shock at my transformation.

“You hid in the park? How is your leg now, Raitt? Does it still hurt?” Since she was holding me and my wings were beating in a hover, I had no inkling how bad it was indeed or if still broken.

“What the bloody hell!” Gordy yelped as I landed on all fours. My hind leg was sore as if it had been broken twice but had healed. I could walk on it.

“Where have you all been these last six weeks?” I asked peeved as Tegan scooped me up to carry me into the cabin away from prying eyes.

“The Red Witch thinks you’re dead, Sir Raitt, let’s keep it that way.”

The inside of the cabin was just a box with benches, a small spirit stove on which a kettle was boiling and a pot of stew. There were windows on all three closed sides so that the pilot had a fairly broad view 360° around. The wheel and rudder were close by and I was surprised. I thought barges just went with the current but this one obviously had both power and steering.

Lyndseye dug through her pouch and pulled out some kind of jerky that she held out towards me. I didn’t think I’d chewed one bite but swallowed it whole, looking expectantly for more.

“Tegan?” She said and he poured me a mug of wine. I nearly dived in headfirst draining it with slurping noises. They laughed.

“I’m starving. Grass is great if you’re an ass but it didn’t much satisfy me,” I complained.

“No wonder he liked the mashies I made,” Juniper muttered. I let them talk, explaining to each other what happened while Linz fed and examined me at the same time. She found scars on the scales where Jasra had skewered me, hard knots on the bones where the breaks had occurred. She checked the iris of my eye and my gums particularly close and made me stick out my tongue. Forked, of course.

“I think the Atarax poison is all gone,” she announced. “The star potion has neutralized it. You should be safe from the compulsion to obey her.”

I noticed Gordy had curtains on the pilothouse windows. Blue gingham. It gave the rude cabin a bit of unreal charm. He still hadn’t closed his mouth.

“Thanks for the lift,” I told him.

“It talks! A bloody Dragon and it talks!”

“Good thing you didn’t turn me into the regular sized version,” I said and burped. I wasn’t at all sleepy like I usually was at night. I had a craving to go exploring in the night sky and hunt. I did hear the sounds of rats in the walls but wasn’t quite desperate enough to dig for them. Nor was there enough room in here for me to extend my wings. “What about the collar?” I asked. “Shouldn’t it come off?”

“Jasra’s magic is binding it to you. I can’t remove it, maybe another wizard could.”

“I wish Murphy was here, he could probably do it,” I sighed. I was so stupid, again. Taking off without the gargoyle had been a dumb move and I regretted it. Yet, if he had known what I attempted, he would not have let us leave. “I have to find Marcus and Roelle,” I said suddenly. “I must return to Topaz and Khafra.”

“It’s half a world away!” They protested.

“That’s not a problem for a Dragon,” I said and smiled a Dragon smile which was a scary show of rows of sharp fangs.

“You can’t fly us on your back,” the Princess protested. “And someone would see you!”

“Trust me,” I said. “First, you have to make a harness for me, something that could expand when I do and strong enough to pull the barge.”

Tegan got the idea immediately and prodded Gordy and Junie into helping. Using the lines that tied the barge up to the docks, they made a harness long enough for a twenty foot draw and nearly big enough for my forty foot size. The trick was converting without sinking his barge. He insisted the ship was sturdy enough to take the weight of that larger creature. I slipped into the center of the harness which dwarfed me, warned everyone to stay out of the way or they'd be in for a big surprise. Nodded to Lyndseye and she uttered the release words just as I leapt into the air.

Instantly, my bones lengthened and I was forty feet long, hovering just above the decks. I flew forward into the harness jerking the barge through the water so hard that everyone fell on their butts. Tegan shouted up at me, he sounded gleeful. "Look at the wake we're making! We must be going at least 25 knots!"

All of them crowded the bow rail watching as I skimmed across the surface of the ocean, starlight making the bioluminescence of the waves look like fireflies. I craned my neck around to watch them and wished I could do some loops and spirals in the joy of being so big and powerful once again.

"Yee-hah!" I shouted and really pushed barely feeling the drag of the barge. When I looked back, it was up out of the water except for the stern, almost like a hovercraft. Dolphins followed us but even they had a hard time keeping up with me.

Time flew by for the first few hours and after that, it became a monotonous chore. It wasn't painful just boring to look at the same stretch of water even though the coastline changed. I maneuvered close enough to see the land but far enough out to sea so that no one could spot me. Occasionally, Tegan or Mallei shouted questions on my condition and endurance but I told them I was fine.

Normally, I would have preferred to soar at higher altitudes on thermals but my wings and muscles didn't seem to find the constant flapping a hardship. I slowed and let the barge settle in the water until it was nearly stationary, turned in the lines and hovered over the deck looking for Lyndseye. It was nearly midday and all of them were in the cabin sleeping out of the heavy sun.

"Linz?" I called and she appeared rubbing her eyes with her bow close to hand.

"Raitt?"

"I'm tired, Linz. Can you make me small so I can rest on the boat? I don't think dragons float and I really don't want to try swimming."

"Okay." She did the spell and the world became smaller to my eyes. I let myself land on the salt stained deck, crawled over to a bollard and went to sleep. Not even the excited babbles of the kids woke me.

Chapter 31

"Can we pet him?" The littlest girl lisped and I rolled my eyes as both Linz and Mallei good-naturedly let the kids check me out. I was more fun than a battery-operated helicopter.

"Okay, kids," Mallei ordered. "That's enough. Raitt is really tired, he needs to sleep and eat."

I fluttered my wings, yawned and looked around. It was late in the evening of the second day at sea. So far, we hadn't passed any other ships; what I could see of shoreline and described to

Gordy had put us close to the port city of Gates Cove, an incredible distance for a full masted schooner under tight sail and even more for a barge. Of course, the *Wallopig Wompas* was only a barge and the feat was doubly amazing for a vehicle of her type.

We'd already gone through the meager food on board, Mallei hadn't planned on all the extra kids but Lyndseye had told me she wasn't leaving them to be butchered by Jasra's Thrids.

"If I could," I said low under my breath, "I would burn every fucking one of them off the face of the Shadow Realms."

They were discussing food; how much we needed and for how long. Water was no problem, the ballast for the *Wompas* were oaken kegs of water in the hold. We had nearly 10,000 gallons to draw on. Some of the kids fished and I found that during the times I rested, it was no effort for me to dive below the boat and catch whole schools flipping the catch up on the deck.

In my smaller size, I was quite agile and handy in the water nor did it bother my wings or flight ability. It did, however cool my Dragon furnace down so that after my dip, I needed a vigorous warming or I'd become lethargic. I felt a pulling towards the east, towards where Lindy said Topaz and the kingdom of Khafra lay. The further we retreated from Minsk and Jasra, the safer I felt.

We needed meat and fresh vegetables. I knew from association with Roelle what kind of edible stuff grew wild. I had Gordy drop anchor close to a small cove on a desolate stretch of beach and went inland to scout. I did it as the smaller sized Dragon because at greater height, I could be mistaken for a bird or a large bat. This allowed me to fly low enough so that I could search the ground for foodstuffs.

The land below me was feral, patches of scrub brush, thickets of cane briars with small grassy clearings between. The grass was brown and in hummocks which told me it was probably marshy. I did see marsh marigolds, Jerusalem artichokes and bull reeds among the small ponds. It was early summer here, there were small berries on the bushes but not yet ripe. Or at least, not red or dark blue like my own varieties. I recognized cranberries and blueberries.

Kicking in my infrared sense didn't work in the smaller version but my eyesight and hearing were just as acute. I did use my hearing more—to depend on my eyes when I had no depth perception was tricky. There'd been a few times I'd overshot the mark and landed on the ground instead of lunch's back.

I caught sight of something like pronghorns but more robust, too large for the mini Dragon. There were marsh deer but the same problem—I was big enough to kill one but not carry a whole one back and I wasn't sure if multiple trips was such a good idea. Slowly, I spiraled closer to the ground and sat down. Checked the area around but I hadn't seen any habitations while in flight and nothing else once I was grounded.

I found a sandy wash that other animals had made use of to roll and squatted down in the center where I uttered the lines to make me the normal sized Dragon.

Rolling, I scoured my scales and every inch of me, the sand getting into cracks and crevices to make me drool in an ecstasy of itch relief.

I stood up, shook and blasted into the sky spooking two bucks that were just coming down for water. It took only seconds to dispatch them and I ate both right then and there. Twenty minutes later, I had set fire to the brush near a small pond and spooked out a dozen marsh deer, taking six

in my claws before I used my wings to put out the fire. With all that water, I wasn't really worried about setting off a wildfire but I couldn't see the sense in killing or destroying more than I needed.

On the way back, I passed a small valley and saw the first signs of occupation. An old silo and windmill creaked in my passing, its water wheel still filling and dipping. It looked deserted as did the rest of the land. I flew on towards the cove and saw them waiting for me. Several started to wave. Just as I dropped from the land to over the water, I flew headfirst into something. Knocked myself silly and tumbled ass over tea kettle till I hit the ground, carcasses flying in every direction. My wings slapped the sand and I blinked, seeing doubles and triples of everything. Stood up, shook and walked forward. Just before my feet reached the water, I hit the same invisible barrier. No matter how far up or down the beach I walked, I could find no break. Nor as high as I could fly. I even tried to dig under but was thwarted there. Flames didn't affect it either when I blasted full strength at it.

By now, all those on board the ship knew something was wrong and yelled across the water to me. I yelled back and they could hear me a great deal better than I, them. Finally, Gordy launched a smaller rowboat with Lyndseye, Tegan and Mallei. I watched them come with anxiety, worried that I wouldn't be able to protect them if something happened.

Tegan climbed out first, stopped to extend his sword and had no problem stepping through the barrier. Nor did the ladies or the boat. In fact, they marched back and forth several times with no ill effects yet when I tried, instant wall.

"What if you're smaller?" Mallei asked as Lyndseye tested the air. I slipped back into my smaller size with the same results. Even when I changed to the mule, I wasn't able to step off the land or into the water. "What do we do, Raitt?" She asked. I looked at Linz.

"Any ideas?"

"There's a spell governing this but I'm not sure if it's Jasra's or really old one that was put up to protect the borders. It has the flavor of really old magic, my Lord. Older even than dragons," the Princess explained.

"Tegan, take the deer on board and feed everyone," I suggested. "I already ate. Will the rope stretch out to a hundred feet?"

"If we undo the harness, maybe," he said slowly.

"Tie a big knot in my end and I'll fly the coastline as long as I can and pull you," I said.

"What happens if you can't—like over a mountain or the water's too shallow?" She asked.

"Then, we'll go inland. It's a river barge, it can go up the river if we have to. I wish we had a map of this world or at least, this coastline," I grumped.

"Gordy probably does," Tegan said. "You think if we carried you, it might allow you to exit?"

"I don't know. It's weird it let me in the first time. I don't think it's Jasra's doing, she thinks I'm dead."

"I don't like leaving you alone," Linz said. I laughed.

"I'm a Dragon, Princess. What could hurt me?"

Mallei's eyes rounded. "Princess? Princess of what?"

“Whoops. I wasn’t supposed to let that slip. Sorry. Princess, Mistress Mallifer of Alameth, the best animal doctor in the Realm. Mistress Mallifer, this is Princess Lyndseye, Crown Princess of Minsk, and Caldor’s daughter.”

Mallei curtsied in shock and Linz pulled her up. “Don’t bother and it’s Crown Prince. They never change the title over when the sex is female. My father kept me in the background and male to confuse his enemies.”

“How old are you, just out of curiosity?” I asked.

She smiled at me mysteriously. “Old enough. How old are you?”

“In real years or dog years?” I quipped and she looked puzzled. Mallei laughed. “I was seventeen when I died,” I said finally, to their astonishment. “I became the Dragon and I’ve been this way for two years. Does that make me nineteen? I don’t know. Sometimes, I feel ancient.”

“If you solve the riddle, Raven,” Lyndseye said softly. “You can have your heart’s desire.”

“Yeah, but first we have to get to Topaz.” I watched Tegan and Mallei throw the deer meat into the rowboat and then he came back for me. I let him pull me inside his cloak and straight forward through the barrier but I was torn out of his grip as if I were greased. It didn’t matter who held me, nothing they did would let me pass the barrier. So I watched them all retreat to the barge and I remained on the beach where I converted back to the larger size because I felt safer. Not much would challenge something like me. I fell asleep to the smells of roasting venison and children’s laughter.

In the morning, Tegan rowed back over with the guts and parts that no one else wanted. I wasn’t so picky. I devoured them and picked at my teeth with a claw while he dragged the rope ashore. Instead of a knot, they had knotted a spar through so that I could grasp and pull it like a water skier. I waited until he returned to the barge and they sent me a shout and wave. I drew the bar between my front legs, took off parallel to the land and flew just about ten feet above the sand dunes and sparse trees. I had to judge the line carefully, too close and my wings hit the barrier and stung. Too far and I dragged the barge into the shallows and because the angle was different, it was both harder for me to pull and for them to steer. Several times I pulled them into shallow sandbars and got them stuck which necessitated Tegan changing the direction of the tow rope and me flying back towards Alameth. It was frustrating and twice as tiring. There was a definite limit to what my Dragon body could take.

We kept going until they called a halt, not me. This time, Gordy and Mallei came ashore with lanterns and maps. He laid them out on the rowboat’s seat and showed me where he thought we were. It was still some thousand miles to Khafra’s borders, a distance that would often take months in a ship. He thought the small cove we’d anchored in had been Blackbird’s Bay which told us we were nearly halfway there.

As long as I paid attention to what I was doing, everything was fine. I didn’t hit the barrier or dragged the barge in too far. I was able to fly for six hours at a stretch before hunger and fatigue dictated I rest.

When I sat down, I gently pulled the barge in until Gordy sounded the depths at 2 feet which gave the sturdy *Wompas* a clearing of 12 inches. She was one of the lowest draft vehicles I’d ever seen, needing only 6 inches of water under her flat bottom. This way, they were able to step ashore and stretch their legs without having to swim for it.

Once ashore, the ladies set up a cooking pot using driftwood that had washed ashore. The kids went nuts running up and down the beach, digging for clams and crabs, shells and whatever else tickles their fancy.

While in flight, I'd checked out the area and hadn't seen any signs of people; no homes, and no smoke from campfires or old camp rings. This land was desolate—dunes, sparse grass and little woods. I hadn't seen any large grazing animals only rabbits, foxes and birds.

I took a short nap and when I woke, I smelled something good. Mallei was stirring the big pot and dishing out bowls of fish chowder. It smelled great but I'd have had to consume the entire kettle three times over to satisfy my raging appetite.

"I need to hunt," I announced. "Do you need more meat?"

Tegan shook his head. "No. There's plenty of venison left. We need to use it up before it goes bad."

"I'll eat it," I said and he frowned. "Well, my taste buds are different than a humans," I shrugged. "It won't go to waste."

"Take me with you." It was more a question than an order. Linz looked up, interested.

"You're the best swordsman here," I returned. "You should stay with them."

"Linz is as good as I am, with bow and blade."

"And I'm skilled at defensive spells which Tegan is not," she said calmly. "Go. We'll be fine." I nodded, showed him how to hold on and took off.

Chapter 32

Tegan screamed in exhilaration, his legs clamped tightly around my ribs just behind the front legs and before the wing buds. He couldn't stop chattering about the pure joy of flying. We passed over endless flats of dunes with tough bunches of salt grass. I rose high enough so that I caught thermals, soaring so that it was nearly effortless. As a result, everything looked flat and tiny. We could still see the cove and the barge but they were like toys for an ant.

"Look," Tegan said, pointing over to the left. I did and saw the land drop a way into huge cliffs. On the headlands were giant trees cut through by a massive river that was as wide as the Mississippi but flowing faster with whitewater as it roared over rocks and tumbled down to the sea in a spectacular waterfall.

"That's the Mouth of Niagara," he yelled into my ear. "The border between Khafra and Tethys."

At least, here we could find game and I angled into the land away from the shore feeling the faint brush of the invisible wall against my wingtip. Slammed to a stop by back flapping and hovering as I explored the barrier. I turned sideways, raking my clawed back feet on the wall for a long way before I gave up and turned around. Tegan pointed out a small clearing where he wanted me to set him down. I did and it was just barely big enough for my body.

"I'm going hunting," he told me. "I can track better in these woods than you. Unless you shrink."

"I can do that," I agreed. "I can scent out deer and herd them your way."

“I won’t take anything too big, we still have enough for a day or so. Mostly, I wanted to see how far you can go and where we were. The barrier extends around this whole district, right up to the Sentinels which divide the East Kingdoms from the West.”

“I can’t go further than this,” I worried. “If I can’t cross, how will I get you all to safety?”

“I don’t know, Raitt,” he said slowly. “If we can’t get you to your friends, we’ll just have to go and bring your friends back to you.”

“They could be anywhere,” I said. “This is a big Realm. I don’t know if they stayed in Topaz or went on trying to find me. I don’t even know if they came on after me. For all I know, they could still be in Loest at her dad’s house.” I shook and spread my wings, flying slowly through the close packed trunks of pine trees. The scent was heavy of resin and molds, earthy and very little underbrush so Tegan had no trouble following me. I smelled deer and wolf, even bears and warned him away from the big brown beast that was busily uprooting tree stumps in search of grubs. It stared at me curiously, seemingly unafraid but I couldn’t say the same for the small button buck that bolted as he saw me.

“Raitt, let me!” Tegan yelled and I chased the buck towards him, dashing aside at the last minute so that he had a clean shot. His arrow took the little buck in the side, right behind the front leg and such was the power of the bow that the arrow came out the other side embedding itself in a tree. I landed on it as he went after the stag and it managed to run a dozen yards before its heart stopped beating.

He butchered it swiftly, giving me the heart, liver and guts. Then, he quartered it, tying the pieces together through the hamstrings and forearms with a bit of leather so he could carry one forequarter over a shoulder. The meat steamed in the cool air of the woods and I heard the cries of jackdaws and crows attracted to the scent of blood.

He whistled as he worked, his eyes never still but scanning constantly around him.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “I can see and smell anyone long before they know I’m here.”

“This is the Woods of the Raven,” he told me. “A land that is rich in folklore and horror stories. Of murders and massacres. Not many who have journeyed here have come back to tell of it. There are legends of unnatural beasts that roam here.”

“Oh? Like what? Dragons?” I mocked. “Harpies, wyverns and unicorns? In my world, those are all unnatural beasts.”

“Really? What world do you come from, Raitt?” He set the haunch down and went to retrieve his arrow. It took the both of us to pull it out of the tree trunk.

“A Shadow Realm called Earth. The same one that Ryan came from. I’m curious how he reached here, he said he was a physicist so somehow, he manipulated the energy to bring him and his soldiers over.”

“They fight like demons even without their weapons,” he admitted.

“You fought them?”

“They tried to take Minsk several times but we were always able to repel them.”

“Until I showed up.”

“We had no defense against such a creature as you, Raitt. You’ve killed many of the King’s

villagers and he wanted no more blood on his hands.”

“I know,” I whispered, despair sitting heavy on my soul. Although I wasn’t sure if I still had one. I did know how many people I had murdered for Jasra and it was another burden I would have to live with.

“Ready to go back?” He asked sensing my mood. He pointed towards the sunlight just barely seen through the trees. “The clearing is that way.”

“Hold on. I smell something,” I said and flew off to the west. I hadn’t gone more than twenty feet when he was no longer visible but what had drawn me was the smell of firestone and irresistible.

I landed on a small rocky outcrop and dug with my claws into a deposit of the blue stone that I craved. Ate until my crop was full. By that time, Tegan had tracked and followed me. “Hello,” he called laughing as I looked up, my face covered in dirt. “You look like a hog wallowing in the sty.”

“Hey,” I complained. “This is the stuff that lets me make my fire. Without it I’m useless.”

“Hardly.” He pattered around the hole, digging out chunks of hard blue crystals that were hexagonal in shape and glittered as he turned them. “Pretty stones. What are they?”

“Looks like star sapphires,” I burped and snorted which resulted in a thin stream of fire that licked at the base of a blue pine. I accidentally set it on fire and hastily knocked it out before the whole place went up.

“Shall we go?” He asked placing a few of the larger ones in his pockets.

“How are we going to do this? If I change down here, I’ll knock over trees and might hit you. Can you find the clearing again?”

“Of course. Follow me.” I let him lead me back to the clearing and once inside, had him wait at the perimeter as I chanted the spell to make me big. Once there, he climbed on settling the meat on my neck like two oversized earrings and we returned to the barge.

The ladies were glad to see us, the kids each wanted a ride but Lyndseye and Mallei both vetoed the idea as they were afraid that one might fall off. So, they went swimming instead which made me even more nervous as I couldn’t reach them if one got into trouble.

The firewood the kids had collected was all wet so I used my newly recharged flames to set it alight. Wished I could roast marshmallows over it instead of chunks of venison.

They wanted to spend the night on land and the men wanted to go on. They left it up to me and Tegan didn’t mention my discovery of the barriers. I was afraid that none of them would go on to safety without me and would want to remain behind to seek another route.

“There are no people around this area,” I shrugged. “We’re safe enough unless another ship passes and they’d have to actually enter the cove to spot the barge. Besides, I could use the rest.” I rubbed it at my neck, the collar was itchy and seemed to be getting tighter. I must be putting on more muscle with all the flying.

“See what I found, Linz,” Tegan held out the blue crystals and both Mallei and the Princess exclaimed as they saw the stones. Pure blue with a white star in the center, they were pretty and at least 20 carats each.

“Stars tears, they’re called,” Lyndseye said. “Rare. Found only where ancient stars are said to have wept from the sky.” She knotted one in a cord and tied it to my neck and the irritating pinch of Jasra’s collar stopped annoying me. I scratched at it one more time and no one was more surprised than me when the thing popped open and rolled across the sand where it disappeared in a puff of smoke. I went after it, stopping with my feet in the surf and couldn’t find any trace of the silver circlet.

“What’s that all about?” I said and then realized I was standing beyond the invisible barrier. “Hey!”

“It must be the jewel,” Lyndseye said. “It influenced or negated the effect of Jasra’s spell. Let’s leave now before it can revert or something worse.”

“Good idea.” They gathered up the kids, our food and gear and I was hauling them out to sea faster than a New York cabbie on a Sunday night.

Half a day went by before I had to stop and I was afraid to chance the land so I hovered over the barge converting in midair to drop onto the deck where I lay panting. As I didn’t get up immediately, the two women gathered around me in agitation, their faces creased in worry. I stared at them. Mallei was burned brown by the sun and wrinkles gathered her eyes in their midst. Her lips were chapped, stained with salt brine and her golden hair had faded in the harsh sunlight. She looked years older. Linz’ had the sunburn of fair complexion of a red head even though her short hair was blonde. She too had chapped lips and salt stained clothes. To my nose, they smelled interesting but to one another they must reek.

“Raitt, are you okay?” Mallei frowned.

“Fine. Just a little tired,” I struggled to my feet and crawled over to the top of the cabin where I could lie in the late afternoon sun stretched out like a cat.

I wasn’t there too long when one of the kids climbed up to peer over the edge at me. I thought his name was Leos or something like that. He was the boy with two fingers and clearly the leader of the pack.

“Hey,” I lifted my head and back down, still heaving for air.

“You hungry?” He offered me a chunk of deer meat that someone had salted and dried into jerky. It wasn’t bad. “There’s plenty more. Water, too. We’re out of wine.”

“I know.”

“How much further?” He asked and I remembered the old joke—are we there yet?

“I don’t know, Leos.” I swallowed another piece and he climbed up to sit next to me but as his bare skin hit the hot metal of the roof, he yiked and stood. Stared out to sea and was so still that it alarmed me. I stood up and looked at what so entranced him.

Dragon eyes were like a hawk’s but even more acute. What he saw as a bright triangle to my eye was a fast-moving black warship heading straight for us.

Chapter 33

I wanted to flee, I had a sinking sensation that it was her following, that somehow she knew I was alive. They wanted to check it out and see if it were simply merchants heading to Gates

Cove as we were entering the shipping lanes for that port city. Gordy said it was a bit odd for merchant ships to be this close to the coast but they did sometimes put in for fresh water as the huge river Danverse emptied into the sea at Niagara's mouth near Gates Cove.

I was afraid to wait to start dragging the barge, I wanted to be out of sight before I changed. I didn't know if they could see me as I had them.

"What are you going to do, Raitt?" Tegan asked standing at the bow looking out towards the ship.

"Get out of here. The sooner the better."

"But you're tired!" Lyndseye protested.

"Better than dead or enslaved," I said and went back to the rope, picked up the handlebar and began the job of hauling the barge through the waves.

