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*Blush*

# Shadow Queen

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McKAY



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Shadow Queen

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# *SHADOW QUEEN*

Christine McKay

## Dedication

For Grandpa, who instilled a love of writing in his kids and grandkids. His collection of stories scrawled across the backs of envelopes, calendars and leftover paper has ensured that those memories will never be lost.

And for Grandma, who denies that Grandpa's "sex on the roof" storyline had anything to do with her...

## Chapter One

Quince would damn himself to the seventh layer of Icy Hell before he'd beg for even a glance from Cerenth, the Kildarkee Queen. Duty demanded he be present for her mating. Honor kept him from speaking his mind. But neither duty nor honor could force him to participate.

The rest of the male members of the Kildarkee Dragoon formed a loose semicircle around her. They were dressed in gleaming white tunics, arms, legs and heads bare, their tunic sleeves and hems the only spots of color. The symbols embroidered around the garments' edges represented more than twenty centuries of dragon men's bloodlines.

Cerenth, their Queen, was also resplendent in white. She wore a fitted white sheath belted at her narrow waist with a gold cord. Her flaming red hair spilled in loose curls down her back, ending just above the dip of her waist. Everything about her sparkled from the band of gold she wore at her brow to her flashing emerald green eyes to her toenails adorned with precious stones. She looked like a fiery goddess but it was a cold fire she cast and her eyes were the eyes of a predator.

At times like this Quince knew they had not truly evolved far from their animal roots. His blood thrummed in his ears. The beast side of him scented Cerenth and like a siren's song she beckoned to his body's primal instincts. The man side of him rejected all she offered, knowing it was but a ruse so she could do what she willed to whomever she wanted. He was hard-pressed to know which side would win out, man or beast. Already he was soaked in sweat from the sheer effort it took to rein in his dragon nature.

Cerenth approached Adonthe, the youngest of their group and a water dragon bloodline. Why he was forced to be present was a mystery to Quince. It was cruel to taunt them, crueler still to taunt one so young and unable to take to the air.

A single painted nail traced the seashell scrollwork on Adonthe's sleeve. His chest heaved in and out. The smell of the Queen, ripe and ready for conquest, drifted through the group. Adonthe abruptly crumpled. No one moved to help him.

Cerenth's glittering green eyes fastened on Quince. He continued to stare straight ahead, watching her out of the corners of his eyes. She wrapped her hands around each of his bicep muscles, nails cutting into the flesh.

"Beg me to call your name," she purred. When he remained silent she released his arms and raked her nails over his chest. The fabric of his tunic shredded. "Beg me," she insisted.

He moistened his parched lips with the tip of his tongue but remained silent. Sweat rolled down his back, settling in the curve of his spine. His bloodlines would die with him—he'd not mate her.

"I can see your need." She pouted then caught his jaw in her hand and turned him to face her. "Tell me you do not desire me."

"Any female in heat can make the males pant for her," he said and met her gaze. She hit him with the full force of her displeasure. It was like plunging a knife through his eyes. His carefully built mental shields crumbled under the assault. She left his mind in tatters, the sound of her voice and her scent burned into his brain. He remained standing only because his knees were locked and her grip kept him from doubling over.

"Bastard," she hissed and slapped him.

Only a quick tilt of his head prevented her from scratching out his eyes. The Kildarkee had no healer. She'd have left him blind just as a sign of her displeasure, of his disobedience.

She turned to another eager male, teasing him as well. Quince doubled over then, clutching his head in his hands. She wanted to hear him scream in pain. He could refuse her that, only that. He dug his fingernails into his palms until they bled. Parts of his tunic lay in blood-spattered ruins at his feet.

In his haze of pain he did not hear whom Cerenth chose. He saw her white robes flutter to the ground as she shifted into her dragon form. The beast was as lovely as the woman. Her scaled hide was nova red, a sheen so bright it hurt to stare at it. Her silver underbelly shimmered like the liquid chains she often strung around her waist and neck. She shot skyward, her body as lithe as a fish slicing the water. Her lungs strained to pull a half ton of bulk skyward at the speed she demanded. She was a high psi, her psychic talents unmatched among her suitors. Shunting oxygen from one organ to another was child's play to her but not to them.

Quince recognized the dragon chasing after her as Handilee. His jaws were wide open, sides heaving as his lungs struggled for air. His dragon hide was as deep as an evergreen tree, his underbelly a dappled chocolate brown. In the eyes of a woman, Quince supposed, Handilee was a fine-muscle specimen. Handilee spent his days leading the border patrol. Quince had even served a time or two beneath his command. A fair man, Handilee, but in Quince's eyes his acceptance of Cerenth's offer lowered his intellect.

Cerenth executed an abrupt backflip, no doubt her psychic talents giving her body the buoyancy her wings couldn't make up. Handilee almost broke his back trying to keep up with her. Quince could hear Cerenth's lazy laugh in his mind.

It was a beautiful and intricate sight to behold, two grand beasts chasing one another, their bodies a spatter of paint against the sky's gray backdrop. He imagined the villagers were watching as well. Handilee's servants would be scurrying, prepping his suite for the arrival of the Queen. Quince had dismissed his own servants for the day, hoping they'd flee the citadel and the evening's forced festivities.

Quince glanced around. All heads were turned skyward. Adonthe still lay in a crumpled ball, knees drawn to his chest, arms wrapped around them.

A roar rang out. Handilee had snagged the Queen as she executed an aerial pirouette. Cerenth had misjudged his endurance. His evergreen hide twined around her red, a vine-encased rose falling from the sky. Cerenth writhed in his grasp while they plummeted toward the earth. Handilee flung his wings wide, slowing their descent. All the while Cerenth tried to twist in his grasp and tear at his underbelly.

Handilee kept her tucked tight against his belly then finally caught her neck with his. The two mated. Cerenth's rage at being possessed swept through all their minds like a flash flood. Several of the Dragoon staggered. The urge to mate, to reproduce, to fuck anything that held still was overpowering. Quince closed his eyes and fought it off as the sweat poured down his back. He could hear the moans of the other dragon men who were forced to take matters quite literally into their own hands. Quince refused to be reduced to that.

Then the mating was over. Quince no longer had any obligation to remain. And so he left.

Cerenth's contented laugh followed him into the bowels of the citadel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something uninvited shared the blackness with Leahlisande. Though her dragon night sight could not pierce the gloom, she could smell the creatures circling her. Their scent was like wet canine, worse, like wet dead canine that had lain beside the dusty trail for days in the hot sun.

She was destined to be the Belkirk Dragoon's Queen. She should fear nothing. She shivered. *Comforting thought that is.*

She did not know how she had come to be in this space, trapped in the dark with creatures bent on stalking her. Her talent as a seer had manifested itself at an early age. Being thrust against her will into visions had tempered her panic attacks. But this was different. This was no far-seeing dream. She'd tasted fear in her far-seeing but not mind-numbing terror. Nor did such dreams seek her life. Oh they wanted it, but only to give voice to their proclamations.

"What are you?" she called out. She held her knife in one hand, not sure when she had even drawn it. Its ivory handle was the only comforting friend at the moment.

The darkness had a life of its own. It clung to her nightgown like a thick fog, sought out her throat. She stifled a scream. Dragons were not afraid of the dark. Dragon Queens were afraid of nothing. Fine words to speak and think. They did nothing to ease her terror.

"Go ahead, Dragoness. I wish to hear you scream."

She spun around. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, perhaps even in her head. She put her free hand to her forehead. Her lips were parched. "This is a

dream," she whimpered. "This is only a dream." Her voice came out stronger. She held her head up. "You are not real." The darkness shifted, shadows playing hide and seek with one another.

"Oh but I am."

Something brushed against her legs. She yelped. She caught the gleam of red eyes, the silhouette of a sleek black body and then it was gone, buried in the engulfing blackness.

"What do you want?" she demanded. Indignation was preferable to fear. And fear simmered at the edge of her mind, taunting the more rational parts.

"Your heart," the voice whispered. "Your lifeblood."

"Why? What grievance have you against me?"

"Why?" it mocked. "Why not, little Queen? Such a tasty morsel, all curves coated in flesh, like a fine truffle." He snuffled, seeking to capture her scent.

She tried to grip her knife tighter but the ivory handle was slick with sweat. "This is my dream and I will not die in it."

Her hunter laughed. "Haughty even to the end. How delightful. Tell me, little Queen, would you rather be dead before I rip your heart from your chest?"

"I'd prefer to keep it."

"I'm afraid that's not an option." His voice was charmingly polite.

"Then you must die," she retorted, shifting to her dragon form. Throwing back her head, she blasted the room with fire. Inky limbless shadows cringed away from the heat and the flames.

The bodiless voice laughed. "I like the ones with spirit. They take so much longer to die." Something seized her heart right through her scaled armor and began to squeeze.

Leahlisande woke up, a scream lodged in her throat. Berdo and Micah, two of her men, held her down on her bed while she writhed in their grasp. Her mother Marith, the elder Belkirk Queen, watched from a safe distance away, her face furrowed in worry.

Leahlisande stilled. "I am awake."

Berdo eased off her long enough to reach for a wet cloth. He pressed it against her forehead. "Dreams again, my lady?"

"Nightmare," she shuddered, looking around. Someone had lit all the lamps in her chamber. Micah offered her a mug. Sitting up, she cradled it in both her hands as if it was her only tie to this world, this reality. Since she was a little girl she'd been haunted by premonitions, bits and pieces of what might be. Her men were well accustomed to her terrors. She didn't care that the brew was bitter with herbs as long as it helped her sleep, as long as it chased away her unknown assailant. She shivered again.

"Do you wish to share it?" her mother asked. Her voice hitched slightly.



Leahlisande knew just by the tone that her mother dreaded asking the question. She'd predicted her own father's death just two seasons ago. Marith had never forgiven her, as if she was responsible for the fall. She'd lost both her parents that day. She looked at her mother over the rim of the mug. "I was attacked." She closed her eyes, unable to bear the unspoken accusations in Marith's gaze.

"The citadel is safe," Marith retorted.

When she was a child her mother would cradle her on her lap and whisper soothing words until the dreams fled. Leahlisande ached for her touch. "It was only a dream," she said wearily. "It meant nothing."

Her mother's hard gaze did not ease.

Berdo, an empath, sensing Leahlisande's need, brushed the hair out of her eyes but his touch was not soothing. She wanted her mother. She wanted to feel safe. Gods help her she hated her gift. She took another deep drink from the mug. She knew better.

"Sip it, my lady or you may gag," Micah murmured.

As if on cue her stomach churned. She turned her head, her vomit narrowly missing the bed linens. Her mother's slippered footsteps faded away. Hugging herself, she rocked back and forth again and again. Why had she been cursed to be a seer? When the queasiness finally ceased, she rose, brushing off Berdo's and Micah's helping hands.

"May I be alone?"

Berdo's eyes reflected her anguish. "She grieves still." He squeezed Leahlisande's shoulder.

What about her? Did Marith think she didn't miss her own father? That she didn't yearn to hear her father's voice again, to have him praise her for her swordsmanship, comfort her when she felt overwhelmed by her talent? She'd been through this a thousand times in her own head, relived each moment and damned herself every time for the words she uttered.

"I cannot undo the past," Leahlisande said wearily. "I am her only daughter." She waved her hand. "Leave me. I wish to dress."

"The day has not yet dawned," Micah protested.

"I will disturb no one. Best you catch what sleep you can." She'd bet a diamond pence that Marith would be urging the Belkirk elders to meet. Only they could decide Leahlisande's fate. She was too precious to them to be shunned. But she bore close enough bloodlines to most that it might be of worth to trade her off to another Dragoon.

She didn't want to think of those possibilities. This was the only home she'd ever known.

She bathed in private. The water was a bit tepid but it shook off the last dregs of her dreams. She heard someone return to her room, no doubt to refresh her sheets and clean up the mess she'd left them. Pulling on a long-sleeved forest green tunic, she dressed in a soft caramel suede divided riding skirt and well-worn brown boots that buckled beneath her knees. She wound her sword belt about her waist twice but left her blade in

its sheath beside the hearth. She had no wish to add fuel to Marith's fire. A dragon woman wearing a sword alarmed many of the elders. Her hand hovered over the same knife she had held in her dreams. She debated about hiding it in the pouch at her waist. Instead she tucked it into her boot.

She plaited her hair, still wet from the bath, into one fat braid that wound its way down her back. She had her father's face and complexion, not the pale skin and silvery hair of her mother. As a child Leahlisande always thought her mother looked like a fairy queen. Leahlisande was a feminine version of her father, thick chocolate hair and naturally tanned skin. Perhaps that's why her mother could no longer bear the sight of her.

She passed her mother's chambers on the way out. The light beneath Marith's door sputtered like a candle drowning in its own wax. Marith had already retired. Did she still worry about her daughter? She used to fret over her, clucking sympathetically while Leahlisande recited her visions. Leahlisande rubbed her brow, feeling the dredges of a headache coming on.

Her fingers paused on her bare forehead. She should fetch her silver band. She hovered, indecisive. The hallway's shadows plucked at her nerves, urging her forward. Everyone knew who she was. It was fine where it lay, cast aside on her nightstand. The citadel was silent this morning. No one would notice the *faux pas*.

Two guards stood at the far entrance to the nursery. She acknowledged them with a nod. They stood a bit straighter. If she remained at the citadel any longer one of them might very well become her mate. She was acutely aware of how the dragon men had begun to regard her. Not as the Queen's only daughter but as their soon-to-be Queen.

She wanted no more than to shift and stretch her wings but that required an escort and she truly wanted to be alone. She wandered to the raised dais where her mother's eggs sat. The Belkirks had been ecstatic when Marith, in her advanced age, had laid five. She brushed her hands idly over their smooth surfaces, biting back the dreams threatening to surface. They didn't feel safe.

She glanced at the guards. They stared straight ahead, awake as ever now. The eggs were warm, perfectly incubated. She shifted from foot to foot in the sand, biting her lip. Dare she let her talent surface? If the eggs were in danger she had a duty to protect them. These were her half siblings. Perhaps one might even contain another Queen. Her hands hovered over the nearest egg's surface. She closed them into fists. The prophecy drifted at the edge of her vision as if an apparition waiting to be given Leahlisande's peculiar breath of life. *No*.

She turned away.

The guards saluted her as she passed. If they wondered about her odd behavior they kept it to themselves.

The hallways were still empty but she could hear the buzz of activity from the Queen's kitchen. It was staffed at all hours in case the Queen should need anything. Her stomach was steadier now. She thought about grabbing a bit of fresh bread but she

knew the balm to her agitation did not lie within the kitchen. Perhaps when she returned from her walk she would be ready to break her fast.

She passed from the bowels of the citadel into the courtyard. The cool night air caressed her cheek, the gentle wind whispering promises to her, urging her to shift and take flight. Such an action would raise the guard and only further Marith's claim that Leahlisande was not an asset to the Belkirk Dragoon but a horrible, out-of-hand wild thing. She did not know if Perry's men's allegiance transferred to his daughter.

Crossing the courtyard under another set of keen guardsmen's eyes, she entered the Hall of the Dead. Normally she avoided the place. Her dreams' tenuous grasp on her tended to take a more firm hold where whispers and shadows rested. She stood in the doorway. Urns lined nooks in the walls from floor to ceiling. Here lay the ashes of all the past Belkirks, thousands of years of history locked in the earthen and brass containers. Oil sconces set in increments along the wall cast weird shadows onto the floor. She didn't look too closely.

The room was deceptively small. Narrow passageways sprouted off both sides of the main aisle, providing more room for urns to rest. Taking a long match from a tray beside the door, she lit it from one of the sconces. A worn altar stood at the center of the room, its stone veined in red. Supposedly it was here, upon this very stone, where the very first Belkirk Queen had died. Her broken dragon body, mortally wounded mid-flight, cracked the stone and her blood etched ruby veins within the rock.

Leahlisande knelt and lit the fat candles on either side of the altar then blew out the match. The candles smoldered. Herb-scented smoke tendrils curled toward the shadowed ceiling. She lowered her eyes.

"Father," she breathed.

The room was silent save for the smacking of the greedy sconces as they gulped oil.

"Father, I am all alone here. Why did you have to leave me?"

Her eyes burned, whether from the candles or grief she did not know. A lump lodged in her throat. Something bubbled in her, repressed for far too long.

Her hands balled into fists. She raised her head, gazing at his urn, and smacked both fists onto the altar. "Why!" It was both a demand and a plea.

The shadows crept closer. She impatiently brushed them away.

And then she heard his voice, as clear as if he stood beside her. "Fetch me my pipe."

She looked around, gaze wild.

"Hurry, my Sande."

Only her father had ever called her Sande. Scrambling to her feet, she spun around. The urns stared back at her like rows of fallen sentinels. She was still alone. "Father?" Her voice hitched.

"Run." It was a whisper now, fading already.

"Do not leave me," she begged. But he was already gone.

She turned, the candles still burning, and ran. Instinct or perhaps her dreams guided her. She did not know where her father's smoking pipe lay but she did know where one roll of his tarpithy was stored. She'd made the last batch for him herself, carefully rolling the leaves and smoking them until they were a rich brown. Why, when she'd finally had come to him for solace, had he sent her away for a pipe? Her face burned. Had he too rejected her?

She fled into the citadel, racing past the guards, down the hallway, past the nursery and to the Queen's kitchen. She burst into the kitchen out of breath. Bits of her hair had escaped her impromptu plait. She was sure she looked like a wild creature. The servants stopped their work, the room abruptly silent. The head cook held his knife up, mid-blow.

"All is well," she gasped, waving her hand. All was not well. She tucked her loose hair behind her ears, wishing she'd taken the time to at least put on her crown. She turned toward Berdo, who was making Marith's morning concoction to ease the old Queen's aches and pains. "I need access to the root cellar."

He raised his eyebrows but did not question her. "Do you wish me to make you something? A soothing drink?"

She shook her head. "You have not discarded my tarpithy?"

"It is not a habit fit for a Queen." His voice, as always, was level and calm.

"It is for my father. I have no time to explain."

His eyes darkened. Perry had been a good friend and many still grieved his untimely death. Berdo bent his head and pulled on the iron ring set in middle of the kitchen floor. The wooden hatch lifted.

She needed no lantern. She blinked, letting her eyes adjust to the dark. Berdo set a foot on the stair tread behind her.

"I do not need further assistance, Berdo. Thank you," she called over her shoulder. She did not wait to see if he heeded her wishes.

Her shelf was tucked into the nook beneath the stairs. Here the staff let their young Queen collect and learn to preserve what she gathered. Sometimes her experiments failed, rotting in place. But she had always taken extra care when preparing her father's tarpithy. Standing on tiptoe, she felt along the top shelf.

She was so focused she nearly fell when one of the servants upstairs dropped a cast iron pan. Another pan fell and then it sounded as if an entire rack crashed on its side. Rocking back on her heels, she moved to the edge of the staircase. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the normal light. Before they were fully focused, a body tumbled down the stairwell, knocking her off balance and onto her derriere.

The head cook's dead eyes stared back at her, his own knife firmly sunk into his chest.

She screamed. A stampede of arms, legs, people and pans followed his body down the stairs. She pushed the dead man off her and scrambled on all fours out of the melee. Someone pulled the trap door down. The cellar was swathed in darkness.

Leahlisande hunkered beneath stairs, her arms wrapped around her. She could smell blood, smoke and human sweat. The sweat tasted of fear. She blinked and blinked again, trying to recover her night sight. She could hear someone's muffled crying off to her left. Then her vision cleared.

There were perhaps fifteen people crowded in the cellar, all human kitchen staff. Blood spattered their clothing. One man was missing part of his arm. A makeshift dishcloth tourniquet staunched the blood.

She found her voice but not the courage to stand. "What is going on?" she whispered.

All eyes swiveled toward the sound of her voice but they did not have her night vision.

"We are under attack," one of them finally said.

"Impossible. The citadel's defenses are unbreachable." She sounded like her mother.

No one answered her. What sounded like the stone butcher block collapsed against the floor above them. As one they shrank back, as far from the stairs as possible.

"Where are you, little Queen?" Her assailant's nightmare voice from this morning's dream filled her ears. She glanced around. The servants didn't appear to hear it. "I, the Hunter, have come to fetch you."

She reached for the knife in her boot and paused. He, it, whatever it was, truly didn't know where she was. She pulled into herself. Instead of erecting mental shields to protect herself from a metaphysical or physical assault she became very still.

Her father's actions became crystal clear. Even in death he had tried to keep her safe. She had no illusions. She'd barely escaped her nightmare. Her swordsmanship was excellent but she'd die under that creature's hand if she faced him alone. She would not fail her father again.

She slowed her breathing, forced her mind to blankness. She was nothing more than one of the servants, a simple kitchen maid. She wore no crown, no fancy clothing. She was a simple maid, no more.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," the Hunter taunted.

Leahlisande shivered. She refused to hear his voice.

"I know you are here." The Hunter's voice was muffled and tinny, as if he called from a long ways away.

She thought about this morning's porridge being scalded on the stove, the drudgery of dragging more firewood in to relight the kitchen fires, anything servant-like to distract her mind from worrying about her mother, the eggs and the rest of her family.

The ruse must have worked. The voice faded away.

“You will all pay in blood for her escape.” This time everyone heard the Hunter’s voice. One couldn’t help it. His voice grew in rage and decibel until the very walls shook with its fury. Leahlisande slapped her hands over her ears, trying to muffle it. Her ears rang. Her brain burst and began to trickle out her nose. She touched her fingertips to the fluid and came away with only blood. She shivered. *Brain intact, mind terrified beyond coherent thought.*

She knew she couldn’t beat the Hunter alone. Despite how much a fly struggled in a spider’s web it never escaped. Her only option was to cling to the illusion she had spun for herself. She was but a servant, one of many.

Then the world spun away from her and it mattered no more who or what she was. She blacked out.

## Chapter Two

One of Handilee's arms was flung across Cerenth's bare breasts, the other curled around his own waist. He snored softly, mouth open, a spider web of drool connecting the dragon man to the bed. Cerenth shoved his arm off of her. She'd been seduced by well-formed biceps and tight abs, the dip of a broad back as it curved and became tight firm buttocks. That was all Handilee had to offer. Long ago it might have been enough.

Truth was the overwhelming passion Cerenth spilled to her people was more fantasy than reality. What serving woman would want to experience her Queen's disappointing two minute romp with the Captain of the Guards? They had a better selection of lovers to choose from than the Kildarkee Queen herself. So Cerenth spun a dream and kept her disappointments closely guarded. "Accomplished lover" meant two vastly different things in the minds of a man and woman.

Cerenth rested her hand on her flat stomach. Had Handilee finally given her a daughter, a new Queen to carry her Dragoon into the next century? She was tired, so tired of being pregnant, tired of siring sons that turned out to be carbon copies of their less-than-stimulating sires.

She rose, drawing her silky golden robe around her shoulders. She'd done her duty. Now it was time for her to indulge in a bit of freedom. No one would miss their Queen tonight. She was expected to be in Handilee's bed but she had pushed his mind into a deep slumber.

A few hours' freedom! She twirled in place then glanced around, as if anyone might have seen her un-regal fall from grace. Of course no one had. If the night had been a bit darker she'd have launched herself from the balcony.

Although the fortress was warm, Cerenth clung to her robe as she stepped out of Handilee's chamber. The citadel was riddled with passages, most forgotten in the dredges of dragon history. Cerenth wasn't one to let such valuable knowledge be lost. Passageways ranged from the crawlspace reserved to hide away a prize or a lover to elaborate mazes that accessed all the levels of the citadel. She was sure she hadn't discovered them all. It was an amusing diversion.

Once in the hallway she glanced to make sure the way was safe. At the far end two bodies coupled on the floor. Cerenth's keen hearing detected the serving woman's soft mewling noises. The humans wouldn't notice her. Cerenth was absurdly jealous.

Cerenth counted the stones from the hallway's dead end. And then she danced a simple three beat rhythm that struck the stones in particular sequence. Part of the wall in front of her dropped out of sight. She stepped through the opening and tapped another stone with her foot. The opening closed. Unlit torches were set in niches along

the corridor but tonight she preferred the dark. She let her eyes grow accustomed to the blackness then, with a rapid eye flick, settled her night vision into place.

This particular corridor twisted downward, winding its way into the bowels of the citadel. Her footfalls were muffled, the dust thick beneath her bare feet. Some days she wished she could stay hidden away in the corridors. Of course then she'd have no admirers. And that would never do. She reached the cellar and used both hands to slide the wooden panel open.

Water dripped down the walls, trickling over her feet. She stood in the Dungeon Master's chamber. Only they had no prisoners in their dungeon and the current Dungeon Master was a fat old dragon who avoided this place as much as possible. Judging by the grime and mold on his desk, he took little pride in the position. She'd need to remedy that.

Hurrying out of the chamber, she trotted to the end of the corridor. She fished a key out of her robe's pocket, put it in the door's rusted keyhole and turned it. It squealed, the key sparring with the lock's rust, but opened. Here the sea waters mingled with machinery built before her time and became the fresh water the citadel used.

She could smell the cool air, feel the caress of it against her cheek. There was a vent that serviced these tunnels just above the waterline. And handholds conveniently placed for one as lithe as her to escape. A bigger man or even a dragon man would not consider it an exit. She'd have to get wet to reach it, a small price to pay for a few hours of freedom. But the chance to stretch her wings without the watchful eyes of her kinsmen spurred her on. The sound of splashing water made her pause. The giant waterwheel to her left still turned ever so slowly, carrying water upward to the purification machinery. Water splashed out of its troughs but it was not the sound she heard.

*There!*

She spun around. Darkness be damned. Cupping her hands, she blew a hot breath of air into her palms. It hovered there like a mini-sun then shattered. The children of her fireball swirled off to find a torch to light.

The slapping of the water ceased.

"You have a keen sense of hearing, Dragoness," a man's voice said.

She choked down an irrational stab of terror. Who would dare attack a psi-laden Queen? She was more worried about being caught escaping than being hurt. Then again, what was the owner of the voice doing in her dungeon? She turned slowly, giving herself the time she needed to compose her mind, to prepare her defenses.

A water dragon watched her from the water's edge. She didn't quite know how she recognized him for what he was but she did. His skin was pale, unlike that of his cousins, her kin, who bathed under the warmth of the sun. From what she could see his body was built for speed, compact and curved, no excess muscle to weigh down his swimming. He propped himself on the edge of the stone dock, head resting on his



folded arms. His eyes whirled a series of colors then settled on a pearlized violet like the inside of a seashell.

Cerenth's breath hissed out.

He inclined his head. "Good evening, Kildarkee Queen."

"What do you do here? How did you get in?" He must have swum through the rock-cut channel that funneled the sea waters to the citadel. But why? Other than Adonthe, she'd never seen another water dragon.

He waited patiently for her to rein in her emotions. That irked her.

She shook back her hair. "You are trespassing on Kildarkee lands." She wished she was wearing more than her dressing robe.

"These are my waters." He spread his arms wide, encompassing the water he floated in. Six fingers adorned each hand, webbing stretching between the digits. "This is my land."

"Semantics," she replied. "Leave before I call the guards."

"Won't they wonder why their Queen is nearly nude and hiding in Kildarkee's dungeon?"

She ignored his comment. "What are you doing here?" He knew who she was so he had to know what kind of talent she possessed. She could drown him where he floated. Either he was extremely powerful or just plain rash. "Answer me," she demanded.

"I saw you fly today, Dragoness. You were quite beautiful." He sounded wistful.

She didn't know what to make of the compliment. She stared hard at him, lips pressed tight. Surely he teased. He met her gaze, lips quirked ever so slightly. His face was too alien for her to read. She pressed against his mental shields. He was well protected. How intriguing. There weren't many dragon men who had enough strength to mount a defense against her.

"You could ask me my name instead of trying to pry. It's Zeb, by the way."

"You could enter through my gates instead of sneaking up my sewers."

"Could I?" He sounded skeptical. "I think if the likes of I approached your gates I would become a captive not a guest."

"You presume a lot."

"Your reputation as a sweet and benevolent ruler proceeds you."

Cerenth was shocked. How dare he! Her own snigger surprised her. When she managed to regain control of herself she said haughtily, "No one speaks to me like that."

"You laughed and it was genuine," he pointed out. "May I seek dry land?"

He had her there. She waved her hand. "Do as you wish. You will anyway."

He boosted himself out of the water. His skin was pale, ghostly white and flawless, like an alabaster statue. And he was nude. She tried not to stare. It was unqueenly and

no land-born Queen should be aroused by an inferior cousin. But she couldn't help herself. He was well-built, very well-built.

She had an excuse. She was still in heat, still seeking a mate.

*Hardly.* She thought she heard his snort of disbelief within her mind. But that was impossible. No one had as strong a mind as she.

"Am I permitted to ravage the Kildarkee Queen?" he asked abruptly.

Her jaw dropped open. She blinked then blinked again.

He approached her, shedding water as he walked. His hair was closely cropped, a hint of silvery fluff capping the smooth round surface of his head. His cheekbones were set high in his thin face, eyes and lips the only splashes of color. Those eerie eyes darkened from pearl to deep violet.

She took one step back then cursed herself for it. "I warn you. You will die if you lay a hand upon me." She held her robe closed at the throat, her other hand clenched in a fist at her side.

"By whose hand?"

"Mine."

His eyes gleamed, lips quirked. "And if I lay both hands upon you?"

"You mock a high psi!" She drew her robe tighter around her.

"I do nothing of the kind."

She could smell the salt of the sea clinging to his skin.

"The brave Kildarkee Queen cowering before a mere water dragon," he whispered.

She raised her hand, calling fire to her fingertips, and shot it at him. The tendrils of flame extinguished in midair. He caught her out-flung arm by the wrist.

She froze. "How dare you!" But her voice was a mere whisper.

He turned her hand, palm up, tracing the ring of bruises around her wrist with three fingers. The touch was barely there, like the whisper of a powder brush against one's cheek. "Your lover was rough." He kept his voice smooth but she detected his disapproval.

"I like it rough. Violent even." She licked her lips. This creature, this subspecies, made her pulse race. It helped her to think of him as an animal, not as an equal. It put him in his place.

"It takes little skill to be rough," Zeb pointed out.

She couldn't break his gaze. "I could kill you."

"So you've said. Would you take pleasure in that?"

"Yes."

"Why is that?" He raised her wrist to his lips and licked the line of bruises. His tongue was rough, like a cat's, his breath cool on her skin. She felt the skin on her arm break out in goose bumps. He held up her wrist. Her skin was smooth and unmarred.

"You are a healer," she breathed, astonished. "How is that possible?"

"Water dragons have gifts too." He pulled her toward him until her breasts grazed his chest. "They say you are a wicked Queen, cruel and arrogant."

She was shocked yet again. She tried to pull away from him but his other arm snaked about her waist. His grip was curiously warm. She'd expected the sea's clammy hold to taint his flesh. His fingertips stroked the dip in her back. The invasion was not unwelcome. He had a soothing touch and she'd been strung tight for far too long.

She found her voice. "If I am such a hideous creature, why do you want me?"