I pulled for hours. It began to rain and the waves grew choppier making it harder to see the coastline. Instead, I used my infrared sense to heat the coastline and followed the dim red line north and east.

The storm worsened and tossed the boat making the dragging infinitely worse. The only good thing was that the boat following us would have just as harrowing a time sailing and maybe sink.

I ran into a huge rock that appeared out of nowhere so swiftly that I had no time to avoid it. Smashed chest first into a spire that hit me with a punch so hard, I lost my breath, slid down the sheer face and hit the water only to vaguely hear the barge roll over me and into it.

Pieces of lumber showered down from above, following me down to the sea floor. Several more hit me, one on the head and it was like a poke in the side to a sleepy person. It woke me up and made me angry. I roared (which underwater wasn't such a good idea even for a Dragon) and started swimming up towards the light.

When my head broke the surface, all I saw were pieces of the barge battering the base of that stupid rock. I called out names and heard some faint responses. I found the Princess and Tegan, two of the kids and had them climb on my back where I crawled up the cliff face to search out a spot where they could shelter from the storm. Found a small cave just above where I had hit first and set them down. I spent the next two hours diving, flying and looking for the rest but all I found was Gordy's body stuck beneath a piece of the *Wompas*. I left him there but grabbed the haunch of venison still hanging and a barrel of water.

When I finally collapsed on the narrow ledge near them, I was immediately gone. Out like a light. I didn't even see Lyndseye crawling over me or Tegan dragging me into the cave.

"Raitt, Sir Prince. Dragon," a sweet voice called me and I wanted to answer but my whole body ached as if I'd been pummeled by an entire football team. My chest really hurt, and it made breathing difficult. I opened my eye and saw her face leaning into mine and she looked normal sized. I was in the cave with them so she must have shrunk me.

"Mallei and the kids?" I asked hopefully and it came out a weak rasp of breath.

"Don't try to talk, Sir Dragon," she said. "You broke your ribs and pierced your chest on a rock. Tegan pulled it out and packed the wound but you've been bleeding so much. I finally got

it to stop.”

I closed my eye in defeat. Mallei and the kids were gone, drowned or worse. Some hero I turned out to be. I shifted and my left wing throbbled. I felt something pinioning the wing close to my shoulder.

“It’s broken,” she said flatly. “You won’t be flying on it till it heals.” She said something else but my ears heard only a buzzing and then it all faded away.

I groaned, tried to turn over and my entire body was enveloped in cramps so severe that I cried out in agony. Someone held my head and poured hot tea down my throat and a soothing warmth traveled through my belly to my muscles. Tegan crooned to me and tucked his cloak around me.

“There’s a small beach on the other side of this rock,” he explained. “We found a way down and picked up some of the things that washed ashore. The storms eased and the skies are clear. No sign of any...one.” I knew he had been going to say bodies. “Can you move? I gave you some of Mallei’s pain potion. I found her basket and pack.”

“No kids?” I managed hoarsely trying to stand.

If I could convert, these wounds should heal and he must’ve read my mind because he added, “Linz did change you back and forth but nothing happened. Either it’s a spell that you hit or something just geared to your physiology. You’re changing, Raitt. Your scales are softer and your bones heavier. Your claws aren’t as sharp as they were, either.” I looked and instead of claws, they looked more like long fingernails. “Your eye isn’t quite as Dragon-like. What’s happening?”

“I don’t know.” I sat back down before I fell over. “Where are we now?”

“In the cave you found. There’s a trail above that leads down to the beach and remains of fire pits. Someone has used this place before. Shall I carry you?”

“Is there shelter there?”

“Lyndseye and Leos found an old hut but at least it provides shade. There are some trees and vegetation on this rock. It’s not an island, just a spire that sticks up out of the water. There might have been a lighthouse here at one time but no one has climbed to the top.”

“Yeah. Bring me down. I don’t think I can walk yet.” He scooped me up in his arms, carrying me carefully down what he euphemistically called the trail and I called a goat track. How he managed to walk it and carry me was a major miracle. I breathed a sigh of relief when we reached the small beach on the other side of the rock. It formed a perfect half circle and was no more than 50 feet wide, not large or deep enough for a big ship to anchor in. Linz and the two kids were gathering wood for a fire and I cringed when I saw that most were from the barge.

She gave me a sad smile. “Hello, my Prince. How are you?”

“Been better. Any sign?” I glanced at the two kids and she shook her head sadly. I shuddered. I was the Dragon of Death. Where I went, death and destruction followed. She came close and touched me.

“You nearly died trying to save souls that had already been marked for destruction by the Red Witch, Sir Dragon. They died free and not enslaved and their spirits hold no grudge against you.”

“That’ll help me sleep better at night,” I retorted. “Why does everyone die around me?” I couldn’t cry, there weren’t tears left in me and I wanted to rage but even that was denied me in my present condition. So I did what I did best, I sulked. Refused to eat and drink, brooding in my own little world.

The kids being kids, rebounded quicker—they’d already explored what they could of the island; it wasn’t much more than 100 feet wide and 200 feet long, maybe half an acre in size and composed of hard granite shot with quartz. It was shaped like a miniature Matterhorn and Tegan said it was the start of the Sentinel range that separated one continent from the other. The only way around the range was to sail, expeditions had tried to climb it and disappeared. No one had ever found a passage through.

“There’s no food or water on this rock,” she said softly. “And you can’t swim or fly with one wing.”

“I don’t need my wings to swim if I’m full-sized in the water,” I pointed out. “I can swim to shore with you on my back.”

“We have enough food for a few days and water for a week if you stay small. That’ll give that wing a chance to heal.”

“No, we don’t,” Leos said panting as he ran towards us to slide to a stop on yellow sand. “I saw the black sail coming over the horizon!”

“We don’t have any more time,” I said and spoke the words. I was forty feet of Dragon on the small beach with them under my one wing. The other was strapped close to my body and a rude patch on my chest from which a giant ache emanated. I felt a shudder rack my whole frame and it was all I could do to stand. When they climbed on me, I wanted to collapse. Instead, I forged forward into the water and started swimming in the absurd doggie paddle that kept us afloat but tore my muscles and wound. I gritted my teeth and ignored it concentrating on reaching the mainland.

I cut my awareness away from all else but the need to reach land, not their frantic cries to slow down or that I was bleeding. Only the need to keep moving and get ashore so it was with some astonishment that my churning feet hit solid bottom and I ran up and over the hill to face a monstrous wall of rock. There was nowhere left for us to go except back into the water or down the line of rocks or over.

“Linz, can you make a spell to hold the bones together in my wing?”

“Maybe.”

“You have any stimulants? To make me less tired?” I asked urgently.

“Yes, but it’s dangerous,” she protested even if she was digging them out.

“We have no weapons other than me,” I said rapidly. “And I can still see them coming. All that’s left is to fight or flee. I can’t fight but I can still run.”

She gave me the dose and the spell together. A tingle ran over and through me as magic enhanced healing held the broken wing together just enough for it to work. The hole in my chest covered over with thin, baby scales and stopped losing blood and fluid.

I took off at a shambling run with the four of them on my back and it was much harder to

reach flight speed. I flew straight up the rock using my claws to push and pull as well as fly.

The air grew chill and snow appeared. I warned them that up high would not have enough oxygen to breathe and she must secure a bubble around them or they would pass out and die. Still, the spell was simple and I recited it for her as I remembered it from Jasra's use. It worked when she tried it but she saved it until I told her when to use it.

I didn't want to look back or down. I didn't want to see if the black shape was following or how far a fall from here would be. We reached the top and the sun was so close that I swore I could touch it yet it did not warm me.

The way down was more a controlled fall that I barely remembered. I knew that somewhere, the bones of my wing broke free again and I struggled to keep in the air, gliding for a forest clearing I saw below. In desperation, I reached up, grabbing their bodies and cradled them against my chest just before I hit the trees, tumbling through branches at the edge of the clearing. I saw someone's frightened green eyes and then my head smashed into a tree trunk hard enough to splinter it. I didn't remember hitting the ground.

Chapter 34

The Lighthouse of Cabra was in use, both Random and Julian each had a garrison stationed there. Random had a cavalry unit and Julian a small fleet of the Navy. When Corwin and his party appeared in the study, it was in front of the unit commander and he nearly fell over in shock. "My Lord," he stuttered as his usually peaceful office was suddenly full of very filthy and disreputable looking men. He stared at the General. "Cathorian!"

"You know each other, good," Corwin said. "I need a quick ride to Khafra and these men need to be paid, sent on their way or inducted into our forces. Whatever they want. And find a spot for the General."

"If it's all the same to you, Prince Corwin, I would like to follow you," the one armed man shrugged.

Pire and the Captain nodded but Corwin shook his head. "Two men can get there safer and faster."

"Let me come, my Lord," Pire argued. "I am the boy's bodyguard and it is my duty."

"So be it. Commander, this is Capt. Lambrecht of the Amber Household Cavalry. See to his welfare."

"Yes, my Lord. What is it you require?"

"Horses and food. Weapons. Good cloaks. Send a message to the king to keep watch on the borders. I fear the Red Witch will try to attack now that the Black Dragon is gone."

"Gone, my Lord?" His face turned white at that thought.

"Not dead, gone. He is somewhere over the Sentinels near Khafra and the Border Kingdoms. We're on the way to return him."

"Do you want a squad of men to aid you?"

"No. As I said, we will return him ourselves. You will I am afraid, need every available man here to protect Amber's borders."

The commander barked orders and within a half hour they were mounted and riding down the road. As they traveled, Corwin began his Hell Ride, changing the land in subtle ways so that it began to more closely resemble Khafra's terrain.

They ran the horses until Corwin called a halt in a small valley that was nestled between two ridges. Oak, Pines and apple trees lined both sides and in the ravine ran a busy little stream with a large barn and an old farmhouse. Its driveway was off the road and Corwin took it down to dismount in the front yard under a huge old maple tree in full bloom. Pire reached up and pulled off a nearly ripe Mac Apple, chewing it in four bites.

"Peg, are you home?" Corwin called and presently a little brown dog barked at the front door behind a short little woman could have been a Disney caricature of an elf. She had curly white hair, round cheeks and twinkling hazel eyes. She came down the stairs to hug the Prince gleefully.

"My Lord, so good to see you." She spoke to the little dog who was sniffing everyone in a friendly fashion. "Down, Buddy," she said. "Can you stay, Prince Corwin?"

"For rest and some water, Peg. I'm after my grandson."

"Another emergency mission? Help yourself to the barn and feed. I'll make you something to eat and to take with you." Without another word, she was back in the house while they saw to their horses.

They broke up for only an hour before mounting and riding on. The land grew rougher and more desolate. They passed homes and farms burned and looted and the crows were thick on the ground. Occasionally, they saw bodies of soldiers and once, Pire dismounted to check the man's wounds finding them odd. Round or star shaped but not like those seen from an arrow or a blade.

Corwin got down next and his eyes widened as he drew out his blade to dig into the wound and extract a small silver ball. He looked worried. "See if you can find his weapon," he ordered and the pair scoured the skirmish area. All they found were arrows, swords and knives. He had them mount and race the horses making greater changes than before. Here, the sky was a deep golden yellow and the road green paved stones changing to gold colored bricks lined by flowers that had faces and watched them race by, warning in bell-like tones that danger followed and that they were running head on into it.

Occasionally, they met another traveler, also fleeing some nameless terror. Most ran with the clothes on their backs and few possessions as if the disaster had occurred before they could grab anything.

The air smelled of burning homes, a heavy fog bank that drifted ever closer as they rode towards Khafra. Corwin stopped at midnight in a sheltered lea off the road hidden behind a fold of ridge that opened to a tiny ravine just barely wide enough for one horse and rider. They rode single file until he ducked through a stone arch and then dismounted, leading his horse through a tunnel and emerging into a sinkhole the size of a small baseball field. It had water and knee-high grass, was protected on all four sides by unclimbable walls of sheer rock and the only entrance in was the tunnel.

"We'll be safe here," Corwin said stripping the saddle off his horse. The others did the same. All three horses rolled, shook and immediately started eating. "It's safe to make a fire, the smoke won't be seen above the ramparts here. We are close to Khafra's borders and there are garrisons

of the King's Guards every 20 miles. They can contact each other by heliographs so if we're spotted, they'll let the Palace know we're coming. I'd like to avoid that in case Luke is involved or he thinks he's keeping the Dragon for his own use."

"How could anyone force the Black Dragon to obey them?" Cathorian asked. "He's a bloody big ferocious beast!"

Corwin shook his head sadly. "No, he's not. He's a seventeen-year-old kid who went through hell and died to come back as a construct of the Unicorn. He's stuck in the Dragon body and he wants out. I can see why he took the chance to find a way out even if it meant invading Luke's Kingdom. What I don't know is what Luke thinks or wants and that worries me. Then, there's Jasra. She'd like nothing better than to depose her son, kill me and invade Amber."

"Could she?" Cathorian asked.

"With Raven's power and the weapons that killed those soldiers? Yes. I tried once to bring explosives into Amber and had no luck. Jasra seems to have found the secret and that worries me." He paused. "Get some rest. We'll go on in the morning."

Pire said, "I'll make dinner, my Lord." He set about the chore unpacking the meal that the old woman had sent with them while Corwin and Cathorian made camp. They ate well on fried rabbit and bottled red wine.

Roelle gathered together the ingredients that she knew were part of the spell and mixed them late at night in the Palace Gardens where she could see the light from the stars called the Seven Dancers. The others watched her mix the ingredients under Marcus's directions, grinding them in a mortar and pestle. The air shimmered above the bowl for a second and then went flat with a poof. "It's because three ingredients are missing," Marcus said. "The Star's Tears, the Star That Fell and the Swimmer's Fears. We have the star anise, starfish and the Star stone. The Star that Fell is in the Treasury of King Caldor of Minsk and his family have the other artifacts."

"Unfortunately," the king said dryly. "My spies have told me that Jasra and the former General of her forces, Ryan Secrest are waging war on the Border Kingdom. Minsk has fallen and they've killed Caldor, the Royal Family and all the Army."

"I refuse to believe we can't find the rest of the items," Marcus stated. "I think the spell will seek out Raven and alert him were trying to fix him."

"What about the sacrifice part, Marcus?" Roelle asked nervously.

"It's only a drop of blood needed, Roelle," he soothed. "And from a black crow-like bird called a raitt. There are plenty of them around here."

"No, Marcus, it needs to be something rarer than a mere crow but I can't figure out what. Just that it has something to do with Raven. I wonder where he is."

Luke said, "My spies have reported that the Dragon is working with my mother and has killed many people, destroying whole villages and towns. I've also heard rumors that she's chained him to the front gates of the city. And is starving him to death, offering him only human corpses to eat."

"No!" Both Marcus and Roelle paled at that. "If he eats of the flesh of humans, the spell won't

work!”

“He won’t,” Roelle avowed. “Not knowingly. Raven would never do that.”

“I hope so,” Luke returned. “Because I’ve read in an old manuscript on Dragon Lore that if the Dragon does eat humans, it can drive them into a bestial fury that can’t be controlled. At one time, dragons were a part of Khafra’s fauna until the people slaughtered them all. The Dragon Wars.”

“It was real?” Marcus asked.

“According to the books, it happened over a thousand generations ago, before the continents were divided into the Border Kingdoms. The Sentinels were raised to protect the kingdoms from invading dragons.”

“No one’s seen any since?”

“Not one until your Black Dragon turned up here,” said the King. “My mother leaked that manuscript you found, Marcus to lure him here. She found a way to coerce him to obey her. I don’t believe he’s any more willing to aid her than I am.”

“We need to find him and quickly,” the boy said grimly. He took Roelle’s hand.

“Don’t worry,” Luke said flatly. “She’ll find us. She’s heading this way with her army.”

Murphy caught sight of the Prince’s group and dropped low to buzz their horses which startled two into bolting and Corwin’s to rear. All three being natural and confident horsemen managed to deal with the animals’ terror. He made no apologies to the trio but landed and began to speak to the Prince. “I’ve tracked Raven halfway across this realm, Prince Corwin and have learned that he was in Minsk, tethered to the Gates of the City like a chained dog. The Witch was slowly starving him to death.”

“Was?” Corwin snarled.

Murphy’s eyes were blood red and his fangs glistened with saliva. “He escaped and no one’s seen him since. I can find only minute traces of him and the last one was several days ago. Near the city of Alameth. I followed a black warship out of the harbor that is chasing a rumor of the last living heir of Caldor. Lost the ship in a storm and sensed you were near. Came here because this is the direction they were heading when the storm hit.”

“Was it Jasra’s ship?” Cathorian asked.

“The captain was a man named Ames. Gregory Ames and he came from my realm. Prince Corwin, he shot at me with a gun.”

“Guns don’t work in Amber or her close Realms,” he said but remembered the star shaped wounds of the dead soldier.

“I stole one off a sailor,” Murphy said simply and handed over the strange, bulbous shaped black pistol. Corwin broke it down observing the CO2 cartridge and a twenty-two caliber shell. “So that’s how he did it,” he mused. “Just enough power to kill. Do every one of his men have these?”

“From what I could judge, no. Just the elite guard this Ryan keeps around himself and the Red

Witch.”

“Thanks, Murphy. That’s invaluable information,” Corwin returned. “We’re heading into the city. Are you coming or do you plan to continue tracking the Dragon down?”

“I await your orders, Prince Corwin,” the gargoyle said.

“Find him. He’ll need you more than we will,” the Prince answered. The gargoyle nodded, leaped into the sky and was gone in a flurry of wing beats.

Chapter 35

I opened my eye and the world seemed different, less vibrant, duller and heavier on my body. I ached, too. There was a deep pain in my shoulder and chest, and when I tried to touch it, my hand wouldn’t move. I could feel the ground under me. Cold, gritty and full of broken branches.

“Lyndseye? Tegan? Kids?” I called out and heard a faint echo further down the slope. Presently, I saw Tegan toiling up the slope using a tree limb as a crutch. His figure wavered before me and I shook my head to clear my vision, when I did so, the movement attracted his attention. He stopped dead and stared at me, his mouth hanging open. Linz came up behind him.

“Where is he, Tegan?” She asked, blood dried on her forehead.

“The kids?” I asked and her eyes widened in disbelief as she saw me. “What? Am I hurt that bad?” I joked and winced.

“Raitt, raise your hand,” Tegan ordered and I tried. Cried out as the bones protested. Both of them rushed to me, knelt and put their hands on me feeling for the parts that hurt. She found my broken shoulder, a large gash on my chest and various scrapes and bruises. Carefully, Tegan brought my right arm around and raised it to my face.

“See this, Raitt?” I stared at a pale white hand with four fingers and a thumb, slowly rotating the hand to drop lower and feel a human body complete with male genitals. I blushed a deep red.

“Tegan,” I begged, strangling on the words, nearly bawling in shock. He wrapped his cloak around me and ordered Lyndseye to go back to camp.

“You need me to help,” she argued. “Your ankle was sprained or broken and you can’t help the Prince by yourself. Can you rise, my lord?”

“My true name is Raven,” I sniffled, embarrassed that I was crying. “Don’t call me Prince or Sir.”

“Easy does it, lad,” Tegan said and put his arm under my good shoulder. Between the two of them they stood me up on my feet. My head whirled and Tegan took more of my weight until I could refocus. “Ah, that’s better. Pale gray isn’t your normal color is it, lad? Still have that pretty golden eye, though.”

“Still blind in one eye?” I mumbled trying to adjust to having two feet under me. I felt weird. Besides the pain that invaded this body, it just felt weird. Like I was inside a clown suit.

“Can you walk?”

I took a deep breath and that was a mistake. Ribs protested violently along with my shoulder. Linz tore the bottom of her cloak into strips and wrapped my arm close to my chest right over

Tegan's cloak, binding my shoulder and ribs at the same time. It helped but after five steps down the slope of uneven rocky ground, I had to stop and rest. My feet were bare and soft, I wasn't used to walking on rough ground.

It took us nearly an hour to reach the rude camp they made in the sheltered hollow underneath a spreading hemlock. The two kids were tending a small fire, poking deadwood branches into the flame. Our supplies consisted of one water skin and one backpack stuffed with a lone haunch of venison. Linz made a bed of sorts with boughs and leaves stuffed under her cloak and the two of them eased me down as both of the two kids stared.

"Where's the dragon? Who's this? How do you know he's not with them?"

"Quiet, Leos and Bryn. This is still Raitt."

"Cor! Really? What other things can you turn into?"

"Go get some water, please and some of those yellow flowers that look like sunflower. And the purple asters. Any of you have a knife?"

Tegan did and handed it over as she slowly unwrapped my ribs, having him hold my arm so that it didn't pull on my shoulder. With careful hands, she inspected the hole in my chest which was black and blue, raw red edges and the white of bone showing. "I need to clean it, Raven," she said quietly. "It's full of dirt, rock pieces and slivers of trees. And I don't have any painkiller."

I looked around and saw tall stemmed bunch of weeds with white trumpet like flowers near what looked like thick ferns and dog tooth violets. "See those—Devils trumpets? The seeds are hallucinogenic. If I smoke them, they'll make me high and I won't know what you're doing to me."

"Too much will kill you, too," she said.

"Personally, I'd wish for some OxyContin but I have a better chance of becoming president," I drawled and she looked worried, patting my forehead.

"He's delirious, Tegan."

"No," the bodyguard grinned. "I think he just made a joke. He's a big, tough Dragon Lord. He can take a little pain, right, Black Dragon?"

I could've lied and said I took her treatment stoically like a man but the truth was at the first touch of the hot rag on the wound, I fainted and didn't wake up until she was wrapping my chest and arm to my side. I was leaning against Tegan's shoulder on my side and had the shakes so bad that I made him shiver. "I'm cold," I whispered and someone drew another cloak around me but it didn't help.

"Linz, lay next to him," Tegan ordered and she wrapped her arms around me, tucking her head into the side of my good arm and rolling me slightly at an angle so that half of her body supported mine. Slowly, I warmed and fell into a deep sleep. I didn't wake until early morning when the dew settled on the land and dripped off the hemlocks branches to hiss as it hit the fire. We were dry being closer to the trunk and under the thick inner branches.

"Tegan," I whispered, trying not to move and conscious that a young girl was snuggled up to my very naked body.

“Raitt,” his voice came from behind me.

“I have to pee,” I said in a strangled voice.

“Do you think you can stand?”

“I don’t have any clothes on, Tegan,” I said in agony.

“It’s nothing we haven’t seen before,” he said and she echoed him making me blush deep red. “Princess,” Tegan said firmly. “Don’t tease the boy. Bring me the spare trousers in the pack”

She slid out from under me and reached for the bag, digging through what had been Mallei’s pack. All that was left in it were some clothes and a small bundle wrapped in fine linen. When she unrolled it, we saw it contained a gold band, clearly an old wedding ring. It must’ve been one of Mallei’s most cherished possessions being so carefully wrapped and one of the items she had chosen to save.

Lyndseye gave it to me and then knotted it into the thong that held the blue Star stone. “She would want you to have it,” she said softly, kissed me on the cheek and left me alone so Tegan could dress me in the rough spun trousers. Together, the two of us hobbled off to use the toilet, a short stretch above our heads that was a small ledge off the tree line and dropped into rocks. He held me up so I could hold myself and direct the stream away. It felt weird to do it that way, as the Dragon and the mule, I hadn’t given it any thought, had just gone when the urge hit. Now, my bodily functions embarrassed me.

I would’ve thought that after all I had experienced at the hands of my uncle Jurt, I would not have had any sense of embarrassment left. As his slave, but my body had been his to use and abuse and he had done so in every conceivable way.

“Tegan?” I asked in a very small voice. “What do I look like?”

He narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean? You look like a man.”

“But how? I can’t see my face.”

“You’re as tall as me, maybe an inch taller. Thin, muscled. White skin with a fawn tint. Straight nose, two ears, black hair, firm lips and the goldeneye. Scar tissue where the other eye was. Are you afraid you’re ugly? Don’t be, you look very...respectable.”

“I’m hungry. Is there anything to eat?”

“Some rather off venison. Do you think your stomach can handle it? Do you think you can go back to your Dragon body?”

“I can try. It might make my bones heal faster too.” I spoke the spell that I used to convert the big Dragon to small, and even tried the one that converted me to mule but neither worked. I remained human. I wanted to forge ahead, get down off this mountain and head for town but both of them said I wasn’t ready nor would make it. Even the two kids ganged up on me and said the same thing.

The Princess had cut off the outer layer of the haunch and found the inside was still edible. Slicing it into thin strips, she laid it out on the rocks she caught the sun, drying it into jerky. The rest, she’d boiled inside an old helmet that one of the kids had found on their wanderings. After we shared the hat full of soup in equal portions, I’d fallen asleep in front of the fire with the kids using them as pillows. They smelled terrible until I realized that I smelled no better or worse.

Tegan's ankle improved once he wrapped it. He discarded his crutch and started to build something with saplings that he cut down with his knife. I watched fascinated until I realized he was making a travois and it was for me.

"No," I stated. "I can walk out of here." I demonstrated by trying to climb to my feet and because of my ribs, couldn't even get my legs under me.

"We can't stay here, Raven," he said plainly. "We don't have enough warm clothes, food or shelter. No tools other than a knife and some sharpened staves. We'd be easy pickings for the first bandit we met."

"Unless I was the Dragon."

"I tried every variation of the spell to change you. I even took off the Star stone but you're still human," She said.

"I can't be, Linz," I said in despair. "My human body died in Amber and was buried. This can't be real!"

She cupped my face in her hands. "You are real, soft skin, blood and bones. Does a construct bleed? Does it feel pain? Does it feel this?" She leaned in and kissed me on the lips and I kissed her back, my tongue plunging into her mouth like I was drowning and she was my life preserver. I reached for her with both hands, forgetting that I was broken and my cry of pain became a moan of ecstasy as she worked my tongue. Her hands slid around my neck and I was slowly falling back to the ground dazed and filled with such sensations that I thought I had died. Tegan laid his cloak over me.

"He'll sleep now, Princess?"

"Yes, Tegan. I used the last piece of the stone on him." That was the last thing I heard for a long while.

Chapter 36

Roelle and Marcus were comfortably ensconced in a pleasant chamber of the palace guarded by the king's elite bodyguards and some of Marcus's spells. They were free to come and go. Had in fact, visited Evril in the bookshop several times and were amazed at the volume of newcomers in the city. The population of Topaz swelled as refugees came in from the outlying Border Kingdoms and ships carrying those of the wealthy and noble from across the Sentinels. The news was not good, nothing seemed to halt the Witch or her Army, even without the Black Dragon at her side. The rumor was that he was dead, or banished by the Red Queen.

Luke hadn't seen the pair in days, he was busy mobilizing his armed forces and fortifying the wards around the city with his own spells. Worse, he had heard that a squad of Amber's commandos were infiltrating their way into Khafra.

Roelle was sitting outside on the balcony off her room bathed, dressed as befitted her station with a serious frown on her face as she watched the ferocious activity below. Soldiers and support crews were busy coordinating arms, food, supplies and shelters. Marcus joined her, chewing on a large joint of turkey leg. He wore clean trousers and a fancy blouse with the sleeves rolled back and his fingers were stained from his spell castings.

"What you doing?" He mumbled, his mouth full and his hair looked like a bomb had gone off

in it.

The sky darkened over his head and they heard shouts of ‘the Black Dragon is coming! It’s an attack!’ People screamed and ran for cover as the black shape circled the palace. Guards mobilized and ran towards their posts, aiming crossbows and weapons on the menacing shape. Both Marcus and Roelle screamed not to fire on him but no one was listening nor could anyone hear them over the tumult. Magic bolts speared out of the sky and bounced off the creature with little effect as it dodged the arrows, lances and spells. Spiraling lower in a tight circle, Marcus’s eyes were the first ones to recognize the figure.

“Murphy!” He screamed and waved the poultry leg at him. The gargoyle dropped to the stone balustrade and perched, oblivious of the armed men attacking. Of course, they stopped when they realized they were endangering the two guests of the King. Murphy looked leaner, extremely muscled as if he been going nonstop which he had, nearly flying the circumference of this Realm twice.

“Roelle. Marcus,” he said in a grim voice. “Are you unhurt?”

“Yes, Murphy. Where’s Raven?” They demanded just before Roelle’s door burst in and they were surrounded by the King’s Palace Guard.

Luke tried to enter the room but the guards held him back even as he shoved to the front, his hands ready to work a spell. Roelle leapt forward, her hands out. “Stop!” She ordered, every inch the Baron’s daughter. “He’s a friend, not an enemy!”

Slowly, King Luke dropped his hands and the guards followed suit. Luke stared. “You’re a gargoyle.”

“Yes, sire,” Murphy acknowledged. “I was created from the soil and magic of Ireland to protect and guard Raven Murphy-Sines, the son of King Merlin of Chaos. I seek him here.”

“He’s not here,” Luke stated. “Is Random on his way to Khafra?”

“I am not privy to the workings of King Random’s Army, sire,” Murphy shrugged. “My aegis is the Prince. He is headed this way.”

“Are you sure?” All three questioned.

“As the spell that created me bound me to him, I can still sense his presence.”

“You’re a gargoyle? From Ireland? What next, a leprechaun?” Luke snorted and Murphy snarled.

“Why should I stretch your imagination, sire? Are we not looking for a Black Dragon?”

“True,” Luke said and waved his hands at the soldiers. Grumbling in protest, all of them departed save for his bodyguard. They all came inside the bedroom and the gargoyle told them of his search and of the Red Witch’s troop movements which were current news. Luke sent the information to his generals with the comment that he wished Cathorian was there to make strategy.

“He’s on his way,” Murphy said.

“But I sent him with a squad after the Dragon,” Luke said.

“He, Prince Corwin and Sgt. Pire, are heading this way and should be in Khafra by the

morning,” Murphy said calmly.

Luke’s face turned red with anger and he gritted his teeth. “Is he the advance scout for Random’s Army?”

“If you do not bring back my Dragon, Random will be your last concern,” the gargoyle said flatly. “Raven is Merlin’s son, and Corwin’s grandson. So far, Lord Merlin is unaware of the events surrounding his son. Do you want to drag him into this fracas with Amber as an ally of the Courts of Chaos?” Luke didn’t answer. “Random will not interfere if you step back.”

“And my mother?” The king asked.

“If you do not address the situation, I will,” the gargoyle returned and both King and bodyguard shivered as the stone beast’s eyes flared blood red.

“Whoa, Murphy,” Marcus said. “King Luke has helped us, given us access to his archives and housed, clothed and fed us. He’s not interested in Raven, just stopping his mother. He asked Raven to help and Raven agreed.”

“Without coercion or spells?” The gargoyle demanded and Luke agreed.

“You have my support and my army backing you,” the King added.

“Let’s hope that’s enough. I will find Prince Corwin and have him come straight to the palace.”

“Better make it the War Room so we can get straight down to business. My spies aren’t painting a very good picture.”

“So I’ve seen,” the gargoyle leapt for the window was gone before they could say or do anything.

I couldn’t stop shivering; the fire in my chest burned so icy hot that it seemed to be freezing my body from the inside out. I was rolling from side to side and the motion made me sick to my stomach. I started to complain and it turned into a bout of coughing that ended with me puking. This made the motion stop from side to side and become an up-and-down with a sudden stop on the ground. It was bumpy and cold on my butt and back, hurting my shoulder so that I cried out.

“Raven, hush. You have to be quiet. There are men everywhere,” a woman’s voice said near my ear but as I looked, I saw only two very dirty men or a young boy and an older man both with sea green eyes and fair hair.

“Tegan? Linz?” I whispered. “Where are we?”

“About an hour from the Trenton marshes. Another day’s march from Khafra’s borders. We’re dodging refugees from everywhere,” she said.

I heard screaming off to our right, struggled to sit up and saw mounted troops of armed men marching down from the mountain led by the Red Witch, no less. She wore red body armor and rode a blood red horse with Secrest at her side. His guard, all handpicked soldiers from Earth’s Shadow rode behind him and the air shimmered as their protection spell flared around them. She gave us not a second glance, merely rode past us with a sneer not even sparing a curse for what she thought were peasants.

The ground was hard packed and the dust they stirred up lingered long after they were gone although she had so many troops that it took an hour for them to pass us. Some kicked at us, sending both Tegan and Lyndseye sprawling, knocked my travois over and spilled me to the ground. Several kicked me until little Leos braved their wrath, grabbed me by my cloak and dragged me into a ditch where he covered me with his body.

The sound of their marching feet and pounding hoof beats echoed in my head long after they were gone. It wasn't until the dust settled that the people crept out of their hiding spots. One man leaned over and pulled the child off me. I saw his eyes were open and dust caked his corneas. He didn't blink, not even when the man tossed him aside as if he were trash.

"This one's dead," he said callously. "And this other one looks close. Stabbed in the chest, broken ribs and shoulder. He's only wearing homespun trousers." I felt him tugging at my pants pocket to turn them inside out only to find nothing. "No coin. Nothing," he grumbled and his eye caught the leather thong of my neck. "Hey. What's this?"

He pulled and the star stone with Mallei's gold band glimmered into view. I could see the sun setting behind him and the glow of burning fires on the horizon like Devil's Tears.

"No!" I cried and he laughed as he jerked the thong breaking it and snapping my head back into the dirt. I heard Tegan shout and as I tried to rise, the man kicked me back to turn away as the sun set and the bodyguard charged. My head whirled and everything dimmed, my heart kicked in my chest and I could barely breathe. I sucked in air, coughed and red flashes burst in my vision.

Suddenly, I was standing above all of them, looking down on a gravel road that bisected the marshes wandering between giant clusters of Bluestone outcrops. I roared and flames spewed out to devour the man in front of me as if he were made of paper. All that remained was the necklace and I snatched it out of the air as I burst into flight. I had one thought and that was to destroy—I was going after those that had killed the child and hurt my friends.

"Raven!" Lyndseye shrieked. "Come back! We need you!" Tegan added his cries to hers and it broke through my insanity of rage so that I slowly turned, circled and landed.

Lyndseye got up from checking the boy and shook her head. "He's gone. His ribs are crushed. What kind of soldiers would kill a child?" she asked sadly, tears streaming down her face.

"The other child?" I asked in a whisper.

"Bryn? He ran after a villager he met, said he knew her." They both stared at me. "You're back in the Dragon form."

"Yes and I'm afraid it's not permanent. I have the same wounds, they haven't healed, it's just that this body and the rage I felt made the pain seem insignificant," I returned. I held up the star stone and Mallei's ring. "Put these back on me, please."

"Jasra will sense you this close," Lyndseye said worriedly as she took the thong and re-knotted it around my neck. The minute she was done, I was sprawling, screaming in pain as contact with the ground touched my back. I was human again, and naked. Tegan whipped off his cloak and wrapped me in it before she could see much in the darkness.

"Take it off him, Tegan," she ordered as he carefully moved me to a position that eased both my chest and my shoulder.

“Lyndseye!” He protested, truly shocked.

“No, you idiot. The necklace, take the necklace off.” He did and abruptly, he was holding the wings of the Dragon. “So the stone facilitates the change. But only at night for I’ve seen you remove it during the daytime and there was no effect,” she mused. Carefully she placed it back on my long neck and hugged me so that when I changed back, I was in her arms, my naked body minus Tegan’s cloak pressed up against her slim female body. And there was no doubt that she was female. Gently, Tegan pulled me away from her wrapping me back in his cloak.

“You’re going to be hard on clothes, boy,” he laughed gently. “Linz, can you spell him something that follows when he converts?”

“Shorts on a Dragon would look silly,” I protested, my head doing strange things. It felt like everything was falling away from my eyes as a hot flush started in my belly. I heard their voices from far away and a swooping sensation as Tegan’s arms tightened on me. Then, nothing.

Chapter 37

People jostled each other in the never ending stream that flowed into the city following in the tracks left by others as they ran from Jasra’s Army. She and her troops had turned off to attack the port city of Gates Cove, one of the leading centers of distribution for Khafra’s products and of strategic importance. It was the last barrier to Khafra in the province of Tethys and one of the ways she could launch an attack on Amber.

The two men in old rags staggered along with the rest of the refugees, the taller one carrying a nearly naked younger man on his back. His face was glazed with concentration as he stumbled along with the double weight. How he managed being so old and infirm himself to carry the other man was a miracle. The younger boy with him helped to shore him up and gave encouragement so often that it sounded rote. “Linz,” the old man gasped. “I have to sit down.”

“Okay, give him to me,” she said and looked around. The road dipped down a series of hills and towards a copse of woods—hawthorns, lindens and some oaks. It had a flat rock in front shaped almost like a seat and had caught the meager sun all day.

“Can you make it to the trees?” She asked. He nodded, hoisted the boy higher on his back and grimly continued on. It took them a quarter hour to reach the spot and the trees almost seemed to enfold them in their grasp. Carefully, Tegan rolled the Prince onto the stone which was blissfully warm from the sun and covered him with both of their tattered cloaks. He sat down against the rock, his hands on his knees and his head hanging between them as he sucked in a lungful of air.

“Any water, Linz?” He gasped when he could speak.

“I’ll go look,” she offered and disappeared into the trees finding a small stream no more than ten paces in. She filled the water skin and looked around. The trees here were all giants with branches way above her head and crowns so thick that they blocked the light from reaching the forest floor. So, little undergrowth could succeed but she found berries and fruit that she knew were edible. She used the bottom of her tunic as a pouch and carried all back to the little cove that hid them from the road.

When she reached the spot where she’d left them, Tegan was asleep and Raven was awake. He looked horrible, his face yellow, his eyes sunken and black shadows under them. His lips were an unhealthy gray and his mouth pinched in pain. He gripped the cloak with his good hand and

was shivering. Sweat beaded his brow.

“Linz,” he whispered. “Is there any water?”

“Yes, Raitt,” she held the water skin to his lips and he swallowed painfully. She could feel the fever heat come off his body. Digging through their meager supplies, she found it almost empty and nothing she could use to boil water. She did start a small campfire and slowly, made her way down to the road waiting for the next group of refugees to pass along.

She waited an hour before a family group of farmers came pushing an ox and a few sheep. Begging, she bartered for a pot and food, exchanging a few coins for bread, millet and some rather off meat. The old mother threw in a tattered set of clothes and a moth eaten blanket when Lyndseye gave them a ward to protect them from dangers of sickness and an old Wyche globe.

She waited until they had moved off before she returned to the others. Moving quickly and economically, she made tea and a thin soup that she could spoon-feed to the boy. Once he had taken some hot tea made of blackberry leaves, a pink flush reached his cheeks. He seemed more alert and pointed out a few plants he said would help him. His voice was a bare whisper and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

“That’s marsh rose, Linz, good for fever. Also, the bark of an aspen or willow tree. You can crush the rose to make a poultice.”

“How do you know so much, Raitt?”

“Roelle taught me herbs and potions. Like Marcus taught me how to light Wyche globes and fires. Is Tegan all right?” He tried to lean forward and touch the bodyguard but any movement caused him instant pain.

“He’s asleep. Exhausted. He’s carried you for the last few miles.”

“Where are we?” He asked.

“Tethys, I think we’re not very far. All the people are heading this way.”

“Lyndseye, if I die, will you tell my father and grandfather what happened? I don’t expect you to save my body but bury me so he can come back and get me.”

She rounded on him in fierce anger. “You’re not going to die, Raven!”

“Actually,” he laughed gently. “I think I have several times. The problem is, I don’t stay dead.” He closed his one eye and sat silently, only his chest moving to prove he was still with them.

She woke Tegan to feed him, he ate an entire bowl of the beef soup and a hunk of saturated bread while she and the Prince finished off the second pot full. His eye still had a feverish glitter and he seemed too animated for someone with the wounds he did. “How do you feel, Raitt?” The weary Princess asked.

“Pretty good, Ro,” he smiled and it was ghastly to see. A thin trickle of blood stained the corner of his mouth and a blank look crossed his face. “Master!” He cried out, startling her. “Please, don’t use the flagellum on me! Please, I swear on the blood of my mother, I won’t disobey you!”

Tegan woke, his arms on his blade in a defensive move before he realized where he was. He put the knife back in a sheath under his tunic and touched the prince’s face. “Gods!” He

exclaimed. "He's burning up! Raven, can you hear me?"

"Please, master, don't fuck me," he wailed and tried to cover himself. Tegan's face turned white and he carefully gathered the boy into his arms.

"Oh my poor child," he murmured. "What have you lived through?" After a moment of stiffness, the boy relaxed and Tegan realized he had slipped into a coma. "Princess," he said sharply. "We have no more time. What spells have you left to aid us?"

"Light at night, the masking spell and a message spell globe I was saving for when we reach near enough the palace to ask for aid from the King," she answered. "No healing spells or weapon spells. No food spells."

"Will the message spell reach from here?"

"It has a limited range of a hundred miles. How far are we?"

"Twice that. Have you seen any of the refugees with horses and carts?"

"Some. They won't sell them. I tried. That's how I bought the bowl, food and blankets. All I have left are the florins. If you or I bring those out, we'll be robbed or hung as thieves."

"I have a star stone or two. We can trade them. They're small, maybe a carat or two. Should be worth a horse."

"No," she said sharply. "We need those. For Raven."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just have this feeling." She held her hand out and he dug through his pockets to pull out a small knotted bundle with hard lumps in it. Placed it in her palm.

"You'd best call now, Princess," he said simply, one arm still around the Dragon Prince. She opened the pouch, pulled out the four stones that glittered with an eerie radiance sending rays back to the larger one on Raven's neck. It too, began to glow. Lyndseye, Princess of Minsk chanted and a glowing raven the color of the stone appeared out of the ether to hover in front of them.

"Your Majesty," she spoke and now she was every inch the Princess even though she wore rags. "I beseech you, I am Caldor's Crown Prince, and I beg your aid. We are where this sign will lead you on the marshes with a wounded companion. I ask you to honor the age old treaties my great-great-grandfather made with the house of Khafra. Yours, Princess Lyndseye Caldor." She paused as the bird bobbed its head. "Go now and seek the King of Topaz."

The bird fluttered up in their eyes could not track its flight nor see its body against the blue of the sky. "We go or stay, Tegan?"

"I think we should go on," he said and tried to hide the weariness in his voice. "Travel through the night, also. There are enough people on the road to guide us and there's protection in a crowd."

"Can you carry him?"

"I have to." Carefully, he wrapped the burning, delirious prince in the cloak and eased him onto his back using the spare blanket to make a sort of sling. The prince's breath fluttered against the side of his throat, a heated whisper in which were traces of pleading murmurs. Lyndseye

packed their meager belongings and slowly with leaden steps, the pair rejoined the stragglers on the road.

They hadn't gone more than a mile when a wagon drawn by a sorry mule and an old woman came upon them from the rear. She stopped her beast with a single word and addressed the m. She had pale blue tinted hair, short sharp pointed ears and eyes of a pale witch light that were razor-sharp. She could have been fifty or over a hundred but she was anything but infirm. Her cart was loaded with a bed of straw and plants. "You need a ride," she said and both stared dumbly up at her. "Well, come on, lass. Commander, bring the boy up before he croaks."

Tegan didn't know whether to obey or draw his sword. The woman had seen through their masking spell. "Oh, don't worry, Princess. I know who you are. I've seen both of you at Court. I was Caldor's nanny. Get in. You're safe with me."

Tegan gently slid the prince off into the bed of the cart, pushing the potted plants aside to make room. The smell made his head clear suddenly. "Annaliese," he said. "I've heard the King speak fondly of you."

"He was a mischievous child, always in trouble. Rest his soul. He told me you had escaped."

"You saw him?" She gaped. "Is he alive?"

"No, Princess. That bitch tortured him to the point of death and was going to behead him. I gave him and your mother the means to end it before it reached that point. I would've tried to rescue them but I couldn't get into the palace so I sent a messenger with poison.

"Now, who is this young man?"

"Raith," she answered as Annaliese gently undid the cloak to study his wounds. Traced the scars on his body, faint images of whip marks, knife wounds and others that made a pattern of a coiling Dragon.

"The Dragon Prince," she whispered and she recited a poem that neither had heard before:

"Dance the Seven Sisters in the skies
Raise the mountains laid to rest,
All the stars are now just one;
Between the Scarlet Queen and None.
Upon the wing the black bird flies
To bring the dragons back he must
Before the sun sets and the fire dies,
He rules the Pride, his will be done."

"What is that, Annaliese?" the Princess asked as Tegan drove the cart on. The mule moved so smoothly that the cart glided along as if on springs.

"The Legend of the Dragon Prince," she said busy with her plants. She plucked several leaves off a red stemmed plant, crushed them and placed them on the boy's chest. Poured a vial of sweet scented fluid down his throat and fingered the star stone. "Have you all seven?"

"No, just the three," Lyndseye returned.

“So, he’s only human during the day if he wears the stone.”

“Can you heal him?”

“I can help. He needs the rest of the spell to make him well and powerful enough to take on the Red Bitch. Corby, trot,” she said and the mule broke into a smooth amble that had them passing the few travelers on the road. The animal seemed to know exactly where to step to avoid jarring the cart and disturbing her patient. He had an unusual gait and turn of speed for such a sorry looking animal. She smiled at the Princess’ worried look. “He’s not really a mule, Princess. He’s a jinn that offered me his services to remain in this realm. He likes humans. He’ll go forever, doesn’t eat or tire and isn’t subject to spooks or spells. Relax. We’ll be in Khafra before nightfall.” She busied herself with the Prince and Linz held his hand.

Chapter 38

Murphy flew over the streaming lines of refugees feeling the strong essence of the Dragon calling him. Just as suddenly, it was gone and he backtracked thinking he had overshot him. He felt nothing, only saw the flash of blue light coming from the woods. He spent hours trying to trace the essence from the boy and gave up when he saw Prince Corwin galloping towards the city.

He landed in front of them, scattering the people into terrified clusters, folded his wings and in two strides was his more human counterpart.

“Prince Corwin,” he said. “The King of Khafra requests your presence in his War Room. Marcus and the Lady Roelle are his guests.” He handed over a Trump with Luke’s picture. “He asks that you come immediately and offered his word that no one in your party will come to harm.”

Corwin thumbed out his pack of Trumps, pulled from it his own copy of Luke’s image and the card activated with the same touch of iciness. “Your Majesty,” he greeted. “There are four of us and horses.”

“Wait then. I’ll head for the courtyard,” Luke’s picture said and when the image expanded to show the palace’s outer courtyard, Corwin reached forward to grasp the king’s hand and the others followed, Murphy by hanging onto the tail of Pire’s mount.

Luke stepped back rapidly, letting go of Corwin’s hand and got out of the way of the horses which milled around in confusion at the rapid method of transportation. Soldiers held their horses’ bridles so that the three could dismount.

Cathorian bowed to the King. “Sire, I fear the news is not good, the witch has found a way over the Sentinels and has brought both armies with her.”

“Jens, stable the horses,” he ordered. “The rest of you, please follow me to the War Room.”

“Marcus and the Lady Roelle?” Corwin demanded and was told that they would meet all of them there. The reunion between Corwin and the teenagers was traumatic, full of tears and protestations of blame from both youngsters who said they would gladly accept punishment for their actions if only the Prince would help track down Raven. It took them only fifteen minutes to bring the others up to speed and Murphy added his aerial reconnaissance of the troop movements.

Luke had thought that the Sentinels would have protected Khafra from invasion except at the point where the mountains broke at the sea by Gates Cove and Tethys allowing them to bottleneck the Queen's Army with his Navy forces.

"I should tell you, King Luke, that Cathorian has accepted a position in Amber's army should you release him," Corwin said with a straight face.

"Hell no!" Luke retorted. "Give Random my finest general? Over my dead body!"

"The General seems to feel his talents aren't appreciated because he has only one arm," Corwin added ignoring the General's attempts to silence him.

"Is this true, Cathorian?"

"Yes, sire. I found myself ignored by other officers and my orders unexecuted because of my association with the Queen Mother," the General said firmly.

"Do you trust me, Cathorian? To do what is right for Khafra?" The King snapped.

"I do, sire," he returned swiftly. "Do you trust *me* to fulfill my oath to you and the throne?"

"Yes, I do," the king said swiftly.

"Then, I am your General, My Liege," he dropped to his knee before his King.

"I'll knight you later Cathorian, or make you a Baron. If we survive this war," Luke said. He laid out a map of the kingdom and all of them contributed their observations to the layout of the Army as he devised a plan of action.

The War Room was a large chamber deep in the center of the palace, well protected by heavy walls and barricaded fortress gates spelled with strong rune stones to ward off both battering rams and destruct spells. Its magic went deep into the bedrock of the land, anchoring the palace against all but a world disaster.

The room itself was pillared with a hundred white columns that held a vaulted ceiling depicting scenes out of Khafra's past and showed dragons of every size and color supporting the pillars of the world.

The floors were made of green travertine and shot with white veins that shimmered with the magic of the wards. There were no windows but an oculus allowed light to enter and spread out, illuminating the tables and workstations of the officers and generals who strategized. Boards hung from the walls with messages and maps, communications came in via message globes that wizard readers translated. It was a hive of activity yet it was not crowded.