"Perhaps all the reports are biased," he continued, his voice low. He laid his cheek against hers. She felt as if she were frozen. Her heartbeat sounded loud and flighty in her ears. No dragon man had ever made her feel this way. They had simply taken what they needed.

What was this water dragon doing to her mind?

"Zeb," he absently said. "You can say my name."

*How dare he invade her mind!* She raised her free hand to rake her nails against his cheek. Her hand froze. She struggled but could not move it. He leaned back and kissed the open palm of her paralyzed hand.

"High psis are a rare gift," Zeb said softly.

"What have you done?" She felt the first stab of real fear.

He took the paralyzed hand and folded it to her breast. "I have come to make love to the Queen of the Kildarkees on this her mating day."

Her eyes widened. "You would rape me?"

"Your mind is not incapacitated. If you wish you may call for your guards."

Nothing she had ever done had prepared her for this. She was struck speechless.

"Now then. You will lie there." He eased the robe off her shoulders and spread it on the floor. Then he took her hand and drew her to the stone floor. Her body moved against her wishes. She obediently lay down.

"I will kill you," she whispered.

"Such viciousness," he murmured. He sat beside her and simply stared at her body. "It's unbecoming in a body so beautiful." He traced the line of her collarbone. "In a mind so strong."

She had never been overly modest but nor had she ever been subjected to such a frank gaze. It was the look a man gave to a woman, not a dragon man to his Queen. She felt herself blush.

"You are very beautiful here." He laid a splayed hand on her flat stomach. His skin was cool. His touch sent the fire in her cheeks roaring through her body. "Unmarred." He laid his hand over her heart, careful to not touch the swell of her breast. "Who broke you here?"

Her breath came in shallow gasps. She raged against her invisible prison. When she had spent her energy, she lay still, whimpering, a sheen of sweat to her skin.

"Your kin take poor care of such a treasure."

"I am sure water dragons do the same. Copulate and toss aside those who fail to produce an heir."

Zeb tipped his head. "You know much about the water dragons' domain then?"

"We have one," she retorted.

"Ah yes, Adonthe." He smoothed a stray curl off her face then let it tangle in his fingers. The lock spilled over his pale flesh like a strand of rubies. She thought he might say more but he appeared to change his mind.

"What are you doing to me?"

He let the curl fall. His eyes widened, all innocence. "You are an experienced woman. I am courting you."

She detected a trace of sarcasm with his arrogance. "One does not court a Queen. One savages her."

"I make no claims on your body. I simply wish to touch you, to understand the Queen of the Kildarkees better."

A suitor? This silly water dragon was risking his life to court her. *Her?* It was a giddy and unconceivable thought.

He trailed his fingers along her thigh. "Well, my Dragoness, will you call your guards?"

The emphasis on "my" had her fighting her invisible prison again. But it was secure. He didn't appear to exert any effort to hold her. He was her match.

She stilled. "No."

"My thanks." He leaned forward. "I would like to kiss you on the lips, Queen of the Kildarkees. Will you permit it?"

"My name is Cerenth," she said through gritted teeth.

"Cerenth," he whispered. He made her name a promise, a moan. He pressed his lips to hers.

He was not Handilee, strong and willful. No, there was no roughness. It was like the kiss of the tide as it lapped the shoreline. It tasted of salt, of the sea. His lips were firm and possessive, seizing control, a balm to her fire. With a sigh her lips parted. His tongue flicked into her mouth, a clever forked tongue that tasted and teased. She breathed fire into him then opened her eyes. They stared at one another, lips locked. His eyes gleamed, amused but unhurt.

"My precious Cerenth," he whispered. "Do not worry. You will not hurt me. Nor I you."

"You know nothing about me."

"You are wrong." He cupped her face in his hands, fingertips brushing her cheeks. "I've watched you escape from your gilded prison for many seasons."

She gasped. She'd been so careful.

His lips brushed hers again. Then he started at her fingertips, kissing a path up her forearm, her upper arm, gaze locked on her eyes. He moved to her face, kissed each cheek and headed down the other arm. Each kiss left a burst of fire on her skin. She felt as if she were being branded, marked, claimed by this...this...

"Zeb," he whispered, reading her thoughts.

She should call her guards. No one had the right to take her body. But she was mesmerized by his gentle touch. She was a woman of fierce needs, used to satisfying her whims. This inability to touch, to strike, to lick blood from his cheek was strangling her.

She wanted to taste his blood. She wanted to wrap her hands around his neck. She made a small noise in the back of her throat. Who was she trying to prove herself to? She wanted to press her breasts against the smooth skin of his chest and feel her fire warm his skin. When he had first emerged from the water she'd thought he was poor copy of her kind. She was wrong.

He was muscle and sinew. The torchlight played off his sleek stomach muscles, the corded sinew in his arms. And yet when he held her it was as if he held a goblet blown of thin glass.

Zeb was resting on his elbows above her, watching her with his alien violet eyes. "What will it be, Cerenth?" He traced the line of her jaw.

"You incapacitate me with your water magic, have your way with me and now ask permission to continue? You have quite the brass balls."

"Say my name," he said softly.

"What?"

He bent over her, pressing his lips to her exposed neck. Her jugular vein fluttered beneath them. "Say my name," he said again. "Beg me."

"I'll die first."

He ran his hands down her sides, sliding them beneath her buttocks. Cupping her rear, he arched her against him. Hip to hip, chest to breast, she felt his cool skin quench her fire. She closed her eyes, letting his touch breach her defenses, spiraling to her very core. Beyond that she felt his mind press against her mental shields. She'd wonder later why she let down her defenses.

His mind caressed hers, seizing control of her every breath, every beat of her heart. The touch was so intimate, so intense she let herself slip. The orgasm came swift and fierce, all-consuming. It rode through her body, satisfying the hunger Handilee's hurried mating had stirred. Zeb sheltered them from her kinsmen, selfishly keeping the pleasure just between the two of them.

"You are a high psi," she whispered, fully convinced.

"Yes," he replied, his lips pressed to her neck. She felt the vibrations in her throat. "Your match, your missing half."

"You cannot be serious. You cannot fly me."

"Ah, but you can swim."

She snorted. "I certainly cannot."

"You are a high psi," he pointed out. "Why not?"

True. She opened her mouth then closed it. She would have to think about what he said. She'd never tried to swim, had only dealt with water when she needed to bathe. But water dragons could not fly. What would make her think she could swim, high psi or not?

He pressed a finger to her lips then laid his lips on her forehead. "I came to taste, to touch, to see if what I heard was true. It is not."

"I am all they say I am," Cerenth assured him. "Selfish, haughty, a wild thing." *A failure. Unable to produce a daughter and secure my Dragoon's future.* She closed her eyes.

*Beautiful, intelligent and kept in bondage,* he whispered in her mind. He laid his hand over her heart. "I am a healer. Let me work my magic."

"Zeb," she began. The air seemed too still. She opened her eyes.

The water dragon was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

A mating night was a predicable event where Cerenth was involved. It started with sex and it didn't cease until the citadel reeked of sweat and seminal fluids and exhausted bodies littered the halls. With her powerful psychic talent the Queen could make anyone who did not have a strong talent of their own feel exactly what she was feeling. At this moment it was a languid sated-ness. She'd want more shortly and she'd force everyone around her to indulge as well.

Quince exerted a bit more effort to enforce his personal mental shields. He refused to let Cerenth determine what he felt and how he behaved. Had she wanted to she could have crumbled his mental barrier with a snap of her fingers. But he was beneath her notice...he hoped.

Since he had missed both breakfast and lunch and had no desire to participate in the mating feast he was left to scavenge for his supper. His servants had taken him up on his generosity and fled. The remaining servants would be mimicking Cerenth's movement's like marionettes whether they wanted to or not until she fell asleep. Right now that meant they were either passed out in exhaustion or seeking another partner to couple with. Quince wondered how Handilee fared.

He could almost feel pity for the dragon man.

Quince headed to the communal kitchen. He passed a foursome of servants on the stairs, in various stages of undress. Two were collapsed on the landing. Another pair

were entwined on the next tread. They didn't spare him a glance. Their eyes held a glazed look as if they weren't aware of themselves or what they were doing. And truly, they weren't. The poor sods were simply falling under the spell of Cerenth's pheromones. It was a positive or negative side effect of serving in the household of a dragon Queen, depending on how one felt about casual sex.

Quince wiped a thin line of sweat from his brow. He needed to get another assignment, preferably guard duty on the border, far away from his powerful, self-absorbed Queen. He wasn't sure how much more he could endure.

He was surprised and pleased to find that Adonthe had already beaten him to the kitchen. The young man hailed from the seaborne dragons and was something to be treasured, though Cerenth seemed to see him only as another toy.

"Long day?" Quince asked.

Adonthe muttered something unintelligible. Dripping with sweat, he'd twisted his long caramel-colored hair in a knot at the nape of his neck. He still wore his now-disheveled mating apparel. The embroidery on his white tunic hinted at sea-borne bloodlines, though who knew what they might be.

"No partner?" Quince asked.

Adonthe pulled a leg of some small unfortunate animal out of the cold chest and bit into it. For a dragon man normally meticulous in his eating habits this was yet another sign that he was on edge. He shot Quince a wild-eyed glance, food and grease dripping out of the corner of his mouth.

Quince reached for the arm holding the meat. "Shall we take a walk? Or a swim?"

Adonthe growled low in his throat and jerked the meat out of Quince's reach.

Quince struck him, a quick open-handed slap across the cheek.

Adonthe blinked, once, twice, then his eyes focused and he dropped the leg bone. The wildness vanished from his gaze. His breath hitched. He glanced from Quince to the meat and back again.

Quince wordlessly handed him a napkin.

Adonthe dabbed at his face. "Why does she do this?" It came out a whimper.

"Because she can." Cerenth had the ability to suppress her emotions from her subjects. She chose not to. Quince thought she took perverse pleasure in pushing them to sexual exhaustion. And no one dared to reprimand her. She was the sole Queen in the Kildarkee Dragoon.

"Adonthe, I am going for a walk. Why not accompany me?" The more distance he put between the Kildarkee citadel and himself the better.

"She will be very upset if we leave."

"She will get over it." Anyone with even half a heart could see this ride she was taking them on was torment for them all, especially the emotionally fragile and those who could not shield themselves from the worst of her whims.

Adonthe folded the soiled napkin and laid it on the counter. His hand trembled. From somewhere within the depths of the citadel they heard Cerenth roar. The rest of Adonthe began to shake.

Quince took him by the arm and steered him out of the kitchen. They headed down the hallway, stepped over a few inert bodies and strode through the courtyard unchallenged. Sear, one of Cerenth's sons from a previous liaison, met them at the gates.

Sear glanced at Adonthe. "Is Mother causing you distress?" His voice was carefully neutral but his dark eyes gleamed with amusement.

Quince didn't bother to respond. Sear was cut from the same cloth as his dam. His flaming red hair was cropped tight to the scalp in an attempt to prevent his inherited curls from running wild. Some of his conquests, now disgraced, served in Quince's household.

Quince continued walking, keeping a firm grasp on Adonthe's arm.

Sear stepped into his path. "You know I cannot allow you to pass."

Adonthe suppressed a small sigh and glanced around wildly.

Quince could fly out but he'd have to leave Adonthe behind. Or he could press his point. His patience was at the breaking point. "Do you seek a duel?"

Sear licked his lips. He was barely eighteen. "You know I do not."

"Then stand aside."

"She should be done soon." He jerked his head toward Adonthe. "Can you shield him until then?"

"There should be no reason for me to do so. Adonthe and I are leaving. You may inform your mother of our transgression or you may hope she does not notice our departure."

"She will not ask about him unless..." Sear didn't finish his sentence. Quince had drawn his sword. The point hovered at the hollow of Sear's throat.

"Go," Sear squeaked. "But Mother will hear of this."

Quince sheathed his sword and tugged Adonthe through the arch. He cursed softly under his breath. Normally he was not so short-tempered. Once free from the citadel he dropped Adonthe's sleeve. Choosing the path that angled away from the village— the villagers too would be at least partially under Cerenth's thrall— he headed toward the sea. Adonthe trotted after him like a puppy in tow.

As soon as Adonthe scented the sea he began to shed his clothing, half-shifting before his bare feet even hit the water. His arms split in two lengthwise, his bones realigning themselves to form wings and webbed forepaws. Skin gave way to scales. His head was more streamlined than those of the airborne dragons, with a fin sprouting from his skull rather than the beginnings of a protective ridged spine. His scaled skin was the clearest aquamarine Quince had ever seen on a dragon hide, a shade lighter than Adonthe's eyes in human form.



Adonthe dipped and bobbed in the waves. Quince saw his head disappear beneath the water, his forked tail flicking. Another dragon man had escaped Cerenth. Who knew what Cerenth might have had in mind for him?

Quince gathered Adonthe's stray clothing, folding it as he went. Then he shed his own clothes and laid them on top of the boy's. He tipped his face skyward. Wispy clouds periodically drifted across the two moons. He arched his back, stretching his arms over his head. His blood boiled, singing triumphantly as he changed. It wasn't painful, just a moment of unease as his bones realigned themselves. His dragon hide was as dark as his hair, black with navy and violet highlights when the light struck his scales just right.

Clutching their clothing in his small forepaws, he launched himself skyward. The sea was calm tonight, marred only by the ripples Adonthe made as he played with Quince's moonlit shadow.

Dip, flip and plunge. How could the young dragon man have been a wreck only a moment before? Cerenth was like a parasitic fungus, slowly eating away at their ranks. Quince wished for the umpteenth time that she would birth a daughter. Then the Kildarkees could be rid of her, though he knew they never would. If she could birth them one then maybe she could deliver another. Their numbers were too low not to cling to hope.

The caress of the wind along Quince's scales and wings did much to soothe his nerves. Adonthe seemed content to do nothing more than frolic in his wake. Quince cut a course toward the distant shoreline, a fringe of deceiving lush green. He knew the shoreline to be fraught with rocks and hidden reefs but Adonthe would have no problem navigating them. Near the moss-laden cliffs the wind switched. The unexpected gusts actually forced Quince to concentrate.

Below him, Adonthe had found a sliver of sand and changed, his fragile human legs dangling in the water. Quince did a slow roll, basking in the moonlight, washing away the nightmare that was Cerenth. He wanted to seek a sheltered spot and a chance to stretch out on the sand. But there was Adonthe to consider. Quince landed on his haunches, tossed the bundle of clothing to the ground and shifted.

After the kiss of the wind against his scales the sand felt coarse on his feet. He sat nude beside Adonthe, legs outstretched. The water lapped over his toes. Somewhere far off a flock of seabirds argued. He could spend the better part of the night simply listening to the waves cuff the rocks. His mind began to heal from Cerenth's touch.

Adonthe cleared his throat. "You never judge, do you? Never question my control."

"We are far from Cerenth's reach. She would have to exert some effort to affect us. We are not worth her time."

"I think she wants me."

Quince opened one eye. Adonthe was staring out to sea, a brooding look in his eyes. His long hair fell loose over his face, the wind drying it in a tangled mass of gold strands. "Only to torment," Quince murmured.

"It would be quite a coup, to be with the Queen." Adonthe's voice was wistful.

"Better to bed a viper." At least its true nature wasn't shrouded in a comely package of flaming red hair and curves.

"Hmm." Adonthe continued to look out to sea.

"She would force you to take to the air."

"That might not be such a horrible thing."

Quince hissed softly. He had fought in enough wars to know death's face intimately. It was not an alluring one.

"I am not looking to end it," Adonthe said in a rush then changed the subject. "What now?"

"Dress. Find a bite to eat."

"Thank you for bringing my clothing. That was very thoughtful."

Quince grunted and began to dress. Belkirk's villagers were accustomed to the dragon men's eccentricities but there was no need to rouse their ire by appearing naked. He buckled on his sword. Cerenth roused mobs well enough on her own, at whim.

"I appreciate you looking out for me." Adonthe continued talking as if Quince were a chatty partner. "I consider you to be one of my dearest friends." His voice hitched.

The boy had little enough of those. In response Quince clasped Adonthe's shoulder briefly. Adonthe was at least five decades younger than himself but a child by their standards. The Dragoon outlived generations of their human servants. Yet another reason for the humans to resent them, if slavery wasn't enough of one.

Quince wore a plain collarless white shirt, a pair of close-fitting black breeches and leather boots folded over and cuffed just above his knees. He was still lacing up a boot when something splashed into the water beside them.

Adonthe vomited before Quince even had a chance to focus on the object. Whatever it was tinged the water pink. Quince sat up.

It was an arm and it was missing its owner. The waves continued to slap it against the rocks as if applauding Adonthe's behavior. Quince grabbed Adonthe around the waist and flung both of them against the rock ledge. Adonthe continued to gag.

Quince silenced him with a warning hiss.

The arm's owner lay sprawled twenty paces above them, eyes wide and locked in a frozen gaze. Long dark hair billowed around the slack face. Blood dripped down the cliff face, soaking into the moss above them. Quince listened intently but all he could hear were the soft slap of the waves and Adonthe's heavy breathing. He unsheathed his boot knife and handed it to Adonthe. Adonthe took it without a word of protest. Quince drew his sword, motioning toward the ledge. Adonthe nodded.

They crept up the footpath, Quince first. He peeked over the ridge. The village lay a quarter mile away, silent. The dead human appeared to be the only villager to reach or attempt to reach the cliff's edge. Quince nudged the body with the toe of his boot then flipped it over. It was a woman. She wore a well-cut dress, a sign of a high-ranking

servant, though the garment was soiled now. The Belkirk Dragoon pattern was stitched into the dress's sleeves and hem. Whatever had severed her arm had not done so cleanly. She held a bloody kitchen knife slackly in her remaining hand. He heard Adonthe be ill again.

Quince dropped to one knee, bent over the body and sniffed. The scent of some sort of canine clung to the corpse but not any breed he'd smelled before. It wasn't domestic. Nor was it the scent of the sentient wolfkin. The scraps of flesh indicated the arm had been torn off its owner, not cut. He touched the drying blood. It burned his fingertips. He scrubbed the blood away on the grass. Human blood did not burn. What manner of canine left acid in its bite marks?

They should return to Kildarkee and summon help. Would any dragon men be sober enough to assist? He glanced at Adonthe. The boy was pale, eyes luminous.

Quince rose. "You go back. Find Hart and Stephen." They were strong enough talents to avoid the Queen's glamour...and likely not to be missed by Cerenth. Each had a human servant to meet their needs and neither was young enough to attract Cerenth's attentions.

Adonthe shook his head. "No. I can wield a knife." He paused, chewing on his lip. "And if necessary use teeth and claws."

True. Quince glanced at the gnawed-on arm of the corpse. The longer they waited the greater the likelihood they would find more victims. "Keep close watch."

Adonthe looked surprised at the quick capitulation. "I will not let you down."

If he did they could both die.

\* \* \* \* \*

They need not have crept through the meadow. The village was deserted. Fires still burned in the empty homes' hearths. Animals bellowed, waiting to be fed or milked. They found no survivors, nor more corpses.

Like all the Dragons, the Belkirks were a tightly knit group. Clutches, Queens and dragon men numbers were also closely guarded. Despite their close proximity to one another, the Belkirks and Kildarkees shared no bloodlines. Cerenth had never gone out of her way to be kind to her nearest neighbors. While roaming through each other's villages was not unheard of, Quince didn't think they'd be warmly welcomed at their citadel.

He didn't have to worry. The Belkirks' guard tower was deserted, door askew.

The Belkirk citadel was laid out much like the Kildarkee's. An outer wall over thirty feet tall and built of stone served as an initial deterrent. Soldier and servant quarters were built into this wall. An inner wall protected the clutches, the Queen's quarters and all the servants who served the Queen.

The eerie stillness grated on his already strung-tight nerves.

The citadel reeked of death and blood and sweat and, if it were possible, of sorrow. The despair was palpable. It pressed against Quince's chest, stealing the air from his lungs. He was not an empath. He should not be able to feel the Belkirks' lingering emotions. But he did. Adonthe was a shade paler as well.

They made their way directly to the nursery. If anyone was left alive and still loyal to the Belkirks they should be found defending their Queen, her offspring or her eggs. One of the doors to the nursery looked like it had literally been blown out of its frame. A spattering of splinters were all that remained of the wood. Quince steeled himself.

The Queen's nest was flooded. Five drowned eggs lay in its soggy embankment.

To his credit Adonthe did not flinch. He sloshed through thigh-high water with Quince to the closest egg. Quince laid his hands on the egg then reached gently with his mind to touch its inhabitant. It was dead, drowned in its shell. He had not expected it to be alive.

He wanted to weep or rage at the waste of such precious life. His hand clenched into a fist while the other white-knuckled the sword hilt. Taking a series of deep breaths did nothing to ease his slow-building anger. Adonthe was trying to roll another egg to higher ground.

Quince put a hand on his shoulder. "They are dead."

"They cannot be." Adonthe put his shoulder to the egg, soaking himself in water to his chest. The egg did not budge. He slumped in the water, doused himself completely before he recovered himself then stared at Quince with haunted eyes. "Who could have done this? Why? Why?"

Quince had no answers. "It looks like the Belkirks heated their Queen's nest with warm water channeled under the sand. Clever idea." He pointed to the broken terra cotta pipes. Under other circumstances he'd have been intrigued by the invention. The Kildarkees used their own body heat and, when winter struck, wood fires.

Adonthe simply stared as if he couldn't comprehend what Quince was saying. "Why?" he asked again. "And where are they? Why was no one here to protect them?"

"Apparently the Belkirks made some enemies." Quince offered Adonthe his hand and pulled the boy to his feet.

Adonthe growled low in his throat, his pupils vanishing under a wash of multi-faceted color. Quince felt the texture of the boy's hand change from flesh to scales.

"Changing will solve nothing."

Adonthe growled again but the color in his eyes fled, replaced by pupils and aquamarine irises.

"How can you be so cavalier?" he hissed, his voice still lower than normal.

"Do not be deceived by appearances. It is a pitiful sight but what did this may still linger. We need our wits about us."

Adonthe swallowed hard and nodded.

"There is no shame in grieving." Quince tried to gentle his tone.

Adonthe nodded again and turned away.

They waded out of the nest. The Queen's and her beloved servants' chambers lay on the opposite side. Blood marked the entryway. Quince knelt and touched his finger to it. It was cold. Still, his sword entered the room first.

He had fought in many battles before but nothing could have prepared him for this. He wanted to change right now and wipe the whole mess away in blast of dragon fire. But others needed to see this. He should have called for help immediately. This was more than two dragon men could handle.

There was nothing but parts left. Dragon parts, human parts, half shape-shifted parts. Parts that looked like they belonged to months-old animal corpses mingled in the remains. He found the Queen's head mixed amid the menagerie. The Belkirk Queen had not been a young thing. Her face was lined with age, eyes wide and shifted to dragon form. Pupil-less, their many facets stared dully at him, asking the same question Adonthe had asked him. *Why?*

Quince found a bit of cloth and covered her face. For her to be that age and still be able to carry five eggs to term was a testament to her strength. And yet she had died tasting steel.

"There is another room," Adonthe called.

He stepped carefully around the bodies to Adonthe. This was where the Belkirk citadel floor plan deviated from their own. They had only one Queen's chamber. Adonthe waited for Quince to enter.

There was no blood here. The room was torn apart, the great bed uplifted and flung haphazardly against the wall. Two full wardrobes of clothing lay emptied on the floor. Judging by the garments it was another woman's room.

Adonthe lifted a heavy piece of jewelry from an upended armoire. Precious stones glinted against the gold. "Did the Belkirks have a second Queen?"

"Perhaps." Or the Queen could have taken a female lover. Without a body they'd never know for certain.

"I hope the cowards couldn't find what they were seeking."

One thing was for certain. They weren't after jewels or treasure. There were enough of those strewn about the room. That ruled out human deviousness. What did the Dragoon value the most? *Its Queen*. With the elderly Belkirk Queen dead, had the marauders met their objective? Quince thought so.

"We need to alert the others." Quince glanced sideways at the youth. There was a set to his jaw now. His eyes gleamed and they spoke of revenge. What remained of Adonthe's innocence has been swept away this day.

"Take care."

Adonthe shook off Quince's hand.

"As you wish." Rage right now could be as deadly as grief but it was preferable.

They left the chambers as they were. When they were in the hallway Quince paused to empty the water out of his boots.

"They should all die for this. Whoever did this...they should all die." Adonthe's voice came out choked.

"I agree. But make no promises in the presence of the dead lest they hold you to them."

Adonthe looked startled. Lowering his voice, he asked, "Do their spirits linger?"

"I do not have that gift." Thank the gods for that. The dregs of despair that roamed through the citadel like a fog were enough to fight against.

"Nor I." Adonthe shivered.

They examined the remainder of the inner cordon with care but while there were signs of struggle in places, there were no more bodies. The well-dressed female servant with the missing arm had held a kitchen knife. They had already been through the Great Kitchen, the one which served the commoners, soldiers, lower level servants and dragon men. Only the Queen's kitchen was left to be explored.

Her kitchen looked as if it had been blasted by sheer winds. Anything that could be tipped over was, including cabinets which had been firmly bolted to the stone wall. Even the stone-topped butcher block was tipped over. Pots were strewn across the floor, some dented as if they had been used as weapons. The kitchen knives were all missing. Quince found two embedded in the wall, sunk to the hilt. He marveled at that. Even a somewhat talented dragon man would have had a hard time burying steel in a solid stone wall.

Their footfalls and the wheezing fire gasping for air were the only sounds to be heard. Quince automatically opened the fireplace's flue. The fire surged to life. He wrapped a dishtowel around a broken chair leg to make a makeshift torch then used it to light the wall sconces. Bathed in light, the devastation was far more apparent.

"Anybody alive?" Adonthe called. His voice was swallowed up by the thick walls. "Hello?"

There was a scuffle of noise beneath Quince's feet. He dropped to his knees and shoved aside the fallen table. A trap door was laid in the floor beneath it.

"The root cellar." Why hadn't he thought of that before? Because most of his combat had been hand-to-hand on an open field, not in the bowels of a home. It could serve as both a trap and a perfect spot to defend oneself. He almost changed. Dragon scales and fire were far better protection than human flesh and fabric.

He let his mind brush against the dark interior. Fear seized him by the throat. He fell back, gasping.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Quince waved off the boy's hand and slammed his mental shields back in place. Whatever waited for them was not a physical threat. "Give me a hand."

Adonthe hooked his knife in his belt and helped clear the debris. The stone actually looked like it had partially melted, nearly fusing the trap door shut. Not even dragon fire could melt stone. It took both of them, a bit of scraped knuckles and some creative cussing to extract the hatch from the congealed stone's grip.

The black hole in the floor looked even less inviting than the Queen's chambers. Quince blinked twice, letting his night sight membrane settle over his eyes before peering into the hole. Adonthe drew his knife.

The Belkirk citadel hadn't been deserted after all. Servants were huddled in clusters, their faces turned toward the light cast from the opening. Quince felt his hackles rise. There was something not quite right about their blank, staring faces. Their fear spilled out like a living thing, clutching at Quince. He physically shook off their terror.

"Praise the gods," Adonthe breathed. "Survivors."

"If you can call them that." Their fear huddled at his feet, waiting. They might not be innocents, but deserters. "You," he said louder, singling out one of the men, "We are here to lend aid." He extended his hand.

The closest human male shook his head vigorously, scampering out of reach.

Quince had very limited talent but when he focused he found it to be of some use. He reached out mentally, capturing the man's face with his eyes. The man went slack-jawed.

"Who did this?" Quince asked.

The man covered his face with his hands and shook his head.

"Who did this?" he repeated and gently pushed against the man's mind.

The man stared back wild-eyed. There was nothing behind his gaze. Nothing. His mind had been wiped clean. He didn't even know his own name.

Not even someone as powerful as Cerenth could perform that feat.

*May the gods spare Kildarkee from such a fate.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Quince almost missed the body. It was curled in the fetal position in the corner of the root cellar, tucked beneath the stairwell. At first glance it appeared dead. Upon closer inspection he saw that it was a she. Her long dark braid of hair followed the bow of her spine. A forest green tunic hugged what curves he could see. A riding skirt and pair of boots hid the rest. She was almost too well-dressed to be a servant. The rest of the wights they had rescued wore the stained clothes of kitchen staff.

He dropped to one knee, pulled off a glove and laid two fingers alongside her throat. Her heartbeat was erratic, rib cage rising and falling as if she gasped for air. His hand grasped her shoulder. He shook her lightly. She lunged awake, her eyes wide and staring, her hand gripping a knife. He caught the wrist holding the knife, spun her around and held her tight against him, her back to his chest.

She made a distressed noise, struggling in his arms. Her movements lacked direction as if she were still caught up in some dark inner turmoil.

"Shh, shh," he said, rocking her gently as if she were a frightened child. He forced the knife out of her hand.

She stilled at the sound of his voice. Her muscles bunched and shifted as if testing his strength. She smelled of fear but it was the undercurrent of vengeance he sensed that worried him. He held firm.

When she stopped struggling he pressed his lips to her ear. "What are you doing down here?"

"Hiding."

She was the first of the rescued servants that spoke. The others, those conscious anyway, had made inarticulate noises.

"Is something amiss?" Adonthe called down the stairs.

"I found another one," he called back.

She whimpered at the rise in his voice, struggling again in his grasp.

"Easy, lady, you are safe. We will protect you."

She stopped then, every movement, even her breath. For a moment he thought she had simply died of fright. Then she turned in his grip very carefully. Her eyes were wide and dark, as black as a moonless night, her stare unfocused. Did she even see him? He doubted it. She was a beautiful creature. Soft coppery skin, hair the color of decadent chocolate, lips full and a rich shade of burgundy. No wonder someone treasured her enough to dress her in fine clothes.

"That's better," he whispered. "I am going to take you upstairs to safety."

She blinked, once, twice, but her eyes still did not focus. Her skin was very flushed. He laid a hand on her forehead. She was much too hot for a human. "Lady, do you hear me?"

Something flitted through her eyes, a momentary awareness. Then it was gone. She remained mute.

His heart went out to her. "I am going to pick you up," he said and gently lifted her.

She curled into his arms then, resting her head against his chest as if that was her place. He felt a bit of the dread ease its grip around his heart. She had a slight build but her clothes hid a surprisingly well-muscled body. He carried her up the stairs and into the light. She stirred then, pressing herself more tightly to him. He'd never had a creature cling to him so.

Adonthe glanced at her. "What is this?" He fingered the edge of her tunic between thumb and forefinger. "Fine fabric for a servant. Is she human?"

"Aye," Quince answered automatically. "She is feverish, I think. Best to get her back to Kildarkee."



"The wagons are ready and the first of the council's men are here as well." Adonthe matched his pace. That a Great Council had been so quickly convened was troubling. Normally the designated Council members, one or two from each Dragoon, met but once a century. The rest of the time the Dragoon squabbled amongst themselves, working hard to capture more land, more servants and more livestock.

Quince noticed the boy now had a sword strapped to his side. His hand rested on its hilt.

Adonthe caught his glance. "The sooner we are well away from here the better."