"Inform the citizens to seek shelter within the city in the tunnels and the arena. Both are spelled to protect them," Cathorian announced and a junior officer scurried to obey. "I need updates on where the Red Queen's Army is. Send a message globe to Tethys's Prime Minister, ask what his situation is."

"Aye, General," a captain saluted and ran to do his bidding. The room was instantly abuzz with conversation as Luke leaned over the largest board with Corwin at his side. They studied the miniature troops and warships aligned on the table.

A glow appeared in the center of the green felt right above the amber square that denoted the city of Topaz. Brilliant blue light that they could not stare at because it blinded them.

“What is it?” Whispered nearly everyone until it became a bird, ethereal, and beautiful as it hovered above the map.

“King Luke. Your Majesty, I beseech you, I am Caldor’s Crown Prince. I beg your aid. We are where this sign will lead you on the marshes with a wounded companion. I ask you to honor the age-old treaties my great-great-grandfather made with the house of Khafra. Yours, Princess Lyndseye Caldor.”

“Murphy, can you follow it back?”

“Yes. Will you come with me, my Lord Corwin?” The gargoyle asked.

“Luke, can you use your Trump again?” Corwin turned to the King.

“Yes. Go. If she’s that close to Tethys, Jasra can sense her. She’s an important figure in this war, our rallying cry for the Eastern kingdom.”

Murphy opened his wings, grabbed hold of Corwin’s belt and flew out of the oculus without breaking a ward; the magic simply parted around him as he followed the bird into the sky.

Gates Cove had fallen to Jasra’s power, her city gates lay shattered and her port was in ruins. Large merchant ships lay burning at their moorings while the city’s formidable Navy was at the bottom of the harbor. Her spells were a hundred times more powerful than they had been and Ryan’s soldiers took out hundreds with their weapons he called pistols from incredible distances and with firepower that pierced through blood and bone. It killed with such a small hole that it frightened the city soldiers.

She ordered the city leaders to surrender or face her Dragon Fire. They mocked her, told her to blow her best against their warded gates and when the magicked steel and wood went up in flames, capitulated too late to save the central city. A hundred thousand died in the first hour as fires ravaged the interior.

She saved the Government Palace for last to rob the Treasury and the Relics, increasing her power with their talismans. When she and her consort entered the last stronghold of the Council and the Prime Minister, it was to force the last living member to concede defeat as he begged for the lives of not only his family but that of the citizenry.

“Bring me your relics and your gold,” she ordered and he unlocked the vaults to give her access. As a reward for his swift compliance, she let her Thrid guards enjoy his children, his wife and last, the Prime Minister himself. He died, bent over screaming as the Thrid poison ate his insides. “We’ll rest here,” she decided. “In the morning, we’ll start for Topaz.” Her soldiers scoured the palace and secured it, killing all those they found, leaving only a few servants to carry on with the running of the building. All the upper officers were imprisoned in the dungeon and held for the torturers. Her armies’ ranks had swollen with each successive win, no one wanted to be on the losing side and from the power she now exhibited, no one had any doubt that she would annihilate her son, King Luke.

The tingling that started on her palms made her scratch idly at them until it became an obsession that her consort noticed and handed her a tube of medicine from one of the many pockets on his uniform. “Here, Jazz. It’s anti-itch cream. You must have touched something like

poison ivy.”

She stared at him, his bland pretty face with its carefully kept three days scruff and wondered if she could reach his Realm too. “It’s not that kind of itch,” she shrugged. “It’s warning me of magic in the area. Strong magic.” Her eyes widened. “Dragon Magic! I’ve been feeling it since we’ve hit the Sentinels but this is stronger. It’s him, the Black Dragon. He’s alive and near here!” She whirled on her closest soldiers, just outside the walls of her sumptuous tent and Secrest stopped her.

“Send Martinez. He’s a tracker and won’t be spotted.” She nodded, called the soldier and gave him explicit directions and spells to locate, track and subdue the magic that was the Dragon. “You have your radio, Martinez?” Secrest asked. Strangely, their Realm’s devices worked there as well, even without electricity or radio waves (which were just another form of the energy of magic.)

“You’re looking for the Dragon, the magic can only sense him in his large form, and if he’s smaller he doesn’t put off enough emanations to register. He somewhere on the Marsh Road heading towards Khafra.”

“Can I kill him?” The soldier asked skeptically.

“He is weakened, most likely near death. If you strike here,” she poked him in the chest just below his xyloid process, “you will hit an old wound where his scales are the weakest. Therein lie his two hearts. You must pierce both to kill the beast. Bring me his heart and his eye, they are both powerful talismans.”

“Yes, sir,” he saluted and slipped out as silently as a ghost.

Murphy flew on strong wing beats carrying the Prince as if he were only a small package and not worthy of notice. The sky was a blue so pure that following the bird seemed almost as if following a ghost yet the gargoyle never faltered. Somewhere over the marshes, the bird alighted and Murphy set the Prince down on his feet in a small meadow near a copse of trees. The bird fluttered on the rock and disappeared in a small flash that was so brilliant, it caused a sorry looking mule to rear to a stop in harness, provoking a round of curses from the driver, an old man in a ragged cloak. An old woman, still tall and firm sat in the back.

“Easy, Corby,” she said and stared at the pair. “You’d be the folk come to rescue the Dragon Prince and Princess?” She nodded. “Best hurry, then. He’s not so well and the Red Bitch knows he’s here.”

Murphy ran for the cart and uncovered the boy, cried out as he saw Raven’s condition. “Is he still alive?”

“Yes,” the woman smiled sadly. “This is Princess Caldor, and Commander Tegan.” She pointed beyond her at the men approaching behind them in a cloud of dust. “Those would be Jasra’s elite forces.” Corwin put his hand on the wagon and reached for Luke’s Trump. The last thing Jasra’s men saw was Murphy’s middle finger as they disappeared from the road.

Chapter 39

The sight of a mule drawn cart appearing out of nowhere into the palace courtyard caused

more than a few eyebrows to raise, especially when the gargoyle burst into the palace proper carrying a nearly naked young man and escorted by a larger group than which he'd left.

Luke took one look at the boy and his face paled. "God! He looks just like Merle! Is he alive? Penn, call Dr. Arianas as fast as you can. Here, Murphy use this room!" He flung open the door to a bedroom that had clearly been the Queen's and Murphy gently laid the boy on the satin and silk coverlet, smoothing back the lank greasy hair. His touch seemed to evoke a response, Raven moaned and moved his lips asking for water.

Marcus and Roelle were the last to arrive and both nearly fainted as they saw Raven. The doctor pushed his way in and gently examined him to begin barking orders but Corwin stopped him.

"Luke," he said tersely. "I'm going to call Random and have him bring my physician straight here. Is that okay with you?"

"From Earth Realm? Sure. Whatever you need," he returned swiftly. Fifteen minutes later, Dr. Flauvel had the boy hooked up to fluids, blood and painkillers while he treated the infected wound in his chest. "Broken ribs, the shoulder is fractured, collarbone and maybe his ulna. His temp is 104.9° and his lungs are full of rales. He's got pneumonia, his blood pressure is 88/58 and his pulse is 125."

"Do you want him in the hospital, Eric?" Corwin asked.

"He won't make it there. This body is too weak. He shown signs of severe malnutrition, and he has no reserves. I doubt he'd survive another move."

Roelle pushed her way to the bedside holding out a small vial that held the glimmering blue potion swirling as if the night sky was entombed within. "He needs this," she said breathlessly. "It's the rest of the Seven Stars. With it, he'll be whole." She saw the old woman. "Peggotty!"

The herb woman smiled. "My true name is Annaliese I am also a mage. The child is right, the Dragon Prince must imbibe the Seven Stars to make right his form. As for the sacrifice required, he has made it four times over and each one of you has pledged to honor him with your own. So, all it requires now is a drop of each of your blood."

Lyndseye extended her hand first and Annaliese gently picked up the Princess's roughened hand with its splintered nails to prick the fingertip with a leaf from the star anise plant. The blood crawled up the leaf's vein and soaked in, turning the color to a pale rose. With each successive drop, the leaf turned to that same halogen blue that was almost unbearable to look at. Everyone in the room contributed and the leaf absorbed it all. When there were no more, the Herb Mage crushed the leaf in her hand and drops of blue incandescence dripped from her palm into Raven's mouth.

His face flushed, he moaned and whimpered, all expression smoothed from his visage and his clenched body. He exhaled and a faint puff of smoke lingered in the air. His breathing deepened and evened out. Dr. Flauvel retook his vitals and sighed in relief and amazement. "His heart is at 90, BP has come up to 102/68 and his respirations are 12. I can still hear some rales but not bad. He's still in a coma. We need to get him on some food, antibiotics and O2. Let him rest."

"We'll sit with him," Corwin and the others said. Luke, Cathorian and Dr. Arianas left the Amber group. Tegan and the Princess introduced themselves and both Corwin and Roelle saw the look in her eyes as she studied Raven. Corwin saw Roelle's hand in Marcus's and smiled a

secret little smile. He couldn't keep from stroking his grandson's flesh, as precious a gift as he'd ever received from either Amber or her Shadows.

"Can we clean him up?" Lyndseye asked and the doctor nodded. "Just don't move him too much. I need to cast his shoulder and arm. Corwin, can you get me some x-ray plates, plaster and cotton?"

The Prince nodded, thumbed out his Trump and was gone. He returned in mere minutes carrying the requested items while Tegan busied himself with ordering hot water and meals brought to the bedroom. In a rapidly short time, the bedroom had been converted into an ICU and lunchroom. Tegan set to with the appetite of a longshoreman and fell asleep over his meal. The Princess pushed him back onto the chair and stroked his hair. "Such a loyal friend," she whispered. "I would've died but for him."

"We still might," Corwin said. "If we don't stop Jasra."

Lyndseye put her hand on the prince's forearm and stared up at him from her impressive five foot height. Her sea green eyes brimmed with tears. "May I speak to you in private, Prince Corwin?"

He hesitated but the doctor nodded. "He'll be fine, Corey. Nothing drastic will happen in the next ten minutes."

The Prince, still attired in Luke's Army uniform followed the diminutive girl out into the hallway. "There is a legend about my family, my Lord, which goes back ten thousand generations. Around the time of the Dragon wars. There were many dragons in the Eastern kingdoms and they preyed on many folk until my ancestor fought the leader of the Horde of Dragons and forced the ban against their killing and burning. In fact, he banished them from Khafra entirely. Legend states that my ancestor raised the Sentinels to protect us from them. He also demanded a future task from them that they were honor bound to obey. If that future person could master the Dragon Lord. I know that Raven is the Dragon Prince and that he knows how to raise the Horde. That is the only thing that will stop the Red Queen."

"How? How will he raise a creature that hasn't been seen alive for twenty thousand years?" He demanded and the Princess shrugged.

"I don't know."

"Do you love him?" Corwin demanded.

"I do. Though I have only seen him three times as a human. He was our mule for a time as I was a young boy. Many people have died helping him, my Lord. Many more will yet die if he does not succeed."

"First he has to live," Corwin stated flatly and returned to his grandson's bedside. Roelle and the doctor were washing Raven, a small towel laid discreetly across his privates and towels under him to catch the rivulets of soapy water laced with Sani-scrub used as a pre-surgical scrub and disinfectant. Flauvel had already placed the x-ray plates under his back and arm having Marcus use magic to activate them. He'd hung them in the window so that light from the sun illuminated the black plates.

"Shoulder's fractured, collarbone's displaced and both bones broken in his left arm," he told Corwin. "Marcus used a spell to wire the bones together but I still need to cast his arm. Here."

He gave Corwin the scrub and instructed him to wash his hands, paying particular attention to the nails and finger wells. "I need your help to realign the bones and assist me in treating the chest wound for debris and stitching." Corwin swallowed, looked white and then relieved when Annaliese offered to help. For the next hour, there were only murmured conversations between the doctor and the aide as they worked on the boy.

Once finished, Dr. Flauvel removed his gloves, checked Raven's vitals and seemed relieved. The Prince had a cast from his elbow to mid-palm and another padded shell that cradled his shoulder locking his arm into his chest. He slept peacefully, his breathing slow and even, the leather thong pulled snugly on his throat so that the stones were hidden beneath the hair on his neck. Flauvel went to cut it off and Lyndseye stopped him.

"No," she said sharply. "He must wear the Star Stone until he unleashes the Horde."

"What horde?"

"The Dragon Horde," she returned. The doctor pulled the cord around and all that glimmered on it was the simple gold ring that had been Mallei's. Lyndseye went nuts, searching with careful hands under Raven's neck and on the bed striving to find the stone. She had them on their hands and knees searching through the thick pile of the room's carpeting, retracing their steps and even tore apart the bedding of the mule cart to no avail. The Star Stone was nowhere to be found.

The soft rose curtains on the window blew in a gentle breeze and fluttered the silk bed skirts. Flauvel pulled the sheets up and covered Raven to his chin. "So young to have seen such hardship," he murmured. They watched over him, jumping every time he moved or sighed yet he did not wake or acknowledge anyone.

Messengers hurried past the bedroom doors going to and from the War Room but it wasn't until the king returned that they heard any news. He stood just inside the double brass hammered doors and knocked. "How is he?" He asked quietly, entering the room. He was dressed in clean jeans and a pale green Oxford with a blade in a scabbard at his side.

Corwin led him up to the bed and he studied the people sprawled on chaise lounges and armchairs. He tugged on the bed pull and when the quiet maid servant entered, gave her orders. "Jenny, can you see to everyone's comfort? Rooms, baths and meals? Clothing?"

"Yes, sire," the woman agreed and gently woke the ladies first. There was a bit of an argument over whether the two young women would leave Raven but between Annaliese and Jenny, they convinced both that Raven would be fine and they would feel much better cleaned and rested.

In the men's case, Doctor Flauvel ordered both of them out for at least an hour so they could bathe, sleep and come back when they all smelled better. Grumbling, all of them departed except for Murphy whose presence loomed in the room like a statue of Michelangelo.

"You don't need to eat, shower or rest, Murphy?" Flauvel asked and the gargoyle shook his head.

"Neither food nor rest although I have rested many times for centuries," he answered.

"Where did you come from?" Flauvel asked curious.

"I came from Ireland in the centuries when the Druids ruled and built stone henges long before men worshipped the stars."

The doctor adjusted the nasal prongs in Raven's nostrils and peeled back the lid on his good eye. What he saw pleased him. "He's dreaming."

"This is good?"

"Yes. It means his mind is still functioning on a subconscious level. His temperature is still very high, 104.7°. I'd like to see it come way down." He pulled the covers down and stared at the mottled purplish and green flesh where he'd been kicked and stomped on. Boot prints could clearly be seen on his ribs, thighs and stomach. "Hmmm, it looks like this leg was broken several times. Hand me that x-ray plate."

Murphy pushed over the unused film and Flauvel slid it under the boy's right leg. He uttered the spell that activated it, slid it out and studied the exposure. "See this? Two fractures—one of the femur and the other in the tibia. Fractured clean in two, that leg is still healing."

"Has he been...sexually attacked, Doctor Flauvel?" Murphy questioned and his voice was almost trembling.

"I haven't checked him for that, Murphy," he said soberly. "But I haven't seen any blood in his stool, either. Once he's stable, we can transport him to a hospital and I can do a complete workup, blood, urine, etc. on him."

"I'm not sure if he can leave this Shadow," the gargoyle hesitated. "From what I can glean from the history of these dragons, he may be bound here until he frees this horde."

"He's not going anywhere for a while, he's one sick boy."

"So strong a heart this child has and yet so tender," Murphy spoke in a low grumble and the hand that caressed Raven's cheek had all the delicacy of the butterfly's wing.

Chapter 40

I was wandering in a blue void, a blue so bright that I could see it through my bones and flesh, even through my closed eyelids. As I tried to open my good eye, all I saw was like the after image of staring at a really bright light bulb. Stranger yet, I could *see* through my damaged eye--weird because the doctors had removed the whole eyeball from the socket before I had died.

What I saw through that eye was different, it looked like those images on the Science Channel of wormholes only everything was in shades of blue; some for which there weren't names. Thousands, millions of variations from almost purple black to nearly white and my eyes and brain could differentiate between each and every one of them.

Things moved through this blueness, vaguely winged shapes that called to me and invited me into their dreams. They made promises that if I would help them, they would serve me and I felt an instant affinity with them. Their whimpers and pleadings made my heart ache.

"Who are you?" I asked and my voice was like a melody that sang in this place. My words caused an instant cessation of movement so I sang to them. My words created a web of glittering lines that drifted over everything and pulsed with magic that was powerful beyond anything I had ever touched. It even affected me, bringing a calm to my mind that I had only felt when I died that final time with my family.

"Lord?" I heard from the deepest part of the purple. "Are you our Prince come to free us from

this prison?" I sang to them, a melody that formed words that eventually I could even *see*.

Dragons fly with fearsome grace.
Fly, winged beast of Ancient flame
With grace and beauty through the skies.
Jeweled scales that burn with fame,
Rulers of the Heavens as your world dies,
With tooth and claw and fired death,
Till the hero comes and lays to rest
Your awesome power with his blessed breath.
Dragon Prince, my promise this;
Commanded by Star Stone and eye
The Dragons home where none may bide
But Dragons and their very Pride.
So vows the Dragon Prince and his.

Shapes solidified and a deep bassoon voice told me his name and that he would willingly serve me if I held to my promise of a world where only dragons ruled and lived without interference from humankind.

The blue light coalesced into a beam that entered my jeweled eye and living energy filled me until I was so overfull that it leaked from everywhere, even my fingertips. I was the Black Dragon, back in my old body and then, I was slowly awakening inside a form that felt so familiar that it was as if I was coming home.

Slowly, I opened both eyes and other than a faint shimmery effect from my right, I could see equally as well from both. There were bodies sprawled in chairs and couches in a huge room done in soft shades of rose. The bed I was in looked like an antique straight out of an English castle—four posters, canopy and curtains. Silk sheets and satin coverlet with pale pink and peach flowers covered me. The walls were scarlet and gold paper with Fleur-de-leis and the curtains softest pink. The carpeting was a matching rose and thick. Gold, gilt and Baroque, it was a pleasant, restful room but there was modern hospital equipment around my bed.

Even as I woke, I noticed the sudden tightening on my upper arm of a blood pressure cuff and the hardness of plaster on my shoulder, chest and arm. I felt floaty too and saw the IV drip attached to my free hand. I wore a 02 prong in my nose and felt the gentle puff of oxygen. Swallowed against the dry mouth feeling that it and heavy-duty painkillers caused. I moved gingerly and everything came awake with a fierce response from that my body that said 'don't move'. I inhaled and bit my lips and that was enough to cause the dark shadow in the corner to my left to move closer to my bed.

"Raven?" Murphy asked and I burst into tears when I saw his beloved ugly face. He tried to hold me but settled instead for gripping my free hand and laying his other on my forehead. "I should kill you for this," he said in his gravelly voice and I swore I saw tears run down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I babbled, my chest heaving and coughing as I tried to catch my breath. This caused the others sleeping to wake up in a rush. Doctor Flauvel and my grandfather leaned over me.

"Welcome back, Raven," Corwin said smiling so hard that it looked painful.

"How do you feel?" The doc asked taking my vitals. "100.2°. Still up but better."

"It hurts. But all floaty, too," I said slowly. I tried to reach my eyes but the IV pinched. "I can see out of my right eye. How?"

"Well," Corwin answered. "We know what happened to the Star Stone that the Princess lost."

"Huh?"

"It's in your eye socket, Raven. A very pretty blue eye but clearly composed of gemstone."

"It feels weird. Like it's alive," my voice trailed off as I felt waves of sleep drag me down. "Hamburger, Gramps? I'm hungry—" I didn't hear him reply.

This time when I opened my eyes I saw women's faces leaning over me. Green eyes and pansy purple, rosy red lips that were parted in breathless anticipation. What I said instead of hello or thanks was, "where's my hamburger?"

Roelle said tearfully, "so you miss a meal more than me, pipsqueak?"

"You're here?" My eyes searched out and found them all. Tegan, Pire, Gramps, Lyndseye, Murphy, Doctor Flauvel and a woman I vaguely remembered. Two faces I'd never seen before but could guess which one was King Luke.

"No burgers for you yet, young man," the doc pointed his finger in my face. "Soup and some high-protein shakes until your stomach gets used to human food."

"Okay," I agreed. "Thirsty."

Doctor Flauvel held a crystal goblet of water to my lips with a straw colored purple and designed for a toddler. I sipped slowly and it tasted like ambrosia. "Can I sit up?"

"You think you can? How did you get hurt and break your leg *twice*?"

Many eager hands helped me sit up on the pillows where I could see all the way to my feet. "Hi, I'm Raven," I said to the people I didn't know.

"Luke. Friend of your dad's, we went to college together. I met you once," the dark man said.

"I sort of remember you," I returned and looked at the one-armed man in uniform.

"I'm General Cathorian. Your grandfather and I were looking for you. You look like him."

"What's going on? Is Jasra still out there looking for me?" I asked feeling my eyelids lowering. I forced myself awake but found it hard to stop yawning. My voice slurred as I drifted off again only to jerk awake several times until the smell of food got my stomach growling. As my eyes opened and stayed that way, I saw a huge table laid out and filled with a thanksgiving feast, fancy china, crystal champagne flutes and golden wine. Some large section of time must have passed, the shadows were different and I felt as if I'd been asleep for hours. I could hardly recognize anyone, they were all dressed as if for court and as I sat up against my many pillows,

and all of them raised their glasses to toast me.

“Never mind that,” I said grumpily. “Somebody feed me.”

Linz came over with a plate embossed in gold and piled with small pieces of rare roast beef, peas that were colored lemon and vegetables that tasted like roasted corn. Slowly and carefully, she fed me tiny bites between sips of something like fruity lemonade. Creamy thick yoghurt with passion berries for dessert. I managed a few bites of each. Mumbled that I was full and tried to grasp her arm but the IV lines got in my way. “Leos? Mallei and the others?”

“Gone, Raven. You tried to save them. You did your best,” she soothed and smoothed my hair back. “What do you remember?”

“Not much past the shipwreck,” I said in a low voice. “What’s Jasra doing? How much time do we have?” I looked at her, short blonde hair washed and the color of gold coins, her green eyes lined with black so that I melted into them. Dressed in a sea foam concoction of lace and silk with star stones in her ears and at her throat. She was so lovely that she made breathing difficult and left me tongue-tied.

“Raven?” she prompted and I had to look away so I could speak.

“God, you’re so beautiful. How did anyone take you for a boy?”

She smiled. “A spell, of course. Masking both Tegan and myself. It even fooled Jasra.”

“Me, too. I thought you were a ten year old kid.”

“Jasra has invaded Tethys and Gates Cove. Once they have fallen, she’ll take their navy and head here.”

“What are we planning to do?” I asked and wasn’t ready for the looks of disbelief on all their faces. They yelled at me, asked if I was nuts, I was wounded, couldn’t walk or fight and wasn’t even sure if I could convert back into the dragon. I certainly couldn’t fly with my shoulder and collarbone broken. I let them all sputter to a standstill and when there was quiet, said, “Who else have you got?”

They had no answer for that. I made everyone leave the room to go to their own and with both the doc’s help and Murphy’s, managed to slide into a sitting position on the bed. I laughed as my feet dangled way off the floor.

I was over six feet but this monster bed was so high even I couldn’t reach the carpeting. Of course, the moment I sat up, I nearly passed out but both of them were ready and held me.

Against their wishes, I stood up and my legs barely held me. The one I’d broken twice ached. I tried to keep my face blank but Dr. Flauvel felt my pulse change and caught my escalating inhalations. Still, I ignored them and forced myself to walk four or five steps. I limped and lurched like a three wheeled grocery cart but without the groaning.

Before I’d gone more than a few steps, Murphy picked up my protesting body and carried me back to bed. Only then did I realize I wasn’t wearing anything.

“Holy crap,” I said. “Did everyone see me butt naked?”

“I think the housemaid missed a peek,” Murphy said helpfully as he tucked in the covers.

“Well, shit. Can I get a nightgown or something? And I have to pee.” I looked around for the

toilet and Doc handed me a urinal with my name on it. I figured I'd already pushed the pair further than I expected I could so I gave up and used it. One handed and smirked when Murphy had to empty it. At least I found out where the loo was. A door that fit into the wall without a seam but next to a boudoir desk.

"Hey. Is this *Jasra's room*?" I was horrified.

"It is the Queen's Chamber," Flauvel shrugged. "It was the Queen's before Jasra and will be Luke's Queen after."

"Yeah, well, she's gonna be pissed when she finds out I'm in her bed. She's got a real nasty temper. What time is it?"

"Three in the afternoon," Murphy said. He had his own inner clock and was never off by more than two minutes.

"Any chance of a meal?"

"Breakfast or lunch?"

"Pancakes with maple syrup," I drooled. "Those little sausage links. Juice and tea with milk and sugar."

The doc jerked one of those bed pulls and a neatly dressed woman came in wearing a gray and white uniform. She seemed pleased to see me awake and told me hello.

"Doctor, Murphy, my Lord."

"My name's Raven," I said. "I'm nobody's lord."

"What can I do for you? I'm Jenny, the Palace's Housekeeper."

"Please bring Raven some breakfast," Doc asked and went on to describe what I wanted but she was nodding in agreement.

"His Majesty likes the same thing for Sunday breakfast," she smiled. "So the kitchen staff is familiar with it. Fifteen minutes?"

"Great. I could eat a horse," I said. "Hey. I think I did once."

"Whose?" Murphy asked.

"I don't really remember. I was starving. Any chance of getting something to wear?"

She looked at Flauvel. "Bring him a soft nightgown with a large yoke. Cotton or wool if it's thin and soft. Easy on and off so I can get to his wounds."

"I have the very thing, Doctor. Dr. Arianas has some gowns made up for his patients. Open in the back and tie at the neck."

"Johnnies," Flauvel grinned and I groaned. It was a conspiracy to keep my ass in circulation. I pulled the covers over my head and hid until she could come back with my food.

Chapter 41

Three days after I awakened, I was able to get up on my own, use the restroom and brush my teeth. I was worried that my teeth had been going to fall out because of Jasra starving me. They

bled a little but not bad and seemed to be firmly in their sockets. There was a mirror in the bathroom although to call it that was a misnomer. It was more like a swimming pool in a spa. Gold, scarlet, peach and rose hand carved wood, tiles, thick carpeting, everything a luxury loving Queen would want was in there. Even a walk-in shower I could have parked a car in. Doc wouldn't let me take a shower only promised me a sponge bath.

I stood in front of the baroque mirror and saw *me*. All of me except for what was covered by a soft cotton gown that wouldn't have looked out of place in Bellevue. My hair was long, full of curls that covered my neck; black and filthy. I actually found pieces of pine needles, tree bark and stone chips in it. Along with several sore spots where my dragon skull had made contact with the tree trunk and rock spire.

My arm was in a plain white plaster cast and a sling arrangement held both my shoulder and arm to my chest. What I could see of my skin was a gross rainbow of black, purplish blue and sickly green with a 4X4 gauze pad in the center.

My legs under the garment had scrapes and boot prints, a hard knot where I'd broken it as the mule, a smaller dent in the muscle of my thigh where Jasra had broken the dragonet's femur. Strangest of all, my left eye was its normal golden yellow but the other was the blue of the star stone, faceted like a jewel and almost as bright as I remembered it when it was glowing. It would not come out and if I closed my normal eye to look only through the stone, I saw the world as a whole different reality. As if the veil between one realm and another no longer existed. I was still the same image as I remembered from that long-ago day when I was seventeen. No wrinkles, no gray hair and that look of sadness my face had worn from my life with Jurt was gone. It felt as if I was a totally different person than that corbel, his Blackbird. I was Raven and I was the Black Dragon and that was enough for me.

I didn't know what time it was, I hadn't seen a clock anywhere in the room or in fact, anywhere in the country. While I was standing there, I heard a knock at the door and Jenny came in when I said I was up. She held a tray and on it was an honest to God hamburger, fries and a shake. She handed me a linen napkin which I tucked under my chin and followed her out to the table that went across the bed so I could lay back to eat. Tried eating a juicy loaded burger with one hand. Crap dripped down my chin onto the napkin and she wiped it off my mouth as I chewed.

"God, I missed this, I mean, I enjoyed eating as the Dragon but you get tired of the same old thing. Cow, deer and beefalo."

"Really? You were a Dragon? Tell me about it," she encouraged. So I told her what I could remember and she asked a lot of questions—mostly about what I looked like. She said she hadn't seen me when the king had taken me to the arena nor when I'd escaped.

No matter how much I whined, I couldn't get anyone to bring me clothes or let me out of the room. I tried sneaking but Murphy was watching me and when he wasn't, Tegan or Pire was. Marcus and Roelle had come to me shamefaced and frightened, begging for my forgiveness and to tell me that they loved each other. I wasn't surprised. In fact, I was glad as she was much better suited for him than for me. I sent them away with my blessings and Gramps sent them back to Amber so they were one less thing he had to worry about.

I could watch the soldiers scurrying down the hallways and hear their frantic pleadings to be seen by the General Staff yet no one would let me know what was going on outside the walls.

Doc F had removed the IV once I'd started eating solid foods and had me on some high doses of antibiotics, some mild painkillers and I suspected, a sleeping pill. After my last meal, I usually fell asleep and slept through the night. When I woke in the morning, it took me quite a while to get with it, I was so logy I wasn't sure what was happening around me.

I wanted to spend some time with Lyndseye but it seemed like both my family and circumstances were conspiring to keep us apart. She was a Princess and protocol dictated she not be left alone in a male's presence even though she had spent months with Tegan and me. Finally, I threw a temper tantrum in full view of everyone and convinced them it would be safer for me if they just let me sit in on the war planning. I found out that Jasra's war forces were already on the way to the Capital City by both sea and over land. They had told me that crossing the Sentinels was impossible but somehow, Jasra had figured out a way to bring over half of her forces through the 'impassable mountains'.

I saw Linz but this beautifully coiffed and dressed regal Princess wasn't the stalwart warrior I'd known and I was tongue tied around her.

Murphy was with the War Council and on flying spy missions when he wasn't watching me. From the grim looks on everyone's faces, I knew that the news wasn't good, either. I was fretting to do something, anything to get out of the room. I swore when I closed my eyes, all I saw was red. I felt better, my appetite was good almost as big as if I was the Dragon. My sleep under the influence of doc's pills was a dead zone. I didn't dream and I didn't remember anything of the night and most of the morning. When I complained, he vehemently denied I was getting anything like that and when I examined my pills, all I saw were the regular forms of antibiotics and Tylenol #3. My nose couldn't detect anything in my food or drink. So I gave up and waited like a good little boy.

On the afternoon of the next day, Flauvel came in and checked my shoulder and arm. He seemed pleased with the amount of healing I was showing. My ribs and the hole in my chest were almost healed over; it was my leg that bothered me most, it ached constantly.

"You're healing fast but then, all you Amber folk do," he said. "If you don't expire immediately, you heal quickly."

"You've known Gramps long?"

"Thirty years or more if you count Amber time," he returned and looked at me seriously. "Raven, has anyone molested you?"

I shook my head. "Who would dare? I'm a Dragon and as a mule, I would have kicked their heads off. Why?"

"Murphy and all of us were worried it might have happened again."

"Nope," I grinned and it startled him. "I haven't had time for sex, doc. Of any kind. Now will you let me get some clothes on?"

"Not until that shoulder knits. I don't want you trying to move it and mess up Marcus' and my wiring job."

"Marcus? Wires?" I asked pulling the gown down to my knees. He handed me a velvet robe which he helped tuck over the contraption on my shoulder.

"Your shoulder's wired together by magic and modern technology. It and your collarbone

were smashed into several pieces. You have six fractured ribs and a hole in your chest, and you fractured the xyloid process—that's the little bone that you compress when you do CPR. Any lower and that rock would've torn open your abdominal cavity and strewn yards of your Dragon guts across the landscape." He paused. "I thought your scales were invulnerable?"

"Jasra's weakened that spot with magicked weapons. My Achilles' heel, if you will."

We heard a commotion outside my door and I slipped off the bed to follow doc to the portal, leaning against it as soldiers fully kitted ran down the broad avenue towards the War Room. Their cries were easy enough to decipher. They were yelling, 'the Red Witch is coming!' I turned to Flauvel. "What's protecting the city from her magic?"

"King Luke said there's a strong spell around the city limits up to the arena where he had placed you."

"But Jasra knows all of his spell castings." I pointed out. "Its weak spots and how to disengage it."

"He said he redid it after she left."

"Flauvel, I have to be there to stop her. Nothing and nobody else will."

"No, Raven. You're not strong enough yet. Not fit. And you don't even know if you can become the Dragon."

I limped over to one of the huge windows covered with soft thin curtains and velvet red drapes. Threw them aside and looked out on a scene straight from a medieval war camp. Soldiers occupied every inch of space in the courtyard yet nowhere did I see any civilians. Above, I could see through the star stone that was my new eye, the shimmer of Luke's protection shield as it sparkled when anything touched it. Faint fingers of red poked tentatively at its curved surface and when it sparked, the fingers drew back as if burned.

My grandfather spoke at my elbow and startled me. "Raven. She's just outside the city limits. With over 200,000 men. Secrest has guns."

"Guns? I thought gunpowder didn't work in shadow, except Earth?"

"CO2 guns. Fires a .22 shell with compressed gas. In a vital unprotected spot, it's fatal. What do you think you're doing?"

"What I was meant for," I told my grandfather and leapt through the windows. I heard their cries of horror and as soon as I was clear of roof and building, I sang as I had to the dragons in my dreams—spread my wings and rose above the Palace as the Black Dragon. I soared the entire perimeter of the shield and checked out the layout of Luke's forces as well as what I could see of Jasra's. I wasn't sure if I could exit the magic barrier to engage her troops. At least not without Murphy on my back to part it for me.

I was on my second circuit when I saw him coming and he glided into position, dropping on my back between one wing beat and the next to grasp my neck trying to steer me. "Back to the palace," he ordered and I resisted, finding that I could still converse with him.

"No, Murphy. You can't stop me, this is what I was born to do. This is my destiny. You're either with me or against me."

"Are you sure, Raven?"

“As sure as I’ve ever been about anything in my life, Murph,” I said listening to the voices of the soldiers below us. Some were cheering and others expressing doubts whose side I was on. “You need to open the shield and we have to go to the Sentinels. The Seven Sisters will Dance tonight and I have to sing to them.”

Murphy was silent and then, he flew ahead of me, pointing straight for the very apex of the shield. As his wings touched the shimmering magic of the barrier, it folded back and I squeezed through the hole ignoring Luke’s soldiers’ cries of disbelief and the jeering voices of Jasra’s army.

We flew towards the mountains and I ignored my body’s protests that it was not ready for the task I’d set before us.

Chapter 42

We flew on and I could feel the land below me throbbing with the destruction wrought upon it by Jasra’s forces. Worse, I saw the mountains brought down by technology that could only have come from earth. Somehow, Secrest had transported EBM’s to the other side of the mountains and bored tunnels through large enough to transport both armies through. As we left, I saw two vapor trails behind us and dropped in a dive so quick that Murphy fell off me. My tail grabbed him by an ankle and I jerked him out of the path of Stinger missiles. Still legible on its sides, the USAF symbol.

“Holy shit!” I said, and blew twin streams of fire at their exhaust blowing both up before they could reacquire me. After them came flying creatures but they had a hard time both with keeping up and flying high enough. Murphy and I could reach the very tops of the Sentinels where the air was too thin but even there, the creatures and their riders outsmarted me. They went through the tunnels making the distance they had to travel shorter than ours and would surely be waiting for us on the other side.

It was a struggle to fly high, what I could see of the land below me looked like the view out a jet’s window; the ground was a patchwork of brown and green, blue and silver rivers and lakes where even my Dragon sight could not pick out towns or villages.

We hit the frost line and all we could see was rock covered with snow as I forged nearly straight up this indomitable mountain range. The Himalayas and the Andes were hills to these giants and still we climbed.

Murphy could feel me struggling and tried to dismount; I wasn’t sure if even he could fly this high enough to cross the peaks.

We flew until the sun was lost behind these giants and the sky darkened only to be lit by the most incredible array of stars I had ever seen. Dancing above our heads were the stars called the Seven Sisters Who Dance and maybe because the oxygen was thin, they seemed to move in an elegant display just for me.

We crested the top and several miles to my right, I could see the hovering swarm of wyvern’s and harpies waiting below us; so far below that I could barely discern their riders. Secrest might have defeated the mountain’s passage but he hadn’t counted on the lack of oxygen. Luckily for me, I could hold my breath long enough to get over and Murphy didn’t even need to breathe.

“Now what?” He asked and I headed for a lower peak where I could rest yet was high enough

to deter the enemy's air forces.

My hind legs reached for the crag and I perched on all fours, folded my weary wings and rested. The mountain under my feet swelled as if it were breathing and warmed sending plumes of sulfur scented gas into the air.

"Murphy, no matter what happens, don't let go of me," I said and he nodded as he huddled between my legs, wrapping his arms around me.

I sang. I sang until the notes rang against the mountains and lifted in the crystal-clear air. I sang until it reverberated and whole slopes of snow avalanched below and above us. I sang until I heard the cries of wounded and dying so sang louder drowning them out. I sang until the mountains began crumbling away shooting huge house-sized pieces of rock into the sky. The more I sang, the faster the mountains crumbled and from deep within cavities in the rocks, dragons emerged. Dragons of every color and size imaginable. They flew in a tight spiral like a swarm of bats emerging from Carlsbad Caverns and their song joined mine until the very foundations of this realm shook with the might and majesty of it.

With almost a casual indifference, the horde banked and dove on Jasra's winged forces decimating them with claws and flames while I continued to sing.

When the last note trembled on my tongue, I wanted to collapse. Instead, I stood straight my wings extended on the only piece of mountaintop still standing for a thousand miles.

Before me hovered over ten thousand dragons, each and every one named and individual. I knew every one of them from my dreams and the leader greeted me.

Hail, Dragon Prince, Blackbird. I Am the Light That Dances Across the Night Sky Before the Dark Of the Moon.

Moon Dancer, I greeted. Must I face you in challenge to ask of you to fulfill your vow?

No, your song was challenge enough, Blackbird. We will aid you in exchange for the Shadow Realm we may call our own.

His eyes were a deep purple, deeper than his coat which shown with the rich color of an amethyst. I asked if his kind were still prone to the blood madness that inflicted them if they ate humans. He told me that his clan would not jeopardize their promised realm for the nasty lean flesh of man. Wyvern's, griffons and harpies were a different story.

I showed them images of Jasra, Secrest and their men warning them that she possessed magic and magical weapons not of this realm. He laughed at my fears. Murphy climbed on my back and we flew down to the valley floor to rest, eat, and search out firestone, for them to stretch their wings. They roosted on the cliffs from their talons and had decimated the floor of corpses of Jasra's winged Furies, burning the riders' bodies to ash.

Murphy told me to sleep, he would watch over me and I trusted him enough to tuck my head under my wings. I heard their endless song in my dreams and soared with them as they went back in their memories to a time when they ruled this land and were the most powerful creatures on this Shadow. I wanted to join them; their promise of a life with them was offered and the old Raven would have jumped at the chance. Immersed in their minds and culture, he could have forgotten his past or wreaked vengeance on all mankind for what had been done to him but I wasn't that broken, tortured boy any more.

My soul felt lightened and for the first time since I'd awakened from death as the Black Dragon, I felt as if I truly had a soul. I laughed in joy and woke myself and Murphy. Although he never slept or needed to but I'd seen him in a state much as a real statue would be---stone and immobile.

“Go to sleep, idiot,” he grumbled. “The sun hasn't even come up yet. Were you *laughing*?”

I grinned. “Yes, Murphy. I'm happy.”

“Happy? We have wyverns, harpies and men with guns hunting us, a red witch and a soldier from earth, are a thousand miles from the City and you're happy?”

“Yes, believe it or not. For the first time in a long time, I am.”

He looked me in the eyes. “Raven, I love you.”

“I know, Murphy. You've been my mother, my guardian, my best friend for my whole life. Without you, I wouldn't even be alive. I love you too.”

“Don't you dare kiss me,” he said and I broke out in delighted laughter.

Slowly, around us, the Horde woke with a rustling of wings, talons scratching on the rocks. As one, they lifted and went hunting. When they were done feeding, they would return and wait for me to lead them to war.

Murphy rode on my back to the amusement and curiosity of the dragon. They had never seen a creature such as he---composed of stone and yet alive. I explained that he was a friend that had cared for me as a child and they were equally curious that I was both human and dragon.

We flew high but not as high as the mountains had been, now we were merely skimming across the top of Mt. Fuji sized mountains or the granddads of the Rockies. I found flying with Murphy on my back to be no effort at all and my blue eye a beacon that lit the way before us like a search light calling all to my side.

Faint bomb bursts scattered below us and I saw the dark masses of stationary soldiers and equipment. Dropping lower, I checked out who flew what standard. These men were forces from Minsk, tattered but still holding in formation and when they looked up to spot us, there was a deafening silence until I spiraled close with the intention of landing. I asked the Dragon Horde to remain aloft until Murphy and I could discern this group's intentions.

As I dropped to the ground, I became the man again and to my embarrassment, was still naked. Murphy folded his wings around me and one of the soldiers gave me his cloak, wool and lined with gold braid and buttons. He was a high ranking officer then.

“You're the Dragon Prince,” he said and bent his knee before me, offering his sword. I stood him up.

“Jasra's attacking Topaz as we speak. Princess Caldor is under Luke's protection and mine. I've raised the Dragon Horde and we go to defend the City. Will you help us?”

“With our last lives,” he assured me, rising.

“How do you and your men feel about flying?” I grinned and to my astonishment, every one of them volunteered to fly on a dragon. The dragons agreed to carry them and each one told the rider his or her name. Some of their names were beautiful and all of them were magnificent beasts.

Commander Algernon was the soldier that had given me his cloak; told me that the only reason he and his squad had survived was that they had been pursuing pirates at sea when Minsk had fallen returning only after Jasra and Secrest had abandoned the city. They had given the royal family a proper burial and taken what treasure she had left behind.

“I see you’ve found our star stone,” he commented, looking at my new eye.

“The Princess gave it to me.”

“She’s *alive*? Safe?”

“Yes. Would you prefer the Black Dragon or Moon Dancer?” I named the Horde’s leader. He looked shocked that I would offer to fly him.

“You, my Lord?”

“Name’s Raven or Blackbird.” I changed and he stepped backwards in fascinated alarm. “Don’t worry, I’ve never lost a passenger yet although I recommend you put a rope around my neck and chest to make a hand hold. It gets pretty intense when I dive or loop.”

I dropped my head into his reach and he sheathed his sword as he pulled off his leather belt, cinched it around the lower part of my neck. “Ready? Murphy? Dragon Riders? We go to War!” I leaped into the air and the ground trembled with ten thousand pairs of wings as we darkened the skies.

Murphy had me approach from the sea over the shore and from that direction, we came upon what was left of Gates Cove and Tethys’ navies and the impressive armada that was Jasra’s. Commander Algernon outlined strategy with Murphy and me, divided the Horde into smaller groups of ten and sent what he called a phalanx to destroy the ships before they could dock and disembark their soldiers. What worried me more were their battering weapons, they were using them to hit the shield and with each blow, it shook, cracks appearing in its structure.

The Commander yelled a battle cry reminiscent of Marines and fifty men and dragons strafed the boats with flame and arrows, with whatever few weapons they possessed. I saw several dragons take direct hits but everything bounced off their scales. Not so their riders. Several men fell hit by stones or cross bolts and Murphy caught some of them only to let them go. I knew that meant they were dead.

In fifteen minutes, nearly every one of her ships were ablaze or sunk and we’d lost seven men and two dragons with a lucky shot to their skulls that knocked them out in midair.

I counted the ships and there were over 400 of them—surely Jasra hadn’t committed her whole fleet in one surprise attack. I sent a pale green dragon with emerald eyes called Morning Smoke to recon out to sea, she came back with a report that indeed, another flotilla waited behind what was left of the Sentinels. Murphy sent the Commander’s Second and his group to take care of them. I warned them of airborne missiles. The rest of us flew onto the city of Topaz.

Chapter 43

I flew on towards the city and it was terrifying. Bolts of magic constantly assailed the shield as it struggled to repair itself. Flying was an exercise in agility as I dodged and swooped like a bat after an insect to avoid fireballs and weapons. I wasn’t too worried about their lances and arrows, my dragon hide was tougher than that. What worried me more was whether Jasra had magicked a

weapon to hit my weakened chest scales. The commander had offered a solution and now, I wore his shield on my chest like a horse's breastplate and I'd scorched it black with Dragon fire so that you couldn't see any difference between it and my hide.

Our wings were more vulnerable – made of thin membrane so that they could catch the wind's lift, they were the only part not covered by scales and quite delicate. My first pass over her troops scared me. I'd never seen so many men, machines and amassed mythical creatures. Magic bolts flared towards me as soon as they sighted me. I heard faint pops and tiny .22 projectiles with tracers hit me.

“What are they shooting at us?” He yelled at me.

“I can hear you if you speak normally,” I said. “Those are called guns. They shoot a small lead bullet with CO2 compressed air and they will kill you.”

“Like a stone from a slingshot?”

“Exactly. They pierce flesh, bounce around, break bones and mangle arteries. In your head, they turn your brain to mush.”

“Let's try to avoid them,” he said and pointed out the different divisions to me.

“Where are Luke's forces?”

We scanned the field and saw very few. Either they were all inside the shield or still on the other side of the mountains. I sucked air in and blew a wide stream down on a group and as the flames near reached their ranks, they flipped metal shields over their heads like turtle shells. The flames licked off, set the grass on fire and did little damage. I banked and dodged a bolt of green magic from bursting up my butt and felt Algernon grabbed hold of my harness. “The ballistas!” He ordered. “Take them out!”

“They're covered in metal plates, too!” I growled as I just missed a huge net thrown by one.

“Their ram isn't! Set it on fire and they are no more than tall guard towers!”

I scorched two of them, setting the log ram on fire and melting the brass head into rivulets that dripped on the soldiers below burning them horribly. The screams made me shudder and I burned them to charcoal to stifle their suffering. I still hadn't seen Jasra or Secrest but I did spot his elite guards, specifically the one he called his second-in-command, Martinez. He was a Latin American, small, dark and wiry. He seemed to pay particular attention to me, tracking me with his eyes from behind the cover of a blind.

I heard him shout and from six different directions, missiles fired with me as the center point of convergence. No matter which way I could turn, one would hit me. If I flew up, I would run into them, down waited a phalanx of spears. I stretched my neck up and hovered as I blew the hottest ball of flame I could manage, an incredible seething mass that burned incandescent white and rivaled the sun in its intensity. All six veered off and went after it instead of me. Small arms pinged off my chest plate and I heard Al yelp. Tiny holes appeared in my wings as I banked and soared upwards.

“Are you hurt?” I asked craning my neck around and saw blood flowing through the fingers on his thigh.

“Just a scratch,” he dismissed, digging in his pockets for a pouch. He dumped it on the wound,

it sizzled and closed.

I called the dragons in and the sky darkened as thousands of flying furnaces made bombing runs. Fear filled the air but the troops were disciplined enough to hold shields over their ranks so that the dragons' fire slipped harmlessly over the metals.

Those exposed were not so lucky, they burned to ash before they had a chance to scream. Dragons looped and swirled, forcing back the ballistas and the main group as we set the very ground on fire until a ring of flames circled the city of Topaz down to the shoreline. The enemy's trumpeter blew a long chorus and waited for an answer. If they were trying to communicate with their ships, they were going to be disappointed.

I saw a group of cloaked men standing well back from the front lines, dressed in black with hoods over their heads. Wizards by the looks of them. From their hands they conjured balls of wind that met our fireballs and sucked the flames out.

Mounted warriors harried us, they were protected by both shields of metal and spells, their bolts of magic either froze our wings or stole the air from under us. I heard the cries of our dragons as they hit the ground and were consumed by Jasra's men like ants on a dead insect. Cheers carried on the wind for every one they downed as our numbers declined.

I ducked as Algernon yelled in my ear and the net thrown at my wings just brushed my rear legs, tangling in the ropes. I dragged the men, net and weights into the air struggling under the weight before I turned and burned them loose. They fell and didn't bounce as the stone weights tore through their ranks with devastating effect.

Other dragons got the same idea and began to hit the catapults and ballistas, breaking them into smaller pieces and tossing them into the shielded squadrons like missiles. Thousands died, crushed under their own equipment.

I searched for her, for him, for his elite forces and I did not see them on the field. I looked through my blue eye and it exposed every wizard, spell and masking device upon the field. I saw men sneaking through tunnels designed to bring them under the city via the sewage system and the unit coming underwater from the sea to the river.

Half of our forces left still mobile broke off and flew round behind the city, disappearing. Jasra's forces cheered the louder and surged anew sending her mounted wing into the sky. Suddenly, I had twenty wyverns and another twenty harpies diving on me throwing nets that glittered with scarlet and gold wards. As they hit me, they stuck to my wings like a spider's web and I could barely fly. A few quick breaths and the net burned into spectacular fire bombs yet one of the harpies managed to stick me with her barbed tail right under my breast plate and into the softened scales where it pierced my flesh. I dropped, pulling the barb free and slicing it off with my rear talons. Algernon gasped.