"I agree." The place reeked of death, the shadows tainted with restless spirits. Once the councilmen were through with their analysis, the Belkirk Queen's body could be burned. Maybe then some of the spirits would rest easier. He wanted to put as much distance between this cursed citadel and himself as possible.

When they reached the wagons Quince hesitated. The woman seemed content in his arms. He hated to distress her again but he could not carry her all the way to Kildarkee. Her fingers were fisted in his tunic. He gently tried to disentangle her. "A hand please, Adonthe." He set her rump upon the wagon bed and worked at one hand. Her fingers were long and delicate...and strong. He did not want to break them and yet she refused to relinquish her hold.

"I think you might have to shed some clothing," Adonthe muttered, trying to pry the fabric out of her other hand.

Her eyes popped open then squinted. Black pupil-less eyes, the color of despair. Inhuman eyes. Quince felt himself sink into their depths. A human had never been able to enthrall him before.

He blinked, brushing off the emotions and reinforcing his mental shields. The shadows rolled at his feet, reluctantly drawing away. Her eyes were really a deep brown. A nice normal human pupil nestled in their depths.

The shadows crept back, swirling beneath the wagon. Whoever she'd belonged to wanted to keep her at Belkirk. She appeared not to notice.

She studied him, head tilted. His breath caught in his throat. "You have to release me," he said.

She looked around then, for the first time seeing Adonthe. Her gaze narrowed then she snatched the sword right from Adonthe's belt.

"Hey now!" Adonthe protested.

It was too heavy for her to handle and she moved it awkwardly. Quince danced back to keep from getting speared with it. Her other hand fumbled for the hilt, found it and helped hold the blade aloft. She swung the blade toward Adonthe.

Adonthe held up his hands. "Easy, lady."

"You shall not have me," she declared. Her speech was thick and slow, as if it took all her strength just to force those words out.

She slid off the edge of the wagon, balanced shakily on her feet then abruptly crumpled. Quince caught her before she fell. She did not move in his grasp.

"Well, that was a bit of a surprise," Adonthe said.

"She attacked me with a knife in the cellar." Quince laid her on the wagon bed, wrapping a quilt around her and padding her head with another blanket.

"And you didn't warn me?"

He laid the back of his hand against her forehead again. She was burning up. "I did not see the need." Quince turned to a servant. "Here now, this lady needs to be tended to."

The servant woman was bone-weary herself. "They all do, milord. And they will be when we get back to Kildarkee." She started past them.

Quince stepped in front of her. "She is feverish."

"Milord, there is nothing I can do for her here," she said, just a hint of irritation creeping into her voice. She held a bundle of fine fabric. "The Dragoness's orders were to secure as many valuables as possible. Until the wagons are full, we cannot leave."

Quince glanced at the sky. The sky was lightening, dawn approaching. "We ride now. Get onto the wagon." When the serving woman made no attempt to move he climbed into the wagon seat himself.

Adonthe pulled himself onto the seat beside Quince. "What do you do?"

"Scavenging among the dead is beneath me." Quince gathered the reins up and slapped the horses smartly on the rump. The servant holding their heads was nearly stepped on as they jumped, startled into moving.

"Does the woman matter enough that you wish to provoke Cerenth further?" Adonthe asked.

Quince glanced at him. He was right. What was wrong with him? She was but a female, comely, yes but he was already in enough trouble for deserting the citadel during the mating feast. He shook his head. He was used to trusting his instincts. They'd kept him alive countless times in battle. He did not know why but she mattered.

"It is the will of the gods. She must live," he muttered, cursing himself for the way it sounded, the foolishness of it all.

Adonthe grinned. "And here I thought you were simply drawn to her comeliness." At Quince's glare he added, "My apologies. A fine night it is then, to accomplish the gods' work." Then he sobered. "May they spare us from Cerenth's wrath as well."

## Chapter Three

Leahlisande's first lucid memory was of an age-lined face bent over hers. The smell of cloves and earthly things came and went with that face as did the clutching fear that thrust her into the dark. She knew she was ill. She knew that she dreamed. And yet the knowledge did not help her to break free of the darkness's thrall.

There was a dragon man too. She remembered him coming to her at least once, heard the murmur of his voice and smelled his musky, wild scent. He had dark black eyes and a swath of black hair tinged with violet highlights. She had seen him silhouetted against a backdrop of flames, a man of shadow and silence. He and the old face spoke to one another but she could not seem to focus on the words, only the movement of their mouths.

Part of her wished she could just be left to slip away into the blackness. She felt a cool washcloth being applied to her face yet again. This time it was different though. Her fingers closed involuntarily around her bedclothes. They felt scratchy to the touch. Fear followed on the heels of that sensation. She had been hiding, running away from something.

Bolting upright, she cried out. The room was too dark. He was coming, a nightmare creature swathed in black. All she could see were his glowing red eyes. She had to warn her family. She had to hide.

A wall sconce blazed to life. Leathery hands touched her bare shoulders. "Shush now. You had a bad dream. You are safe here."

"Where am I?" Leahlisande looked around. Nothing looked familiar. The ceiling was low, perhaps no more than six feet high. Beds lined either side of the long corridor-like chamber. Two fireplaces, their coals banked, lay to her left. She occupied the pallet closest to the fire. The rest of the beds appeared empty.

Gentle pressure from the leathery hands pushed her down again. "You are safe within the Kildarkee citadel."

Leahlisande turned her head. An old woman faced her, gray hair bound back in a bun and tucked smartly beneath a starched white cap. She wore a simple gray nightshift that gave her a lumpy shapeless appearance. Hidden in the folds of her skin, her eyes were a sharp bright blue. When the woman saw Leahlisande looking at her, her lips relaxed into a smile, softening her features. "There now, child. I won't bite."

"I do not recognize this place," Leahlisande said.

"Of course not, you have never been here. I'm Elizabeth. Do you remember your name?"

Leahlisande thought it an odd question. "Of course, it is..." And she paused. She knew her own name. It was ridiculous. How could one not know it? She closed her eyes and thought carefully. Thinking was painful, as if she'd overtaxed her brain somehow. Her given name was Leahlisande, Leahlisande Belkirk. "You may call me Sande," she said finally, deciding on her nickname.

Elizabeth gave a sharp intake of breath then recovered herself. "That's better than the rest."

"What do you mean?" The sense of nightmare dread was rapidly returning. She forced the dream to retreat. "Why can I not easily remember? What is wrong with me?"

"They fetched you from Belkirk." Elizabeth glanced around. They were still alone. "There was a massacre. You were feverish, kept complaining about the noise and the cold."

That explained the nightmares. She must have suffered a blow to the head. She tried to keep calm. Certainly she must have some kin who were looking for her at this very moment.

"There was a man," Sande began. "Black hair, black eyes. Well-built, tanned." She flushed. "He spoke to me. I...he cared who I was."

Elizabeth smiled. "That'd be Lord Quince. He brought you here himself."

"Quince." She tried the name out. "Who is he?"

"One of the Kildarkee dragon men." She shook her finger at Sande. "And not known to linger with servants so don't get notions in your head."

"I am a servant?" She touched her nose with her fingertips then let them slide to her lips. "May I see a mirror?"

"Certainly. Think it'll jog your memory?" Elizabeth wandered off. "Hasn't helped any of the others," she added. She disappeared out of Sande's line of sight then reappeared with a polished silver bowl.

Sande held it stiffly between her hands then tipped it toward her face so the scone's light captured and filled the bowl.

Elizabeth turned away to add wood to the fire.

Sande stared at the reflection in the bowl. Her skin was tanned, hints of a mixed heritage reflected in her skin's olive undertones, the slight upward tilt of her eyes. Her eyes fascinated her, the delicate round pupil. She had her father's eyes. That thought had always pleased her. Her father had been an outside bloodline, had fought his way up the ranks until he could woo the Belkirk Queen, her mother.

She caught and held her breath. She was no Belkirk servant. She was the daughter of the reigning Queen. Her memories flooded back on a tide of grief. How many of her kinsmen had the Hunter mowed down?

She glanced in the bowl again. She'd survived by pretending to be a servant. Judging by her appearance she'd also managed to apply a glamour, cleverly hiding her true nature. Her mother had done so as well, making herself appear younger and more

appealing. It wasn't a particularly difficult trick, most Queens could master it. Some talented humans too.

With the thought of her mother, grief seized her, sucking the breath out of her. Gods help her what had the Kildarkees done? She should have been left to the ghosts of Belkirk. She fought back the grief and rage, forced her heart to beat, her lungs to inhale. She was alive. She was Belkirk. She would not let the Kildarkee serving woman see her grieve.

Closing her eyes, she pressed the bowl to her chest. "How many?" she whispered. "How many escaped?"

"Ten counting yourself," Elizabeth said. "All servants. The entire Belkirk Dragoon wiped out in one evening." She tsked to herself. "Council's here to get to the bottom of it." Elizabeth patted her arm.

The fresh anguish stole her hard-won breath away. Mother, kind Berdo, everyone gone? She started to shake. "Only servants survived?"

"Aye. The Belkirk bloodline is no more."

Panic, locked so carefully away when she was ill, seeped out. She felt its icy fingers tug at the bedclothes as it crept toward her. She was entirely too vulnerable here, trapped in this windowless room with no air. The Hunter would find her. She had only to think his name to see his glowing red eyes. Did she see eyes in the corner of the room? There, beside the hearth!

"You're safe here," Elizabeth reassured.

Sande nodded, too choked to speak. Her secret be damned. Let's see how the Hunter handled dragon flame. The chamber was barely large enough for her to change. She closed her eyes and willed it so. Nothing happened. She sucked in a breath of air, focusing until her temples pounded. Flesh to scale, fragile human fingers to dragon claws. *Make it so.*

She glanced into the bowl again. All-too-human eyes stared back at her. She couldn't even dispel her own illusion.

She flung the bowl aside. "I do not recognize me." It hit the wall with a clash of metal against stone.

Elizabeth eased herself down onto the edge of the bed. Her shift had been replaced by a prim gray dress and a starched white apron. Compressed tight to her chest, her ample bosom threatened to burst the dress's seams. She patted Sande's hand. "You speak like an educated servant. You must have been favored."

"Favored?" Her voice rose a notch. By whom? The gods who let everyone who ever mattered to her get wiped out by some monster?

"There were other survivors of this...disaster." She shied away from the word "massacre". "What do they remember?"

"Most of the remaining Belkirk servants don't even know their own names." Elizabeth patted Sande's hand again. "Get dressed and we'll find you some light work today. Nimble fingerwork will distract you."

"But...my family?" Heart's blood, she needed time to grieve, to think. If she told them who she was she'd no longer have control of her life, what little was left to her. Or worse they'd think she was delirious. Who ever heard of a Queen deliberately camouflaging herself as human? Wait! The Kildarkee Queen was a high psi. Maybe she'd be able to break her terror-induced glamour.

So assuming she could prove her identity, then what? Return to Belkirk with her nine servants? She was a Queen without kinsmen. The Kildarkees could send her anywhere or keep her for themselves. She shivered. What a prize that would be.

*Get a hold of yourself.* Better to say nothing yet. Better to let them think her a servant and take pity on her.

"Do you have family, child?" Elizabeth asked, not unkindly. When Sande didn't answer she said, "You have your health back. Thank the gods for that. And you have two strong hands to earn your way."

She sighed. "What do I do?" She was better at the arts of war than womanly tasks. Her father had seen to that, much to her mother's dismay.

Elizabeth's gaze was kind. "The others appear to be kitchen staff." She glanced at Sande's hands. "But by the looks of those you were no scullery maid."

Sande held out her hands. They were delicate, the skin unblemished, nails carefully trimmed, fingers long and slim. Her hands wielded a knife with a surgeon's precision. Could they bake bread too?

"There's a washbasin over there." Elizabeth pointed. "And I laid out a uniform. You're about my daughter's size. Less meat on your bones though." She said that as if it were a fault.

Sande drew her knees to her chest and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"Now don't be fussing. I've seen plenty of girls naked."

"I-I do not believe..." She trailed off. She had dressed in front of servants many times. But they were her servants. Grief slipped through her façade. With an inarticulate sob she buried her face in the bedcovers and wept. But she was truly of the Dragoon and the all-too-human tears did not come. Her body shook with sobs.

What of her mother? How had she died? She prayed it was peacefully in her sleep. And the eggs? She stuffed a fist into her mouth to silence the scream, bit down on her knuckles until she tasted blood. She'd known the eggs were in danger but she'd done nothing. Instead of fighting she'd hidden like a servant and let the Hunter mow down her family.

She wasn't a Queen. She'd left her people to die.

Sande held herself very still. She should not be crying in front of the servants. It looked weak. Her safety depended on her ability to fit in. She carefully locked the grief

away, walled it away, willed herself to feel nothing. Taking a deep breath, she raised her head and met Elizabeth's gaze. The older woman waited for her, as patient as an ancient oak.

"Good girl." Elizabeth nodded. "I imagine it'll be rough for a while."

"Yes." Her throat felt gritty. She wrapped the blanket around herself, slipped out of the bed and approached the washbasin. The water was tepid and a bit of soap scum clung to the surface. She wanted to be clean but she didn't want to share her water. She gingerly dipped the washcloth.

Elizabeth's patience cracked. "Be quick about it, child. Our Queen is not an easy mistress."

Frowning, she opened her blanket wide enough to give her body a quick once over. She didn't quite manage to keep herself covered while she dressed, a distressing condition since she had no control over whether Elizabeth watched or not and she was too agitated to look to see if she was. The dress's brown fabric felt coarse against her skin. She laced the bodice up, her fingers fumbling with the unfamiliar lacings.

"By the suns, you are a slow one." Just a hint of irritation crept into Elizabeth's voice. "We'd give you more time but with the Council meeting here we're terribly short staffed." Elizabeth bustled behind her and quickly wove Sande's hair into a braid then wrapped that into a bun and pinned it to her skull. Sande winced. Elizabeth offered her a plain brown cap that hid both her hair and part of her face. "I think that's the only reason the Dragoness accepted the lot of you. Else you'd be homeless in the citadel of the dead. Not a pretty season for that."

Were all servants so callous? She couldn't remember any of hers acting like that. No, Elizabeth's words stemmed from practicality. Servants were a commodity. Please one's lord or lady and life might be a bit easier. Anger the master or mistress and risk being beaten or worse, sold.

Elizabeth surveyed her. "You look presentable. Lord Quince says your home was set up much like ours. If you remember how yours was laid out it'll be an easy adjustment."

The word "home" sent a pang of longing through Sande. She prayed the Kildarkees had been kind enough to burn the bodies. Even if they had she doubted anyone collected the ashes for their place among the Hall of the Dead's denizens. Yet another thing she'd failed to do for her Dragon.

Who was left for her? "This Lord Quince...has he asked for me?"

Elizabeth sighed. "He's a dragon man and no relation to you, child. Why would he care whether you lived or died?"

*Because he rescued me,* Sande thought. He had held her and she had felt safe. It was childish to cling to that memory but it was the only comfort she had in an ocean of overwhelming heartache. "I am sorry to be a burden to you."

"Pity's a poor balm and I promised I wouldn't give you that." But her bright blue eyes cradled the emotion. She patted Sande's hand. "Come along then. We'll try to find you easy tasks until you get your strength back."

"Where are we going?" Sande asked.

"To the Queen's kitchen. She'll be looking to break her fast shortly and she's cranky 'til she does."

Sande followed her out of the dormitory and down the hall. Elizabeth greeted the few servants they met in hushed tones. Each appeared rushed, arms laden. They looked at Sande with a mixture of curiosity and pity. Elizabeth was right. She despised the pity. Sande raised her chin and stared back, her face a mask of politeness.

"They're nosy, that's all. No harm in them, child."

Sande bit her lip and nodded.

"A lot to take in for today but that's our lot in life. You're a pretty thing. You'll do well. My daughter isn't as lucky." She muttered the last bit more to herself. She hustled into the kitchen, deftly dodging a tray full of individual quiches and a servant who wasn't paying attention.

She led Sande straight to the kitchen's pastry chef. "Lloyd, this is Sandy. She doesn't have the hands of a scullery maid. Why don't you see how she is at baking?"

Lloyd was a big man, as tall as he was round. Sande might have said he was fat but he moved with a briskness lacking in a truly fat person. His sleeves were rolled up over biceps as wide as her waist, hands coated with flour. She didn't like being the focus of his frown. She turned toward Elizabeth. The older woman was already gone.

She turned back to Lloyd who hadn't missed her desperate glance. Handing her a lump of dough he said curtly, "Knead and cut into circles."

She stared at the lump before her. "I am not sure what kneading is."

"Roll up your sleeves. Dust your hands with flour." He took the dough from her, folded it and rolled it. His movements were rhythmic and almost hypnotic. He tossed the lump in front of her. "Now you do it."

She stared at it. Then she obediently rolled up the sleeves of her dress and powdered her hands with flour. Her first few tentative prods earned her an eye roll from Lloyd.

"Put passion into it," he instructed. "Is this how you would massage your lover?" He jabbed at her with a fat finger.

"I do not know. I have never had a lover," she retorted, peeved. She bit her lip. Did servants argue with one another? She prodded at the dough again.

Lloyd's scowl deepened. "Elizabeth," he called. "Elizz-a-beth!"

The older lady returned. "How are you doing?"

"She is not a baker," Lloyd announced.



Elizabeth took it in stride. "Don't frown at me," she said to Sande. "No lectures." She shook her finger at Lloyd. "We had to start somewhere. So she is not a baker. I'm sure she has other skills."

Sande moved from the bakery to the sewing room. Her sewing skills were adequate for mending but it was obvious she wouldn't be assigned to any of the Queen's intricate embroidery. Which was just fine with her. The thought of embroidering flowers onto undergarments didn't appeal to her.

When a meal was finished in the dragon men's great hall she helped ferry plates down to the kitchen. After that she was pawned off to the laundry department to fold and press the citadel's linens.

And so her days as a Kildarkee servant began. She worked until she was bone-tired. By day her hands chapped and bled. At night, not even her far-seeing dreams could permeate the body-numbing haze that claimed her. The ache in her heart festered, constantly reminding her of her loss.

She found two of the other surviving Belkirk servants were also assigned to the laundry department. A cheerful set of older ladies, Sande immediately stationed herself beside them. They reminded her of home, their smiling faces and easy nature a better balm than any healer could prescribe.

"Does it bother you? The not remembering?" Sande asked after she'd worked with them for a few days.

The older of the two had a dusting of gray in her sandy brown hair, thick meaty arms and a pair of rough, big-knuckled hands. Vera was the new name she'd picked for herself. "Not really. If I knew I'd be grieving needlessly for what I lost. My future is open now."

Marie, the other Belkirk servant, agreed with a bob, her mouth full of pins.

"But what of your past?" Sande persisted. "Loves lost? Children gone?"

Vera shrugged. "I have my life and these two hands. That's all."

"The Kildarkees were mighty kind to take us in," Marie added. "You should be grateful for the hot meals, the warm bed and the roof over your head."

"Marith was not so demanding," Sande said softly, folding a pillowcase. She passed it to Marie and picked up another linen. At least she hoped her mother hadn't been an ogre. Serving the Dragoon was quite a bit different than being a member of it.

Marie glanced at Vera. "We don't remember. Best you don't either."

"Why would you deliberately prevent yourself from remembering?"

Vera sighed. "You ask too many questions. And worry too much."

Sande touched the back of the older lady's hand. "But it is a part of you. Your past has made you what you are today."

She'd forgotten how swiftly her clairvoyance sometimes struck. Before she could withdraw her hand the vision seized her. Vera was suddenly standing in a little room,

beside a hearth where no hearth had been a moment ago. Two small children played at her feet. The children looked up at Sande and smiled. And then they were gone.

Sande shivered and blinked.

"Are you well?" Vera asked.

Sande rubbed her forehead. "Yes, I-I think I am just overtired." What had happened to Vera's children?

Marie nodded knowingly. "With the Council assembled, they have us rushing around like ants."

"While their own servants sit back and enjoy the fruit of our toils," Vera added. "We'll be done soon enough. The last of the scouts should be in tomorrow. The dragon men will retire early to their chambers."

Marie clucked softly. "I pity them. They've not had a bit of good news."

"Wandering the halls like the walking dead, shell shocked."

"Doesn't seem to bother the Queen at all," Marie commented.

Vera nodded. "She's a cold one, our mistress."

Sande inched away from the pair. The air seemed thick with visions, illusions, whatever they might be. They danced just out of her line of sight, wavering in and out of existence as if they waited for Sande to give them breath and bring them to life. She'd do no such thing. She snatched up another linen, creased it savagely and passed it on. The shadow children stood, hand in hand, watching her movements. When she blatantly refused to acknowledge them they finally vanished away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Due to their close proximity to the remnants of the Belkirk Dragoon the Kildarkee citadel was quickly made the base for the Council. Every spare human rushed to cater to the Council's needs. Normally it would have been an honor to host a meeting of all the Dragoon. With no time to prepare for the Councilmen's arrival though, the Kildarkees were strapped for space, food and servants. Cerenth was in a foul mood. Quince pitied the servants.

As usual, the water dragons ignored the summons. Scouts were dispatched to any airborne Dragoon that did not respond to the Council summons. Those dragon men returned somber-faced. In all, ten Dragoons were found to be decimated, much like the Belkirks. Empty halls, dead Queens and smashed or drowned eggs greeted the scouts. There were no more survivors.

And to make matters worse, the Kildarkees were missing two scouts. Cerenth had tried contacting them but there had been no response. Quince wondered if they would ever mount a search for them. Cowering in their citadel was beneath the Dragoon. But the Great Council had demanded they wait, and wait they would, despite Handilee's formal protest.

Beld, the eldest dragon man and head of the Great Council, watched as another scout approached the Council leaders' dais. The weary dragon man knelt, bowing his head briefly. Quince was close enough to see his chest heave, a quick intake of air as he prepped to face the Council. When he stood his face was grim. "The Sealee Dragoon is no more."

The council exploded in a murmur of voices.

"There is more." The scout's voice was barely heard above the rumblings.

Beld held out his hands, silencing them. "What have you found for us?"

The scout unslung the package on his back. A bundle of lumpy gray fabric collapsed on the table. Pulling on a pair of leather gloves, he unrolled the cloth. Quince recognized the stench even before it was fully unwrapped. It had lingered on the corpse of the Belkirk servant he and Adonthe had found at the cliff's edge.

Beld stood.

Cerenth, to her credit, remained sitting despite the creature's close proximity to her, her slim fingers steepled, eyes focused on the dead thing before her. Her face was unreadable, mental shields drawn around her like a cloak.

"I found it among the remains," the scout said. "Beneath some...debris." A look of dread flitted through his eyes, as if the dead's shadows had accompanied him.

Quince wondered just what kind of "debris" the scout had found it under. For a moment he was grateful Cerenth had ordered him confined to the citadel. He wasn't certain he could endure another trip to a ravaged citadel and stay mentally whole.

The carcass had the body of an underfed hound, its black skin stretched taut over its frame like the fabric on a kite frame. Its head and snout were long, jaws massive. The front row of teeth were exposed, spiked and each no less than a finger in length. Dead scarlet eyes glared at them. Its paws were clawed, the claws silver beneath their polish of dried blood.

"What is it?" Beld asked.

"The wrath of Seventh Hell," someone murmured.

"The Ram God's hounds," another whispered.

Beld crossed the room to get a better look. He extended a hand.

"The blood eats through nearly anything, like an acid," the scout warned. He pulled back the slack lip, his leather gloves protecting his skin. "See the double row of teeth, suited for killing."

Beld suddenly looked his entire thousand years of age. He sighed. His eyes sank into the valleys of crow's feet surrounding them. He passed his hand over the top of his closely cropped gray hair, leaning heavily on his staff. "Would a pack of these be able to decimate an entire Dragoon?"

The scout and Beld exchanged a glance. Words were not needed. It depended on how many were in a pack...and how intelligent the creatures were.

"Does it burn?" another asked.

"It does." The scout flipped the carcass over, revealing a burned patch of hide.

"This must be but a piece of the enemy's artillery," Cerenth commented. "Anyone with any psi talent should be able to easily dispatch it. Lords, the real question is how do we protect ourselves? The Dragoons have kept to themselves far too long. We need to present a united front." Cerenth licked her lips. She wore a low-cut emerald blouse, a swath of cloth draped across her breasts which bared her stomach and a fitted sheath for a skirt. When she leaned forward to present her case her breasts looked ready to escape.

Quince watched as the dragon men's eyes flicked to her chest then back to her face. Cerenth loved an audience. What was she up to? The Dragoons had never played well with one another. The Great Council's fragile peace was tested every time they met. At worst it degenerated into a tangled web of accusations, betrayals and death plots. At best they agreed not to kill each other's Queens off. Inciting lust in the Dragoons' emissaries was not a safe strategy.

"I propose we reach out to our nearest neighbors and share security detail. Several Dragoons could merge their servants' armies," Cerenth continued.

*No Dragoon would agree to that,* Quince thought. Besides, Belkirk was their closest neighbor.

Beld appeared unaffected by Cerenth's charm. "An unwieldy thought."

"You will need hired men," Handilee said at Cerenth's left. "Trained soldiers who are paid well."

"Servants will pay with their lives if they fail us," Cerenth retorted.

"Dragons have died, *sh'niedra*. We need more trained protection surrounding our Queens."

Cerenth did not soften at the endearment Handilee used. Instead she shot him an evil look. Handilee visibly paled. Someone as talented as Cerenth could spread both pain and pleasure in a glance. For a moment Quince pitied him.

Beld tapped his staff on the floor to regain everyone's attention. "The citadels destroyed were not small in size. Your mate is right, Dragoness. We need trained warriors." He glanced around the room. "I would go one step further. The humans were unable to protect themselves, let alone their masters and mistresses. We need soldiers with their own gifts."

Icteen, one of the Council from a Dragoon located in the far east, stood. "May I suggest the wolfkin?" His dark ebony skin gleamed like polished obsidian and he bore no hair upon his scalp.

Cerenth's breath rushed out in a hiss. "Are you insane?"

Icteen remained unperturbed. "Our Dragoon has gotten along peaceably with them for years."

"Local packs are not as benign," Quince murmured.

Icteen nodded thoughtfully. "You have a high psi. Belkirk did not. Perhaps that would be enough."

Cerenth looked smug.

"What of the water dragons?" Quince asked, suddenly thinking of Adonthe. "Are they too ravaged by these assassins?"

"That could explain why they did not answer the summons," Beld said wearily. He raised his hand to forestall the comments. "Aye, I know. They've not come to Council for centuries. Perhaps they are already extinct."

"They exist," Cerenth said abruptly.

Quince glanced at her in surprise. How would she know?

She glared back at them. "We have a water dragon among us."

"Ah, that's right," Beld said, remembering. "Does he speak to his kind?"

"Not that I am aware of," Cerenth replied. "But that does not mean he cannot." A servant appeared at her side, wincing from the strength of Cerenth's mental call. "Fetch Adonthe to the Council." The servant bowed and backed away.

Another servant took his place and refilled Cerenth's water goblet. "The evening meal is ready, Dragoness. Let us know when you wish to have it served."

"An hour ago," Cerenth snapped. "Be quick about it. Do you expect us to live on water and wine?"

"No, of course not," the servant stammered.

Quince allowed himself a small smile. Being pregnant, Cerenth would prefer her food live and squirming. They did not have enough livestock to offer all the Councilmen a live meal. It would be in bad taste but understandable if she left to eat alone. Cerenth did not move.

The goblets were brought in filled with warm blood or wine, each dragon man's choice. Quince took wine. Cerenth watched him over the rim of her goblet while she drank then acknowledged him by tipping her glass toward him. She had blood. She let it stain her lips a moment before licking it off.

Handilee glanced at Quince and frowned.

Quince picked up his own goblet and turned away.

Cerenth chuckled in his mind. *So determined to hate me*, she whispered.

*You chose your mate*, he shot back. *Bed him and be satisfied*.

*Ooh, testy are we?*

He didn't dignify it with a response.

The servants filed out, overloaded with steaming, covered plates. They were set before each dragon man in order of rank. Quince was one of the last served. He waited until Beld had raised his fork before lifting his own lid. A meerbit scampered out on all fours. The little rodent scurried down the tabletop until another dragon man speared it with a knife. It spasmed on the end of the blade, its fat body twitching tantalizingly.

Quince colored. Everyone else's meat was sans hair and quite well-cooked. He hadn't requested a special meal.

Cerenth snickered and raised her fork to him.

The dragon man who'd speared it nonchalantly slid it off his knife and set it beside his plate. "Dessert," he said to Quince with a hint of a smile.

Quince nodded.

"She's a bitch of a creature, isn't she?" the dragon man at Quince's right said softly.

"You have no idea."

The man's lips twitched. "At least she's comely. Ours is working hard at trying to exceed the combined weight of our livestock. We never see her without a fork."

"Care to trade?"

The dragon man laughed.

A servant set another plate before Quince. He removed the lid with care, tipping it back and toward him, well aware Cerenth was watching him. His meal was the same as the others'. Sighing, he set the lid down and began to eat.

Adonthe's arrival wasn't unexpected. His hair was pulled back in a damp ponytail but he had managed to buckle on his sword before being summoned to the Queen's side. He glanced at Quince for support, an uncertain look on his face, but Cerenth's personal guards escorted him directly to Beld.

Both Cerenth and Quince were too far away to overhear the conversation. Adonthe's face hid nothing though. Apprehension, fear, everything flitted across that expressive face.

"He yours?" the dragon man asked, pointing at Adonthe with his fork.

"Our resident water dragon."

The dragon man grunted. "He looks like us."

"Shouldn't they?"

"I'm from Vertee. We see them from time to time in our bay. They like to watch us. More alien-looking than that one. I've never seen them with hair."

Quince shrugged. "Kaystaree was my original home, quite a bit inland." Even now he felt a quick stab of unhappiness. They'd abandoned it. What choice had he and his kinsmen had? They'd had no Queen. "Adonthe was already here when I arrived."

"You trust him?"

"With my life."

It was the other dragon man's turn to grunt. "Some of our servants say they flip boats, deliberately drown their occupants."

"Adonthe is of Kildarkee," Quince said with a bit more force.

"I do not question his loyalty," the dragon man hastily added. He was quiet for a long while, watching Beld and Adonthe speak. "What if..." He trailed off. "That creature the scout brought back didn't look like it was built for swimming."

Quince set his silverware down very carefully. He'd suddenly lost his appetite. Laying his napkin across his plate, he stood. "Excuse me." He wondered if Cerenth jumped to the same theory.

The water dragons couldn't be responsible for the empty citadels, could they? There were inland Dragoons that'd been ravaged too. But almost all of the Dragoon's citadels sat upon rivers. It'd take a little wine and a bit more conjecture to place blame on their missing cousins.

Beld was a reasonable dragon man. Wasn't he?

Quince was suddenly very afraid for Adonthe.

## Chapter Four

Cerenth stood on her balcony, letting the wind run breathy fingers through her hair. The land squatted in darkness, waiting to be illuminated by its lover, the moon. The air was too cool for her tastes but she wore a thick woolen dress, skin well-protected from the wind. Tipping her head back, she scented the sea.

Was Zeb watching the very same skies thinking of her? She shook her head, arms wrapped around herself. *Ridiculous*, she thought. He had toyed with her, nothing more. And she, like a simpering fool, had catered to him. She should have called her guards and had him dispatched.

Her lips curved. Or thrown into the dungeon. Then she could have had him to herself for as long as she wanted. Ach, what she'd give to relive those moments, to replay the giddy emotions coursing through her. Silly, frivolous emotions.

"Cerenth?" she heard Handilee call from within her rooms.

The thought of that dragon man's hands on her again made her cringe. He called again.

"Here," she replied, loud enough for him to hear. "You dolt," she said more softly. If the Council hadn't been here she'd have risked angering her kin and flying. Maybe she could convince Handilee to accompany her on a quick loop that just happened to overlap the sea.

It was folly to indulge her fantasy. She was owned by the Kildarkee Dragoon, pregnant by one of their men. If they knew of the water dragon they'd try killing it. Him. *Zeb*.

Handilee's shadow blocked the light spilling from her room. "You should come inside. You will catch a chill."

"Don't mollycoddle me," she snapped, but there was no fire to her words, just weariness.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "I would never think to do so." She hunched her shoulders and he dropped his hands. "Is there anything you desire?" His lips brushed her bare neck. "Any dark passion I can fulfill?"

*Oh please*. She should have never filled his head with fantasies while he slept away their mating night. He was incurable. It didn't help that the serving women now fawned over him as well.

"Yes. I wish to fly tonight. Will you accompany me?"

"Dragoness, please. The Council is here. We still do not know what smote the Belkirks. It is not safe."



She put both hands on the balcony and leaned far over its edge. "Indulge me," she purred. Her skirt flogged her legs, the wind switching from teasing to demanding.

"I cannot."

She sensed his frustration. "You are useless." Flipping her body over the balcony, she let herself drop five stories to the inner courtyard below. Her psi talent slowed her descent so that she landed on her feet. The guards, startled, straightened up at their posts.

"Cerenth!" Handilee shouted from above. "Stay where you are. I will meet you."

She had no intention of waiting for him. She fluffed her hair with her fingers and started toward the stables.

"Dragoness," one of the guards stammered, stepping in her path. He gave a curt bow. "The stablemen have all retired for the evening."

"I know how to saddle my mount," she snapped.

"I am sorry, Dragoness. We have our orders. No one leaves the citadel unaccompanied."

"Then accompany me."

"I cannot leave my post."

She tried to brush past him but he remained firm. The second guard took up a position beside him, shoulder to shoulder. "Do you have any idea what I can do to you?" she hissed.

A thin bead of sweat slid down his forehead but he did not yield. She gave him points for sheer courage. It was misplaced but she respected it nonetheless. However that didn't stop her from saying, "I could make you choke on your own spittle."

"But you won't," said a smooth voice.

She glanced over her shoulder. Beld stood a few paces behind her. She stiffened and turned toward him. "Good evening, Councilman."

Beld wore a thick cloak over his tunic, his hood drawn up over his scalp. His hands were snugged in a pair of gloves, fingers laced and held at waist level. Did the dragon man never sleep?

"Good evening to you, Dragoness. Walk with me?" It was posed as a question but sounded more like a command.

"Of course." She couldn't wait to be rid of him. She wasn't accustomed to having someone else run her citadel.

He offered her his arm. She reluctantly placed her hand upon it and he covered it with his own. They walked through the courtyard in silence. The quiet extended so long Cerenth started to grow nervous. What did Beld want with her?

Finally he spoke. "You keep your kinsmen on their claws."

She pressed her lips tight and made a disapproving sound low in her throat.

"You are the last of a dying breed, Dragoness. Beautiful. A high psi. Why do you struggle against your fate?"

"You are a male. You have no idea what is to be a Queen." She would not look at him. They continued walking at Beld's pace, sedate and measured.

"True. We try. Your kin try."

She stopped. "Do you think I have not tried? How many children have I birthed? There is not a season I am not pregnant yet not one of my offspring has inherited my talent."

Beld's serene mask slipped, just a little. "You have a duty—" He sounded very much like her kinsmen.

"I have fulfilled it, Councilman Beld," she retorted, her voice tight.

"Until you birth a daughter the debt is still there."

She yanked her hand from his. "How dare you!" she hissed. "You settle yourself in my household, push my servants to near exhaustion, deplete our reserves and for what? What have you found?" Beld was silent. "Nothing. You know nothing more than a week ago."

"This was a twofold undertaking. One, of course, to assess the damage to the Belkirk Dragoon. But two," he paused and his eyes gleamed black, "to evaluate Kildarkee's Queen, one of the strongest Queens we have left to us. We need psi-laden dragon men. Their numbers dwindle every day."

She stood there trembling, hands knotted into fists at her waist.

"The Kildarkee bloodline is obviously not the best match to your genetics."

"This is my home," she whispered, surprised she could even find her voice. She recovered herself and the haughtiness returned to her voice. "The Kildarkee Dragoon cannot exist without a Queen."

Beld was unmoved. "The Council has found one to replace you."

"There are none as powerful as me."

"True, but the Kildarkees are desperate for a daughter. They are willing to make sacrifices."

That explained the nighttime meetings, Beld's insistence she rest instead of attending. Her eyes narrowed. Who from Kildarkee had attended them in her stead? *Traitors*. She'd find them and...and what? Destroy their minds? It'd salve her pride and solve nothing, only turn the Kildarkees more against her. She rested her hand on her stomach. *Please be a Queen, my babe.*

"May the gods damn you to a watery death," she said through clenched teeth.

Beld signed. "These are delicate matters, Dragoness. Matters you are unaccustomed to dealing with. The day grows late." He paused when she did not move. "Go to bed, Cerenth."

She flung a streak of fire at him, setting his cloak ablaze.

He swept the fabric off him in one fluid motion, crumpling it in a ball. "Be reasonable."

*Reasonable?* She wordlessly shrieked, her mental scream causing Beld to waver. A reasonable Dragoon would bring an outside bloodline to her citadel to mate, not cast her out. Why had her sons said nothing? The answer was clear. Her sons were also looking for a mate. They could not fly their mother.

Stepping back, she arched her back, arms up and behind her head then changed. It'd been years since she'd torn up a dress changing. It felt good.

"Running will solve nothing, Dragoness," Beld said.

*It will keep me from killing you,* she said sweetly in Beld's mind.

He flinched at her strength.

She heard Handilee's footsteps. *Wait, Cerenth. Wait,* Handilee begged her.

She could have sent a backlash of psi coursing through them all. That would have given them pause. It was a testament to how miserable she was that she didn't. Instead she rose into the sky with a rustle of wings that sounded very much like the unfurling of a ship's sails.

The air was just a bit too brisk for her liking but anytime she had a chance to fly without an escort was a night to celebrate. Only she didn't feel like celebrating. The Kildarkees wouldn't turn her out before she laid her eggs. But then what? Would they allow her to be present for their hatching? Damn the dragon men. Damn Beld. Damn her traitorous sons. She flew without preconceived direction, though she ended up at the sea. Folding her wings, she landed on the pebbly beach.

The tide was out, revealing the normally hidden shoreline, an expanse of algae-shrouded rocks. Nothing living marred the beach's eerie silence. The sea water drifted up the shore, trickled through the rocks and retreated. Just what did she think she'd find here? Zeb? She snorted, resting her head on the rocks. The water lapped up and licked the very edge of her nose.

Why bother fighting the Council? Once they made a decision there was no appealing it. Where were they going to send her? Was her future mate a high psi? Her stomach rolled. He could be three times her senior, a grizzled old creature with leathery skin. She wouldn't mate a corpse. They couldn't force her.

*They could,* her subconscious whispered. *Especially if he were a high psi.*

It wasn't as if she'd tried to please them, a tiny voice whispered in her head. She ignored her conscience. *Zeb, why did you sneak into my citadel?*

She lifted her head, scenting the air. Her kinsmen were coming.

The cold water lapped gently over her forepaws. She tucked them tighter beneath her and looked across the sea. The inky blackness rolled and dipped. Did Zeb live out there? How did he tolerate the cold?

A splash of color caught her eye. The waves rolled it toward the shore. It was a bright yellow sea flower, delicately veined in red. Where had that come from?

Zeb?

The sound of flapping wings became a hum. She heard them land, their claws scraping the stones.

"Cerenth?" That was Handilee.

She didn't stop to think or reason. They were coming for her. And she'd never be free again. She changed to human form, teeth immediately chattering as the cold hit her bare skin. Scrambling to her feet, she ran into the next crashing wave. It struck her with enough force to knock her off her feet. She swallowed water and choked, going under.

She surfaced once, heard her men shouting. The next wave cut off all sound. She looked up, the eerie blackness encapsulating her. Above her the bright yellow sea flower floated as if marking her grave. She could save herself. All she had to do was use her cursed talent.

*Now is not the time to die, sweeting,* someone whispered in her mind.

Zeb?

*Swim for me, love.*

*I cannot. I will not.*

Zeb caressed her thoughts and she let him relive her conversation with Beld. *I will come for you long before that comes to pass.*

Her limbs felt heavy. Dragons weren't meant to swim.

She heard Zeb chuckle in her mind. *And what about me?*

*You are a dream, an illusion sent by the gods to taunt me as I breathe my last.* The water-induced soundlessness was comforting. She thought she'd let herself drift to the bottom. Which Kildarkee would have the nerve to rescue her body from her watery grave?

*Up, Cerenth, up!* Zeb insisted. She felt him push her numb limbs into action. She did not fight him. She sensed his worry then, just a fleeting glimpse as it streaked through her mind. He was too far away. She felt him bucking the waves, the crash of the sea loud in his ears, his heartbeat erratic. He'd never get to her in time. For a moment she experienced a sense of regret.

She raised her hand, reaching for Zeb's flower. If she couldn't have him one more time in this world at least she could take his gift to the grave. None of her suitors had ever picked flowers for her before. The bright yellow flower seemed awfully far away. She stretched and stretched until her fingertips brushed the petals. Her hand broke the water's surface.

Someone seized her exposed hand. She fought the grip, flailing leaden limbs, fighting against the hands that pulled her from the water. Voices assaulted her both mentally and physically. She withdrew behind her mental shields. There wasn't one of them who could scale those walls.

She felt Zeb's hand cup her cheek. *I can.* His invisible thumb stroked the corner of her lips.

*I choose to let you, she retorted, a bit of fire returning to her.*

*I cherish that.*

Zeb? She felt his invisible hands working on her muscles, willing blood to flow to her frozen extremities.

*Yes?*

*Will you truly come for me?*

*Aye, Dragoness. So try to avoid further marring that beautiful hide of yours.*

*For once, she was meek. I promise.*

He pulled her into a dreamless sleep then. Still she wept when she felt him leave her. "Don't go!"

"She speaks." Someone pressed against her mind. She didn't recognize the touch and immediately retaliated. The strange presence withdrew. She was left with her own thoughts and they were so sad, so utterly disheartening she let herself drift back into a shell-shocked sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Death by drowning.* It was whispered in the servants' halls when the Dragoon breakfasted, even in the shops of the village hunkered in the citadel's shadow. Quince was as shocked as everyone else. No one thought their Queen could be broken.

The Council meetings were a fine way to pass the time but he had not realized how much they squabbled about the most minute things. He hoped Cerenth's suicide attempt served as a warning. There were more important things to worry about than which Dragoon received the next shipment of fine threads from Spinner's Isle. He headed for his seat.

Passing by Cerenth's chair in the Great Hall, he was forced to acknowledge her. "Dragoness." He inclined his head, surprised she continued to attend the meetings.

"Quince." Her voice was low, its normal edge gone. She was paler than he'd ever seen her, making her hair seem even more otherworldly, her eyes glittering jewels set in alabaster. A wrap covered her legs. Four soldiers sat on either side of her.

Quince discreetly tested the soldiers' minds. Four of the men were psi-laden, only one of the Kildarkee Dragoon, the rest borrowed from various citadels. Under their care Cerenth would not be allowed to hurt herself again. Quince almost pitied her.

Adonthe was right behind Quince. Cerenth's head rose and she met Adonthe's gaze. Quince paused. If she threatened him...

"Dragoness," Adonthe murmured.

She held out her hand. Surprised, he took it. Wrapping her other hand around his, she cupped it. "Why is it you have only five fingers when water dragons have six?"

Quince froze. Where had she ever seen a water dragon?

Adonthe slowly closed his hand and withdrew it from her grip. "I do not know, Dragoness."

"Where do they live?" she persisted. "Do they live as long as we do?"

"I do not have those answers, Dragoness. I am sorry."

She drew back into herself both physically and mentally. "I see." Her words were clipped, voice tight.

Adonthe hesitated.

"Off with you. You will only delay the meeting with your dithering."

Adonthe gave her a quick bow and retreated to Quince's side.

"Do not let her distress you," Quince advised.

Adonthe shook his head, ponytail bobbing. "Why all the questions? She shunned my heritage before. Why does she now show interest?"

"If you had been at the seashore, could you have saved her?" Quince asked.

"Plucked her from the sea? Yes," he paused, thinking. "Dead or alive I could have found her."

"The water temperature is not a hindrance?"

"A sea of icebergs would be unpleasant."

"Would Cerenth's drowning have attracted water dragons?"

Adonthe shrugged. "I do not remember much about my kin. I know only what I can do."

"Perhaps she hallucinated when she went under the waves. Never mind. It is of little concern." She'd be gone soon enough. As soon as she laid her eggs they'd hustle her off to her new home. Their new Queen was already en route.

Quince and Adonthe settled themselves in the stands, the tables saved for the actual Council members and their favored persons. This was the Council's last meeting before leaving. They had their own citadels to attend to. Emissaries had been sent out from Kildarkees on a quest to find suitable mercenaries to strengthen their ranks.

All the Dragoons had checked in with their ambassadors this morning. No Dragoon had been attacked for just over a week now. The Council was cautiously optimistic. There was still no word from Kildarkee's two missing scouts. Handilee had received approval to organize a search for them. As far as they knew though, the menace had only attacked citadels, not lone dragon men. Kildarkee's men might have just been injured or sidetracked. Although why Cerenth couldn't reach them was disturbing.

Adonthe touched Quince's arm. "Isn't that the Belkirk woman you rescued?"

"Where?" Quince followed Adonthe's gaze.

The Belkirk woman he'd tussled with stood less than five paces away. This was the woman he'd carried from the ravaged citadel's cellar. And sparred with. And worried over. And spent entirely too much time dwelling on. He'd brought what medicines he could to her side but she was being cared for by the servants and he had no claim to

her. Between Cerenth's house arrest, the citadel security discussions and the Council meetings he had been kept from further aiding her.

And now here she was.

What a shame her dark silken hair was hidden beneath a starched white cap. He remembered how soft her skin had felt beneath his touch, how she had clung to him. Dressing her in a nondescript shapeless brown dress seemed a crime. Like displaying a pearl on a bed of straw.

When she and the older servant, Elizabeth, passed Quince, he laid his hand on Elizabeth's arm. "Who is she?" he asked.

"She calls herself Sandy, my Lord. She is one of the survivors from Belkirk."

"Has any claimed her?" he asked.

"Who would want her?" Elizabeth replied. "She fails at whatever task she's given."

"Ah. Thank you for the observation." And why wouldn't she fail? She had been dressed like a cherished lady, not some scullery maid. And she had wielded both sword and knife like one trained to those arts. He didn't need another servant but he would not be denied another if he chose to take one. And as Elizabeth had said, who would want the Belkirk lady?

Adonthe leaned forward. "What are you thinking?"

"About?"

Adonthe grinned. "Nice try. Your gaze hasn't left her since she walked in."

"That's absurd." Quince forced himself to look away.

"But true."

"Cydele is advancing in age. Another servant to help with the workload might be necessary."

Adonthe rolled his eyes.

Sande laid her platter on Cerenth's table and backed away.

Cerenth must have also sensed a change. She caught the Belkirk woman by the sleeve. "Who is this?"

Sande went rigid. Part of the problem was she did not move like a servant. She carried herself with a self-awareness that could not be missed.

Elizabeth stepped forward. "This is Sandy, from the Belkirk Dragoon."

"Why have I not seen her before?" Cerenth demanded, her voice lowered so that it did not carry across the room. Quince was surprised. Apparently she'd learned to curb some of the drama this past week.

"She's been feverish, Dragoness."

And if she was really as inept as the servant suggested, Quince supposed they'd kept her out of Cerenth's sight.

Cerenth reached for Sande's chin. Sande tipped her head back, tilting her chin just out of Cerenth's hand.

Quince admired her grit, as fatal as it could soon prove.

Sande's eyes were the darkest human orbs Quince had ever seen. Mahogany, with just a hint of a pupil. Her face was finely chiseled, too defined to be considered elegant. Striking was a better term. His fingers itched to pull away the cap.

Cerenth's eyes narrowed. "Is Sandy your given name?"

"Sande, Dragoness," she replied, correcting the pronunciation.

"What else do you remember?"

Sande wavered slightly. "Nothing." Her voice was firm.

"You should be on your knees, thanking me for giving you shelter."

"I am grateful for my life." She didn't sound grateful. She sounded peeved.

Quince leaned forward, suddenly inspired. If she remembered her name perhaps viewing the carcass the scout found would jar her memories. "Lady Sande, do you feel strong enough to view something for us?"

Her gaze swiveled to his face. She might be human but the mental strength she radiated was nearly as powerful as Cerenth's. No wonder she attracted Cerenth's attention. "You were there," Sande murmured more to herself than anyone else. She shook herself. "I am well enough."

Quince stood.

"What do you do?" Cerenth hissed, swiveling in her seat to face him. He expected her anger. He didn't expect to see the flicker of fear on her face.

Beld nodded, acknowledging Quince. "Yes?"

"Councilmen, this Belkirk servant has retained some of her memories. Perhaps she can shed some light on the creature found at the Sealee citadel."

Beld turned to Sande. She lowered her gaze. "Woman, what do you remember?"

"My name," she said very softly.

Cerenth leaned forward. "You are hiding something." The words were for Sande alone. Quince caught them only because he sat so close to the Queen.

"I am a stranger in your court, Dragoness. I have no allies."

Cerenth relented. "True enough." Her slim fingers drummed the tabletop. "What are you?"

Sande visibly flinched.

"Your scent is tainted."

"The scent of the damned clings to me."

Cerenth laughed, a short humorless bark. "Then we share scents, servant."

Sande gazed at her steadily beneath lowered lashes. "Perhaps, Dragoness, we do." She backed away, distancing herself. The air cracked and hummed between them. Quince wondered why more could not sense it.



The bag holding the dead creature from Sealee was brought into the room and dropped directly before Cerenth. Sande's nostrils flared, an odd gesture for a human. Her eyes went wide and she took two steps away from the table.

"Do you know what is in the bag?" Quince asked gently.

Sande drew the sleeve of her tunic across her face.

"The dragon man asked you a question," Cerenth murmured. Her voice was hard as stone.

Sande continued to stare at the bag. Quince immediately regretted his idea.

"Merciless gods." Sande dropped her sleeve then turned and fled the room.

Quince and Elizabeth followed after her.

Sande was standing in the hall, uncertain which way to run. She stood, gasping for air, one hand to her chest the other clenched in a fist.

Elizabeth tsked at Quince. "I hadn't thought you'd be so cruel."

"Ten citadels are empty. If we wish to spare more lives we need answers," Quince replied. He did not need to be lectured to by a servant. He was already feeling guilty.

"She is barely recovered. Sandy, honey," Elizabeth reached for the shaking woman.

Sande backed out of reach. "It is San-day, not San-dee." She folded her hands beneath her apron. Quince could see a hint of the white-knuckled grip beneath the fabric. She squared her shoulders, head back, then turned to Quince, fixing him with a dark-eyed glare. "What is in the bag?"

"A scout found it in the remains of one of the empty citadels."

"I will look at it."

"It is not worth losing your mind," Quince cautioned.

Her gaze was level. "You are mistaken. I have already lost everything. Losing my mind would be a blessing."

His heart went out to her. What role had she played at Belkirk? A soldier? A trusted advisor? Certainly she had not spent her time sweeping floors and making beds. A shrewd mind lurked behind those dark, pain-filled eyes. He made up his mind to claim her.

"As you wish," Quince replied. His voice was as smooth as hers, devoid of emotion. He thought of the drowned eggs they had found at the Belkirks' citadel. He thought of the Belkirk Queen's dead staring eyes. He had a duty to fulfill. This woman held the answers. As much as he despised Cerenth, the Kildarkees needed to protect their Queen from the same fate.

They returned as one to the chamber, Quince leading.

Cerenth was unmoved by the outburst. "Well?"

"She will look," Quince answered.

"She is a servant. She should do as she is told." Her gaze was on Sande, not Quince.

He didn't like the way Cerenth watched her. "If we break her mind we may lose a valuable asset."

There were murmured agreements around the table.

"Her mind is quite strong," Cerenth assured him.

Recalling how the acid blood had burned his hands, Quince pulled a pair of gloves from his belt and donned them. He glanced at Sande. She was rigid, eyes focused on the mouth of the sack, hands clenched beneath her apron. May the gods have mercy on him for tormenting this human. He opened the bag and pulled out the decaying creature.

Sande went a ghastly shade of white. Her throat worked, swallowing several times. "It is a hound."

"We know that," Cerenth snapped.

"Dragoness, please exercise patience," Beld warned.

Cerenth leaned back in her seat, sulking. The room's heavy curtains rustled in a psi wind she barely suppressed.

Sande found her voice again. "It is one of the Hunter's hounds." She raised her eyes to Quince. "Kill him before he kills us all." Her voice hitched. She covered her nose and mouth with her hand then she abruptly fainted.

Quince caught her before she fell.

"Who is the Hunter?" Beld raised his hands, trying to quiet the suddenly noisy group of dragon men.

"Wake her up and ask her," Cerenth demanded.

Beld shook his head. "She has had a shock." He met Quince's gaze. "Ask her in private when she wakes."

Quince nodded.

Cerenth straightened. "Councilman Beld, she'd be better cared for in my chambers." She placed her hands on the table as if to rise.

Quince stiffened. Sande would be tortured the minute she awoke.

"Quince will do well enough," Beld said mildly. "We need your presence."

Cerenth didn't argue but Quince was certain every one of the Kildarkees could feel her seething rage. Cerenth folded her hands very carefully then set them in her lap. Her mental touch vanished. Since he'd arrived at the Kildarkee citadel, her light mental touch had been a constant reminder she was their Queen.

She'd withdrawn herself from them. He was flabbergasted.

Sande stirred in his arms, moaning.

Elizabeth fussed over Sande. "If you don't mind, Lord, could you bring her to the servants' quarters? I have smelling salts there and she could use a bit of tea."

He left the Great Hall and the Council behind, still bemused by Cerenth's abrupt cut-off.

"My quarters are closer," he murmured. She smelled like a dragon, a wild musky scent hidden beneath a wash of lavender. It surprised him.

Elizabeth shot him a glance. "Are you up to protecting her from the Queen?"

"You are quite sharp today, Elizabeth," he said mildly. He led the way down the hall.

"Begging your pardon, Lord, but it'll be easier for me to hide her in the bowels of the citadel than you."

"True enough," he replied but he did not relinquish Sande. They passed the stairs descending to the servants' quarters.

Elizabeth grumbled under her breath, something to the effect that she did not nurse Sande to health to become the Queen's fodder. Quince ignored her.

Sande murmured something unintelligible then rolled toward him and snuggled into his body. His heart stirred. He had no right to her, no right to enjoy the moment of peace she gave him. Not when he had driven her to her collapse. He entered his chamber, debated about laying her on his bed then opted to place her on his divan.

Elizabeth went to the washbasin and wrung out a damp cloth. She laid it across Sande's forehead.

Somewhere along the way Sande had lost her cap. Her hair spilled across the crimson pillows in a messy braid. Quince didn't trust his hands. Why this human woman appealed to him he didn't know. He only knew that he couldn't let her slip through his fingers.

She stirred and her eyes flicked open. She glanced from Elizabeth to Quince, confused.

"You are in Lord Quince's chambers," Elizabeth said. Disapproval was evident in her voice.

"Why?"

Elizabeth brushed a few stray tendrils of hair out of Sande's face. "You fainted."

She bolted upright. "The hound."

"It is dead. It cannot hurt you," Quince replied.

She brushed away his comments impatiently. "I have to go." She swung her feet off the divan. "I have to warn..." She trailed off, frozen in place.

Elizabeth laid the washcloth on the basin and backed out of the room.

Sande stared at Quince, lips pressed tightly together.

"You spoke of a hunter."

He saw dread and knowledge flicker through her eyes. Her face and mannerisms betrayed nothing else. He marveled at her self-control. "Did I? I do not remember."

"What you remember could help protect all of us. This is a shared threat, not just to dragon men." She remained mute. He turned away from her. "Very well. I have also

chosen to add you to my household staff." He said it lightly, as if it were of little concern. But his heart pounded loud in his ears while he waited for her response.

She was as composed as he was. "As you wish." She paused. "But I will not share your bed."

He was startled enough to turn and stare at her.

The anger danced in her eyes like sparks of lightning but her voice betrayed nothing. She was very beautiful, even enraged.

"That is not my intent." Certainly not his conscious intent but subconsciously? He didn't wish to tread there. "I have few servants." He pointed to a door neatly hidden behind the bed curtains. "Servants' quarters are there. Cydell is the elder lady and will direct you in your duties."

He left her standing in his room, struck silent.

## Chapter Five

Lord Quince's servant quarters, while not posh by Belkirk standards, were quite a bit nicer than the citadel's servant dormitory. Sande had her own room, a nook really, but it was her own, complete with a washbasin. She traded her brown tunic for a deep violet one with a black underdress. The caps were replaced by black netting.

She wanted nothing more than to abandon the ruse, to declare herself Belkirk's Queen and return to her burned-out citadel and the shadows that awaited her. The role playing, the "lords" and "sirs" were driving her mad.

She avoided the Kildarkee Queen, Cerenth. The Dragoness had nearly unraveled her ruse before the Council. Why she had not, she did not know. Cerenth was not a woman who could be duped by such a simple illusion as hers.

Belkirk and its shadows beckoned. At night she wept herself to sleep, muffling her sobs with her pillow.

And then there was Quince.

The Kildarkee dragon man was an enigma. He was not one to attract attention. Rather he preferred his anonymity. Most dragon men surrounded themselves with beautiful things, be it trinkets or women. Quince did neither. His servants were mostly old and past their prime but fiercely loyal. He kept but one manservant, Viseau. Viseau's young son served as a stablehand. Cydell was his main serving lady and he employed several other women who saw to his household's needs. It was obvious he despised Cerenth but then so did most of his kinsmen.

Sande didn't know the Kildarkee Queen well enough to form an opinion of her.

Three days after she had joined Quince's household, Cydell came down with a cold. Quince fussed over her, providing potions, additional blankets and other oddities until even Cydell finally waved him away.

"I will try to find you some gingerroot or a bit of dried coneflower," Sande said shyly after Quince had left.

"Have you a healer's hands then?" Cydell asked.

"I know a little," she admitted. She lifted the bowl of broth Quince had brought and sniffed. "Enough to know that just garlic will not dispel what you have." She set the bowl down. "No matter how heavy the dose."

Cydell cackled and it turned into a series of thick mucus-filled coughs.

"Are we free to use the citadel's gatherings or do we rely on our own?"

"There are gardens to share. But not much to be found in them this late in the season."

"If I cannot find what I need perhaps Lord Quince will allow me out of the walls."

"Are you not afraid of what lurks out there?"

She met Cydell's curious gray eyes. "I have survived two such meetings now. If I was meant to be dead I would be." And if Quince had left her in the bowels of Belkirk she probably would have willed herself to do so.

Cydell's swift intake of breath set off another bout of coughing.

"Rest easy. I will make sure our lord has what he needs." She left Cydell at the fire and opened the door to Quince's chambers.

Quince sat cross-legged in front of the open window. The fall breeze was chilly but he did not appear to notice. He wore a pair of loose-fitting gray trousers laced at the waist and no shirt. Sande couldn't help but notice his finely sculpted chest. Like his household there was no excess, just a lean hard body marred by a few deep scars. His hands rested on his knees, palms up. His eyes were closed.

He was quite possibly the most handsome dragon man she'd ever seen. She sniffed at the stray thought. Where'd that come from? And yet, if she were to ever return to Belkirk she'd need dragon men. Posing as a servant provided valuable insight into the Kildarkee men's personalities. When she finally broke down her mental barriers and flew she'd be able to handpick her men. Or so she hoped. She was young, ready and untouched. Cerenth was just past her prime, not quite as old as Marith but not beloved by her men either. She'd heard rumblings that Cerenth was soon to be replaced.

Quince would be her first choice. She left it at that.

She didn't want to disturb him but she needed to fill his washbasin with warm water and replace his towels. She left the door askew and crept barefoot across the room.

She was not quite halfway to her destination when Quince roused. He snatched the sword lying beside him and rose, spinning. Sande squealed. She didn't think, just simply reacted. She found herself holding a blade in one hand, her feet spaced out, ready to spar.

Quince blinked then blinked again, clearing the night vision from his eyes. He stared. "My apologies, lady. You startled me." He lowered the sword.

Sande still stood there, sword pointed at Quince.

"You are quick," Quince remarked.

She glanced at the sword she still held then over her shoulder at its normal place above the hearth. The remains of the water pitcher and towels lay scattered at her feet.

Quince looked amused. "I will not hurt you."

She lowered the blade. "I-I am sorry," she stammered and bent her head to avoid his gaze. What female servant wielded a sword like that? How was she supposed to talk her way out of this one? She dropped the sword in a nearby chair.

"A swordswoman could be a very valuable asset on my staff." He stooped beside her, helping her retrieve the broken pieces of pottery. "No one would suspect it."

"I am no swordswoman," she said softly, to the floor.

"I hear you are no baker either," Quince remarked. He tossed the shards into the ash bin beside the hearth then helped her with the towels.

She colored but said nothing. She glanced up through her curtain of hair. He was watching her, a bemused expression on his face. She was struck by the desire to touch him, to run her fingers through the wave of thick black hair framing his face. A quiet resignation clung to him as if he were locked into his fate. She wanted to wipe away that sadness.

She wondered what his lips would feel like. Would he be possessive or gentle? Generous or demanding? She felt her stomach do a little flip-flop.

"Who are you Sande of the Belkirks and why do you hide?" His voice was gentle as if he were speaking to a wild colt. But his eyes were filled with dark passion, a simmering strength that threatened to spill over into action.

She bolted upright, towels clenched to her chest. His gaze softened, beckoning. She thought her knees knocked together. If he had extended his hand and summoned her to his side she would have dropped to her knees beside him and let him have his way. But he did not.