"Prince, are you hurt?"

"Just a scratch. Harpy poison doesn't affect dragons," I shrugged and blasted another flame on the troops' shields. As I lifted off my strafing run, the dragons colored blue and nearly white hit the same group only these dragons were not fire lizards but ice dragons. Their blasts froze the entire mass of shields together and then the sirens let loose with a note so high-pitched that every one of them cracked as if dipped in liquid nitrogen.

The ground trembled and shook, rippling under the men and their cries of alarm were the

signals for which we were waiting. As the thousands of dragons left behind as our second wave emerged from tunnels dug *underneath* Jasra's troops, they smashed, burned and disrupted the soldiers leaving them easy targets for us.

I veered away from the winged troops and headed towards the far ridge where I'd seen the wizards knowing that somewhere within their ranks had to be Jasra and her cohort. The men below me were too busy trying to save their lives---those that weren't crushed, frozen or burned were running for their lives. Running into Luke's forces which had exited the city by the port and made their way around. Some were on horseback and others on foot. I knew Tegan, Pire and my grandfather would be among them just as I knew that Murphy was somewhere keeping an eye on me.

"How are you doing, Al?" I asked and didn't hear a reply. I craned my neck around and saw him slumped on my back, barely holding on. "Crap," I said and banked, taking out two more harpies intent on flying up my ass. Just then, I saw the glimmer of red and spotted Jasra on a rearing red horse at the very edge of the field next to the tree line. She was screaming at her retreating men and killing those that didn't turn back as they ran for the woods. I didn't see Secret but spotted Murphy.

Yelled. His head swiveled and he approached me, he was unmounted. "Your dragon?"

"I can fly faster on my own," he shrugged. "Are you unhurt?"

"Yes, but Al isn't. I need you to take---" I paused to whack what looked like a griffin out of the air. "Take him to the doc's."

"Yes."

I felt bullets pinging off the shield and spotted a tube-like weapon, saw the flash as a shell erupted aimed at my chest. "Murphy, go!" I shouted and ducked as he snatched the Commander off my back. The missile exploded before it reached me, I was expecting a boom and not the electric blue lines of magic that snagged me and burned like hot acid. In seconds, they had drawn tight clamping my wings and I fell to the ground where immediately, a score of men attacked me. The only things I could move were my head and tail, allowing me to smack a few away yet when I breathed fire, only a few puffs of smoke emerged. I was out of firestone. They whacked me with swords and lances, they hurt but didn't do much damage against my scales. My weakened chest scales were underneath me covered with Al's shield. None dared to brave my face after I bit several, strong enough to cut them in half and the taste of human blood made me even more hysterical to get free.

I heard her yell and to my horror, felt myself shrink as the net shrank with me. I yelled the words to make me revert and nothing happened. Now, Secret's soldiers weren't afraid of me. One of them threw his cape over me and the world darkened. I was tied and thrown over his shoulder struggling to get free as he ran for the wood line.

I could smell blood, magic blasts and heard the clash of steel as the entire group massed around the one carrying me. He leaped over something, nearly stumbled, zigged and zagged as I smelled the ever increasing scent of pines and forest mold.

He tripped finally and fell, tangling among bodies in a hole, one of which must have been caused by the tunneling dragons. I changed to my human body and was able to burrow under other bodies before he got up and frantically started searching for the cape. Felt him tugging on it

as he slowly pulled me out. The metallic filaments on me slithered off as if they were confused, writhing and groping; perhaps having been spelled only for the dragon form. When the soldiers felt my feet, he pushed me aside and dragged out the cape finding it empty.

He cursed in English and I had an irrational urge to giggle. Stifled it. "It has to be here somewhere! She said he can't escape the net no matter what size he is. Help me look."

I slipped the shield off and slid it under the dirt, crawled deeper into the hole as corpses were dragged out. Another foot and I was nearly at the edge where I could enter the tunnel the dragon had made when someone's warm hand clasped my ankle and heaved. I looked up into bright sunlight and the American soldier stared into my face. Before I could blink, he punched me in the jaw. My head snapped back, I literally saw stars and the last thing I heard was, "son of a bitch!"

Chapter 44

I woke when someone threw a bucket of cold water on me. Blearily, I opened my eyes and tried to groan but besides the tremendous ache in my jaw and the throbbing headache that made me nauseous, I couldn't open my mouth. There was something stuck in it that tasted like rubber strapped all the way around my head. I fought weakly and felt the pinch of chains at my wrists and rope around my ankles.

There was a small fire going in front of me but far enough away so that it didn't warm me. I shivered. I was freezing and when I looked down, I saw that I was naked and tied between two trees like in those films I'd seen once in history of how the Romans dismembered their criminals.

We were deep in the forest in a sheltered cove and men moved silently setting up camp, erecting shelters, taking care of horses, and tending the wounded.

The soldier I knew as Martinez came up to me and stared into my eyes. "He's awake, Cap," he called over his shoulder and to my surprise, Jasra walked out of the group dressed in camo and armed like the rest of them. Her smile promised endless torments and my saliva filled mouth suddenly dried up. My balls tightened up close to my belly in fear.

"What a pretty child you are, Raven, Prince of Chaos, and Dragon Prince. You've cost me a major delay in this war, the lives of thousands of my soldiers and worse, you killed Ryan."

I'd killed her lover and didn't even know it. She held her hand out and Martinez slapped her palm with a wicked K-bar. He cautioned her that if she wanted to kill me, the knife went in easily and usually fatally. She laughed. "I can see where it goes, I can see to avoid every vital part of him," she smirked as she slowly drove it into my side just above the hip bone. It felt like a punch of ice in my guts and I held still even though I wanted to struggle. She left it in for a full minute watching my eyes cloud with agony. As she pulled it out, blood gushed from the wound slowing to a trickle. It had a faint bluish iridescence in the firelight.

"What do you want?" I tried to say but nothing came out but a garbled scream. She punched me in rapid succession, in and out flicks that barely punctured the skin but soon, my entire body was clothed in red blood. When the knife dropped lower to my balls and lifted the sac, Martinez stopped her.

"No," he said and his grip on her arm was like iron. "Don't do that to him."

“It’s all right to torture him but not cut off his balls?” She sneered. “He killed Ryan!”

“And you killed his girlfriend,” he said flatly.

Girlfriend? But I’d left both Roelle and Lyndseye safe in Topaz. “The animal healer meant nothing to him or he would’ve saved her,” she retorted. Mallei had been alive after the shipwreck? But, I’d searched for her body and found none but Gordy’s.

“That may be so, Jasra, but none of us will allow you to mutilate a man that way.”

“Man? He’s just a boy!”

“No,” Martinez said and his eyes were flat, black pools in the dark. “He’s a man.” The way he said it made me straighten and stare her in the eyes. Enraged, she punched me in the face and her blow was every bit as hard and as powerful as his had been. I passed out.

The next time I woke, it was on the back of a horse, tucked against the man’s backside with my hands cuffed in front and a rope around my neck. My head had been lying on his shoulder and thumping with the rhythm of the horse’s gait. We were trotting on a trail up a ridge and the trees were so close that my knees kept getting hit. They felt as if all the skin had been scraped off.

I was hungry but so thirsty that the rubber gag in my mouth stuck to my lips and my jaw throbbed with my heartbeat. I ached everywhere but the worst place was where she had stabbed me in the side, a hot vibrating pain that radiated all the way to my back. It felt like it was still oozing and the jar of the horse’s feet hitting the ground made me groan which he could feel vibrating against his back.

“Man, that bitch is cold,” he whispered so that I could hear him. “Threatening to cut off your cojones. And you just a kid.”

I closed my eyes, thought about becoming the Dragon and the instant I did think it, the net wrapped around my arm before I could even complete the change. It happened so fast that it was no more than the blink of an eye and neither he nor the horse noticed. We trotted for an hour, and then cantered, that was even worse. I kept pushing into the hollow behind the cante, mashing my nuts and the knife wounds. I wanted the oblivion of unconsciousness but it was denied me. I knew they were running because Luke and my granddad were no doubt chasing. I just wished they would kill me and get this over with.

Finally after they crested the ridge and descended into a small valley between two narrow mountains and deep in a gorge, they stopped and set up a camp close to the river but underneath an overhang of the cliff wall. I looked up from atop the horse’s back and saw vertical cliffs of gray in red sandstone, green and yellow tinted granite, huge fir trees and cedars. A mountain of gray steel that looked familiar and my mind goggled at the thought that here was a near perfect copy of Half Dome. I looked at the river and sure enough, there were pools that steamed in the cool air. I shivered even though it wasn’t that cold out.

My captor looked up at me, dark eyes hooded. “Can you get down?” Mutely, I shook my head and he put his hands on my waist and lifted me off the horse. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I fell landing awkwardly because my hands and feet were numb. The rope on my neck jerked and started to strangle me.

“Shit,” he said and rolled me over staring at me. “Martinez?”

The Latino master sergeant came over. “Suarez.”

“He’s gonna die if we don’t do something.”

“He’s gonna die no matter what,” he said flatly. I tried to speak. Tried to tell them I could take them home. To Earth Shadow but couldn’t get the words out past the gag. Tears of frustration dripped from my eyes. The blue stone glittered like a halogen laser.

“You thirsty?” Martinez asked bending down to remove the gag. Once freed, I tried to speak but my throat was so dry that I couldn’t even talk. He put a USMC canteen to my mouth and I drained it in frantic sips.

“Thanks,” I managed and promptly threw it all up. Patiently, he waited until I was through retching before he held the other dude’s canteen to my mouth.

“Small sips. Roll it around in your mouth and then slowly swallow,” he suggested. “Suarez, bring me the med kit and a spare uniform.”

“Yes, sir,” the rider who held me trotted off and I shuddered, waiting for Jasra to turn up and begin her torture all over. “Where is she?” I whispered.

“Rode ahead. Told us to wait here. She’s laying some traps for the pursuit,” he said carelessly. “Now’s the time for you to eat, drink and let me look at your wounds.”

“Won’t she be pissed you’re helping me?” I struggled to move and couldn’t even get my legs underneath me. He pulled me up by tugging at the handcuffs and held me there until Suarez returned with two men and a stretcher. Loaded me on it and carried me towards the nearest tent. Inside was quite cozy, they had bedrolls on the floor, a long table made of aluminum poles and canvas and placed me stretcher and all on top. There was a stove going with a coffee pot perking and the place was warm inside.

In five minutes, the man named Martinez had me hooked up to an IV of fluids and morphine, knew my blood pressure, pulse, respirations and gut sounds. Gave me two units of type O blood. By then, the morphine had kicked in and I didn’t care what they did. I barely felt him poking and prodding at me.

“She must’ve hit something, his temp is 103°,” he said grimly. “His BP isn’t coming up. He’s diaphoretic, too. Shocky. We have any adrenaline?”

“Yes. Complete med kit on hand. Here’s the uni and some underwear, socks. I could only find a pair of sneakers.”

“Cut open a bag of saline and start flushing the cuts. Once we rinse them, I’ll start antibiotics and dress the wounds.”

“Can get you home,” I whispered straining to keep my eyes open. I grabbed for his hand and found somewhere at one point, he’d removed my handcuffs.

“What? What did you say?” He asked bending low near my mouth.

“Home. I can bring you home. Earth Shadow,” I strained and his eyes widened. I drifted away before I could say anything or he could ask what I’d meant.

My first inkling of disaster was when I woke from a terrifying dream of falling only to discover I was – Jasra’s enraged face loomed over mine and she kicked over the flimsy cot I was lying on to crash to the ground. I barely felt myself land on the cold grass, I was still on a morphine drip. I was cold but there was something between me and the soil. Clothes. I had on a set of Army camo’s and even socks. A thin blanket lay on top of me.

“Get up, you crawling worm,” she spat and kicked me. I rolled when her foot connected with my ribs. I heard the dull thump but the pain was muted. Still, it was suddenly harder to breathe. The men came in after her and their body language was suddenly threatening. “Stop,” Martinez said and his voice was cold. She reared back in surprise, her eyes flared red and she looked every inch a witch. “Try a spell on me, Jasra and it’ll be the last thing you ever do,” he stated.

“You puny shadow man, I can crush you all in one spell,” she threatened.

“No, you can’t, Jasra. Your magic doesn’t work on us, remember?” He taunted. “That’s why you had Lieut. Secrest bring us here. You promised to send us home when we were done with your silly little war. But you can’t, can you? Not since the Lieutenant is gone and with him the wormhole he opened that brought us here.”

I struggled to stay awake, what I was hearing was important and concerned me. “I can,” I whispered struggling to get the words out again. “I can take you home.”

“He lies!” She shrieked.

“New York City. Disneyland. TCBY and Ben & Jerry’s Rainforest Crunch. Pres. Barack Obama and Seal Team Six,” I recited. “I was born in Ireland and my dad went to college in California. I was raised there. San Francisco, Boston, Washington DC and Padre Island. I’ve been there.” I choked and couldn’t seem to catch my breath. “I swear. Take you all home. If you stop her.” The air shimmered with the power of my vow and with an inarticulate cry of rage, she attacked me with the knife Martinez had given her but before it could pierce my flesh, it struck stone.

From nowhere, Murphy appeared and the blade hit his chest to shatter as he leaped between us. She fell, cursing to come up against the stacked supplies, tubes of compressed gas and O2. Grabbing one, she slammed it against Murphy and the tanks split, dispensing plumes of white vapor that froze both of them in its tracks. Liquid nitrogen covered most of Murphy and half of Jasra. She barely had time to scream before she died and as she fell, she shattered into pieces of frozen meat on the floor.

Murphy’s eyes moved and not much else. Cracks started, I could hear the faintest sound of stone splitting and tiny lines crept up his body from his feet, expanding as they reached his waist and chest.

“Master,” he said sorrowfully. “I love you. I will always love you.”

“Murphy!” I sobbed. “No!” I tried to reach him, to touch his flesh and warm him. I thought to change to my Dragon form and breathe fire to warm him but remembered I had no fire left. His eyes flared red and he smiled as he told me goodbye just before his whole body crumbled to dust before my eyes. I screamed denials and it was as if the heavens heard my sorrow for I took one last breath and remembered nothing more.

Chapter 45

I killed my best friend. I killed Murphy. The words ran through my head and in my more lucid moments I heard myself scream them and yet I couldn't see or hear anything else. Slaps on the face brought my eyes open and a dirty, scraggly bearded Latino man was hissing at me to be quiet. "Kid, what's your name? Shut the fuck up. What's left of Jasra's forces are hunting us, not to mention King Luke and that scary looking dude with the sword."

"That's my grandpa," I said lucidly. What I saw was strange. We were looking up at the ground and warm bodies were pressed close around me. Plants, leaves and things were sticking out of his cloak. I could see feet marching and running past us, a horse veered around our position almost stepping on someone's helmet.

"We're dug in," he whispered seeing my confused look. "In a hole in the ground. We have no idea which way to head. North isn't north here and we don't fancy a trek back to the Garrison. Jasra said it would take nearly a year by normal means."

"Do you have her red cloak?" I asked and he thought I was mad. Perhaps I was, I felt as if my head was balanced on a tray and could tip off any second. I was suddenly too hot and claustrophobic. Started panting and he took hold of me with one hand, the other still on his weapon.

"Calm down. You have a punctured lung and you're not breathing so well. I put a chest tube in you and re-inflated your lung but you really need surgery. That ain't gonna happen out here. Which way do we go?"

I was going to answer him but he sort of faded into a gray and green mist where I lay gently rocking. I sat up, put my hands on my knees and looked around. I recognized the beautifully landscaped grove where everything was a picture of perfection and nothing out of place. I was in the Unicorn's Bower and it had the air of a place forgotten and unused. I called out as I stood up and wandered, searching for the Unicorn. I found the glade where she slept, a dell in the deepest grove of ancient elder trees, the grass knee-deep and covered with flame yellow daffodils and yellow and white jonquils. The grass wasn't smashed down where she lay nor was my bed where I left it when I visited and spent the night with her. I heard birds chirping but their songs sounded sad and the sparkle that filled the place with her magical presence was gone.

"Mother?" I asked and my voice echoed back mocking me. I saw a reflection of myself in the crystal clear waters of the spring and my face scared me. I was looking at a skull with a thin veneer of gray skin pulled tight across the bones.

Before I could even think, I was torn loose from the security of the Bower and was back in the real world lying propped up against the rock near a small fire and Suarez was forcing water down my throat. I felt incredibly hot and every breath was a struggle with an alarming whistle.

"Hey man, you're back with us?" He seemed surprised. There was snow on the ground and bare patches where even the tenacious cedars couldn't find a crack to plant their roots. We were high up in the mountains and from their jagged peaks, I recognized what was left of the Sentinels.

"Raven," I whispered hoarsely and coughed. Blood sprayed him in the face and he jerked back in fear.

“Oh man, oh man,” he moaned and wiped his face off with his sleeve.

I chuckled. “Don’t worry, bro. I’m a virgin.” He stared at me and his face dropped. “I mean, you won’t get AIDS or nothing like that from me. Sorry.”

He wiped my mouth off. “You hurting?”

“Where are we?”

“About 2 miles from where we left the EBM’s. Martinez humped you most of the way on his back. There’s a storage hut there with supplies. How you doing?”

“Been better. More water?” I asked and rested my head against the rock. It was warm from the fire. I was carefully keeping my thoughts away from Murphy and what I had done to him. Martinez appeared out of nowhere and dropped down to study me.

“Hey, Chico,” he greeted. “How ya doin’?”

“Not so good,” I attempted to smile.

Below us an ethereal glow lit the slopes and out of the thicket appeared the creature that cultures had dreamed of as a symbol of purity and goodness. There stood the unicorn and I gently pushed down the barrel of the rifle that Martinez had instantly brought to bear on the vision. “No,” I said gently watching her. She trotted forward a few steps, turned and beckoned us with her head. I struggled to get up and without moving his eyes from her, his arm grabbed the loose material at my throat and pulled. Really, this dude weighed no more than 150 pounds and was barely 5’8 but he handled me as if I weighed no more than a sack of dirty socks. “Follow her,” I whispered. “Follow her home.”

Suarez took one arm and Martinez the other as they both dragged me on the trail where her dainty cloven feet trod and in her steps, the trail became easier. It still wasn’t a picnic but where her cloven hooves stepped seemed to be a haven against the cold, the dark and even sightings from the rest of Jasra’s Army as they searched for us. I was warm and realized belatedly that I knew where Jasra’s red cloak was – on my shoulders. It was lined with fur and smelled of sharp spicy cinnamon and cinnabar.

She led us high onto a knifelike ridge where we could look down on the rest of this world, a ridge that hadn’t been here before I’d raised the Dragons. Below us, we could see thousands of scarlet coated troops searching and several of his men muttered about sky lining ourselves.

“Tell them, she’s shielding us,” I managed to say. “Just follow her.”

We walked and sometimes my feet moved on their own but mostly, they carried me. She led us no higher and that was good because it was already hard enough to breathe. I didn’t realize we’d stopped until both of them slid me to the ground in front of two enormous round black holes through the mountain’s wall. On the right was a metal Quonset hut with the door locked and bolted. One of the other men from behind me came up and opened it with a key hanging from his dog tags. As we entered, they started a generator sitting just inside the door and rolled it outside where it made barely any noise. Inside lights and heat came on.

Carefully Martinez got me up and carried me inside where he laid me out on the cot. Two men went back outside and walked guard duty. I raised myself up on one elbow and stared through my blue eye, raising wards around for a thousand yards. A faint blue shimmer told me we were safe from all but another wizard’s senses.

“Warded the perimeter,” I gasped and coughed violently. This time, I sprayed blood into the folds of my cloak and swallowed more. I lay back down but that was worse. I felt like I was drowning in my own fluids. “Can’t breathe,” I managed and Martinez was swift with his med kit. He found a tank of O₂, tubing and a cannula, blood, IVs and a pole. Had me hooked up in minutes while the rest of his men heated MREs and made hot coffee and cocoa.

I was fiendishly thirsty but not hungry. The hot cocoa he pushed on me was so good going down and again as it hit my stomach. I tried to hold the cup but my hand shook so much I was in danger of spilling it long before it reached my mouth.

“Is she still out there?” I asked and Martinez nodded to one of his men who opened the door, slid through it so quietly I never heard it close. He was back in seconds.

“She’s still there. Waiting by the South tube. Is she for real?”

I snorted cocoa foam and remembered how Murphy used to play with the marshmallows in my cocoa. I stifled a sob and surreptitiously wiped my face. I didn’t want to be caught bawling like a baby in front of these macho Special Forces dudes. “You’ve seen dragons, wyverns, griffons, and harpies. Why not a unicorn? What are you? Seal Team? Force Recon?” I asked.

“Force Recon. We were in Afghanistan and on a long-range reconnaissance mission when Lieutenant Secrest disappeared. We got called back to search for him. He found *us*, told us about this chick he met and brought us here. Promised to give us a whole new world to conquer. Didn’t know our guns and explosives wouldn’t work here, though. Then, when we wanted to go home, he couldn’t find the wormhole back. Jasra would tell us she was looking for it but we needed an Amber citizen to find it for us since Luke wouldn’t. He had no interest in ruling our home Shadow.”

“There is a way I could take you if I was healthy,” I said. “It’s called a Hell Ride and it is that. Usually, we don’t do it unless something horrible and deadly is after us.” It took me a long time to get the words out and he waited patiently for me to finish. He kept trying to get me to eat and finally to shut him up, I swallowed some thick meat soup that tasted really salty. It sat like a lump of tar in my throat, triggering a feeling of needing to vomit. When I did, it was to a gout of bright blood that soaked my chest and went splattering across the inside of the hut leaving droplets of blood on shelves stocked with parts, equipment, water bottles and foil packages.

I felt instantly cold as my blood pressure dropped and the edges of my vision darkened. I heard him cry out for drugs and barely felt myself fall flat on the cot.

I seemed to watch them working on me hovering above them as he stripped open my shirt exposing my chest. I saw him place the airbag over my face and squeeze while another swabbed my sides with iodine and punched a sharp tube in between my ribs. Blood splattered the floor in a steady stream as a third soldier hooked up a hastily warmed bag of blood squeezing it in as fast as it could go.

“Heart’s in V-fib,” he said tersely and took this enormous six-inch long needle and punched it through my chest wall straight into my heart. I knew what it felt like to get kicked by a mule and this was far worse – I knew why they called adrenaline re-animator juice as my heart shuddered and began galloping at the speed of light.

“BP?” Martinez snapped.

“30/15,” Suarez said calmly. “Pulse is 15.” He waited a few seconds. “Coming up, BP is

60/40, pulse 125.”

“Let’s wait 5 minutes and see if it levels off,” he returned calmly and counted my respirations. “32 and shallow. Up his O2 to 4.”

Fresh oxygen pulsed in my face, I was stuck between two worlds – one of life and the other the threshold of death. Idly, I wondered which one I was tipping towards when I felt a soft hand reach for the golden ring tied around my neck.

Mallei stood before me with Juniper, Gordy and the kids at her side. All sorts of animals lay at her feet. There was an illuminating glow to her shining through the very essence of her skin, her eyes and smile were blindingly beautiful. “Not yet, my beautiful Raitt. You have a long and wonderful life ahead of you. Just hang on for a few more hours.” She bent forward and kissed me on the lips and peace filled me. I smiled, shuttered my eyes and sank back into a darkness where nothing harmed or touched me. Where nothing disturbed my dreams or sleep. Where I left the worries of whether I lived or died in the hands of that mystical magical presence that I knew was all around me.

Chapter 46

I felt odd. Rocking and warm yet my legs were stretched uncomfortably. I groaned and looked up on a strange world, we were inside a black tunnel only dimly lit by bobbing lights and sparkling flares. My hands were gripped in a soft silky mane and I was on a horse. Or so I thought until I saw the glowing two foot spiral ivory and gold horn glowing like a torch.

“Mum,” I managed and my voice scared me. It sounded like the worst asthmatic, liquidy and full of rales. I wanted to cough, I needed to cough and I knew if I did, my lungs would collapse as blood spewed forth.

She moved so smoothly that not one footfall jarred me. Walking beside me holding up bags of blood, fluid and O2 were Martinez and another man whose breast patch said P. Storrer. He was tall, blonde and gave me a grin when he saw my eyes were open.

“Hey. Welcome back, Draco,” he said, his hand warm on my knees. Someone had bandaged them, the scrapes no longer hurt. “What’s it like being that Dragon?”