He remained still, a god frozen in time. His skin was dark-toned, a burnished gold. The light cast from the fire's dying embers gave him an unnatural glow as if he were not quite real. He with the well-built chest and faint scar over the heart. His shoulders were not as broad as some of the soldiers' but his strength was deceiving. His chest rose and fell evenly with his breath and she could see his abdominal muscles ripple in response. But his pulse fluttered at the base of his throat.

So he was as affected as she was? That wasn't good. One of them needed to maintain control. A second longer in his presence and she was going to be the one who lost it.

She was staring. She dropped her eyes, curtsied and started to flee.

"Sande..."

The way he said her name made her want to melt in place. There was a rightness to it. He reached out and touched the back of her hand with a fingertip. Without warning a vision exploded in her mind.

She found her tongue. "I will fetch another pitcher," she choked and fled.

Her face flushed and her heart raced so badly she gasped for each breath. The glimpse she'd gotten from Quince made her alternately hot and cold with need. Quince had been lying in bed naked and she, she had been nude as well, straddling his body and thrusting for all she was worth. The last thing she needed was the dragon man plucking that vision from her mind. She only hoped she'd tucked it away before he caught a glimpse.

The truth was that she desperately wanted to make the vision a reality.

She reached the storage room and fetched a new pitcher. It was glazed a deep green with a black letter "K" carefully etched into its side. It looked a bit fancier than the one she'd broken but it would do. She closed the door behind her, pitcher carefully tucked under her arm.

Halfway down the hall she heard someone retch.

She hesitated. Whoever it was wasn't her responsibility. She'd already started the day off by nearly skewering Quince. The retching continued. She took a step past the door. What if it was Elizabeth? Or one of Quince's servants? Peeking through the crack in the door, she saw nothing but rows and rows of linens.

With a small sigh she pushed the door open wider. "Hello?"

*Silence.*

She eased her way around the shelving. The room was dimly lit and for the umpteenth time she wished for her night vision. She bumped into a shelf, winced and clutched her hip.

*Damnations.* She'd almost broken her second pitcher. As if the combination of anger and pain were the key, her night vision lens slipped into place. She was so startled she actually dropped the pitcher. It bounced off the shelf and struck the floor with a musical crash.

"Why you clawless worm," she swore, shocked and pleased.

She navigated smoothly around the remaining shelving. A hunched form was tucked in the farthest corner of the room. A pile of stained towels lay beside the figure.

"Shall I fetch help?" Sande asked.

"Go away," a female voice replied. The cloak-shrouded body was racked by another dry heave.

Sande pulled a washcloth from the shelf and knelt beside her, tucking away her night sight with a quick flick of the eye.

"I said go away."

She recognized that voice. It made her blood run cold. How had the Queen managed to evade her armed escorts? "Dragoness, shall I fetch you your maid?"

Cerenth snarled an unintelligible response. It would have been frightening if she hadn't choked midway through. Vomiting was not a sign of a hale Queen.

Cerenth looked up. "Are you daft?" Her face was washed pale, emerald eyes luminous. "Of course, it is the Belkirk servant." She said it as if it were a curse.

Sande waited.

Cerenth snatched the washcloth from Sande's hand and dabbed her forehead with it.

No one looked regal after spewing the contents of one's stomach. Cerenth was no exception. From what she'd gleaned from the other servants, Cerenth had never borne a daughter nor a child as talented as herself. If she failed to carry her eggs to term she'd



lose all credibility. Given her attitude she could very well be cast out of all Dragoons. Sande shivered. It was a dragon Queen's private nightmare.

"I will bring back some soap and water," she said finally.

Cerenth looked at her with suspicion. "Why would you do that?"

Sande shrugged. "You are the Queen." She didn't want to tell her she smelled of vomit. Any dragon man would detect its scent. She also suspected Cerenth would scorn pity.

When she returned Cerenth was in the same place she had left her. Sande offered her the soap and water.

"The water is tepid," Cerenth complained.

Sande barely resisted the urge to smack her. Both Cydell and Quince were going to be wondering where she was. "Can you stand?" She bit her lip and offered Cerenth her hand. She didn't want to share any of the dragon woman's dark fantasies but she wasn't about to leave her lying on the floor either. Cerenth grabbed Sande's wrist instead and pulled herself upward. Sande's talent remained silent.

"Do you need help to your chambers?"

"No." She eyed Sande speculatively. "Why do you do this?"

"Why did you allow the Belkirk servants into your citadel?"

"It would have looked unduly harsh to the rest of the Dragoons."

Sande internally winced. Was it too much to hope that Cerenth had a shred of sympathy?

"You do not abase yourself like a proper servant," Cerenth noted.

"No," Sande said evenly, meeting Cerenth's gaze. She felt Cerenth push against her mental shields. The shields held.

Cerenth looked pensive. "Most humans have poor shields." She reached out to touch Sande's cheek.

Sande pulled back.

"I will not hurt you," Cerenth said, a bit of a purr returning to her voice.

"I am a seer." She did not know why she bothered to tell Cerenth. The dragoness would probably use it against her.

Cerenth dropped her hand. "Ah," she said as if that explained everything, or at least explained the strong mental shields. She wrapped her cloak closer around herself. "What are you hiding?"

"I do not understand."

Cerenth raised an elegant eyebrow. "Your name is wrong. Every time I say it I see the wrongness flicker through your aura."

Sande flinched. She hadn't realized seeing auras was one of Cerenth's talents. "It's Leahlisande."

"Quite fancy for a human."

Sande remained mute.

"You do not smell like a human either." Cerenth held out her hand again, not quite touching Sande's cheek, as if she were caressing her aura. "I can taste your fear. Have you looked into the eyes of our murderers, Leahlisande?"

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"And you lived, memories intact. That makes you very brave, very lucky or extremely talented."

"Perhaps a bit of all three," Sande whispered.

Cerenth looked startled.

"Come, we should get you back to your chambers. I do not know how you slipped away from your guards."

Cerenth smiled and it transformed her face from suspicious to radiant. Then she sobered. "Let's keep each other's secrets, shall we?"

She met Cerenth's gaze straight on. She meant what she said. The Queen's gaze was forthright, a trifle actually nervous. "I am not a healer, Dragoness. You should be checked by one specialized in the craft."

"Kildarkee has no healer."

Sande hid her surprise. Belkirk had had several. "Dragoness..."

"Cerenth," she interrupted. "In private you may call me Cerenth."

"I am willing to keep silent if you are willing to let me continue to live here."

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't?"

Sande licked her lips. "Perhaps."

"I will not be living here much longer. The next Queen can worry about ferreting you out. Although I may call on you, Seer."

"As you wish." Sande curtseyed.

"You die a little every time you do that." Cerenth leaned against the doorframe.

Sande stared back evenly. "It was not something I was accustomed to doing."

"And yet you do it. Why?"

"I have no place to go."

"Come now. We are both savvy women of the world. A pretty face like yours—" Cerenth tipped her head to the side. "Exotic. A bit arrogant. Yes, someone would pay handsomely to bed you."

Sande's hand moved of its own accord. She smacked Cerenth across the cheek. Oh gods, what had she done? She put her hand over her mouth but she couldn't find her voice.

The angry red welt brought a flush of color to Cerenth's face. "How dare you!" Cerenth hissed. She cradled her cheek to her hand then blinked as if she were still stunned. "I don't believe anyone has done that before."

"Dragoness..." Sande couldn't keep the horror out of her voice.

Cerenth laughed, a short bark of laughter that wasn't at all amusing. "What do you see when you look at me? Do you see a fool willing to accept the abuse of a servant?"

All she saw was those luminous jade eyes and the emotions swirling in their depths. Her talent was mercilessly silent. Sande looked away, breaking the spell. "I see a beautiful caged bird plucking out her own feathers in misery."

Cerenth simply stared at her. Her hands clenched and unclenched. Then she gathered up what dignity and strength she could muster and swept out of the storage chamber.

Handilee arrived just after Sande left to fetch a new pitcher. He did not have the courtly manners of those born to status. He'd fought his way up the ranks and he still had a tendency to move awkwardly. He might be Cerenth's consort and dressed in fine woolens trimmed with fur but he was still only Handilee, Captain of the Guards.

He lingered in the open doorway, uncertain how to proceed.

"I have decided you will lead the party in search of our two missing scouts," Handilee said without preamble.

Quince finished sweeping the last of the shards into the ash bin before he stood. "Did you choose me for my skill or because Cerenth has cast her wandering eye in my direction?"

He stepped inside. "She is the Queen and you will keep your scorn to yourself," he said in a low voice.

"As you wish," Quince nodded. "Has Cerenth still been unable to contact them?"

"The Queen is not herself. I have asked but she has found nothing. I am not sure if she even tried." He said the last very softly, as if to himself.

"Stephen and Micah are not raw recruits. They are quite capable."

"Could two dragon men stand up to a pack of those canine creatures?"

"They could have just as easily been overwhelmed by another Dragoon's party." Quince refused to allow the hound creatures to be the source of every bad thing happening to the Dragoon. Scouts had gone missing before Belkirk was found decimated.

"We've heard from all the Dragoons," Handilee said a bit impatiently. "They knew what we were doing. Why would they capture our men and then shield them from us?"

Quince shrugged.

"I have chosen Sear, Vince and Bartol to accompany you. You may take what servants you need."

"Sear is untried."

Handilee was unmoved. "This will be a good learning experience for him."

"He is the Queen's son and therefore bait."

"The Queen has many sons."

Quince sat and then gestured to the empty chair beside the window. Handilee seemed bent on handicapping him. Only three dragon men offered? And only two with any experience. Quince folded his hands quietly in his lap. He would not give Handilee the satisfaction of seeing him distressed.

Handilee fidgeted but remained standing. "Have you no more questions?"

"I assume you will leave precise instructions." He nodded at the scroll clenched in one of Handilee's hands.

"I have included a map of the route they were supposed to take. Try not to alarm the locals. The Council would be displeased if they knew we were undertaking this search."

"They approved it," Quince pointed out.

"Aye, but on the evening after Cerenth's swim. I played on their pity."

The Council members had all returned to their own citadels. They could no longer do the Kildarkees any harm.

"May the gods aid you on your search." Handilee drew a sign against evil in the air.

"And may the Queen lay you a full clutch." The Kildarkees hadn't had a full nest in over half a century.

Handilee's lips twitched, uncertain how to take the blessing. He tossed the scroll on the table. "You're a hard man, Quince."

"I have no interest in your Queen, Handilee."

"I believe you. But you catch her eye and that is disturbing enough."

Quince shrugged. "I have no control over that."

"What little authority I have I will put to use. Safe travels, Quince." Handilee left, leaving the door as it was, askew.

Quince was still eying the scroll distastefully when Adonthe entered the chamber unannounced.

"I wish to accompany you on your quest," he said formally, giving a short bow.

Quince snorted. "It is a quest now is it?"

Adonthe colored.

"Has word traveled so quickly then? Everyone knows I'm to seek our quite likely dead kin?"

"I saw Handilee leaving your chamber. I assumed..." Adonthe faltered. "You are not searching for our scouts?"

"Sit." Quince gestured to a chair. "Sear is to accompany me."

Adonthe made a face then quickly concealed it as he sat.

"You can rescind your offer."

"No." He straightened in his chair. "No, I will go where you go."

"No standard bearer will accompany us. We will go quick and silent."

"By air?"

"By land. It is a more stealthy means." He picked up the scroll finally and unrolled it. "There is no honor in this task."

Adonthe looked out the window. "Beld told me my kin were bastard cousins and had no right to call themselves dragons. I would do this, if only to prove my allegiance."

"You have proved it time and again."

"What good has come of me being placed in an air dragon's citadel?" Adonthe pounded his fist against the table, his voice filled with frustration.

"It reminds us you exist." He did not know what deal had been struck up between the water dragons and Kildarkee. Cerenth had no knowledge of it either. Only that a pact had been made between Cerenth's predecessor Violetta and the water dragon clan lurking beyond Kildarkee's shoals. Unless he wished to seek an answer in the Hall of the Dead there was no way he could explain to Adonthe why he was in their citadel.

Adonthe's smile was pained. "Had they no thought of me? Of my welfare?"

Quince was silent.

"Before you came here you had never seen the likes of me before, had you?"

"No one has ever seen water dragons frolicking in a river."

"Too shallow?"

"The channels of my home river ran deep."

"Hmm. I don't mind swimming in a river. Why is it taboo to my kin?" Adonthe stood and turned to the window. He was silent a long moment. "When are we off then?" He sounded eager, as if he was ready to discard the questions surrounding his heritage in favor of traveling into the unknown.

Quince hid a relieved smile. "As soon as we can gather supplies."

He turned to Quince and nodded his head briskly, any trace of his frustration carefully concealed. "Well then. I shall pack." He headed for the door.

"Adonthe?"

The boy paused, hand on the latch.

"Thank you for volunteering."

Adonthe bobbed his head. "The honor is mine. Truly."

It took several discreet inquiries to find out where Leahlisande of the Belkirks hid. Cerenth was surprised when she found Quince had taken her into his household. The dragon man was not known to collect useless trinkets. Had he discovered a use for Sande that she had not?

When she arrived at Quince's chambers she found them deserted save for two elderly servants. Quince's manservant said Handilee had sent Quince to lead the search party for Kildarkee's missing scouts. It irked her that she was left unaware of such.

The old woman had steered her yet to another place, the gardens. Apparently the Belkirk woman had some healing talents and had gone in search of plants to aid the old woman's cough.

Cerenth found Sande on her knees in front of one of the many garden beds. Winter was fast approaching and the beds had been prepped to withstand the icy winds. Sande had combed aside the protective mulch. A trowel hung loosely in one of her hands. Her gaze was focused on a bit of shade cast by a weeping willow tree.

"Seeking to divine the future?" Cerenth asked lightly.

Sande flinched and glanced around guiltily.

"The meerbits play while the master is away."

"Dragoness." Sande stood and attempted to curtsy. Bits of dark earth fell from her skirt.

Cerenth waved her hand. "I am not responsible for feeding you. Do as you will."

Sande glanced at the willow then back at Cerenth. "I was collecting some licorice root for Cydell's cough."

Cerenth's eyes narrowed. "So you are a healer?"

Sande flushed. "No. I learned by watching. I have no talent for it. It is a hard-won skill." She peeked yet again at the willows.

"Is there something you watch there?" Cerenth saw only the gentle stirring of the weeping willow's branches, the dance of its shadow as it played across the dead grass.

Sande shook her head. "I thought I saw something. But it is nothing, Dragoness."

"Do the shadows seek you out even in the daylight?" she guessed.

Sande bit her lip and looked away then back. "Yes."

Cerenth was surprised. Most seers she knew needed certain rites performed before they could try to far see. "Have you no rest ever?"

Sande sighed. "I can choose to not see them. Some are more insistent than others."

"And what do they say here, our Kildarkee shades?" she asked, more than a little curious.

"There is much sorrow." She smiled a little ruefully. "Most do not come to me out of joy."

"I suppose not." She turned away from the subject. "Well, have you found what you are looking for?" She indicated the mess Sande had made of the bed.

"Yes, thank you. I am much relieved. Cydell's cough is too phlegmy. I worry for her."

"Can you concoct something for nausea?"

Sande hesitated.

"Come now. No harm could possibly come from your concoctions."

"I know of plants that could stop or start one's heart...those also that could cause one to lose their baby."

Cerenth was surprised. That was not a simple healing woman's arts. "Where did you learn such?"

"Shadows sometimes wish to share. After all, they were human or dragon once."

"Are you well-versed in poisons too?" She saw the knowledge flash through Sande's eyes but the young woman dodged the question.

"An infusion of gingerroot may help you with your nausea, Dragoness. Have you any dried basil or lemon balm? I suppose you must. I saw the plants."

"Do they stock poisons in my garden?" Cerenth pushed.

"That is the most foul kind of murder. I do not dabble in such." She was quiet for a long time. "There are some such plants in your gardens, Dragoness. But they are displayed for their beauty. I have not seen them being used otherwise."

"Well then, that is good to know."

Sande gave her a small smile. "Is that all you sought me out for, Dragoness?"

Cerenth straightened. "I did not seek you out. I was merely walking through my gardens and stumbled upon you destroying one of my beds."

Sande's smile remained. "The gardens are peaceful this time of year."

"They are that," Cerenth replied, a bit wistful. She rested her hand on her stomach. She recovered herself. "If there is anything you do not find within my walls which should be grown, you have only to ask and I will have servants search it out. It pays to be well-stocked. I would not like to go to war and find that we are missing something as critical as boneknit."

"Rest assured your comfrey plants thrive even as the winter winds creep over the land."

Cerenth glanced back and saw her guards approaching. Ah, they had finally figured out she was no longer resting on her bed. The ruse was up. "Will you have something ready for me this evening?" she asked hurriedly.

"Of course."

"Package it discreetly."

"As you wish."

"You will say nothing to anyone else, most certainly not those chatty old servants. Nor Quince."

Sande shook her head. "I do not make a habit of tittle-tattling."

"I doubt you do." She glanced at the benign weeping willow. "I am certain there are much more scandalous confidences you have heard." Her guards were only a few paces away now. "See that you restore that bed," she said in a more haughty tone.

Sande curtsied lowly.

Cerenth turned toward her guards. "Are you such poor sentries that you cannot even keep track of an addled, pregnant old Queen?" She saw the guards' faces harden. They did not even cast a look toward Sande. Cerenth was relieved.



## Chapter Six

The winter winds were never kind to the land. Trees hunched against the wind, nude, their branches trembling like the limbs of the elderly. Those trees that still kept their leaves were prickly bastards and it was tough to hack a shelter out of their boughs. There was little grass for their mounts to eat, just stubbly remains of brown, nutrient-poor grasses. To add to the scenery, the clouds today promised rain.

Quince drew his fur-lined cloak closer around him. Five days of riding had yielded little. He'd found several old campsites but whether they were Micah and Stephen's he did not know. They had waited too long. Their scents could no longer be picked up.

Sear was a sullen youth, prone to swearing and throwing his mother's name out at whim. Vince, a dragon man the same age as Quince, bore a nasty shoulder scar and could no longer wield a sword well. He was a quiet man, lean and wiry with eyes that saw everything. Bartol, a bit younger than Quince, chatted nonstop, a gossip washerwoman sort. Bartol didn't mind Sear's swearing at all. He just ignored it and continued talking as if nothing was amiss. Quince didn't know which one was worse.

He rubbed his forehead, the dregs of a four-day headache still lingering.

Adonthe rode at his left, ever vigilant. Only he seemed to truly enjoy the adventure.

"My mother would have never approved of me riding out in this." Sear glanced skyward. "Why don't I ride ahead and make camp?"

"We stay in a group," Quince replied.

Sear snarled a response low under his breath. Quince ignored it. But Vince evidently had had enough. "Boy, if you intend to reach maturity with all your limbs intact, sit your ass straight in that saddle, shut your mouth and listen to your superiors."

"Cerenth—" Sear began.

"Mama's boy, I wager Cerenth doesn't think of you at all. Same as your brothers. So you make your way alone."

"But..."

Vince rode up alongside Sear, drew his crossbow and pointed the bolt at Sear's throat.

Sear glanced at Quince. "Eyes forward lest you stumble into a trap unaware." Quince shifted his mount into a slightly faster trot.

Vince spat and strapped his crossbow back down. Sear sullenly followed orders.

Adonthe abruptly veered his mount off to the left. Vaulting out of the saddle, he dropped to his knees, rummaged through the brambles and came up with a bit of cloth. He drew his sword.

Quince and Vince dismounted as one. Adonthe's sense of smell was just a smidge better than their own. Quince chalked it up to youth. Something rotted beyond the tangled fringe of branches. Sear and Bartol circled the brambles. Quince and Adonthe stood shoulder-to-shoulder, swords drawn. Vince was two paces back, crossbow ready.

Quince parted the branches. Parts of a dragon man were scattered about the clearing. An arm here. A piece of a leg there. Sear vomited. Adonthe's throat worked but he remained steady.

"Here!" Bartol shouted. He sheathed his sword and knelt beside a still form at the far side of the clearing. He'd circled a bit faster than Sear as he had not stopped to vomit.

Quince ran forward. Stephen lay in a soiled heap of his own blood and tissue. His limbs looked like something had chewed on him repeatedly. Old chew marks ranged along fresh ones still seeping blood. "Stephen." The dragon man's eyes fluttered at the sound of his name. Quince dropped his sword beside him. "What has been done to you?"

Vince took up a defensive position behind Quince, facing the clearing. Adonthe and Sear stood by as well.

Stephen's throat worked. Quince pulled a flask from his belt and wetted the man's lips. "Run. A trap," he croaked.

Vince swore and shot. A hound's body landed beside Quince, pierced to the heart with an arrow. He picked up his sword and spun, slicing another in two.

"Vince. Sear. Change!" Quince shouted. They'd be safer in their dragon form. Vince was a smidge faster than Sear. He dropped his crossbow and shifted. His head swiveled around and he blew fire, giving Sear cover to change.

Hounds emerged from the brush. Why had he not smelled them before? Their scent clung to the air like a foul cologne. Vince and Sear, wings tucked, crept along the edges, spewing flame and searing hounds. Adonthe, Quince and Bartol formed a circle around Stephen, cutting down those creatures missed by flame.

He did not know how long they fought only that the sky had turned black and the rain had begun. His sword arm ached and he was drenched to the skin in icy water. Finally the last of the hounds were destroyed. He kept Sear and Vince in dragon form but made Bartol change so he could safely guard the clearing. While the rain was miserable in both dragon and human form, the dragon was better built to tolerate it. Quince remained in human form, unwilling to allow Adonthe to become the most vulnerable of them.

Adonthe and Quince eased Stephen under a cover of boughs. Bartol brought them a mouthful of wood and set it aflame. Quince looked at Stephen helplessly. He had not

brought along enough salve and dressings to bind all his wounds. Stephen shivered a little.

Quince offered him water. He drank noisily. "Have you lain here all this time?" Quince asked.

"Yes. He brought food, water, sometimes." Stephen didn't open his eyes.

"Who? Micah?"

"They killed Micah right away. The Hunter. The Hunter wanted to strike fear in your hearts. So he...he left me alive. He knew you would come."

"I am sorry it has been so long." Quince soaked a bit of bread in the water and offered to Stephen. "The Council needed convincing before they gave their blessing."

Stephen tried to shake his head then groaned. "We need to keep moving. The Hunter will be back to see if his bait still lives."

Quince had had the same thoughts but the crippled man didn't look like he'd survive moving.

Stephen opened his eyes. "I think I will live a little longer."

Quince nodded. "I will do what I can to bandage these. Can you ride?"

"Lash me to the saddle."

Quince nodded again. It would be a painful way to ride.

Adonthe stood. "I will collect what I can of Micah," he said softly.

"No, I can do that."

Adonthe laid a hand on Quince's shoulder. "I-I can't stomach... The dead are easier to tend to," he said finally.

"All right then."

Several bundles were lashed to Sear's mount. Quince tied what remained of Stephen's legs and arms to Vince's saddle. The dragon man tried to keep his groans soft.

"There is no shame in crying out," Quince said quietly.

"I am going home to die. Let me have what dignity I can muster."

Quince nodded.

Vince took to the air to scout ahead. Quince led Vince's mount. Adonthe took Sear's and Bartol's. The other men followed in their dragon forms, guarding the group on the ground.

They rode through the night and the next night as well, stopping only for an hour or two's respite. Stephen actually seemed more content when they were riding. Sear, Bartol and Vince traded sky watch. Had they had more men Quince might have sent one ahead to bring reinforcements. With his current group he needed every person. He prayed they could stay one step ahead of the Hunter, the creature who led the hounds and had tortured Stephen.

Sande felt for the bottle tucked in the pouch beneath her overdress. Cerenth's chambers were heavily guarded. What had she been thinking when she agreed to bring her a remedy for nausea? All the servants were at her beck and call. Certainly one of the older ones had knowledge of a similar remedy. But they couldn't have been trusted to keep silent.

It was too late for worries. She had agreed to help Cerenth and she would. Straightening her shoulders, she rounded the corner and faced the Queen's guards. She kept her thoughts closely guarded.

One of the guards eyed her up and down, clearly not hiding his thoughts. She blushed, ducking her head. Then resolve strengthened her spine and she raised her head to meet his gaze. "Good evening, sir. I come to see the Queen."

"At whose orders?"

"Hers."

"She is not in a position to make such demands."

She kept her hands carefully folded at her waist. He did not suspect her of carrying anything. "I am only obeying her command." She kept her voice sweet, a trifle nervous. No one wished to disobey Cerenth, especially not a mere human. She let her thoughts leak a little bit. It had been a long day. She was tired and wished only to return to her master's chamber for a bit of warm food and perhaps a bath.

The guard relaxed. "Wait here."

As if she was going to do anything else. She waited while he entered Cerenth's chamber. She kept her eyes averted, unwilling to meet the stares of the other three guards. Her dress was demure, laced to the throat to keep out the wind, which had a tendency to shrill down the stone hallways. Thank the gods for that inadvertent bit of modesty.

"Who do you belong to?" one finally asked.

"Lord Quince."

There was a quick intake of breath from the guard on her left. "Quince is off on a wild goose chase. Who tends you now?"

"I keep his chambers ready for his return," she replied, not liking where his thoughts strayed.

"Quince is a eunuch. What is he doing with the likes of her?"

"He has some talent, Derth. He would know if she was touched."

"And what would he do about it?" Derth replied. He stepped forward.

She took one step back. Her heart began to hammer. She had no weapons with her, not even an eating knife.

Derth seized her shoulder with one hand, trapping her, then tipped her chin up and toward the torchlight with the other. "Look at that, Fenway. Tell me that should remain hidden in a eunuch's chambers."

She started to shake. She glanced at Fenway, wordlessly pleading for help. Fenway looked away.

Derth licked his lips, eyes shifting back and forth. There was no one but the guards and herself in the hallway. He gripped one of her breasts, clenching his hand around it until she uttered a low pathetic cry.

"At the peak of ripeness." He lowered his head to hers. She turned her head aside. Fenway chuckled.

Derth seized her chin in his hand, the other still painfully clenching her breast. He mashed his lips against hers. When he drew back she spat at him. He cracked her hard across the face, sending her to her knees. "Harpy. See if this turns you on." He drew his booted foot back to kick her.

"Derth," Fenway cautioned.

She crab-crawled away from him until she felt the opposite wall against her back. She glanced at Fenway but there was no pity in his gaze. The third guard was completely ignoring the entire scene, staring off down the hallway she'd come from. The shadows cast from the torchlight danced, stretching into grotesque shapes. All she had to do was give breath to them. Would that be enough to scare him away from her?

Fenway glanced down, saw the twisted shadows and swore. He high-stepped around them. Derth ignored him, intent on Sande.

Long-dead dragon men whispered in her ear, begging to be released. They would defend her honor.

"Enough!" Cerenth's voice rang out like a slap.

The shadows shrank back to nothing more than what was cast by the torchlight.

Cerenth was dressed in a heavily embroidered gold tunic. Her frothy skirts peeked from beneath the belted tunic, surprisingly feminine. In the evening light she looked like a wraith herself or perhaps an avenging angel. Bright flaming red hair, devil-green eyes in a ghostly pale face, all surrounded in thick gold.

Derth straightened and saluted Cerenth. He opened his mouth.

"Don't speak," she warned. She swept past him and offered Sande her hand.

Sande wordlessly took it and stood.

Cerenth touched her cheek. Sande winced. "Who did this?" Cerenth demanded.

"She fell, Dragoness," Fenway said. "Derth was helping her to her feet when you arrived."

"Are you prone to stumbling then?" Cerenth asked Sande. Her voice was deceptively calm but those green eyes flashed fire.

"No," Sande whispered.

Cerenth's eyes narrowed. "Did he touch you?"

"You insult my men's honor," the head of the group said.

"Captain, I believe it wasn't your men's honor that was insulted." She dropped Sande's hand and turned to the third guard. "Jern, what happened here?"

"I will query my own men," the head guard protested.

"Then do so," Cerenth snapped. "But I will not stand for this abuse." She took Sande's hand again and pulled her into her chambers. The door slammed shut in the guards' faces. Cerenth's angry psi rustled the sitting room curtains.

The Queen's chambers were unbelievably opulent. The walls were done in patterned gold silk, the crown molding thick and white like frosting. Heavy gold drapes flanked the windows, held back by thick gold chains. The carpeting beneath her feet was pure white like freshly fallen snow and as soft as rabbit's fur. Above a crystal chandelier twinkled like starlight, reflecting the flickering flames in the creamy marble-framed fireplace.

"Sit."

Sande sat on a white leather divan. Cerenth swept out of the room and returned with a small bag. "Put this on your cheek."

"Thank you." She was still too shocked to say anything else.

"What would have happened if you loosed your pets on them?"

"N-Nothing," she faltered. "I had hoped they'd run."

"Hmm." Cerenth didn't seem inclined to believe her. "Where else did he touch you?"

"Dragoness, please." Sande flushed. "I am unhurt."

"I will see what has been done to you."

"My right breast," she said softly.

Cerenth unlaced her bodice and pushed her chemise down one shoulder. Her entire breast was swollen and red. Cerenth swore. "They are little more than animals. I will fetch more ice. Stay."

She returned with another package of ice and handed it to Sande. "Unfortunately I have little say in who are my guards. The Council has seen to that. But," and her eyes glittered, "I can make their task a bit more difficult."

Sande hissed a little when she put the ice on her own chest.

"It will keep the swelling down. You don't want to appear lopsided, do you?"

She glanced up at Cerenth and realized the Queen was trying to make a joke. She smiled tentatively. "No."

Cerenth's face softened just a little bit. She turned away. "Have you received word from your master?"

"Nothing."

Cerenth was silent for a long time. Finally she said, over her shoulder, "I sought them out last evening. They are still alive. My son chafes under Quince's leadership but he needs such discipline. Like his father, that one." She said the last with distaste.

"Are they returning home?"

"Oh." She seemed distracted. "Yes. They found one of the scouts, Stephen, badly wounded. Sear's thoughts were scattered but I gathered there was a fight."

"Then there will be wounds to tend to?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Sande dropped the ice and stood. "I should be off then. There is much to ready for their return. How soon may we expect them?"

"They move slowly. I do not know if Quince will attempt to fly the wounded one in. Perhaps tomorrow if Quince pushes them." She turned to Sande. "You like him, don't you?"

She was already thinking of the herbs she needed. "Beg pardon?"

Cerenth laughed. "Your mannerisms betray everything. Quince."

"He is a good master." She laced up her dress.

Cerenth laughed again.

Sande could not help but blush. She looked away from Cerenth's probing gaze and pulled out her infusion. "I will make more if it works for you. Take it three times a day. It's a bit sharp so add honey if you must."

Cerenth took the bottle and set it on the long low table running behind the divan. "Thank you."

Sande nodded. "I owe you thanks as well, for rescuing me from the guards."

Cerenth waved it off. "If you had had a sword or other weapon would you have defended yourself?"

"Yes." It came out so definitively that it surprised them both.

"Are you a swordswoman then? Your talents never end."

"I am quite good with the blade."

"Good enough to defeat my guards? They are strong. I would have said ruggedly handsome until I saw their manhandling." She sighed. "Little more than beasts."

"Strength is an aid to skill, not a substitute for it."

"If I gave you a chance to redeem your honor, would you?"

"My dignity and honor are still intact, Cerenth. It's just my pride which has been dealt a blow."

"You do not wish any sort of vengeance then?"

Sande gave a short bark of laughter. "My dance card is quite full at the moment. Let the gods deal with them. I was frightened. I will not wander unarmed again."

Cerenth eyed her closely. "So young. Naïve. And yet there is an undercurrent that runs through you that is startlingly fierce." Cerenth picked up the bottle and held it to the light. "You wish to flee. Go then."

Sande hesitated. "I wish... If you could not speak of this to Quince."

Cerenth's eyes narrowed.

"I fight my own battles."

"I see." Her voice was noncommittal. "Quince and I exchange little enough words as it is."

She took that as acquiescence. "Thank you. Should help be sent to Quince?"

"Handilee would deny him such. I had not thought him to be so jealous a lover he'd endanger his own men but the men chosen for the search indicate exactly such. I will keep watch over them."

"Then I owe you, thanks again."

Cerenth gave her a small smile. "I do nothing out of generosity."

Sande disagreed but remained silent.

"Well, be off with you then."

"I will see you again, Dragoness?"

Cerenth picked up the bottle again and tipped it from side to side, sloshing the liquid inside it. "I don't doubt it, Leahlisande. Get you gone before my servants return from their supper."

When Sande left Cerenth's chamber all the guards were staring straight ahead, backs rigid. She did not skulk but exited as Cerenth might, head high, confident in herself and her abilities. It was a hard act but she managed it. She felt the guards' wondering thoughts trail in her wake.

*What manner of creature keeps her poise after an assault?* their leader thought.

*A Queen.* When she was out of their sight she started to shake. She picked her skirts up and fled down the hallway, back to Quince's chambers.

Cerenth was in a considerably better frame of mind after having an entire day of no vomiting. When she sought out Sande in Quince's chambers she found the woman surrounded by plant material and boiling concoctions.

Cerenth wrinkled her nose. "It smells like an alchemist's shop in here."

Sande did not jump this time but paused and raised her head. "Have you any word?"

"No 'Hello, Dragoness' and a curtsy?" Cerenth asked.

"If you wish, I shall. I am sorry. I forgot myself."

Intrigued by anything that distracted the woman enough to forget her manners, Cerenth waved it off. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing salves and such for battle wounds."

"I suspect they will be here by this afternoon." She grit her teeth. She had had to embarrass Handilee in front of his men before she could convince him to send out a wagon and more troops to meet them. Cursing him and threatening him with excruciating headaches did little to budge him.



Cerenth poked through a few of the pots. "You have been industrious."

"I robbed much from your comfrey plants."

"They are impossible to kill, are they not?"

Sande gave her a small smile. "Very good, Dragoness. Yes, they are quite hardy."

Cerenth was absurdly pleased. "I have aloe growing in my chambers. You may have use of it." She used a leaf nightly and rubbed it into her skin.

"Thank you."

Cerenth tipped her head and mentally called out to Handilee. *How far are you from the citadel?*

She startled Handilee so badly she nearly unseated him from the saddle. She laughed lightly in his mind. *Handilee?*

*Dragoness, he replied. We are within sight of the gates.*

*You will bring them to the Great Hall. I will meet you there.*

*There are severe injuries, Dragoness. Grotesque. He hesitated. Women should not be subjected to such, especially pregnant women.*

*Do not order me about!* The roughness in her mental tone had him clutching the saddle pommel in an attempt to keep upright. She left him then.

Sande was waiting for her attention, quietly staring at her.

"They come soon. Best to get your supplies to the Great Hall."

"As you wish." She put together several baskets. "Cydele can help me bring them down."

"I am perfectly capable of carrying objects." She eyed Sande. Would she be able to handle the sight of disfiguring wounds? She should have asked who the injuries belonged to. Sande handed her the lighter basket. "What do you know of battle wounds?"

"Very little." She glanced at her a bit nervously. "You?"

Cerenth blew out a breath of air. "I have been sheltered from much. Let us try not to disgrace womanhood too badly."

"I will do my best, Dragoness."

Gods, the woman was entirely too earnest. She forced herself to move at a sedate pace, taking her time to reach the Great Hall, Sande at her side. Handilee and another soldier were bringing in one of the wounded.

Cerenth bit back a hiss. The pain ravaging the dragon man rolled off him. She clenched her hands tighter around the basket. They laid him on a padded bench. Quince was not far behind, looking far older than his years. Gods, she barely recognized her son. Even the water dragon looked haggard.

Sande dropped to her knees beside the injured man.

"Lady, no." Quince reached out a hand to stop her.

She flicked back the man's cloak. "Dear gods," she whispered. Then her face took on a polite mask, completely devoid of emotion. "Dragoness, your basket, please."

Cerenth started forward. Sande gently took the basket from her hands. A servant appeared with a bucket of warm water. Sande dipped one of the bandages into the water and began to work on Stephen's arm.

Stephen's eyes flicked open. "Don't bother." He coughed and a bit of blood came up. Sande dabbed at it. "Now that I have Kildarkee's walls around me it is safe to die."

Cerenth simply stared. She couldn't help herself. It looked like Stephen had been used as a pet's play toy. Parts of fingers were missing and there were holes in his flesh that went clear to his bone. "What did this?"

Stephen's eyes focused on Cerenth. "Ah, Dragoness, so kind to see one of your own off." He coughed again.

"Shh," Sande murmured.

"Tend to the living, maid. If you have anything to cut the pain for a little bit I need...I need to tell my tale."

Sande looked at Cerenth. "I do."

"Fetch it," Cerenth replied.

Sande stood. "It will kill him," she said in a low voice.

"That will be a mercy."

She closed her eyes and nodded. "As you wish."

Cerenth knelt beside Stephen. She carefully folded his ruined hand in hers. "Lady Leahlisande is a skilled healer. She will give you something to soothe your pain."

She felt Handilee's hands on her shoulders. "Dragoness, there is no need for you to be here."

She ignored him. "How long were you tortured?"

"We were ambushed five days out."

Cerenth closed her eyes, mentally calculating how long the dragon man had already clung to life. Dear gods the man was strong.

"He...the Hunter, he wanted me to live. As an example of what happens if you try to defy him."

She bent over his hand. "What does he want?"

"The destruction of the Dragoon."

Sande returned but Cerenth did not relinquish her position. She held a goblet in one hand. "I will need him propped up." She turned to Stephen. "This will ease the pain, I promise you."

Cerenth could smell the pungent herbs even before the cup was lowered to his lips. He drank deeply, dribbling a bit out of the corner of his mouth. Sande made sure it was all consumed. He lay still then.

His breathing smoothed out and the lines eased from his face. He opened his eyes and focused them on Sande. "I give thanks for you."

"May the gods have mercy on me," she whispered.

Stephen smiled. "They have, child. They have." He turned his head toward Cerenth. "The Hunter is a horrible creature. He walks on two legs and the hounds come to his call. He rides a black cloven-hoofed beast that loves bloodshed even more than he."

"Has he any weakness?"

"I saw none. The hounds, they can be burned." He closed his eyes then opened them. "So many hounds though. He wanted me to carry forth a message if I lived." He grimaced. "Ah, it ebbs and flows now."

Sande raised an eyebrow.

"Can you give him more?" Cerenth asked her.

"It was enough to kill a horse."

"But he is a dragon man."

"No, no more," Stephen murmured. "He said he looked forward to ripping out the Kildarkee Queens' hearts."

"Cerenth's?" Handilee asked, leaning over her shoulder. "Stephen, we have only one Queen."

"Multiple Queens. He made me remember." He closed his eyes and shuddered. "Queens," he whispered, but no sound came out. He did not open his eyes again.

Cerenth laid his ravaged hand on his chest then covered his face with his cloak. She stood. "Preparations will be made for his funeral tonight. He should not have to wait any longer."

"Dragoness," Quince said quietly.

She turned to him. She wasn't sure how much longer she could maintain this mask. Her stomach roiled and she wanted nothing more than to soak the stench of the dead off her skin. How Sande maintained herself and managed to tend to the others' wounds Cerenth did not know. But she would not compete against her in this. "Yes?"

"We brought back what we could of Micah too."

She glanced at the bundles dropped near the Great Hall's door. Her stomach churned. No potion would keep the bile down. She nodded. Sweeping up her skirts, she fled the hall as quickly and as dignified as she could.

She made it back to her chambers before she vomited.

## Chapter Seven

Quince watched Sande bandage Adonthe's wounds. She worked with a brisk care. Her hands dipped into her baskets, knowing the feel of her salves and poultices without looking. She kept her face bent over the wounds.

"Your skills never cease to amaze me," he said to her.

She looked up and pushed a piece of hair out of her face. Her lips were set in a line, face weary. "I am no healer. You should barter for one from another Dragoon."

"That would be Cerenth's responsibility, not mine."

"She is little more than a figurehead now. If you seek a healer you will need to find one yourself." She laid a bit of crushed leaf on a bite mark. Adonthe grimaced. "Patience, Lord. This is the last one."

"I know you are being careful," Adonthe murmured. "It stings."

"I imagine it does." There was sympathy in her tone but she did not ease up. She patted the bandage. "I will bring an infusion later on today. It'll help your body fight the infection." She turned to Quince. "You are my last one."

"I can tend to my own wounds," he said stiffly. He had not seen this side of her before. This was no fearful creature afraid of her own shadow.

Cydell returned with a fresh bucket of warm water. "Best let her do her work, Lord. You don't want them to get infected."

He grimaced. "In my chambers then." He had no urge to drop his trousers in the Great Hall.

"There's a good lord," Cydell approved, patting his arm.

He caught Sande giving Adonthe an exasperated look.

Adonthe grinned briefly then sobered. "I will see you this evening, Quince."

"She pushes the ceremony. Things will not be done properly."

"The Queen doesn't wish them to linger any longer than necessary in the shadow lands, Lord," Sande said, rising with her baskets. "She does them an honor. The dead care little if it is a meager feast."

He looked at her with a bit of surprise. He hadn't thought of it that way, only of what Cerenth could gain. A funeral pyre would give her the perfect backdrop to be dramatic. There wasn't much more she could do to top a suicide attempt.

"The Council ate us out of delicacies," Cydell murmured. "But the Queen is having several cows butchered from her own herd."

"How thoughtful," he replied. He still distrusted her benevolence.

In the hallway, servants scurried past them, intent on the evening's preparations. Glancing out a window, Quince saw wagons leaving to fetch wood for the pyre. Then they entered his chambers. He sighed with relief. It was good to be home. Viseau had built a fire and poured wine. The chamber was warm, filled with the smell of sweet herbs.

He sat in his chair before the fire. Sande waited patiently beside him, head bowed, until he pulled off his shirt.

She dropped to her knees and started immediately cleaning a wicked side gash.

"I washed it out in the river," he protested.

"The river is a poor substitute for boiled water, Lord."

A swath of escaped hair covered her face. He reached out and tucked it behind her ear. An ugly black bruise marred her cheek. She froze. "How did this happen?" he asked. She glanced at him, guilt in her dark eyes, and then she returned her gaze to the wound.

"What, milord?" She applied the salve with trembling fingers.

Rage built. He took her wrists, forcing her to stop. "Who did this?" he demanded.

"It is nothing."

"You are under my protection."

She cringed back from the tone in his voice.

"Cerenth," he hissed. He dropped her wrists and stood.

"No!" Sande leaned forward, grabbing his arm.

He stared at the delicate fingers smeared with greenish salve. The strength in her grip surprised him.

"She is not responsible for it. Please sit."

He relented at her cajoling tone.

"I-I fell." He stared at her. She raised her chin, tucking the hair back into its bun. Her dark eyes flashed a quiet fire. "Cerenth's guards thought to make sport with me."

His breath hissed out. "At her bequest."

"A sane woman does not take pleasure in another's demeaning."

"Cerenth is not sane."

"You let your hatred for her mask the truth."

"You do not know what she is capable of."

She applied a bandage to his wound, a bit too tightly. Her hands still shook but now it was with barely controlled anger. He suppressed a small cry. She moved to his arm, examining a cut on his biceps.

"She could kill you."

"She could," Sande agreed in a tight voice. "Instead she stopped the guards."

He was too shocked to say much more. He had to think about that. He let her tend to his other wounds in silence. Gods forbid, what had the guards done with her? They were not Kildarkees. They reported to their captain alone. "You...You are unhurt?" he asked finally.

"I will be fine, my lord." He did not know how to ask the delicate question on his mind. His face must have betrayed his thoughts for she added, "There was no rape. He manhandled me only."

The thought of another man's hands on her had his rage returning in full force. "Which one?"

"Does it matter?" She sighed, sitting back on her heels. "They are all responsible. One watched. One pretended not to. And the third deserves a lashing."

"Where was their captain while all this was going on?"

"Fetching Cerenth."

What was she doing passing by Cerenth's chambers? They were in a separate wing. Unless Cerenth specifically asked for her she had no need to travel down those corridors.

"I would see what was done to you."

A blush crept up her face. "That is not necessary."

"I would see," he repeated, "what was done to my own."

"As you wish." Her voice was cold now. She laid down her salves and wiped off her hands. Then she stood before him and briskly began to unlace her bodice. His breath quickened.

She pushed her chemise off one shoulder. Bruises ringed her breast. She pulled it back up. "Satisfied?"

"Are there more?" He glanced at her face and saw she was horribly embarrassed. He instantly felt guilty. "I am sorry for that but it was necessary to see what was done."

"I am not property," she whispered. "Had I a weapon he'd be the one with the marks."

Despite his guilt, he laughed. "Ah, my bold maiden."

She glanced down at him. "I see you are not a eunuch as they assured me you were."

He shrugged. "I am a man, lady."

"That is a poor excuse," she said tartly. "Have you any other wounds that need tending or may I be dismissed?"

He looked at her with surprise. She was truly enraged by his erection. How could he help himself? The glimpse of that soft globe of skin would put an erection on a dead man.

"I can tend to what is left." He hesitated. "Lady Sande, please accept my apologies. Upsetting you was not my intent."

"You do me as much dishonor as he did."

That had him standing. He towered over her. "Did I lay a hand upon you?"

"No...No."

"I needed to know what had been done." He gripped her shoulders and jerked her toward him. "This," he whispered harshly. "This is laying my hands upon you."

Her head tipped up, lips parted. He wanted to crush his lips to hers. He wanted to place his fingers carefully over the bruises and wipe away the injuries done to her. But he had no talent for healing. Instead he lowered his lips to hers, his touch gentle.

Need flared through him. It took all his willpower just to raise his head. Her eyes were still closed, lips parted. She sighed.

"I have much self-control. But woman, you test it." He dropped his hands.

She opened her eyes, emotions swirling in their depths. Sorrow, regret, guilt—they were not things he expected to see reflected in her eyes after a kiss.

Then she carefully reached up, cupped his neck and drew him down for another kiss. Her lips were as reckless as his had been controlled. She claimed him, drew his breath from his lungs until he had to sever their claim to catch his breath.

"That, my lord, is how one kisses," she said softly. Then she slipped through the servants' door and vanished.

He stared after her, bemused.

Each Dragoon honored its dead slightly differently. But Sande thought the Kildarkees' ceremony was a much more solemn affair than she ever remembered the Belkirks' to be. The last funeral had been her father's. She didn't recall much of it as if her mind had blurred the details until all she saw were the flames leaping from the pyre, her mother throwing herself at it and being held back by her men. Her mother had screamed accusations at her then. She'd been cursed repeatedly until the guardsmen drew Marith inside. And still over the din of the crowd and the crackle of the flames Sande had heard her mother's screams.

She blinked, willing the memory to hide. Now was not the time nor place to grieve.

Sande stood within the crowd of servants lining the courtyard on both sides. Cerenth led the procession from the gates. She was dressed in basic black. Her hair was tucked tight to her head in an elaborate series of knots, her head bare save for a single gold band running around her forehead. No embroidery embellished her gown. It ran from high on her neck to her toes. The severe bodice conformed to her lithe body, held in check by hundreds of tiny buttons running down the front of the dress. Like her head, her feet were bare.

Behind her two groups of dragon men carried litters. The first bore Stephen. He had been washed and dressed, the most severe of his wounds hidden beneath the fine fabric. The second bore a shroud-draped lump—what remained of Micah. Cerenth

circled the courtyard three times in silence, the litters following her. Then she stepped into the center of the courtyard and stopped before two platforms.

They were built out of rough-sawn wood and draped with swaths of black fabric. Micah's litter was set on the first platform, his tunic laid over it. Stephen's adorned the second. Five foot tall unlit torches marked the platforms' corners.

Silence filled the courtyard.

Cerenth stood between the platforms. Fire leaped from her fingertips. The torches blazed to life. "May our light guide you through the shadow lands. May your sacrifice not be for naught."

She picked up a silver bowl at the base of the pyre and anointed the bodies. "The land will be scarred with the hounds' blood. And their master, who creeps in the dark like a thief, shall be vanquished. This I swear."

The crowd shouted their assent.

Two dragons crept forward, Micah's and Stephen's brothers. Their hides gleamed, copper and ice. As one they raised their heads and blew flame upon their brothers. The bodies and the wood supporting them started to burn. Cerenth stood on the raised dais as the conflagration swelled around her, her hands clenched on the silver bowl, head bowed. Sande wondered how her fabric withstood the heat.

Finally she raised her head and stepped down the dais. The stairs she had just tread on burst into flame. The sparks shot skyward like miniature comets. Cerenth handed the bowl to a servant.

Then they followed Cerenth inside for the feasting, leaving the two dragons to guard the fires. After the meal they returned to the courtyard. The dragons flanked the charred remains. Cerenth carried a ceramic urn. She bent beside the remnants of the first pyre and scooped ashes into the urn. Then she turned and gave the filled container to a servant at her side. She took the second urn from the servant and repeated the gesture.

Cerenth stepped toward a nondescript wooden door set in the wall of the citadel leading to the Kildarkees' Hall of the Dead. Sande wanted nothing to do with that chamber. She knew from the servants around her that the room upstairs was deceptively small. A shaft was actually cut into the ground, angling below the citadel, which contained hundreds of urns.

The crowd pressed around Sande. She was jostled forward. She lost sight of Cerenth and the other dragon men. Then she was abruptly pushed into the Hall. She tried to turn around but the crowd continued to press forward until the guards pushed the remaining assembly back and closed the door.

Two guards flanked the door, both part of Cerenth's personal guard. She recognized Derth. She would not beg him to open the door for her.

Turning, she saw that Cerenth had approached the stone altar at the front of the chamber. She took each urn from her accompanying servant and carefully set them on



the altar. "Mother of mothers." She bowed. "Father of fathers." She bowed again. "Lead your children home. Cradle them in your light."

The sconces on either side of the altar burst into life. Their green flames swept horizontally over the urns.

Sande glanced around. The bulk of the crowd was comprised of dragon men. A few servants had snuck in as well before the doors had been closed against them. A low hum filled the room, a sound that human throats should never have been able to make. But dragon men weren't exactly human.

Cerenth dropped to both her knees before the altar. The sconces lining the rest of the chamber burst into green flame as well.

Sande shivered. It was better when they were bathed in darkness. Shadows writhed across the stone floor, danced over the bowed heads of the dragon men and twisted up the stone pillars supporting the ceiling.

"Go away," she softly pleaded. She backed against the wall then slid along it, away from the group. There must be another way out of here.

She found herself angling downward. The sconces flared to life at her approach.

"No."

The resulting shadows curled around her feet like contented cats, twirling in and out of her legs.

She bolted then, running headlong down the shaft. Crashing into a wall, she whimpered and fell then crawled on hands and knees along the corridor. The cool air here caressed her cheek. She could still hear the hum of the dragon men above her, feel their chant rumble through the stones.

Then someone was standing before her, holding a globe of green light in one hand. Sande started to rise then noticed she could actually see through the shadowy figure.

"Stay away from me." She held out a hand.

"You called to us." The wraith spoke with a woman's voice, sweet and melodious. Sande could see a hint of a crown around the woman's brow. Her hair was a deep brown, almost black. She wore it loose down her back. Her gown was royal blue, heavily worked with embroidery that teased Sande's eyesight but never quite revealed its pattern.

Sande dropped her hand. "Name yourself."

"What is a Belkirk doing hiding in our citadel?" the woman inquired.

"Name yourself," Sande repeated. She put a hint of power in that command. Binding them by their name kept them somewhat obedient. It was the only way she'd found to control the shadows. At least it had in the past. She wasn't sure if Kildarkee shades played by the same rules as the Belkirk.

The woman juggled the globe of light from hand to hand, distaste evident on her face. "If you demand it," she said finally. "Violetta."

"Violetta, I banish you."

"If I leave you will be left to the darkness. Do you really wish that?" Her voice was sweet, too accommodating.

Sande glanced at the swirling shadows lurking just out of reach of the globe's light.

"Wait."

"I thought so." Violetta smirked.

"Who were you?"

"One of the Kildarkee Queens," she replied as if Sande were daft.

Sande closed her eyes, trying to focus her questions. "Can you lead me out of this chamber?"

"I can."

"Will you?"

"If you entertain me."

Sande's eyes popped open. "What?"

"There are few with your talent. It has been a long time since I have been able to give voice to words."

Sande sighed. "How shall I entertain you?"

"Speak with me."

"While you lead me out."

Violetta's eyes narrowed. "As you wish."

Sande stood then and approached the wraith. "You are Cerenth's mother?"

"Yes."

Upon closer inspection, she noticed the resemblance. Cerenth bore her mother's strong profile, the same hard glare. "So you are the one who bargained for Adonthe?"

"Who?"

"The water dragon."

"Ah yes. Names have a tendency to fade through the centuries." She turned and began to walk deeper into the citadel.

"Wait!" Sande hurried to catch up to her. "This will lead us out?"

"Yes."

She didn't entirely trust Violetta but she had no other guide, unless she wanted to go back the way she came and face the dragon men. The older shadows seemed less a threat than the new ones. She didn't want to see Micah try to put himself back together again. "What deal was struck to gain him?"

"I had a rather large fountain in my gardens. I wished to have a living sculpture."

Sande was aghast. "You would have kept him prisoner? What Dragoon would agree to that? What kind of animals are the water dragons?"

Violetta pursed her lips. "Well I did have to exchange one of our own."

Sande stopped. "You damned an air dragon to a watery death?"

Violetta sighed. "You make it sound so evil. It was a simple transaction. Dragon for dragon. We had a mutual interest in each other's species."

No espionage or secret pact involved. Adonthe was to have been nothing more than an elaborate toy for a bored Queen.

"But then I died," Violetta continued, "before I had a chance to really play with him. The fountain is quite beautiful yet, I see. But the swans do it no justice. It was built for a water dragon."

Sande was shocked into silence.

"He is a nice specimen, is he not? The water dragon?"

"Yes," she managed to choke out.

"Here we are," Violetta said conversationally. They reached a door, hinges rusty with disuse. "You have only to go through it and you'll be free of me."

Sande reached for the door latch. There was no lock.

"There are easier ways to get out of the Hall of the Dead than becoming one of them," Cerenth said from behind her.

The wraith swore softly to herself then simply vanished.

Cerenth's torch lit the chamber. It glowed a nice, healthy, normal shade of fire.

"What is beyond this door?" Sande asked, dropping her hand.

"If the old maps are to be believed, a channel to the sea. Open the door and it triggers a switch to flood the lower levels."

"Gods," Sande whispered. Violetta, the old hag, was trying to drown them both. She closed her eyes. All she had asked for was a way out of the Hall of the Dead. Not necessarily a *safe* way out.

"Who were you speaking to?" Cerenth asked. "I saw the green light but I could see no being beyond that."

Sande rubbed her brows. "One of the Queens," she murmured. "A frivolous creature."

"Bent on drowning you?"

"She said a Belkirk had no place in the Kildarkee citadel." She changed the subject. "Why is this door not locked and barricaded?"

Cerenth shrugged. "Who would open it?"

"Someone unaware." Sande turned away from the door. "How did you find me?"

"I know when you are about. You leak emotions."

Sande stared at her.

"I could tell you the locations of all my men at this moment." Cerenth started walking toward the upper chambers.

"But...but I am not one of your men."

Cerenth shrugged and continued walking.

Sande hurried to keep pace with her. "The ceremony?"

"It is complete." Cerenth allowed a bit of weariness to creep into her voice. "I detest wearing black. It leaches color from my face. Did you glean anything of use from your conversation with our dead?"

"No, it was a bored creature, evidently only looking for the diversion I provided it."

They entered the upper Hall of the Dead. "Why would you come here?" Cerenth asked as she secured the torch in a wall niche.

"I was pushed in. The crowd was quite adamant about getting prime viewing positions."

"Ah. The gossiping villagers compete with one another. To witness the last rites in the Hall of the Dead, now that is fodder for weeks. We keep most of them out."

Sande glanced at the door. There were no guards. Cerenth followed her gaze. "They stand on the outside. If there was another way out of this hall I would have discovered it by now." She gave Sande a rueful smile. "I know many of our secret pathways, a bit of a hobby."

Trapped in a citadel by her kinsmen, Sande didn't doubt that she too would have sought out such secrets.

"I am sure your master must be seeking you by now," Cerenth said lightly.

Sande's head shot up. "He is looking for me?"

Cerenth gave her a wicked smile.

"I-I just don't want to be punished." She thought of Quince's hands clenching her shoulders, of how gentle his kiss was. She felt herself go hot. The Queen would know. She tucked the thoughts behind her mental shields.

Cerenth's smile widened a little bit.

"Oh." Sande threw up her hands. She pushed open the Hall's door.

Two of Cerenth's guards straightened immediately. She did not see Derth. Cerenth caught her shoulder before she stumbled into the courtyard. Sande paused and let Cerenth exit first. What would it look like if a servant was caught exiting before the Queen?

Sande fell behind her. Servants were already dismantling the remains of the pyres. Dragon fire burned hot and quick. The ashes would be dusted over the surrounding fields. Cerenth's guards fell in step behind Sande.

Quince had been looking for her. Cerenth wouldn't have said it with such delight if she hadn't picked up a trace of his thoughts as well. Her lips tingled. She fancied she could still feel his lips on hers.

Who was she kidding? He was seeking her, Sande, a servant in his household. Not Lady Leahlisande, Queen of Belkirk. She hurried after the Cerenth, slipping away when

she entered the Great Hall. She washed his laundry for gods' sake. No wonder the man was looking for her.

## Chapter Eight

"She is a pretty thing," Adonthe remarked, glancing at Sande hanging laundry on a drying line. He held a sword and faced Quince.

The suns were not yet directly overhead but both men were sweating. Sparring was an excellent way to keep in shape and stave off boredom. Both were using it to strengthen their healing muscles.

Their swords met and Quince forced Adonthe back. "She is not your concern."

Adonthe looked surprised at the vehemence in Quince's tone. "I meant nothing by that."

Quince was startled himself at the possessiveness he felt toward Sande. Servants came and went. Most were born within the same lord's service they died in. Cydell's mother had served him and her mother as well. It was the way of things. How did this one woman manage to sneak beneath his defenses?

And she seemed totally unaware of her effect on him. While he was all too aware of her. And she hid so effectively. She made it nearly impossible to find her unless he actively sought her out. When he did find her she was doing one of his household's duties. He could hardly take her to task for being efficient.

Adonthe grinned as Quince wavered. He tagged Quince's leather heart plate lightly. "It is good to see you distracted."

"I am no such thing," Quince retorted and parried, glancing a blow off Adonthe's heart plate. "Did you know she once attacked me in my bedchamber?"

Adonthe raised an eyebrow. "What a grand way to wake up."

"No, not in bed." He actually felt himself coloring.

Adonthe smirked.

"You are an impertinent dragonling. Wait." Quince held up a hand. The boy was a quick study.

Sande was hanging his laundry in a corner of Quince's garden, humming to herself. He never tired of watching her. Her dark hair was bound up under a silver netting Quince had picked out himself. It sparkled in the sunlight like a dew-laden spider web.

"Let me show you how well she fights," Quince said. "Lady Sande," he called.

Adonthe chuckled. "You will make me jealous."

Sande looked up, her mouth full of clothespins. Laying her laundry down, she carefully took the clothespins out of her mouth. Her movements were so precise they seemed choreographed to arouse him. She bobbed to Adonthe and curtsied quickly to Quince. "Is there something you need, my lord?"

She was dressed in his deep violet color. Something thrilled deep inside him to see his bloodlines swirled around her cuffs. She was his. Her dark eyes watched him, neither curious nor demanding, just patient. Sometimes though, when she slipped through his room in the dead of night, he thought he glimpsed hunger in those dark eyes' depths. A desire he wished she'd indulge in. But it was coupled with sorrow so bone-deep it bled the color from her face. Her sorrow held him in check. He let her come and go as she pleased. Had it not been for the way she'd responded to his kiss he might have chalked such fancies up to pleasant imaginings.

"Take Adonthe's sword and show me what you know."

She looked flustered and glanced around.

"There is no shame in knowing how to tip steel," Quince murmured, his voice soft and cajoling.

The boy's blade was lighter than his own but still a bit heavier than what would best fit her hand. He made note of that.

Adonthe eyed her stance. "Were you a protector for the Belkirks? One of the Queen's own soldiers?"

If so, it would explain her lack of servitude, the way she met everyone's eyes squarely, how she held herself. Everything she did screamed of refinement. It also explained why she could not bake, fold a straight line or mend.

"You assume too much. Do not embarrass me, lords," Sande murmured softly.

"I would not do that." Quince thrust at her experimentally.

She knocked his blade aside. And then he saw her eyes darken with emotion. Were more of her memories returning? Her feet danced and she forced him back a stride.

Adonthe laughed.

The vixen was quick. She never let him sink a hard blow, not that he would have. He was afraid of injuring her. One thing was certain though. She had been trained. And she had a deft hand. Here was a woman that would not be taken unaware. He had best get her a sword that fit her hand. At least she'd be able to protect herself when he was not present.

She bit her lip in frustration, her skirts hampering her movements. He watched her work on her lip and felt a quickening of his pulse. With a well-practiced grace she swooped her skirts up and fisted them in her left hand. Quince caught a glimpse of a deliciously muscled calf and then he felt a tap on his heart plate.

"Men," she muttered, well aware of her distraction.

"Well played," Adonthe cheered, clapping his hands.

"That was unfair," Quince protested.

She handed Adonthe his sword. "Try wearing skirts next time, my lord. We would see who called what unfair then."

"You have training, Belkirk lady," Adonthe affirmed.

"It appears so," she answered evenly. "Anything else, my lord?"

Quince grabbed a hold of his libido. "Nothing," he managed, waving her off. He couldn't help but watch her as she walked away, humming again to herself. Having her tend to his domestic duties was a waste of her talent. He was going to require her to train with Adonthe daily, whether she liked it or not.

"I cannot compete against that," Adonthe said, eyes twinkling. But then he sobered. "This was entertaining but I actually have serious matters to discuss."