“Awesome,” I grinned in a ghastly parody of a smile. I hugged my legs together and shivered. I felt very odd, cold yet so hot that sweat poured off me. Lucid yet I felt as if I wasn’t quite awake, my ears made everything thrum yet every sound was crystal clear. I could hear their foot beats, her cloven hooves scraping, even the ticking of their watches and the dust settling yet my heartbeats were so loud it drowned out his words.

“Hey. I can see light up ahead!” Suarez’s voice broke my concentration and as the glow at the end of the darkness became an irregular circle, I could see it, too. The Unicorn stopped and I could hear her thoughts in my head as clearly as if she spoke them.

We have traveled the origins of the Power that made all before the Pattern, before Chaos and before even I existed. I can go no further. I love you, Son of my Desire. From here these mortal men hold your life in their hands but they have been worthy of touching me. They will defend and support you. Go and I will see you again in Amber.

She dropped to her knees and I slid carefully off, held by both SF men. She lightly touched

each man in the unit with her horn and turned, leaped and was gone in a flash of light.

It was only about twenty feet that we had to walk but it took us nearly 10 minutes and they finally carried me. We stepped out into the bright sunlight on a desert scene of bare sandstone, dry grass and sere landscape. Hills bare of anything but goat tracks, ravines and higher mountains. Martinez set me down against his pack and pulled out his radio.

“Sarge?” Storrer asked holding me with his knees. “This looks like –.”

“I know. Just exactly where we followed the LT into this crazy shit.” He pushed the button on his radio and spoke softly as he sent Suarez and Jackson out to scout. “Peppermint Patty, this is Retriever 9, do you copy?” He clicked off and waited. Repeated his call sign again. “Retriever 9 calling for pickup, come in.”

We heard the static and crackle of an American voice. “Who is this? Where did you get a US radio? Identify yourself,” the words were sharp and angry.

“This is Retriever 9, I repeat, Retriever 9 with his puppies, some eleven in all. LT is dead. We request extraction from Little Bunny ASAP. We have critically wounded.”

“What’s your DOB, Retriever 9? You and your puppies have been reported KIA six months ago.”

“Holy shit. We’ve been gone longer than that,” one of the other grunts said.

“Time runs differently in the Shadows,” I whispered. Storrer held a canteen to my mouth and I took a few sips. Listened blearily to Martinez reciting his DOB, SS number and other data. He kept his signals short until finally he burst out, “Riley, you asshole! Come get us before the ghoulies triangulate our position! Out.”

The two running perimeter came back stealthily and held up their hands, two fingers each and pointed downhill. Quietly, they reported that four boys were pushing a herd of goats straight towards us and the tunnel yet when we turned to look, the tunnel was merely an old narrow cave entrance.

“Can you move, Raven?” Martinez asked and I nodded. Storrer helped me up and we shuffled up over the narrow ridge just before we heard the bleating of goats and a few sheep. Luckily, the boys were far enough behind the herd that they didn’t notice the animals staring at us and their sharp hooves destroyed what little sign we left behind.

The other side of the ridge revealed a small valley with a glimmer of green in the bottoms. Silently, we made our way down and halfway there, all of them were sweating in the dry heat. Except for me. It was so dry that it hurt to breathe and the dust from our passage lingered in the still air. There wasn’t a breath of a breeze and sound carried yet I was the only one who moved stones or made noises. They moved as quietly as specters and they eventually put me in a chair hold to hurry our progress along. I knew they wanted to get as far away from these Afghans as they could.

His radio crackled just as we entered a dense thicket at the bottom of the ravine, filled with cedar trees and stuff that looked like gorse. It made great cover especially when they pulled out their ghillie suits. You could walk right past them and not see them. I was fascinated as Storrer explained it to me and I pointed to the wood elves standing near us wearing their own such apparel. He stared at me, with his brow furrowed and when I looked again, nothing was there. He

placed his huge palm on my forehead and I recalled that it grew larger and larger until it filled my whole world. After that, I remembered vague images of being carried to a small hilltop where the wind swirled and hummed like a giant bee. Someone rolled me and cut my clothes off, pinched my arms and stuck cool plastic over my face. I felt my stomach drop, bodies leaned into me and I thought I was flying but my wings didn't want to open. Martinez leaned in my face and his dark eyes smiled at me. "Time to sleep, macho hombre. Grande Negro Draconis. You're almost home." His voice faded but the pounding beat of a giant heart remained in the background.

The Chinook set down at the base in Kandahar and was met by MPs and medics who whisked the weary team into custody and took the other unknown soldier into the hospital. Martinez shouted his STATS as he was led away, breaking free once to grab the nearest doc. Rapidly, he said, "broken ribs, punctured lung, knife wounds in the abdomen; possible entry into bowels and pneumonia. I gave him 10 mL of morphine two hours ago," he shouted as he was dragged off.

In minutes, the boy was x-rayed, hooked up to fluids, on a respirator and readied for surgery. The nurse, a twenty-year veteran from Florida looked for his dog tags and found the leather thong around his neck but all that was on it was a thin gold wedding band. One of the other medics lifted his eyelid and stared.

"Hey. Look at this." He held the boy's eye open and all of them stared at the strange blue gemstone embedded where an eyeball should be. He tried to remove it and it wouldn't come loose. The other eye was a strange yellow – like a predatory cat yet reacted to his penlight within an acceptable time.

"He can't be more than seventeen or eighteen," he said, his mouth agape under the mask.

"Whatever. Let's cut him open and see why his BP is still falling," the Major said and the boy was scrubbed from his chest to his groin. Hours later, he stitched and stapled the boy back together after finding the nicked vein in his liver and repairing the punctured lung and torn bowel. On massive doses of antibiotics, anti-inflammatory for the 104° fever, bowel infection and pneumonia, with over half his blood volume replaced and a machine breathing for him, Major Garret sighed and cautiously pronounced him critical but stable. Two hours later, he was on a C-147 hospital plane enroute to Ramstein AFB in Germany.

Transferred to the state of the art hospital under armed guard, he was placed in a bed in the security wing with curious medical and military personnel waiting for him to awaken.

The entire Retriever 9 team were vetted by a doctor, debriefed and sent on to Ramstein as well, where they spent the same uncomfortable night in the locked wing of the Hospital under guard where they were told they would be interrogated by both the NCIS and CIA.

"Any idea who this kid is?" the surgeon in charge of the boy questioned. His name was George Armstrong Favre and he was AF, a tall, bald man with hardly any wrinkles and crisp hazel eyes. He was a whiz with battlefield wounds saving life and limb where others were too quick to amputate. He asked the question of the LT in charge of the investigation into Retriever 9's case. That officer was dark and sleek like a seal, not quite white nor African American in color but could even blend in with Asians. His name was Paul Ferrete, called Ferret by his men because he had the same qualities as the weasel family.

“His fingerprints aren’t in AFIS or the Military data base and his DNA is... weird,” Ferrete said. “How old do you think he is? Do you think he’s a native or American gone native? We even checked his teeth—he has no fillings of any kind, no metal implants and other than the eyeball, looks like a US teenager.”

“He’s definitely not Arabic, he’s circumcised. Not Afghani, Iranian or Iraqi. If anything, northern European or American. He’s 6’1/2, should weigh 180-190 but has clearly been severely malnourished for a year or more. The sutures in his skull aren’t closed yet nor are his spinal processes showing signs of arthritis so he’s no more than 21 although I believe it’s closer to 17. He’s had his left tibia and femur broken twice, all of his ribs, the xyloid process, and a major concussion. He has extensive scarring on his back and buttocks, a healing shoulder fracture and right arm. Pneumonia, knife wounds, abdominal punctures and penetrating stab wounds, peritonitis. In short, this child has been tortured to the point of death and nearly died on my table.”

“Huh.”

They stared at the pale, composed face lying on the air mattress covered with blankets and his hands lying at his side. He had short hair of blue black, the nurses had shaved it to stubble to remove the dirt, crusted blood and lice that infested it. Bathed, in a clean gown, he looked and smelled clean.

Favre picked up his hand and read the vitals. His heartbeat was fast and thready, the respirator breathed an even 16 inhalations per minute and his BP hovered at 90/60 while his heart was in the 100’s. His temperature stubbornly refused to drop below 102.9° even on the massive doses of alfa calforan and other high risk antibiotics. He had so many tubes and lines coming from him that the nurses had to work around his bedside in shifts.

Favre lifted the boy’s eyelids and touched the stone, gasped when the gem reacted with the star shaped slit widening much like a human iris. He checked the normal eye and saw the same reaction. “Holy Christ!” he breathed. “You think he sees out of it? What the hell kind of technology could produce this?”

“How much longer before he comes up out of the anesthesia?” Ferrete questioned. “You know, he’s a really good-looking kid. Who’d do that to him? And what was he doing over in Afghanistan?”

“Didn’t you asked the team that brought him out?”

“Yeah but they said some weird shit before they clammed up. They said they’d talk to us after they talked to him. Called him the Black Dragon in Spanish and said they owed their lives to him. Seems to me it was the other way around. They brought *him* out.”

“We’ll find out when and if he wakes up,” the doctor said.

“What’d you mean? I thought he was on the mend?”

“He has peritonitis. Which is 95% fatal when treated this late. And a walloping case of pneumonia. Don’t hold your breath.” Both of them stared at ‘John Doe’ before returning to their other tasks leaving J. Doe to the nurses and armed guards.

Chapter 47

I wasn't sure if I was alive or dead. I was drifting—nothing seemed to hurt but everything was numb. I had a strange constriction down my throat that suddenly made me gag and that I fought. I heard a woman make a startled exclamation and she popped a penlight in both eyes. “Well, hello my beauty,” she grinned. “Cough and I'll take the breathing tube out.

I coughed and it was as if my lungs were made of glass. I managed a feeble huff and out came the long trach tube I'd had before. Before I could even lick my dry lips, she was putting those rubber prongs to my nose and watching the pulse OX meter.

“Good, your levels are staying at 95%, that's great compared to your O2 levels yesterday. There are a great many people waiting to see you.” She pushed the call button but the nurses' station already knew I was awake from my elevated STATS.

“Dad? Grandpop?” I whispered. “Water, please?” I begged and she held the cup with ice and a straw to my lips. I took two sips and started hacking. Tiny electric sparks danced before my vision and when I could see again, the room had two doctors, two officers in uniform, a man in a three-piece suit and a woman that looked like a Federal Agent in a dark skirt and jacket. She was a blonde like Dayle Hinman.

“Hello, son. I'm Major Favre, I did your surgery. How are you feeling?”

“Like hammered dog shit,” I said succinctly.

“What's your name?”

“Raven Corey.” I was exhausted and started to drift back to sleep. He touched my hand and I jerked awake. It was cold and I didn't know him. I didn't like strangers to touch me.

“Where are you from, Raven?”

“California.”

“Your dad? Who's your father, and grandfather?”

“Merle Corey. Carl Corey. San Francisco.” It was too much for me, I sank back into sleep.

The next time I woke, it was because someone's hand gently rubbed on my chest bone, annoying and it hurt. I tried to swat at it but my hands were tied to flat boards and IVs. “Raven, wake up. Can you hear me? Hi, Raven. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

I grumbled. Everything started to hurt but especially my chest. I tried to feel for it but my hands were tied to those boards. I felt an uncomfortable fullness in my bladder. “Need to pee.”

“Go ahead, you're wearing a catheter. That's good, it's a sign your kidneys are working. What's your dad's address, Raven? We couldn't find one that was newer than ten years old... when he was in college. And your grandfather's out of the country and no one seems to know where he is.”

George was no longer alive and he'd used to care for Grandpop's San Francisco mansion. I didn't know who the factum was now. Remembered Bill. Bill Taylor, Grandpop's friend for over thirty years. Still, I wasn't sure if he was in Amber or on this Shadow. Again, I remembered that Murphy was dead and started sobbing.

“Hey, kid. It’s okay. What’s wrong?” He seemed really concerned. “Are you in pain? AFC Brewster, get me 2 cc of Roxynol.”

“Yes sir,” the nurse scurried out and I choked out a reply between gasps. She was back in seconds and he injected it into my port. Immediately, I was floating and his fingers were on my pulse.

“That’s better,” he said. “Raven, who can we call for you?”

“Taylor,” I mumbled. “Bill Taylor. Lawyer. Grandpop’s lawyer.” I faded into oblivion with a sigh of relief.

“I think his eyes are fluttering.”

“He’s coming up, his pulse is increasing and his BP, respirations. Temp is down to 101° this morning and his urine output has climbed to 400 mls. The drainage looks clearer, too.”

“Has he mentioned anything?”

“About what? Family? Afghanistan, who did this to him?”

“Where’s he comes from? That eyeball is so far above our technology – unless it’s from China or Japan.”

“He’s awake. Hi, Raven. How are you feeling?” I looked at the doctor, a major with a white lab coat over his uniform. He had hairy knuckles and surprisingly slender fingers. The other man looked like a Fed. I swallowed and lubricated my dry mouth.

“Water, please.” The Major let me drink my fill and asked if I wanted to sit up. I nodded and he slowly raised my shoulders so I could see the room. Private but there were barred windows and locked doors, three walls of windows waist-high. I could see the nursing station and out their windows to an airfield. “Ramstein?” He nodded.

“Have you been here before?”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Lieutenant Ferrete. NCIS. We have a few questions for you.”

“About Martinez and the SF team?” At his nod, I continued. “I’d be dead without them.”

“He said they’d be dead without you. What happened to you? How did you get into Afghanistan? And just what the hell are you?”

“A US citizen,” I spat back. “Call Bill Taylor of San Francisco, lawyer.” I refused to say anything else until he was called. I wondered what had prompted their hard-ass attitude towards me. I was obviously not a jihadist or terrorist and certainly no threat or danger to either the US military or myself.

The rest of the day I spent sleeping, complaining, drinking and trying to eat but my appetite was gone. I drifted in and out; they asked me lots of questions but I was so doped up most of the time my answers were unintelligible. Days passed, each one leaving me a little clearer and more coherent, awake longer periods of the day and unfortunately, into the night. I heard the powerful noise of jets taking off and landing, the thumping beat of helicopters many times during the day. Was visited every day by different people but Dr. Favre kept the visits to fifteen minutes or

under because of my condition.

So when the door opened, I didn't even bother to look until I heard a voice exclaim, "Holy beards of Dworkin!" I bolted upright in bed and nearly passed out as everything screamed with pain.

"Bill!" He rushed over to me and squeezed me so hard I thought I would pass out. I found myself crying into his shoulder but managed not to sob out my story. "What are you doing here?" I asked when I could finally get the words out. He squeezed my shoulder in warning.

"Your grandfather sent me from Europe. He's in a delicate situation and couldn't leave."

"How did you know to come *here*?" I stressed the word meaning Earth Shadow. "How did you even know to *look* here?"

"You mean Ramstein?" He asked letting me go. "They left a message at my office and my secretary forwarded it to me. What's going on, who did this, where have you been?" I heard his unspoken words. *Be careful what you say, they're listening.*

"The red lady did this. She caught and tortured me. The SF dudes found me looking for their Lieutenant Secrest. He was killed by unfriendlies. When I said I knew the way home, they rescued me and brought me out of a cave. Came out in Afghanistan. I was really sick, I saw unicorns and dragons at war with red soldiers."

"You were pretty out of it, huh?"

"He still is, Mr. Taylor," Lieutenant Ferrete said coming in my room without knocking.

"This is a private conversation," Bill shot back and Lieutenant laughed dryly.

"If you really think that, you're naïve, Mr. Taylor. Raven has been declared a person of interest to Homeland Security and the CIA."

"How long are you planning to keep him in custody?" Bill demanded.

"That depends on what he tells us about Lieutenant Secrest and the Recon team," Ferrete returned. "We have a few questions about the technology of his eye."

Bill noticed for the first time the gemstone implanted in my eye socket. "Holy shit!"

"Indeed," Ferrete said flatly. Major Garrett came in and chased both of them out of my room as he examined me. My temp was still up there, my belly tender where Jasra had knifed me and my lungs still felt like ground-up glass was inside them. It didn't stop me from asking when I could go home.

"Oh, not for a while, Raven. Your bowel injury is very serious. In fact, given your injuries and the length of time you went before treatment, it should have been fatal. But, you're in the lucky 5% that made it. Surprising too, considering your malnourished and abused state. What happened to you? How did you wind up in Afghanistan? Are you the child of some Blackwater operative? Is your mom Iranian or something?"

"My mum's dead," I said flatly and my expression grew sober. I was finally able to move my hands, the IVs had been downgraded to fluids and antibiotics only; and just one hand. I had a soft cast on my previously broken right arm and a brace on my left leg. For the broken ribs they did nothing but tell me to cradle a pillow when I needed to cough. Which, having pneumonia I did often.

They still had me wearing a catheter and I still had a drain coming out of my side where the wound had been. “I want to go home,” I whined and opened the deck of cards that Bill had slipped me. I shuffled through them and the major smiled.

“You like to play cards? I might arrange a game with you.”

“No, I don’t gamble,” I said and in the middle of the deck, I found both Dad’s and Grandpop’s Trumps. I knew that I could leave immediately if I wanted to and suddenly the burden of staying was lifted. “Doc, what would happen if I went home right now?”

“Without intensive medical treatment? You’d die. Of peritonitis, a long, lingering and painful death, Raven. It’s not a pleasant way to go. I know you want to go home but give it a few more weeks and we’ll see how you do. You’re still running a fever and frankly, I doubt you could stand up for more than five minutes. You’re weak and still very sick. You know that you’ve been sleeping nearly 20 hours a day? Even when you’re not on pain meds. Not eating any significant amounts either. When you can walk across this room, eat three meals a day, gain 10 pounds and your temp drops to 98.6° for three days in a row, maybe then you can go home.”

“Why not ask for pigs to fly, too?” I returned sourly.

“Ha. I’ve seen pigs fly. Lay back down and get some rest. No more visitors today.”

“Will you ask Bill to come see me tomorrow?” I begged. “And can I see the dudes that saved me? I want to tell them thanks.”

“We’ll see. Depends on whether Lieutenant Ferrete lets them out of the Brig.”

“Brig! What are they doing in jail? They’re heroes, not criminals!” I protested and sank back down against the pillows as a wave of malaise hit my gut. My face whitened and he checked me out, calling for the nurses.

“Heart rate just tripled, and his BP is dropping,” he said. “Raven?” He flicked his light in my eyes. “He’s still with us; get some Fentanyl and Reglan for his stomach.” I tried to retch but it hurt too much in my ribs and he rubbed my belly. “Tell me what hurts, Raven.”

“Belly,” I managed. “Ribs and belly. Nauseous.”

“The nurse will give you something for that.” She came back and popped the needle into my hand. In seconds, I was floating and the pain went away. I could feel the cards falling from my hand and made a conscious effort to hold them. Slid them under my pillow but kept my hand on them. Fell into a troubled sleep where I dreamed thieves wanted to steal my grandfather.

Chapter 48

My father, grandfather, Bill, and even Rinlon, Tegan and Pire all crowded the conference room along with a strange man I didn’t know but had heard his name. J. Emerson Sergeant. He was the top litigation lawyer in the world, wasn’t afraid to take on the US government or any other government. He had scads of politicians in his pocket and dark shit on everyone. Plus, he was a personal friend of the President. No one pissed him off and lived to regret it.

Right then, he was securing my release from US military and HS custody. I wasn’t present, I was still in my bed dreaming but Dad told me about it. Even then, Major Garrett only let my family in one at a time.

So, the second person I saw from home was my Dad – the King of the Courts of Chaos although rightly his title was Lord. He looked every inch a successful IT guru in his fancy three piece designer suit of thin blue pinstripe, starched lavender dress shirt with French cuffs. He looked pissed and I thought if I hadn't been full of tubes, lines and in shades of white, yellow and green, he might've punched me. Instead, he hugged me gingerly and said, "Cool eyeball but it's kind of throwing a wrench in things." I knew Trumping out of here wasn't the easy answer, it would leave too many questions. Both Dad and Grandpop liked to visit this Shadow and being on the Watch List would definitely cramp their style.

"Fine. I can fix that," I shrugged and popped the stone out. I would've swallowed it but my throat was still sore from the trach tube. I handed it over to Dad. He stared at what looked like a giant star sapphire and nothing more exotic than that. My eye socket was empty and the world looked weird through only one eye. Flat, wavering as if it wasn't quite real.

"They'll want to study it," he said. He reached into shadow and handed me an eye patch. Great, now I'd look like a pirate.

"That's okay, too." I spoke the word in Draconic, the oldest known magic language and an exact copy appeared in my hand. Without its magical properties, of course except for the action of the star widening and narrowing. When their scientists took it apart, (as I knew they would) they would find it was merely a miniaturized camera lens with a sensor embedded inside a man-made gemstone.

"Don't do anything stupid," he cautioned. "Rest and let Emmy get you out."

"Okay, Dad," I agreed and he paused. His eyebrows, dark and winged flattened over his eyes. "I like the sound of that, Raven. Never thought I'd say that. Son."

"Love you, Dad," I mumbled going back to sleep.

Grandpop came in next and lightly kissed my brow. I opened startled eyes and he stared at my eyepatch. "How are you feeling, Corby?" He teased, his warm hand on mine.

"Okay. Tired." My eyes welled with tears. In halting words, I told the Prince what had happened to Murphy and he gripped my hand hard.

"He loved you, Raven. As much as any mother or father," he said and I nodded.

"I know. I just never got to tell him how much he meant to me. I wish I had died in his place."

"He wouldn't want you to feel that way. I love you, too. You up for the rest of the gang? If not, they'll understand."

"Roelle, Marcus? Linz?" I asked carefully.

"Roelle and Marcus stayed home. Blissfully happy with each other but woefully worried about you. The Princess is with Vialle and she's waiting for you."

"Tegan left her?" My eyebrows raised.

"She's in the castle surrounded by the – Palace Guards," he smiled. "What could happen?" I knew he'd been going to say the Black Dragons but stopped before it could trigger any interest. I knew they were both recording and videotaping us.

"Luke?"

“Signed an alliance with Random and the Golden Circle. After all, his place is within its borders. And it provides them access to Blackbird.” He paused. “There’s a little problem with a...covey of lizards in Khafra?”

“I suspected as much. They’ll behave until I get back.” *I hope*, I said under my breath. I closed my eye and he kissed me again. Ugh, too many lips on me today.

“I’ll let you rest.” He softly closed the door and I drifted away peacefully. I sort of suspicioned that other people came in to see me. In a half world between sleep and dreaming, I was aware that the nurses came in, treated, fed and hydrated me, and even rolled me. Other people came in and with cold hands explored my belly and ribs. Some dude in scrubs entered next and tried to get me to breathe into this tube and float a plastic ball but I couldn’t stay awake long enough.

That afternoon, I had visitors. Two at a time. Most of them hung out and whispered quietly among themselves. It was comforting to know that that they were there, even if they didn’t say anything to me. I could smell them, especially the sharp, spicy scent of Dad and Gramps. I could feel it when they stood over me.

“Merlin, are you going to take him to the Courts?”

“Hell no,” my Dad shuddered. “They’d make mincemeat out of him. Why don’t you bring him to the Palace or San Francisco? I could stay there, I haven’t had a vacation in a while and Ghost has things well in hand at Court.”

“If Emerson can get the US government moving,” Corwin said. “They dug in their heels until I told him I could give them the eye.”

“What exactly is that thing?”

“Can I talk?” I asked cautiously.

“Yes. Merlin put a ward around the room when we’re in it so they only hear us discussing Great Aunt Dottie,” he grinned. “And her pet bats.”

“Do I have a Great Aunt Dottie?”

“Oh yes,” he nodded. “On your great-great-grandfather’s side, Dworkin. She was and is probably still alive and batty.”

“So, what is that gemstone/eyeball?” my Dad asked.

“It’s magic, part of a comet that fell in Minsk, part of a spell of the Seven Stars. I think it’s part of Amber’s beginnings. Sort of like the seed of the Primal Star.”

“Like the Jewel of Judgement?”

“Even more powerful than that. I think it could destroy the Jewel.” I paused and continued. “What was your dad like, Grandpop?”

“Oberon was a lot like Random. And like Eric without Eric’s mean streak. He was fun but a rascal around the ladies. No one really knows how many wives he had. After all, there are over nine of us that we know of and that’s not counting Dworkin’s get. You have cousins, aunts and uncles on all the Shadows. So, what you do want to do? Come home to Amber, Khafra, or San Francisco?”

“The doc said I’ll die if I don’t stay here until the infection clears up. I don’t mind staying as

long as I know I can leave. Besides, if I just disappear, won't that make it really hard for you to visit?"

"No. I can kick around in Amber and other places until years have passed here so that they won't be looking for us. It depends on what you want." He looked at me inquiringly.