Quince prayed it did not pertain to the Queen. Cerenth's abnormal attitude since her suicide attempt unnerved him. Actually the whole business was disquieting. Cerenth was much too powerful to be driven to something as weak as suicide. But she had tried. And she had continued to keep them all locked out of her mind. Once Quince would have wished for that. But dragon men were not meant to be apart from one another and Cerenth was their only shared link. While she didn't prevent them from speaking mind to mind, her familiar touch nestled at the back of all their minds was noticeably absent. The aloneness irked him.

Quince steered them toward a bench nestled within a patch of shade.

Adonthe wasted no time. "I received contact from my kin."

Quince froze. *The water dragons?*

"It was unexpected." Adonthe stuttered a bit. "I know the Council is over and a ruling already made."

"What do they want?" Quince asked, keeping his voice neutral. And more importantly how had a messenger breeched the citadel's defenses? Or had Cerenth's withdrawal given them an opportunity to contact him mind to mind?

Adonthe looked uncomfortable. "They wish to speak to a Kildarkee representative."

As much as he hated to say it he said, "You should bring this to the Queen's attention." Figurehead or not now, Cerenth was still their Queen. At least until her replacement arrived.

Adonthe shot him a desperate glance.

Quince's breath exploded in exasperation. "Damn it, Adonthe," he whispered.

"They want someone they can trust. I told them I trusted you."

Quince grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "How did they breach our defenses?"

Adonthe pressed his lips together and looked away.

Quince shook him again.

He would not look Quince in the eye. "You of the air put so much faith into your Queens' talents but none into your own. We of the sea foster our own."

It told him nothing. "We are not to leave the citadel."



Seeing the opening he needed, Adonthe looked a little bit hopeful. "They will come here," he offered.

Quince let Adonthe go, swearing under his breath.

"How about the village?" Adonthe asked.

Quince ran his fingers through his hair. It would not be uncommon for a dragon man to go to the village. The Council had banned travel, not day-to-day activities. He immediately decided against it. "Humans practice even less discretion."

"It is not an ideal situation, I know."

"If Cerenth finds out..."

"They are discreet. None will be the wiser."

"Damn it, Adonthe," he swore again. He stood, swinging his sword belt and scabbard over his shoulder.

Adonthe slunk down the bench, looking very childlike.

"Stop shrinking. I am not angry with you."

Adonthe stood, his sword belt slack in his right hand.

"You make yourself a target," Quince said finally. The hurt in Adonthe's eyes was palpable.

"I am their only link to your kind."

"They chose to make you their only link," Quince corrected. Why, he didn't know. He set a brutal pace back toward his quarters. The implications of it all gave him a headache. Adonthe followed behind him. Quince slowed his stride. Adonthe slowed to match. How would the boy ever become a man if he didn't start acting like one?

"Walk beside me," Quince instructed.

Adonthe crept to his side, uncertain.

"I will meet with them on one condition," Quince said. "This is an exception. If they wish to speak to us again they need to go through the Great Council. Not you. Not me. And not in the citadel. Understood?"

Adonthe nodded, his worried expression easing. "There is one more thing."

Quince glared at him.

Adonthe flinched under the gaze but kept pace. "They specifically asked for us to bring Lady Leahlisande along."

"That's a ridiculous request. What use do they have for her? How do they even know she's here?"

"They asked for the seer. She is the only one in Kildarkee with such a skill."

"Have you seen her use this talent?"

"The servants whisper of it. You only have to ask Cydell to get a full accounting. They say the night she was threatened by Cerenth's guards the shadows curled at her feet, ready to defend her."

"Did that come from Derth's drunken lips?" Quince entered the Great Hall. Already food was being set out for the midday meal.

Adonthe eyed a hunk of fresh made bread with longing. "He curses her whenever he can."

"He'll be leaving with the new Queen's retinue. His services are no longer needed." Quince had arranged that. Only the threat of the Hunter kept them from turning Derth out alone. Quince was surprised to find that Cerenth also wanted the man's head, quite literally. Since he wasn't of Kildarkee and Sande had not been raped they could do little more than banish him from Cerenth's sight. He was a tower guard now, far from people, human and dragon.

"She did not ask for you to defend her honor?"

"She asked nothing of me." The words hurt. She had only to ask and he'd have run the man through. Instead she'd turned to Cerenth.

"You weren't there," Adonthe said as if guessing his thoughts.

"What was she doing going to the Queen's quarters?" He buried a fist in his opposite hand. "If Cerenth hurts her..."

They passed a set of servants on the way to the hall. Adonthe lowered his voice. "Our Queen is much changed since her accident."

Adonthe could be fastidiously polite. Everyone knew she'd tried to kill herself. "I do not believe that."

"You *choose* not to believe it."

Quince glanced at Adonthe, startled. So the boy was finally growing an opinion? Good. If only he'd picked another topic to have an opinion on...

Adonthe managed a small smile.

"I'll not have Sande made a pawn, by Cerenth or the water dragons."

"I don't want to see her hurt either."

They turned the corner, pausing by Quince's chambers.

"The bread smells quite good today," Adonthe said a bit longingly.

Quince generally took his meals in his room. He huffed. "Go. Eat and gossip. We'll talk more of this later." His mind was already whirling.

Sande had already washed up and settled herself into bed when there was a soft rap on the servants' door. She glanced at Cydell. The woman was asleep in a chair drawn close to the fire. Viseau, Quince's manservant, had been dismissed as well. She pulled a cloak over her nightgown and opened the door.

A dragon man guard stood in the doorway, dressed in full livery. She bit back a wave of panic. Was Quince going to be arrested? Had he done something to Derth?

"The Queen wishes to see you."

Her? At this hour? "Do I have time to dress?"

"She instructed that you come as you are. I am to escort you."

Sande drew her cloak closer around her, more for the security it gave her than to ward off the chill. "Please lead the way."

The guard snapped his feet together and spun around. She followed behind, wondering what the dragon man thought of the disheveled maid in the hand-me-down cloak and undone hair. She had let it down to dry. Given a moment she would have bound it back. But it appeared they had no moment to spare. She prayed Cerenth did not have a situation requiring a healer but she could think of no other reason for Cerenth to call her at this hour.

They twisted around into the heart of citadel, emerging at a door guarded by two more dragon men. Derth was not there.

At their look she raised her chin, gaze level. "The Queen has asked for me."

"Careful, little maid, 'tis a double-edged sword, being at the Dragoness's beck and call."

She wondered if she should have let Cydell or even Quince know where she was going. No, Quince hated Cerenth with a passion. He would have forbidden her to come here alone. And that would have only raised Cerenth's ire. Cydell would have only fretted. Neither would notice her absence if she were quick about it.

"Thank you. I will exercise caution."

The dragon men exchanged looks then one held the door for her.

When they had closed behind her she called, "Cerenth?"

A servant finally appeared. His gaze roved over her disheveled appearance. She could almost hear his disapproving thoughts. She wished she'd taken the time to dress, guards be damned. Cerenth's servant was dressed all in black, a startling contrast to the gold and white theme of her sitting room. She wondered if Cerenth had been allowed to choose him or if even this decision had been taken away from her.

His head was shaved and his face devoid of emotion. "She is in the bedchamber," he said, his tone bored. "Follow me." He led her to another door, also guarded, and opened it for her.

Sande stepped inside.

This room was bathed in blood-red silk that ran in a pattern of swoops and waves down the walls. Sconces lit the room. Ebony crown molding circled the room like the jaws of a predator, spiked ridges jutting out at odd angles, clearly arranged in some sort of demented pattern. The floor was made of a dark, highly-burnished wood and thick, dark-furred hides were strewn around the bed. A circle of ceiling was glassed, the moonlight illuminating the bed.

Cerenth lay in a four-poster bed that could have easily slept six and she was not alone. Handilee sprawled beneath her. She made no effort to cover herself or Handilee.

Sande's first thought was that he wasn't as nicely built as Quince. She glanced away, polite and a bit unnerved by her casual observation. Cerenth was just as

resplendent nude as she was clothed. Her body was one sinuous curve, a splash of cream showcased on the silky jade sheets. No wonder anything capable of breeding desired her.

Sande wondered what Cerenth had in mind. She picked up the scent of alcohol and blood. A pitcher of blood-laced wine rested on Cerenth's nightstand, its coaster arranged with warming stones. How much had Cerenth been drinking? And what had set her off? She waited by the door.

Cerenth rolled over and off Handilee. "I wish to make use of your services," she purred. The room smelled of sex, sweat and semen.

For a moment Sande thought about bolting. She forced herself to look Cerenth squarely in the eye. The blasted dragoness was broadcasting all sorts of emotions. It made Sande edgy and a bit desperate herself.

Cerenth chuckled. "Handilee wants confirmation that I carry a Queen." Cerenth patted her belly.

"I am no midwife, Dragoness," Sande said through gritted teeth. Lords, if she didn't get out of this room soon she'd be climbing into the bed with Cerenth. She didn't think that was Cerenth's intent.

Cerenth sobered. "Seer, I demand a reading." She sat upright, the sheets puddling in her lap.

"Not all readings are favorable, Dragoness." And she wasn't even certain of her own skill. Sometimes despite her best intentions it remained mutinously silent.

Cerenth held out her hand. Her voice changed, cajoling, "Surely you can find a promising reading for me."

Did Cerenth want a true reading? Or was she simply seeking something to pacify Handilee and the other dragon men? Sande approached the bedside, eying Handilee warily. He watched her through hooded eyes, as cautious of her as she was of him. He was a poor shadow of Quince, overly muscled, hair much too long for Sande's tastes but she supposed Cerenth enjoyed using it to yank his head back. She gasped, forcing Cerenth's thoughts out of her mind.

"He is sated," Cerenth assured. "Sit." She patted a corner of the bed.

Sande sat beside her on the bed, her feet dangling.

Cerenth extended her hand. Sande hesitated. "Would you rather a lock of hair or perhaps a piece of flesh?" Her breast bounced just out of reach.

Part of her, the sane part, was screaming, *Run, run!* Another part of her seemed unable to draw away. The shadows cast by the furniture thickened, waiting. She took Cerenth's hand. It could have been her own save for the painted nails and coloring. Long slim fingers, blemish-free skin, although her own hands had suffered since she came to the Kildarkee Dragoon. Cerenth's hand was surprisingly cool. Sande folded both her hands around it and closed her eyes.

She took a deep breath and slowly let down her mental barrier. She could still smell sex in the room. It was no longer Cerenth's chamber but Quince's. Sande tried to break out of the vision but it fought her. She felt the sweat bead at her brow. Quince groaned beneath her. His hands reached up and gripped her breasts while she ground herself into him. She whimpered and called his name. His calloused hands slid over her sweat-slicked flesh while the breath rushed out of her in gasps.

*No*, she told herself. *Not here. Not now.* The vision shattered, the fragments separating like the shards of a cracked mirror. Another image surfaced through the fractures.

Cerenth was weeping tearlessly. Blood pooled at her feet and she cradled a single cracked egg in her arms. The woman's overwhelming grief swamped her. Sande didn't know the Queen could be so emotional. She continued to hold onto the hand but she felt her skin grow as cold as Cerenth's.

Words died in her throat. She couldn't speak of this, not with Handilee in the room. Then the vision spun away as if it had been made of nothing more than dandelion fluff. Another took its place, so strong Sande could scent the sea on the wind, hear the swarm of voices like the angry hum of bees punctuated by the clash of steel, the scream of horses. She shivered.

She stood on a parapet, the wind fanning her loose hair around her like a cape. Below her, two armies crawled toward each other. One was shrouded in mist but it was more than a fog. It radiated a power so old, so ancient the very earth shifted to meet its needs. Mountains formed at the army's back to protect them. A jagged chasm ripped across the landscape separating it from the second army.

The other army appeared no more substantial than the stuff of shadows. But when the shadow scouts reached the chasm they simply flowed down and through it like a thick molasses. It was a slowly moving storm that could not be stopped, a plague undaunted by the earth's wrath.

A young woman stood at her right. She shared Cerenth's strong features, set in a face carved of alabaster, hair nearly as white as her skin. Her eyes were a shifting sea of gray, a quiet tempest trapped in stone. "We could use Mother's talent now," she murmured

"Rest easy, sister. They say Navarre is as powerful, no, more so than Cerenth ever was." They looked the same age, brother and sister. He was young, his body not yet developed into that of a man. When he matured he would be a man to be reckoned with. His dark hair held a bit of Cerenth's red in it, in the form of toned down highlights. He wore a sword at his waist but it gave him no ease. His fingers were Cerenth's and they moved when he spoke, leaving a trace of silver etched in the night sky.

"This is not a war we can win," the woman insisted.

The young dragon man's eyes were haunted. His gaze seared through Sande. "I fear it as well. Even the ancients quake in the face of this nightmare."

Sande felt as if he were staring right at her.

"They are all around us," the woman continued. "Can you feel them?"

"Aye. There is a very beautiful one watching over your shoulder at this moment. Lady, whisper to us how you beat this monster back before our time."

The woman glanced over her shoulder and their eyes met.

Sande couldn't catch her breath. The heavy wet air clung to her like a second skin. Breathing became a conscious task. She fought to break free of the vision but the woman's eyes held her prisoner, trapped her between worlds. The cold bit into her bones. Her chest heaved. She could hear the sounds of battle. It was all around her, the screams, the thunk of bodies, the strike of blade against blade, the musical whisper of steel slicing through armor to pierce flesh. If she could have gotten enough air into her lungs she would have screamed herself.

And then as quickly as they had come the apparitions vanished.

She thought she saw a flicker of concern in Cerenth's eyes. The dragoness held her hands in her lap. In the firelight they seemed to shake. But that was impossible. What did Cerenth have to fear? The dragoness did not exist in the second vision. Sande closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around herself to keep from shaking.

She felt the bed shift as Handilee moved. "Well, what did you see?" he demanded.

Sande shook her head, mute. Then she opened her eyes and stared at Cerenth. She knew they had bled from human to dragon, that her disguise was no more. "The Queen will bear a daughter." *But it will not be Handilee's*, she added silently.

Cerenth tilted her head, eyes gleaming. "Are you satisfied, Handilee?" she asked, not bothering to look at him.

"Aye, beyond my wildest hopes."

Sande's teeth started to chatter. The cold seemed to have accompanied her back from the parapet. She thought she could see the shadow army's mists begin to pool on the floor. *No*. It could not have followed her back.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," the Hunter's voice called.

"Get out of my head!" she screamed. She put her hands over her ears, shaking from both the cold and fear.

"There is no one here." Cerenth's mental shields settled over hers like a thick fuzzy blanket, muting her senses.

Several of Cerenth's personal guards slipped into her bed chamber, swords drawn.

Cerenth waved them off. "It is nothing."

They physically backed off but not without pressing at Sande's mental shields. She was thankful Cerenth was cloaking her.

"Enough," Cerenth commanded. "Do you not trust me?"

"No," the closest soldier replied.

Cerenth bared her teeth at him, eyes flashing, then she drew her arm around Sande's shoulders, careful not to touch her bare flesh. She turned her face into Cerenth's shoulder, thankful the woman now wore a robe. *Settle yourself*, Cerenth demanded in her mind. *Or your ruse is up and we are both damned.*

Sande forced herself to breathe normally, to concentrate on the rise and fall of her chest. Inhale. Exhale. It was hard to do when one's teeth were chattering uncontrollably. Inhale. Exhale. She forced her shields into place. They squealed in protest, as if a rusty set of doors in need of oiling. She winced at their high-pitched shrill. Then they settled back in place, doors locked from intruders.

She set to work on her eyes then, willing the illusion to take effect. Even Marith was capable of applying a slight glamour. The thought of her mother brought a sharp stab of grief. She gasped.

Cerenth's arm tightened around her.

She choked back the emotion, locking it away with the rest of her memories. The invisible door bulged. She didn't know what she'd do when that floodgate let loose.

She pictured the dark human eyes she hid behind. It was like settling a mask in place. This time it had a weight to it.

Cerenth ordered a servant to bring warm wine. A goblet was pressed into Sande's hands. "Drink," Cerenth demanded.

She drank, long and deep. She didn't care that there was a bitter aftertaste to the wine. The lethargy seeped into her bones and she welcomed it. She didn't want to dream, to think. She didn't want to see Cerenth sobbing over her unborn child. And behind every vision, every ghost, every whisper, there was Quince. Her private vision. And he, stark naked, lay beneath her, his eyes shut while his hands worked magic on her body. A small gasp slipped from between her lips and she dropped the wine glass. It struck the carpeted floor with a dull thunk, the last sound she remembered.

When she opened her eyes again Handilee was gone.

Cerenth stood by the fire, a gold robe draped around her. The extra fabric pooled at her feet. Her unbound hair fell to her waist in a tumble of curls. She was easily the most beautiful woman Sande had ever seen. And it was an effortless beauty.

"My child is going to die, isn't it?" Cerenth said softly to the flames.

Sande moistened her lips with her tongue. The sorrow in the air was palpable. There was nothing she could say or do to change the tide. "Perhaps."

Cerenth smashed her glass against the stone hearth. "Do not lie to me!"

Sande flinched. "You will have a daughter, Cerenth. Try to focus on that."

"Who is her sire?" Cerenth demanded.

"I do not know. But she will have two brothers as well, one a healer and one a high psi."

She heard Cerenth's quick indrawn breath. Bearing a high psi was no small feat. And the Kildarkee had no healer.

"When?"

"Nothing is precise." She uncovered herself and swung her feet out of the bed. The room pitched. She flung out a hand to steady herself.

Cerenth turned away from her. "One of my men will escort you back to your chamber," she said softly to the flickering flames.

"Thank you. You are very kind."

"I am not. You know that."

Sande was too tired to argue.

"Why do you hide so?" Cerenth asked.

"I have no kinsmen."

"You could be Queen here."

Sande shuddered. "I have no wish to take over Kildarkee. Belkirk is my home."

"They would not let me see it in ruins," Cerenth said softly. "But Quince was there."

"Yes, I remember him."

"The bodies we found were burned in dragon fire."

"I thank you for that." That answered at least one of her questions. She would not wish to return to find her kinsmen waiting for her, their perfectly preserved corpses requiring her fire to send them to the next world.

"I said I was not kind." Her voice sharpened.

"I heard you. You seem to be quite proud of that."

"Rulers must be heartless."

Sande sighed. "No one can properly rule without a heart, Cerenth. One can be strong without being cruel."

"I have given them ten sons and they still hate me."

"Perhaps they hate you for precisely that reason." Easier to blame the woman than the man.

The bed curtains danced, stirred in Cerenth's unnatural psi wind. "Your secret is safe with me, Leahlisande of Belkirk." She met Sande's eyes.

"And yours with me," Sande whispered.

Cerenth pressed a bell beside the hearth. A servant appeared in the doorway of the bedchamber. "See that the Belkirk makes it safely to her chambers," she commanded. Her gaze met Sande's. All Sande could see was Cerenth's daughter's haunted eyes.

Cerenth stood at the fire for a long time. The servants cleaned up the broken glass and dabbed at the wine stains. They provided fresh sheets and straightened the bed. When they'd sanitized the chamber as best they could they vanished as silently as they'd appeared. Cerenth spared them no glance.



Her unborn child was going to die. She rested her hand on her stomach. She'd known it, as only a mother could. But to hear it voiced, to see the sympathy in another's eyes...that was too much for her. She should have never called Sande in to confirm her suspicions.

Handilee had come to her chambers seeking sex, as was consort's right. She could have fought him but she had been too tired to protest. Instead she'd relented and given him as rough a bout as she could. It left him sated. Maybe he'd leave her alone for a while. It should take at least a week for his muscles to heal. She'd felt them tear as she rode him and it had forced a groan from his lips but even then he did not concede. Her lips curved. He was a strong man. She gave him that.

What would her child have been like? The product of two such strong parents? Would he have been a soldier, led the charge against the war Cerenth glimpsed through Sande's haunted eyes? Or would he have bedded the next Queen, continuing their legacy?

She'd never know.

She left the fire finally to sit on the edge of her bed. She wasn't tired. Sex always energized her. She could get dressed and roam the halls. What would her kinsmen think of that? Sighing, she glanced through the domed glass above her bed. It was a cloudless night, bound to be cold. She'd welcome the kiss of the winter winds against her wings' hot veins.

She'd never have the satisfaction of seeing her child fly.

The grief struck her like a fist to the face. She flung herself onto the bed, buried her head in the pillow and wept. The sobs racked her body. She wrapped her arms around herself and still the sobs came. Once she thought she heard the slippered footsteps of a servant and she stilled. They faded away and the heartache flooded back as if it'd never left.

*Why do you weep, my Queen?* Zeb suddenly asked in her mind.

Cerenth froze. She hastily reinforced her mental shields. If Zeb could feel her grief what about her kinsmen?

*We psis have a bond no thickness of wall can block, sh'niedra. Your kinsmen dream their own dreams.*

*Mine are dead,* she whispered. *Zeb, come and take me away.* She wanted to be treasured, to feel someone's heart quicken when she touched him. Not because she could sire him an heir but for sheer love alone.

*My beautiful Queen,* Zeb murmured. He ran invisible fingers down her body.

She trembled under his touch. His hand pressed against her cheek. *Why do you stay away?* she demanded.

*I fear your kinsmen's wrath.*

That brought a chuckle bubbling to her lips. *You do not!*

His invisible arms settled around her, holding her tightly.

*I wish to hear your heart beat, she murmured.*

*I must confess, my patience runs thin as well. But you are of Kildarkee and it's the gods' wills that bind you there. For now.*

The covers rustled, then began a slow wiggle up the bed as Zeb's mental touch tucked them around her body.

*Make love to me, she whispered.*

*I wish to be there when you scream my name.*

That earned him another chuckle.

The comforter settled comfortably beneath her throat. She felt his fingers brush away a few strands of hair at her forehead.

*Perhaps you'll be the one screaming, Cerenth said.* She could feel him pushing her mind toward sleep. A thick comforting warmth washed through her limbs. Her breath slowed.

Zeb laughed. The sense of longing he sent to her had her body clenching in anticipation. *I look forward to sparring with you, my Queen. Now let sleep help heal your sorrow.* His invisible lips pressed against her lips. Then her mind slipped into sleep's numbing cocoon.

## Chapter Nine

Sande could only stare at the contents of the box before her. Gloves. It was packed full of gloves, in every possible variation. Fine leather riding gloves, work gloves with leather-reinforced fingertips, lace gloves and elbow-length dress gloves.

Cydell glanced over Sande's shoulders. "What is this?"

"I am not sure." Oblivious to Cydell's curiosity, she carried the box back to her nook. A card lay at the bottom. It was green with a black C scrolled in a flourish on it.

*Cerenth.*

Sande was alternately pleased and alarmed. She tucked the card into the pocket of her apron. She need not inadvertently touch someone's flesh. Cerenth was protecting her.

"From our master?" Cydell asked.

Sande shook her head. She slipped a pair of work gloves into her pocket as well.

Piqued that she was to get no more information, Cydell said briskly, "Our lord is taking a jaunt outside the citadel today. He's requested your company."

"Why?"

Cydell eyed her as one might eye a naïve child. "I'm sure it's not for your bright and witty speech."

Sande bit back her own sharp retort. Cydell was still recovering from her cold, not that that could be blamed for her naturally cranky nature. Why would Quince request she accompany him? And more importantly how had he gained approval to leave the citadel and surrounding village?

"I am sorry, child," Cydell murmured. "I do not wish to see our lord hurt."

Sande stiffened. "I have my own sense of propriety as well."

"I see the way you look at him. And he you. Praise the gods Adonthe is accompanying you."

Her heart thrilled at little at that. "I will not sully his honor," she said carefully. Nor her own. She had Belkirk's bloodlines to protect.

Sande waited for Quince in the stable. When he entered she felt her stomach flip-flop. A thick leather vest protected his scarred chest. He wore a sword at his waist, boots uncuffed and lashed to his thighs. Adonthe followed in his footsteps, similarly accoutered. They were dressed for a fight. All they needed were helmets.

To take a woman on a scouting mission was folly. She had no weapon, no leather-plated armor.

"We are off to hunt," Quince said as if reading her mind. "To fetch the Queen fresh meat."

If the Queen needed fresh meat they could carve up one of Cerenth's own cows. Sande said nothing.

"Truly," Adonthe added, a trifle too anxious.

"I thought none were to leave the citadel, Council's orders," she said finally.

"I need to swim." Adonthe checked the cinch on his saddle, tightening it.

Her eyes narrowed. Hunt and swim, eh? What did that have to do with her? Oh she'd hunted before but not in human form. "I have no skill with the bow."

"Not necessary," Quince said.

"What is my role then?" She did not relish being Hunter bait. But neither Quince nor Adonthe had any inkling she was just that.

"You forget your place." Quince's voice was mild but his eyes glittered.

He was angry and she did not know why. She felt her heartbeat increase. She curtsied very low. "I beg your forgiveness, my lord."

Adonthe coughed. It sounded very much like muffled laughter.

Quince seized her arm and pulled her upright. "Have you ridden before?" He managed to keep his voice neutral but anger radiated off him.

She tried to ignore his grip. It was just this side of painful. "Yes."

"Then mount up. We have no time for defiance."

"You are hurting me, my lord," she said through clenched teeth.

He immediately dropped his hand. She massaged her arm.

"My apologies," he murmured.

She inclined her head and did not answer him.

Quince held her methore cross while she mounted. The beast was an indeterminate brown with a series of armored plates that grew all over its body. Horns grew from either side of its nose and a ridge of bony horn growth sprouted along its crest in lieu of a mane. Full-blooded methores were reserved for skilled dragon men and few were brave enough to partner with one. A fiercer, more intelligent creature couldn't be found to ride into war with. Sande's mount was but a part-bred, the methore brain dulled by the cross to the horse. Despite its fabled intellect, a methore stallion would mount just about anything that'd stand for it. Adonthe had also opted for a half methore.

She gripped the saddle horn, put her foot in the stirrup and swung herself into the saddle.

"Fine set of riding gloves," Quince remarked.

She flinched then found her voice. "They were a gift."

He was silent for a moment. "A suitor already?"

"No, no." She cursed herself for flushing.

He eyed her thoughtfully. "Hmm." Then he pulled a fine-edged sword from his gear along with a scabbard and a belt. "Best you be prepared." He presented it to her.

"I am not battle-trained," she protested, but her hands itched to test the blade.

He held up a gloved hand to forestall further complaint. "You may need it."

"What have methores and swords to do with me?" If they were merely off to hunt and swim, a simple horse and crossbow would have sufficed.

"I do not force answers from you. I expect the same courtesy."

He had a point. Because she could think of no other protest she simply said, "Thank you."

"That's better." He leaned over to buckle the sword belt. She felt his arms circle her waist. Her heart beat a bit faster. If he heard it he ignored it. He centered the sword on her right side then tucked her cloak over it.

Servants, unless enlisted in the guard, generally did not walk about armed. And Sande had yet to see a servant woman similarly attired.

Adonthe watched the proceedings, a hint of a smile on his lips. When she glared at him he merely winked.

They rode out of the citadel unaccompanied.

"I thought the Council ruled that we were to remain close to home," Sande persisted. Did Cerenth know what they were up to? She almost sent a stray thought in the Queen's direction then thought better of it. Cerenth might be jealous of Sande's freedom.

"True, the Council made such a rule. But all the Dragoons will do as they wish, regardless of whether they paid lip service to the ruling or not." Quince eased his methore down the embankment, guiding him toward the sea.

"What shall I watch for us to hunt?" she asked after a time.

Adonthe snorted.

Quince glanced sideways at her. "Cydell says the Queen called for you late the other evening." His eyes gleamed beneath the hood of his cloak.

She schooled herself to remain calm, although her mount reacted to her tension, skittering to the side. "Yes she did."

Adonthe was suddenly more interested in the scenery around him.

"And the servants say you bear the curse of far sight."

She pressed her lips tight. "You should not believe every rumor that haunts the halls, my lord."

"Do you wonder why I brought you along?"

Her frustration mounted, barely checked. "It is not my place to question your decisions. You said so yourself."

"And yet you do." His voice was so soft but it carried steel. "Has the Queen asked you to spy on me?"

Her voice rushed out in a hiss. "No!"

"And yet you say nothing to defend yourself."

"I have no reason to."

He leaned forward and laid his hand over hers. Her mount twitched but remained steady. "Look at me."

She threw back her hood and stared at him, defiant.

"I *own* you."

His eyes were an inhuman yellowish-green, pupils all but consumed by the whirling colors. She felt him press against her mind but her shields held, reinforced by Cerenth's will.

"I will not betray you as I owe you my life." She pulled her hand from beneath his. "But nor will I be told whose call I may answer."

"The Dragoness does nothing on whim. You do not want to become a casualty in one of her games."

Sande's eyes flashed fire. She jerked her mount away from Quince. "What do you know of the Queen?"

He was stunned. Where was the docile creature that had lain so still in his arms in the bowels of Belkirk?

The wind played with the wisps of hair that escaped her elaborate bun. She pulled her mount back so she no longer rode abreast with him. "I will remember my place," she spat.

Quince slowed his methore's pace. The quick stab of guilt angered him. "I speak from worry only," he said, his voice as composed as he could make it.

She pulled up her hood. Her voice was muffled but still sharp. "You speak from anger and jealousy."

Jealousy? Where did that come from? It irked him, every moment she spent away from his side. They had exchanged no vows. He had no right to covet her time. And yet he did. "You have not witnessed her ploys and machinations." Calm and rational thought must prevail.

The methore flicked an ear back in his direction and snorted.

"What would you do to amuse yourself if you were trapped in a city of stone? Tied to a life of forced breeding?"

"Her every whim is met trifold. Woman, how can you blind yourself?" Quince said, exasperated. He found himself turning to speak. He pulled on the reins to slow his animal.

The methore slowed to a parade pace, dancing in place. Must everyone challenge his authority today?

"Enough," he said in a low voice.

The methore shook his head from side to side, then rounded his back and threatened to buck. Quince jostled back and forth, banging himself against the methore's prominent withers, inconveniently cased in bone. He winced.

Sande had slowed her mount to a crawl, still keeping herself behind Quince.

"I can smell the spray of the sea," Adonthe exclaimed in the ensuing silence. He shot past the pair, his lanky body folded over his animal's neck.

Sande kicked her creature into an easy canter, leaned forward and rapidly stretched it into a gallop. Her hood flew back and her hair fell out of its bun.

Quince's methore jiggled beneath his tight grip, working the bit until foam spilled out his mouth. Quince finally relented and the beast surged forward.

What could Cerenth possibly want with Sande? As a whole, the servant class disliked their Queen. The dragon men viewed her as a necessary evil...one that would soon be bartered off. He wondered if he could hurry along the process, offer to escort Cerenth to her new home immediately. The less time Sande spent in the dragoness's presence the safer she was.

Adonthe and Sande were already dismounted and waiting for Quince at the water's edge when he caught up to them. The waves lapped over the animals' hooves and the waterworn rocks. Sande had a faraway look on her face. Her head was tipped back as if she too were scenting the sea. "The Belkirk citadel was along the sea," she said softly.