"Like what? Go to high school? Graduate and go to college? I'm a little beyond that now, don't you think?"

"Well, what you want to do with your life? You needs some kind of occupation. A Prince of Nothing and the Black Dragon is a unique skill set but it doesn't exactly look good on a resume."

"I'd like to study architecture," I said out of the blue surprising myself. "To learn how to repair the Gothic cathedrals, the gargoyles and stonework."

"Oh, I see. For Murphy?" He smiled. "Hoping you may one day find another?"

"There'll never be another one like Murphy," I said sadly. "Grandpop, can you do something about the men that saved me?"

"Saved you?" It was his turn to look surprised. "I thought they were Jasra's men?"

"They were in it only because she promised them a way home. She didn't deliver."

"Secret?"

"He... loved her. He wanted her to quit. She said I killed him but I never saw him. I think she did it and blamed it on me; she was trying to get him to show her where the wormhole was that brought him here. I suspect he didn't because he realized she was only using him."

"How do you know that?" He asked curiously.

"He told me. He called her a quisling once."

"You're a smart kid, Raven. Are you eating yet?" I looked down at my blanket-covered knees. I was still in bed, they only allowed me up twice a day and that was for a short walk to my door and back.

"Stomach and guts are still sensitive. They have me on a tube thing and put this nasty stuff in it." I lifted the blankets, my gown and showed him the duodenal port sewn into my belly. Even after two weeks, I was still horrible shades of lime green and yellow. His eyes darkened in rage and his teeth clenched. He looked every inch an avenging Prince.

"Remind me never to piss you off," I said shakily.

"All I can say she's lucky she's dead. I would have done worse to her than she could ever have imagined," he snarled.

"Hey, Gramps, don't raise your blood pressure." I felt the room shimmer and looked at him inquiringly.

"That's the wards warning us of non-Amberites. Watch what you say." I nodded and the door opened to let in Martinez and Suarez. They were in dress uniforms and spit-polished, along with Lieutenant Ferrete and the CIA man whose name I forgot. The SF dudes eyes' widened at my grandfather and the close resemblance between us.

"Hey, little Dragon," they gave me a careful fist bump. "How you doing?"

“I’m alive, thanks to you. What do you want for a reward?”

“Depends,” he returned.

“On what?” Gramps asked and Martinez jerked his thumb towards the US government agents.

“On them. If they believe our story. We told them what happened. You told them the same thing. We’re waiting to see what the bigwigs decide.”

“Will this end your military career?” Grandpa asked.

“It could,” he said.

“Did you like saving my grandson?”

“Yeah. It was... intense,” both admitted.

“The pay is double what you make here and you get to live in the Palace. Want to come back and join us?”

Their eyes lit up. “I’m in. We get to go back and forth?”

“That can be arranged or you could bring your families too,” Grandpop said.

“Wait a minute –,” Ferrete said. “Palace?”

“Why yes,” Prince Corwin of Amber said. “I’m the brother of the King of Amber. Prince, if you will and Raven here, why he is the son of King Merlin of Chaos.” Their mouths dropped open at the outrageous although true claim. I snickered at the expressions on their faces. “Shall I call President Obama and ask him?”

“Wow, Gramps. You know Barack Obama?” I said admiringly.

“Quite well. All I have to do is ask him to release these men and my grandson and that will happen. You have the device and your facts; it’s time to release everyone.”

“Call him,” Ferrete said calling Gramps bluff so he did. The upshot was that we were all invited to be flown to Washington as guests of the President and I was going into a very exclusive rehab place out on the Beltway where, surprise, Grandpop had a residence. We would leave on Friday, which gave me another two days at the AFB. Everyone else flew over first, leaving Grandpop with me to ensure I didn’t disappear into CIA or HS limbo. Truth was, I was scared that it would happen, too so I was glad to see him stay. I fell asleep knowing I was guarded.

Chapter 49

Murphy took me to see the Lincoln Memorial when I was 12. I remember staring up at the giant noble and sad face of the President and being awed by it more than anything I’d ever seen. Naively, I asked if he was a gargoyle like Murph and if he would rise and fly off. Was sort of scared that he was so huge. Murphy didn’t laugh at my question but several other people standing nearby did.

After that, we explored the Smithsonian, the Reflecting Pool, White House, Capital building and even the Library of Congress. Last, when night fell, traffic dimmed, and you could smell the cherry blossoms along the Potomac even over the smell of diesel and car exhaust, Murphy flew me to the top of the Washington Monument where we perched atop the needle. The view was

magnificent (between the bursts of the strobe lights warning airplanes). I could see the Pentagon, J. Edgar Hoover building and the pentagon shape of the entire city. It was even grander than the view from the Statue of Liberty.

In the fancy ambulance guarded by Secret Service agents, I saw all these things again as we drove past them. The ride from the airport was long and traffic had been murder. Lots of stop and go, even in the fast lanes. We'd attracted attention from the Press because of the military jet landing at a restricted area at Dulles and being met by a waiting ambulance and black Escalades. The Press knew some VIP was coming in but not who or what so they were curious. My transfer from plane to ambulance occurred as I was sleeping and I didn't wake up until we were passing the loops of the Beltway. I couldn't see much, flat on my back on the hospital cot and the flight had left me exhausted. Grandpop was still with me along with a nurse.

The driveway I could see partially as we motored up its crepe myrtle lined paved cobblestones. The suspension in the diesel ambulance was so good that I didn't feel any bumps. I did see a high fence of steel made to look like wrought iron with fancy gates but couldn't see anything of the hospital itself. From the whistles of the drivers, it must have been something. I really didn't pay much attention until I was actually transferred into a hospital bed and on an air mattress.

My room was private, more like a fancy suite. My bed, a pretty Cherrywood dresser and bookshelf with a computer desk and chair. Papered with genteel hunting scenes of elegant TBs going over brush fences and pale pecan bead board below. Brass sconces on the wall, hand knit throw rugs on lovingly maintained wide plank floors. Four big windows that opened to a small balcony. A sitting room done in yellow and pale wicker and a small kitchenette complete with a bar table where a wheelchair could comfortably park beneath.

The bathroom was huge, able to accommodate a wheelchair for the shower and even a lift for the tub. Double sinks and a huge mirror. I was afraid to look at myself but thankfully, they put me to bed first. All I wanted to do was sleep and even did that through the Unit doctor's physical examination.

After that, I took a powernap that lasted for 18 hours and Gramps woke me declaring he was afraid I had lapsed into a coma. I opened bleary eyes, well, one eye anyway and I was disoriented for a frantic minute until I realized where I was. Even more bizarre, my room was filled with serious dudes in three-piece dark suits, sunglasses, earbuds and suspicious bulges at their armpits. They were armed. And presently, I saw why. My eyes widened as the President entered my room, hand extending to shake Grandpop's and asked me how I was doing.

"Okay," I stuttered, trying to hit the button to make me sit up at the same time as I tried to finger comb my hair.

"Don't worry," he teased me. "You look presentable, if a trifle jet-lagged. I hear you had an exciting time in Afghanistan. Are you recovering?"

"Yes, Mr. President," I stammered shaking his hand.

"Good. Just wanted to meet Carl's grandson and to tell you all that the Unit that rescued you have been rewarded and those that are so inclined may discharge into your Grandfather's service with no repercussions."

"Thank you."

"You hungry?" he asked smiling. "I heard the chef here is almost as good as mine." I looked at

my doctor whom I had yet to meet officially and he nodded.

“As long as it’s bland and he can tolerate it. Today’s the first day your temp has been normal and your WBC below 100,000. I believe the infection has been eradicated. Stop at the first sign of nausea.”

“Okay,” I agreed. Looked around the room and an aide appeared. A little guy with dark hair and eyes, his nametag was ‘Ramon’ and he escorted everyone out.

“Would you like a shower before you get dressed?” he asked me and I relaxed when I saw he was wearing a wedding ring.

“Can I get my belly wet?” I was dubious.

“Sure. Your port’s closed and as long as you don’t scrub your surgical wound, it’s covered with steri-seal, you can have a sit down shower.”

“Great. My hair feels grungy.” I rubbed the stubble---I’d been shocked that my head had been shaved but I’d gotten used to it after the first week. It helped that I wasn’t near any mirrors, too. He slid me out of bed into a shower chair, removed my gown and covered me with a sheet. Didn’t say anything about the fading bruises or the scars. Pushed me into the bathroom and into the porcelain tiled shower done in Aztec geometric designs of taupe, rust and beige. I scrubbed my hair, armpits and crotch while he got my back and legs, even between my toes. Strapped the seatbelt around me, grinned and asked if I needed some hand time.

I looked at him and blushed as I translated his meaning. Mumbled something and he handed me a washcloth, the shower wand and lotion as he closed the door. I thought about it but my body and belly muscles were just too sore to risk so I rinsed myself off, gooped up my skin with the lotion and called him back when I was done.

Towelng off was beyond my capabilities, sitting on the bed while he dressed me took all my remaining energy. Gramps or Dad had brought my clothes from the Frisco house, even my sneakers and dress shoes. He put me in my very best suit (Grandpop had them made in London) a simple but elegant wine so deep it looked almost black. Worsted with narrow trousers and a slim cut jacket with narrow lapels. A soft blue shirt, gold cuff links, silk socks and shiny black slip-ons. No tie and I wasn’t the bow tie type. He brushed my hair back, shaved me and applied cologne that I recognized as Dad’s unique scent. Admired me and then held a small boudoir mirror up to my face. I gaped. I looked exactly like my father except for the color of my eye.

“Oh, here’s a new eye patch your Dad left,” he said and handed it to me. I laughed. It had a dragon in gold thread next to a white Unicorn instead of the plain black cup. Thank the gods it wasn’t some football or baseball team logo.

“Ready?” Surprisingly, I was. Eager and hungry. Ramon whisked me down the hallway which was wide enough for two rows of wheelchairs to pass each other. Doors led into other patient rooms and the nursing station was at the end of the hall, a round counter with computer terminals and medical equipment.

We went down in an elevator that had four floors plus a basement and into a large dining room straight out of a Boston mansion. China, crystal and sterling dinnerware on beautifully appointed tables. Flowers on the table, linen tablecloths and napkins. Everyone inside was either related to me or knew me or with the President’s entourage. They all stood up from their seats and clapped making me blush in embarrassment. Dad proposed a toast to my continued recovery and then,

Ramon wheeled me next to my Grandpop and the President. We ate, they conversed around us and I listened to the conversation between my two dads and the President, realized that he knew them both a lot deeper than just friends. He mentioned things that only a person who'd been to Amber should've known. I looked at him with more intensity and he caught my stare, winked at me asking if I preferred red wine or green. Since green wine was the Cuke wine that Vialle drank and I'd never seen anywhere else, I knew he must mean Amber's version.

"And how is your family, Carl?" He asked genially. "Randy and Vi?"

Now I knew he'd been to Amber. "Where did you grow up, Mr. President?" I asked suspiciously.

"Oh you know, here, there, the South Seas."

"Amber?"

"Where's that?" He asked blandly.

"The land of unicorns and dreams," my grandfather said and discussed issues of which I had no knowledge. I contented myself with my tomato basil soup, potato soufflé and Dover sole. They had wine, I was allowed a glass of water with a lime slice and left most of the food on my plate. I took only a spoonful of each before my stomach was full. I had an instant sugar rush and came crashing down to yawn repeatedly at the table. Said excuse me so many times I gave up.

Grandpop suggested I go back to bed but I demurred thinking it was just too rude to fall asleep in the company of the President of the United States. He said if it wasn't rude to call the Prince of Amber *Gramps* then I could take a nap with him present. So I did. Dad wheeled me over to one of the plush couches, arranged me on it and sat next to me while he guzzled fragrant cups of coffee and ate French pastries.

"Save me a Napoleon," I yawned and laid my head on his shoulder. I felt him stroking my stubble before I fell asleep.

I woke up during the night and thought it all a dream until I rolled over and saw the enormous flaky pastry sitting on my bed table covered in plastic wrap. A night-light made my room bright enough to see and it showed me both a nurse sitting quietly reading a Kindle and a guard outside my door. Rinlon and Tegan looked uncomfortable in a suit, both pulling at their collars. I went back to sleep.

In the morning, I woke on my own before the aides or nurses came in. Managed to slide out of bed and hobbled over to the bathroom. I could walk fine as long as I took it slow and didn't stand up to stretch my belly muscles. Toileted, brushed my teeth and washed my face. Stared into the mirror. Saw my face, thin, wind-burned, a silly patch over my eye and the other was bloodshot. I looked pale and sickly, not the robust teenager I remembered. I lifted the clean gown and stared in shock. The doctors had opened me up from the bottom of my ribs to my pubic bone. I had a huge scar where staples and stitch lines were covered with a plastic sticky sheet and a large Band-Aid where they'd removed the drains. Two large bandages on my sides where they had inserted tubes to drain my lungs. I was an ugly shade of lime green and piss yellow. You could count every rib and my hip bones stuck out like a poor cow. The port sewn into my intestines looked obscene, my belly wasn't flat but concave like a deep bowl. I had no muscle although you could see I'd once been heavily built in the shoulders. Probably from all the flying as a Dragon. I was suddenly sick of the way I looked and incredibly homesick.

I sat down on the toilet, resting until I knew I could make it back to the bed but opted for the chair instead. The day nurse came in, saw I was up and asked me what I'd like for breakfast. Gave me my pills and told me I was scheduled for surgery later to remove the port as I was eating and passing food. I nodded, told her I wanted an omelet and she said it would be brought to my room as soon as it was ready. I was picking at the ham and mushrooms when the Amber contingent entered my room.

Epilogue-Chapter 50

Towards the end of the week, I was able to get up on my own and do all my own hygiene without getting dizzy or sick to my stomach. Grandpop and Dad took me out on excursions into the Virginia countryside and finally, the doctor discharged me to Gramps' custody. I saw his Virginia mansion, almost as beautiful as Tara but a much smaller scaled down version. Although I wanted to go home right away, he made me stay a week where I did nothing but lay around and get pampered. I put on another 10 pounds, my wounds faded and all my staples came out.

I wandered the house and found statues and artwork from Vialle and old masters. When I asked Gramps, he told me that they might be Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo but not this world's Michelangelo and da Vinci. Some of them were exact copies except that the Mona Lisa faced right instead of left; the statue of David had boobs and instead of a sling, he carried a bow.

I watched many movies and Dad took me for walks in the woods behind the estate. Part of the Smokey Mountains, I could hike for hours had I the energy. Once around the backyard was enough and all three guards came with me. I'd convinced Rin, Pire and Tegan to try out jeans and they loved them except for Rinlon who'd become a bit of a fashion horse, he preferred Dockers. I couldn't wear jeans yet, the pressure on my belly hurt so I shuffled around in scrub bottoms with a drawstring waist and T-shirt tops. Dad brought me a whole collection of vintage tees from Metallica, CCR, David Lee Roth and Kansas. Even a Blondie. My favorite was Freddie Mercury of Queen.

The backyard was a rose garden complete with grape arbor, pergola and benches to sit on. I collapsed after my first circuit onto a pretty wicker chair and before I could say 'howdy doody', some fancy butler in tux and tails was asking if I would like tea. "Yes, please. Sugar and milk," I added and stared. Jumped up as quickly as an eighty-year-old half dead wizard and hugged Marcus. Kissed him to his utter disgust and smiled so hard my face hurt. "Hey."

"Raven. Raven. I'm so sorry," he started and I snorted. He looked startled as if he expected smoke and flames.

"Horse chestnuts. If it wasn't for your idea, Marcus, I would still be a Dragon," I retorted. "I had a great adventure and met a girl, fought a Witch and managed to bring King Luke into the Golden Circle. Not bad for a year's work. Oh, and I got my body back, not to mention this really cool eyeball."

"Is it yours, truly? I mean, it looks like yours, warts and all but is it really yours or a copy?"

Everyone was interested in my answer. I paused and thought about how to explain it to Marcus and asked, "Is Roelle here, too?"

"No. She stayed behind for the wedding planning," he explained and my eyes popped.

"You're getting married? Congratulations!" I hugged him and then swallowed. He blushed and

he looked funnier than I with his red hair and red complexion “It’s okay with you that Roelle and I—?”

“She told me everything,” he shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, virginity is no big thing in Amber.”

“Good, because I don’t think I could whip you, Marcus. Besides this body is a virgin, too.” He laughed until he realized I was serious. “I’m telling the truth. This body is brand-new, created from the components of the Seven Stars. They mixed and became a strand of magical enhanced particles that were like a blueprint of my cellular makeup and no one else’s. Every human on the face of every Shadow is composed of these elements in a different combination which makes me who I am and who you are. It’s called DNA and is arranged like a double helix. Understand? Every living thing is made the same way.”

“Everything?” Marcus was fascinated.

“Yes. We have the most complex arrangement of all the life out there. I think. I haven’t visited many Shadow Realms. Dad, does this apply to your Chaos Demons, too?”

He looked thoughtful. “I don’t know but I can put Ghost on it. So, tea?”

“Please.” I watched Marcus perform the tea ritual with all the aplomb of a staid English butler, sipped the Earl Grey, leaned back, closed my eyes and fell into a gentle doze. I woke up in bed in my PJs, rolled over and went back to sleep.

By the time the week was over, I was *so* ready to leave. I was worried about the dragons loose in Khafra and even more insane over Lyndseye exposed to the young men always underfoot in the Castle.

Dad helped me dress for the return trip, I chose freshly pressed navy blue Dockers, pale yellow long-sleeved shirt and a snugly fitted vest. Belt, and short boots completed my outfit. My hair had grown out to an overall inch length. I was nervous and paced from foot to foot until I made myself ache. “How do I look, Dad? Grandpop?” I asked anxiously. Both of them studied me seriously but I saw the twitch at the corner of Gramps’ lips.

“Better than the walking dead.”

“Not by much,” Dad muttered.

“Hey, I’ve put on 20 pounds already,” I came back. “I eat and I feel much better.” Gramps handed me a set of cards and from the icy cold of the deck, I knew they were Trumps. I spread them out and saw a complete set. Merlin, Brand, Fiona, Corwin, Deirdre, Martin, Llewella, Caine, Julian, Gerard, Bleys, Benedict and Eric. Flora, Dalton, Luke, Mandor, Martin, Random, Vialle, Oberon, Dworkin and Ghostwheel. Last, a beautifully drawn image of me in black and gold with the Black Dragon behind me. I had on a cape closed at the throat with a pin shaped like the head of the Dragon, its eyes one of yellow Topaz and the other a brilliant blue. I had no weapon like my grandfather’s sword Grayswandir nor a computer as in my Dad’s portrait.

“Wow,” I said. “Thanks.”

“No watering pot, okay?” Dad said.

“Okay,” I sniffed. He pulled out his own set, selected Random’s and asked if we could come home. Random grinned. Thank God he wasn’t wearing those silly striped trousers. He was in

jeans and jacket.

“Welcome home, Prince Raven,” he said, took my hand and pulled me into his embrace. I rolled my eyes at everyone, towering over the much shorter King.

“Majesty,” I mumbled. “I’m sorry to have caused so much trouble.”

“Much more trouble than I’ve ever had to deal with,” he agreed. “Still, you settled the mess with King Luke and Jasra and got your body back. Let’s try to keep this one in better shape. Where’s Murphy?”

My face fell. No one had told him? “He died, Sire. Saving my life.”

“Oh Raven, I’m sorry. Are you tired? I’ve had your old room readied for you.”

I cleared my throat. “The Princess?”

“She’s around here somewhere,” he said carelessly. “Come into the Great Hall.”

I hesitated, I really was tired and wanted to find Linz before I crashed. Shrugging, I followed the King into the Great Hall and as the guard swung open the double doors, I nearly fell over in shock as a horde of people yelled ‘Welcome home, Raven!’ at the top of their lungs.

Random steered me over to a table and I sat down as everyone toasted me. I looked, saw the queen, Roelle and at last Lyndseye but was astonished at the transformation. Her hair had grown out and she was a platinum blond with those incredible green eyes. Still petite but so beautiful in a long green gown of silk and as she approached me she looked like a goddess created out of sea foam afloat on the ocean’s waves. I tried to stand up and bow to her but at the last minute, she flung herself into my arms and kissed me in front of the entire assemblage. I didn’t care. She tasted of peach ice cream, Godiva chocolates, butter cookies and everything I had ever drooled after. The world receded and we were the only two in it.

“Raitt, my beautiful Raitt,” she cried. “You are as beautiful a man as you were my Dragon and my mule.”

“Your jackass,” I grinned. “Linz, I love you.”

“And I love you, too, Raven Murphy-Sines, son of Merlin of Chaos. Here, before these witnesses and the King of Amber, Khafra, the Golden Circle Alliance and the Lord of the Courts of Chaos, I declare it so. I make you a Knight of the Order of the Blue Star as you are already a Prince of Amber and Chaos.”

“Is that a proposal?” I asked suspiciously.

“Yes. What’s your answer?” She pinched my cheek.

“I accept.” I turned in surprise to the crowd as they cheered. They spent the entire evening getting drunk, I fell asleep with my head in the lap of my fiancée. They let me. After all, it wasn’t the first time I slept with the Princess even it was just as a mule.

Next morning, we were both awakened by the chamber staff coming in to clean up after the enormous and noisy party. A few drunks lay passed out on the floor. Lyndseye and I tiptoed past them and I led her outside to the top of the Castle where we faced the magic orbs that protected the Castle from sieges.

“Ready?” I asked. “You might want to change, first.” She gestured and her gown became the

outfit worn in Minsk, trousers, shirt and vest covered with a cape. Somehow, both of us had managed to avoid our bodyguards. Still, I had learned my lesson, I pulled out my Grandfather's Trump and called him. He rolled over in bed and looked up at me.

"Raven. You're up early. Or late." He saw the Princess. "Princess Caldor."

"Grandpop, Linz and I are going to Khafra. I thought I'd tell someone in case – well, you know."

"Wait for Tegan or Pire," he said, throwing aside his covers and pulling on a robe.

"I'm going as the Dragon. I can't carry more than one person," I said.

"Take your bodyguard, then."

"I can't. It has to be the Princess," I explained.

"Why?" He was dressing faster than I could blink.

"Because I promised them a Realm of their own and I need the Princess to help me create it. She is the Lost Star of the riddle and without her, I cannot fulfill my vow to the Dragon Horde. You want 10,000 ravenous dragons loose in the Golden Circle?"

"I see your point. Can one of us come by Trump?"

"No," I shook my head. "Where we go will never have a Trump, will never see the footfall of men. I promised them this, they have been waiting patiently. I could have Moon Dancer bring you from Khafra but once there, I could not carry you both back and the Trumps will not work. It will be too far from the Pattern, even farther than the Court's influence."

"I understand. Raven, be careful," he sounded suspiciously tremulous.

"I plan to, Grandfather," I whispered and changed to my Dragon form. Once again I wore my blue eye and Linz climbed on my back. I leaped from Castle Amber, turned to face Kolvir and flew up towards the top of her peak. Inside the great mountain that was Kolvir lay the Primal Pattern and with it in mind, I willed myself to Khafra. We flew out into green skies over the palace of the King.

I could see the great Dragons flying above me, swooping, diving and patrolling the land. Many were over the harbor and fishing, pulling up the giant eels that gave shipping so much trouble. It was like watching birds pulling worms out of the soil.

I started to sing and my song called them all. Swirling above and around me in a swarm like a shoal of fish, they sang with me in delight that I was fulfilling my promise. As one mass, we rose and banked heading out to the ocean. I sang goodbyes to the people of Topaz and we heard them weeping for they had seen legends come to life and now, must bid them farewell.

I led them over golden kissed seas and Lyndseye's voice joined mine, singing of the land beyond the waves where the mountains were covered with Douglas firs and ponderosa pines. Where the skies were blood red and the sun's aurora borealis made ethereal Dragons dance in the heavens. Where the lands were teeming with wildlife and had never known the footsteps of man.

We flew for days, for centuries, across a hundred thousand light years of time until we approached the golden ball of the Realm that had no name. I could not enter for if I approached this heaven in my dragon form, I would never want to leave. Only one dragon looked back and that was Moon Dancer.

Live well, Great Dragon, Blackbird, he said. You have honored your promise and know---that between your clan and mine, there will always be a bridge. Should you lie at death's door and need me, call my name and I will come to your aid.

Live and be happy, Light That Dances Across the Night Sky Before the Dark of the Moon, I returned.

I turned around, the Princess and I made the journey homeward but not before we blighted the uninhabited worlds around Dragon Lair so that no one could ever return to their new home. Linz and I return to ours, slipping silently into the castle where we sat on the roof and watched the sunrise over Amber.

The End.