"We are forbidden to approach it but there it is, that strip of green." Adonthe pointed. When she looked the wrong way, shading her eyes with her hand, he leaned closer, grabbed her chin in a gloved hand and pointed her to the north.

Quince was struck by a pang of jealousy. How could he be jealous? She was a servant. And quite possibly in league with their Queen. She was magnificent, her narrow waist wrapped with the thick leather sword belt, her hair spilling over her hood. Her riding boots hugged her calves, accenting their curves. He wanted her for himself and it was with a longing so fierce it frightened him. He, Quince, a soldier who had lived through a thousand battles, was humbled by the beauty of a woman. It was ridiculous.

She spoke in a low tone to Adonthe. Yet all Quince could see was how her dark eyes flicked to his face and back again.

He approached them, loathe to destroy her easy camaraderie with Adonthe. Yet part of him wanted to do just that. "How long do we wait?"

Adonthe paused. "They come now."

Sande laid her hand on her sword hilt. "What is it that we hunt?"

"Water dragons."

Her eyes grew large and round. She glanced at Adonthe, who was staring out to sea with anticipation. His form shifted and wavered as if he were having a hard time keeping himself on two legs rather than on four. "Why am I here?"

Adonthe cleared his throat, nervously glancing at her. "They specifically asked for you."

"For me?" Her voice raised a notch. "What have I to do with this?"

"They do not like their motives to be questioned," Adonthe muttered. He fidgeted, letting the waves lap over the toes of his boots. A spray of seawater sent his eyes whirling, pupils vanishing beneath a wash of blues and aquamarines. He turned away from them.

"Men," Sande muttered. "Conniving regardless of species."

"I have never heard that word applied to men. Women, yes. Men, no," Quince replied.

Sande balled her hands on her hips. "If you think so little of my kind then release me from your service. I am sure the Queen will take me on."

She might as well have slapped him. Quince took one step toward her, closing his hand on air. He was afraid of what he might do if he touched her. "You are bound to my household." His voice sounded foreign to him.

"Barter me off to the water dragons then. Your overbearing attitude is more than I can endure." Her fingers closed around her sword's hilt.

He looked at her in surprise. Did she expect him to fight her? "I will not," he said flatly.

"We have no need for you, Lady Leahlisande. Forgive me, curiosity prompted my request."

Quince, Adonthe and Sande spun around in unison. The man who spoke and his companions had emerged soundlessly from the sea. He wore a loose-fitting silvery tunic that went to his knees. It was secured at the waist with a wide black band of scaled hide. The other four water dragons were covered only by breechcloths. They seemed unaffected by the bite of the near-winter winds.

Adonthe dropped to one knee, bowing his head. Quince remained unmoved. Sande held her sword half-unsheathed, her stance ready.

"The Council has already dispersed. You are too late," Quince said.

"True," their leader agreed. "They are not our concern."

"I am but one dragon man. I will not go against the wishes of my Queen." Nor the Council.

"You harbor no goodwill toward her," the speaker pointed out.

Out of the corner of his eye, Quince noticed Sande circling the group. Her head was angled to the side, the tip of her tongue touching the edge of her lip. In any other setting it would have been erotic. Here it was plain disturbing.

Quince placed a hand on the still-kneeling boy's shoulders. "Rise, Adonthe. You represent the Kildarkee here."

Adonthe glanced up at the speaker, clearly torn.



The speaker made a slight bow to Quince, touching his forehead, lips and heart in turn. "I come as ambassador for the water dragons. My formal name is not for land-born ears but you may call me Enneth." He looked toward Sande, clearly amused. "You do not call off your warrioress?"

"She has a mind of her own." He should have ignored their request and kept her safe in the citadel instead.

Enneth raised his voice above the sea and wind. "Hail Lady Fighter and Seer. Your like is revered in our watery depths."

Her blade was fully drawn. The sunlight played off its edge. "Have you satisfied your curiosity, Lord Enneth?" Sande replied.

Enneth's tone changed. "Aye, I have." He looked thoughtfully at Quince.

"Enneth you have named yourself. What of the others?" Quince asked.

"Names are not freely given in our world."

"Do not waste my time. I have lied to my kinsmen and Queen to come here. You best have information that will soften my untruths. Are your Dragoons plagued by a sea-borne version of our virus?" Handilee and the others would be quicker to forgive than Cerenth. Then again, since her suicide attempt, Cerenth hadn't been very interested in the citadel's inner workings. Maybe she no longer cared.

Enneth's smile returned. "The hounds cannot swim."

"So if you are immune, why bother contacting us?"

"Your seer may be able to answer that in part."

Quince glanced at Sande. She refused to meet his gaze. If they survived this meeting and the dragon men's wrath, the woman was going to answer all his questions, even if he had to tie her up to keep her from escaping. He'd had enough of the intrigue and secret-keeping.

When neither Quince nor Sande answered him Enneth shrugged his elegant shoulders. "We have healers among us. When the time comes we will do what we can for your Queens."

Quince's eyes narrowed. "We have but one Queen."

"So you believe." Enneth looked at Sande. "High psis are rare enough creatures but you have yourselves a seer as well now. And soon another Queen. What a feast."

Quince didn't care for Enneth's preoccupation with Sande. "The Queen's whelp are less than her."

"Kildarkee's lines are no match for hers," Enneth countered.

"Why would we bring any of our Queens to you? I cannot believe you make your offer out of beneficence alone."

Enneth smiled, amused. "Have you seen the lovely Reanna? Fair of face, innocent, nothing like your current Queen. In time the Kildarkees will mourn what they've lost. Cerenth may be temperamental but she is very strong."

Why would seaborne dragons covet land-born Queens? It was a disturbing thought. "If you have no valuable information to share then I've had enough of you. I may not be of Kildarkee's lineage but they are a strong line. We endangered ourselves to come here. And you've provided nothing but insults and riddles." Quince turned to Adonthe. "Let us be off. We risk too much for too little. This is folly."

"Your temper is quickly fueled at the mention of your Queen. How can you protect that which you hate?"

"I will do my duty." Enneth was right. The water dragons had raised his ire even before their arrival. He was not accustomed to subterfuge. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he thought about Enneth's words. "So the Kildarkee Dragoon will fall?"

Enneth's hands appeared from within the ample cuffs of his tunic. He opened his arms wide and spread his hands, revealing six fingers on each webbed hand. "As have all the Dragons on the other worlds. You will find few in the sky. The end of the air dragons' rule is at hand."

Quince grabbed the folds of Enneth's shirt. "What is it that hunts us? How can we stop it?" He saw the face of the old Belkirk Queen reflect back at him through Enneth's whirling eyes. Enneth's men started forward to protect him.

"Hold." With that word, the water dragons backed off.

The tip of Sande's blade found its way into the hollow of one of the water dragon's throats. Adonthe too had drawn his sword, although he still appeared uncertain which side to take.

"Easy, female. We mean no harm." The water dragon facing her held out his hands in front of him, palms up. His eyes were the color of the inside of seashell, a rich pearlized violet. His build was very narrow, features sharp with high cheekbones and a thin, angular nose. Milky white skin glossed his body, gloving his lean mass. He was exotic and alien, more so than Adonthe ever could be.

"Do not move," she murmured. "I am well-versed with a sword."

"I recall that," he replied and smiled at her shock.

Her sword wavered but she did not lower it. "You lie," she hissed.

"I used to watch you from the safety of the shoals. You came to the seashore often. Your gift brought you, I think. The seas were a respite from the chatter of the citadel minds."

A lump of panic rose in her throat. She felt as if she wrestled with some dark creature at the back of her mind, something that threatened to swallow her whole if she acknowledged it. She put a name to it. *Grief*.

Her gaze never wavered. She thought she detected sympathy and perhaps pity in the water dragon's eyes. She wanted neither.

"Your control is admirable. Cerenth could not have found a finer ally," he murmured. "If I answer your question, will you answer mine?"

"I have no questions for you."

"You wonder if you'd have warned them, if they'd have survived," he continued as if she had not spoken.

She dropped the sword tip. The point clanged against the rocks.

He kept his hands in front of him. Had he moved she might have run him through without a thought. She raised her blade again. It wavered slightly.

"Leahlisande," he said softly. "It was meant to be."

She couldn't do this. Her grief came back to her in a rush. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. Her chest shook. She glanced at Quince for help but he was engaged in a heated conversation with Enneth.

"Leahlisande Belkirk, you are no coward. But none would have believed your warning."

She found her voice. "They were slaughtered."

He blinked, his alien violet eyes supportive. "Would it soothe the blow to know that someday you will return to Belkirk?"

She straightened. "Are you a seer?"

He shook his head. "No, not my curse. Others of my kind are though."

"Why would they see me in their dreams?"

"You are intertwined in our fate."

Ah, and that's why they specifically requested to see her. To see if she had the mettle they needed? To assure themselves that she lived? Something inside her snapped.

"Damn you." Damn fate and destiny. She was sick of being ruled by such nebulous things. She raised her sword and swung at him.

He caught her around the waist, his movements too quick to register. One arm was captured, trapped tight to her body. The other still held the sword, useless this close. She dropped the sword and reached for the knife in her boot.

"So quick. Quicker than the rest of the humans, young Queen." His breath caressed her ear.

She held the knife to his throat.

Now they had Quince's attention. "Release her," Quince demanded.

The water dragon ignored him. "My shared name is Zeb," he whispered to her. "Read my fate, seer, and tell me what I need to know." He laid his webbed hand along her cheek.

He smelled of salt and kelp. His touch shot the vision from where it'd lain impatiently at the back of her skull since she'd first seen him to the forefront of her mind.

She didn't remember Quince pulling Zeb off her. She simply stared. Zeb was Cerenth's true mate. This water dragon was the mother to her three psi-laden offspring.

But that was impossible. He could not fly the skies and the sky-born dragons could not swim, not even in human form.

"We are through here." Quince wrapped his arm around Sande's waist and pulled her to his side.

She ignored him. "How?" she asked Zeb.

"You have one in your midst."

A half-breed? Impossible. She glanced around, her gaze settling on Adonthe. "I don't believe it."

"Cerenth is a high psi. She can accomplish anything she puts her mind to."

*Except make herself happy, she thought.*

"Exactly."

Sande flinched and erected stronger mental shields.

Zeb's lips quirked. "I apologize. Will you speak of me to her?"

"Little good it would do. She doesn't know you." She felt Quince's arm tighten around her.

Zeb raised an eyebrow, lips quirked. "I beg to differ."

She tried to read the emotion on his alien face. She inhaled sharply. "When? When did you meet?"

"What is going on?" Quince asked her.

She struggled against his grip and failed.

The water slapped the water dragons' legs, spraying a cold mist around them. As one they changed shape, shucking their human forms, and vanished into the sea. Adonthe looked like he wished to follow them then he walled away the longing, his human form solid once again.

She pushed against Quince's arm. "Release me!"

He did not. "What did you speak of? Why did he want you? Who does he want you to speak to?"

"It's none of your business."

Quince spun her around to face him. "Tell me." He shook her.

She relaxed. When he loosened his grip on her, relief evident on his face, she reached back and smacked him across the face. A red welt bloomed across his cheek. He stared at her in silence as she stomped toward her waiting mount. She gathered up the animal's reins, feeling Quince's presence behind her. She was both shocked and embarrassed that she'd slapped him.

"Sande?"

"Do not touch me."

"Your sword."

She spun, impatient to be off. Her sword, indeed! She was angry about that as well. How dare he assume she even desired a sword! He should have never placed one in her hand.

Quince seized her sword hand, pulled her to his chest and kissed her.

Her initial reaction was to fight him. But the kiss consumed her. The sea rolled at their feet, thundering against the rocks. Or maybe it was only the beat of her heart that muffled her hearing. Her lips parted and he tasted her, a quick flick that had her shivering. She dimly heard her sword clank as it slipped out of his hand and struck the rocks again.

With his freed right hand he pulled her close until they were touching, waist to waist, chest to breast. She let him support them both. He bent her back slightly. She clutched at his leather chest plate, bracing herself.

Her heart was beating so fast she couldn't catch her breath. He pulled back, resting his brow against hers. His dark eyes gleamed, whirling with color, with an emotion he did not seem wont to voice.

"Lecher," she whispered.

He smiled, not at all insulted. His face was transformed. "Is that so?" Pulling back, he kissed the tip of her nose then brought her trapped hand to his lips. Something akin to need lodged in the pit of her stomach, unbearable in the strength of her desire. "I have not seen you naked, my lady, but we could remedy that here."

"You should have let me die in the bowels of Belkirk."

"Then we'd not have this." He kissed her again. Her knees almost buckled and she was glad that his arm was still about her waist. He tucked the loose strands of her hair behind her ears, brushing his knuckles against her cheek.

She sighed. The sneaky bastard should be run through with the sword he'd given her. Quince was a man of many moods. An arrogant, proud dragon man, destined to be her lover. Had not her dreams told her so? But there was this also. This carefully hidden, tender side. The romantic in her was drawn to this secret man.

Would she be less of a woman if she submitted to him? She wanted to put her hands on him, to soothe his beast with drugging kisses. To fill herself up with tastes of his skin, the feel of his hands on hers. But she was Leahlisande Belkirk. A woman who had garnered the attention of the water dragons long before she had ever touched Kildarkee soil. An accomplished swordswoman and a seer. A dragon Queen without a citadel. The lie was a wedge between them. How could he not see it?

She slipped out of his grasp, picked up her sword and sheathed it. It was so much easier to focus on the day-to-day activities than the future. She hoped the blade was none the worse for wear. It had taken a beating on the rocks today.

Turning away from him and the sea, she faced her mount toward the Kildarkee citadel. Quince held the reins while she swung herself into the saddle, arranging her cloak and her sword around her. Then she gathered up the reins herself. She watched

Quince from within the folds of her hood. His eyes were again shaded, his secrets tucked away from her.

The wind tore at her cloak, more fierce than before. She smelled rain on the wind. "We must hurry home. There is a storm approaching."

"Aye, that there is," he replied and let her go.

## Chapter Ten

Quince cursed softly to himself. There was no valid reason to call Sande back to his chamber. Supper had already been served and the remnants cleared away. His manservant had stoked the fire. Normally he'd retire to his chair beside the fire and read. But tonight there was a restlessness about him. He didn't want to admit it to himself but he suspected it had to do with this afternoon's kiss.

Sande had been absent at supper. He didn't want to seem over-concerned so he had not asked. Sleeping with the servants certainly wasn't frowned on but it might make it more difficult for her to fit in. Not that the rumor of her gift of far-seeing was any comfort either.

Quince cursed again. He was unused to indulging in indecision. Before he could weigh the intelligence of his decision he stood and entered his servants' quarters.

The quarters were neat and sparsely furnished with functional pieces. The floor was stone, without the comfort of rugs, but it was warm and a fire rumbled in the hearth. Cydell was asleep in her chair, her afghan at her feet. Quince stooped and gathered it up then tucked it around Cydell's form. She murmured in her sleep and turned her head.

A fat black kettle bubbled at the hearth. He took a hot pad from the mantle and lifted the lid. It looked like plain water but it smelled of lavender. Another sound caught his ear. Someone was humming. He followed the voice to the bathing chamber. He thought he moved soundlessly but the humming ceased.

"Cydell, is that you?" Sande asked in a low voice. "Could you grab me the kettle of water? I wasted what I had. Thank you so much. I am sorry to be a bother."

Quince backtracked. He should leave her. He paused at the hearth. What he wanted to do warred with what he should do. She had asked for water hadn't she? He could hardly leave her soaped up and helpless. Cydell was sound asleep. The elderly woman needed her rest.

He fished the hot water off the hearth then poured some cold water into the mix. He tested it by dipping a finger into it. His body was already responding to all the fantasies dancing in his head. He tried to curtail them. She might just slap him in the face. No, she was a human servant, build to yield to her master's bidding. All he could think of was how she'd feel beneath him, his hands kneading her breasts, her head tipped back in ecstasy. He nearly dropped the kettle.

Again it was a bit disconcerting how quickly she knew when he approached. He was used to moving undetected through his quarters.

"My thanks, Cydell," Sande murmured.

Quince slipped behind the wooden screen concealing the bathtub from the rest of the chamber. His mouth went dry. Sande was nude, her back to him, the water covering her to her shoulders. Her hair was piled on top her head and thoroughly sudsed. In the moon-washed chamber her skin appeared creamy, like the inner flesh of a snow apple. Her neck arched in an irresistible long line. His fingers itched to trace the curve of her skin where her neck met her shoulder. For a moment he wondered if she was more than human, a creature sent by the gods to test him.

He almost left.

Then Sande held out a hand and it became obvious her eyes were tightly shut.

Quince crept to the tub and slowly began to pour the water over her hair.

Sande sighed and dropped her hand, working her hair under the water. "Again, my deepest thanks, Cydell."

Her fingers were long and slim, pale against the dark silkiness of her hair. He was mesmerized by their movements. She re-piled her hair atop her head and reached for a towel. Her hand searched for the pile of towels propped on the table beside the tub.

She tipped her head to the side. "Cydell? Are you still there?" Now she sounded uncertain. She glanced over her shoulder, one eye open, one squinted shut.

Quince put a hand over her mouth before she could scream. He bent over the tub, close to her ear. "Quiet now, Cydell sleeps."

She bit into the palm of his hand. He winced and drew back.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"You asked for water," he said simply.

"I asked for Cydell." She folded her other arm across her still-hidden breasts.

"She is asleep."

She gave him a penetrating look, enough to make a lesser person squirm.

He shrugged, grasped a towel and offered it to her.

Her mouth dropped open. "How dare you!" She was gorgeous in her indignation. A few tendrils slipped from the bundle of her hair, framing her face. He wanted to kiss those outraged lips.

"There is an attraction between us, lady, and I intend to see it to its end." He would not waste any more waking moments pining for her body.

"This is madness," she stuttered.

"It is indeed," he agreed, then surprised them both by reaching into the soapy water, seizing her around the waist and pulling her out. She slapped at his hands, wriggling in his grasp. He lifted her out the rest of the way and slung her, sky clad, over his shoulder.

She beat on his back with her fists. "Put me down."

He patted her bare bottom. "Shortly."



She cursed at him. He tried not to chuckle at her inventiveness. She stilled when they passed Cydell's still-sleeping form. Then they were in his chamber.

His body thrummed. He could feel the heat of her through his now-drenched shirt.

Her fingers scrabbled along his backside and he reveled in her exploration. Until she seized upon a loose seam and began ripping his shirt up the back.

"You will be the one mending it," he said mildly.

"Like hellfire." She dug her nails into his bare back.

He yipped softly and flung her onto his bed.

She glowered back at him through her tangled hair then seized an edge of the comforter and folded it over her naked body.

This was a dangerous side of him she'd not seen before. Her breath hitched. She was acutely aware that she was naked. His scent lingered in the folds of his bed, making her uncomfortably conscious of her location as well. His gaze roved the length of her body then to her face. She felt herself flush.

She extended a bare arm and pointed at the door. "You will leave while I dress."

"I do not want you clothed."

His dark hair was mussed and his clothes soaked. He looked like a sorry wet fool, until his eyes gleamed, sparks of fire in their depths. Then she shivered. He wasn't human and nor were his needs. She bit her lip, trying to focus on a point on his chest. She would not look into those eyes. Not again. She could not bear to see the reflection of her own needs in their depths.

She wasn't human either. And she had much the same needs.

She found her voice. "Well then, we have a dilemma."

His lips quirked. "I see none. You are nude and in my bed."

"By force!"

"If you do not wish to remain here just walk away. I will not stop you."

She sat up, comforter clutched to her chest. "Thank you for recovering your manners." Her breasts ached for his touch, longed for those amused lips to kiss a path over her body. She was stirring herself up for nothing, she reminded herself. He would have her when she was ready for him. Oh lords, how her body hummed. The broad expanse of his muscled back she'd seen just before she clawed him would haunt her the rest of the night. She swung her feet over the side of the bed.

"The bedclothes stay."

"What?"

A smile played at his lips. "The bedclothes are mine."

"Very well then." Two could play at his game. Why should she be the only one going to bed alone, frustrated? She mustered up every bit of courage she owned.

Shaking her hair over her shoulder, she dropped the comforter as she stood, her back to him.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Have a restful evening, my lord."

The shock and lust warring on his face made her waver. Perhaps she'd pushed him too far. She swallowed the rising lump in her throat, raised her chin and marched toward the servants' quarters. She made it only two strides before he tackled her. She was pinned against the wall.

Hands, his hands, tangled in her hair. She found her hands shamelessly tracing the curve of his buttocks and, still unsatisfied, creeping toward the drawstring at his waist. His lips possessed hers and there was no gentleness to them. She was being consumed and her body thrummed under his touch. Her mind had fled.

His head dropped to her breasts. She felt his hot breath whisper across them. Her nipples contracted and she moaned softly. His tongue and lips followed the curvature of each breast. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pressing his face tighter to her chest.

"What are you doing?" she whimpered.

He chuckled. "Possessing you."

"No." It came out a plea.

He stood then, framing her face with his hands. "No?" His thumbs played with her earlobes.

She tried to focus her gaze on his chest but he tipped her chin upward. It was impossible to hear her thoughts over the thrumming of the blood in her ears. She was forced to look him in the eye.

"You do not desire me?" he asked.

"No. I mean yes, no."

She saw a shadow pass through his eyes. That was cruel. She raised a trembling finger to touch her lips and then his. "Too fast, my lord, too fast."

He kissed her fingertip. "Stay."

There was no pleading in his voice. She expected none. She had injured his pride. Her heart hammered. She wanted to stay. She wanted his hands on her body. More, she wanted *her* hands on *his* body.

"Will you comb my hair?" she asked softly.

He looked startled. His fingers splayed and he played with the raven strands. "Of course."

For a moment they simply stared at one another. The throb of his pulse in his neck matched the flightiness of her own.

He took a step back then pulled the remains of his shirt over his head and offered it to her. She took it in still-trembling hands and put it on. It fell just past her waist, the torn ends tickling her bare buttocks. He held out a hand. She placed hers in his. Her second sight was blessedly quiet.

"I would never hurt you."

"I know."

"You are untouched?" he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

She felt her face flame. "Yes."

"Ah," he said as if it that explained the mysteries of their world. He chastely kissed her forehead. "Forgive my roughness."

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

He led her to the fire, snatching his comforter as he went. This he folded on the floor before his chair for her to sit upon. He sat in his chair. She curled her feet beneath her, facing the flames. He procured a comb from somewhere then slowly began to work the snarls out of her tresses.

Quince's slow and careful movements were in sharp contrast to the passion he'd displayed only moments ago. Her hair trailed across his lap and over his leg. The fire made her drowsy, the flames' flickering dance erotic as it consumed the submissive wood. She rested her cheek on Quince's thigh. He paused.

Her hand crept to his calf, kneading the tense muscle. She thought she heard him sigh. It was a nicely sculpted leg, not overly musclebound. Her hand caressed its curves, trailing over his kneecap. He flexed beneath her touch, the muscles jumped. Her heart was in her throat. Gods help her, she wanted him. And she'd let him take her this night.

She felt him shift in his chair. He pressed his lips to the top of her head. "You will kill me," he murmured. She felt him tap discreetly against her mental shields.

"You have more finesse than Cerenth," she said softly and immediately regretted her words.

He stilled.

She swiveled in her seat to face him. The firelight played off the hard planes of his face, thrusting his features into the shadows.

"Do you try to read me as you do the other servants?" he asked.

It was her turn to be quiet. The vision of her straddling him naked flitted through her mind. It had become more a part of her than a vision. She placed her hand on his bare chest. His heart beat slowly beneath it. It was not so much a vision as a knowing that came to her. His life would be shadowed with sorrow.

"Am I to die in battle or will I live to be an old dragon?"

She looked into his deeply shadowed eyes. "I do not know." She watched herself splay her fingers on his chest, her skin a hint darker than his own. She turned fully, kneeling between his legs, and put her other bare hand on his chest. If she'd been a healer she'd have chased away the ghostly murmurs of sorrows to come. She could only offer what she had.

"Hold me," she said simply.

He drew her onto his lap then as if she were a treasured sculpture and might break. She nestled her head against his shoulder. She'd done this before.

"You are very beautiful."

She pressed her lips to his neck, thrilled to feel his pulse do a staccato beat.

"Do you resist because you're untouched or for other reasons?"

"You do not know who I truly am." It was easier to say it to his warm flesh, her face hidden in the dark.

"You are Leahlisande of the Belkirks, an accomplished swordswoman and soon to be mine, body and soul." Possessiveness crept into his voice.

She stirred against that. His arms tightened around her. "Mine," he repeated.

She raised her head. "You are an arrogant beast." But there was no fire to her words.

In response he kissed her, slow and sweet. She almost missed the heat, the bestial passion. Then his free hand slipped up her thigh, beneath her borrowed shirt. Sneaky bastard. He never meant to let her go free tonight. Nor would she let him. Her body went soft. He pressed his lips tighter against her and she opened for him. His tongue lazily played with hers while his hand shifted from her outer to her inner thigh.

She cupped his cheek.

"You look at me with pity," he whispered. "Why?"

She shook her head. "Show me the beast, dragon man."

She caught a glimpse of white teeth as he flashed her a wry smile. Then he stood and she wrapped her arms around his neck for balance. He laid her upon the bed. Her body went hot with need at the sight of the emotions in his eyes.

He sat back on his legs, watching her.

"My lord?" she said softly.

"Shh." He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her stomach. She trembled. He drew away when she reached for him. He laid a line of kisses from her knee to her inner thigh, his arms bracketing her body. Then he pressed his lips to her bud.

She cried out softly, fisting the bed clothes.

He took greedily then, as if his control were frayed. She arched her back, murmuring his name. When she thought she could endure no more, he stopped. A whisper of hot air blew across her. She didn't recognize the whimpering noises she made. "Please, please," she begged. His thumb pressed over her throbbing nodule. She teetered on the edge, her vision fragmented, haloed in skittering shooting stars. He both rubbed and thrust into her at the same time, his lips and tongue tracing her secret lips.

She fell over the edge. The velvet darkness surrounded her and for the first time in a very long time she was no longer afraid of the shadows.

He pressed himself against her, his skin slick with sweat. His hands teased the sides of her breasts while his lips found her mouth. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think,

could only react to what was building again inside her. Her hands tangled in his hair. He kept his lips pressed hungrily to hers. She bit his lower lip, sucking it into her mouth, then she was sliding down the length of his body to suckle at his chest.

His breath whooshed out in a single gasp. "Woman, what are you doing?" She laid a finger against his lips to silence him. She worked her way up his perfect chest, marveling at the ripple of muscles that played beneath his skin. His eyes were wild and whirling, pupils hidden beneath a wash of violets. They said dragon men often changed during sex, sometimes to their partner's detriment. Part of her wanted him to change, wanted him to lose control.

She lingered at his abdomen, tracing a winding path between the muscles with her lips and tongue. He groaned and reached for, his eyes blind with need. She dodged his grasping hands. Instead his hands fisted in her hair.

"Enough." He pulled her up, roughly, and wrapped his arms around her. She couldn't breathe.

Their bodies moved against one another, slick with sweat. His engorged shaft bumped against her, seeking entrance. She squirmed, teasing him. He reared back, pinned her shoulders beneath his hands and entered her.

She gasped.

Then she crossed the hazy line between pleasure and pain. Her entire body felt doubly alive. Their hips ground against each another. He dropped like he was doing a push-up, wrapping his arms tight around her. Her world was reduced to thrusts and whispered pleas. She was climbing a mountain, his hand in hers. They reached the peak and toppled off together. Her body clenched and clenched again, her muscles twitching in delicious release. That's how she wanted it to always be. To walk this world alone was a punishment she could no longer bear.

She turned her head, trying to silence a soft sob in the bedclothes.

His body instantly stilled. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, no," but her words were broken by a hitching sob. "You make me feel... I left so much behind, so many people who loved me."

He tucked her against him, wrapping his arms around her. "I will protect you," he murmured.

She almost laughed at that, a hiccupping nervous noise, but then the dam broke and she turned her head into his chest and sobbed. He held her, murmuring soothing sounds until she'd cried herself out.

## Chapter Eleven

Sande shivered. She opened one eye. The room was dark, wrapped in the curious half-light that preceded the dawn. The fire was banked in the hearth, coals winking at her. Quince's body curled around her protectively, his arm wrapped around her waist, leg draped over hers. She could hear his even breathing, feel his warmth at her back.

The shadows owned the half-light. She always feared this time of day. She heard Quince's chair squeak softly. The cushion indented. The coals shuddered in the invisible breeze, stirring to life.

*The Hunter was here.*

A rank stench hung on the air, waiting for her to open her mouth, to taste it on her tongue like a rare vintage wine. She glanced at the sword hanging above the fireplace, too far away, out of her reach. Steel couldn't protect her from the shadows but it was comforting to hold in her hands.

She refused to fight a shadow version of the Hunter within the Kildarkee citadel. It wasn't a battle she could win. It was unlikely she'd be able to hold him off in his physical form either but she needed to find it now and distract him.

She rarely actively sought to use her talent. It often snuck up on her, seized her and took possession. This time she let it ooze out, felt it seep through her pores, cascade down the side of the bed in a waterfall and form in silvery pool on the floor. She sent it forward like a scout, leaving a trail of silver droplets in its wake. It skittered around the fireplace and Quince's chair like a frightened cat then slunk to the window. Pausing at the wall, it hesitated then scaled it, a tiny blob of silver by now. The drop teetered on the windowsill, righted itself and slipped under the sash.

She felt herself spill out into the night, silver water droplets splintering into condensation. She was blown about on the breeze, scattered. She saw as a bird or dragon might, the town sleeping in the shadows of the great Kildarkee citadel. Beyond that lay the sea and beyond that harbor Belkirk and beyond that a great denseness of wooded mountains. That's where the Kildarkees' new Queen slept and dreamt.

Reanna was her name and she was young. Her men fanned out around her tent, guarding her as she slept but they could not protect her mind. Sande slipped into her tent, nothing more than a drop of dew perched on the canvas ceiling.

She was blonde, her long hair in a braid that spilled beyond her waist. A smattering of freckles crossed her pert little nose. Untouched. Untainted by shadows or war or loss.

Sande could sense something wished to mar that perfection. It lingered just beyond the tent, the fringe of men, within the shadow of the woods, courting the false light of dawn. The Hunter wanted her awake. He wanted to taste her fear, to feel her struggle

beneath him when he wrenched the life out of her limbs. And so he waited for her to wake.

*Stay away from her, Sande said.*

The Hunter chuckled. *So the mute grows a voice. Far from home aren't you? Far from the protection of your caretakers.*

*I have no caretakers.*

There was an uncomfortable pause.

She sensed his confusion. He thought she was Cerenth. With Cerenth's shields wrapped around her, the Hunter was unable to sense her. She should have known she couldn't use her talent without rousing Cerenth as well. She held completely still, waiting.

*She is meant to die this dawn, he said finally. Invisible fingers sought to probe her mind but she was well-protected behind both hers and Cerenth's shields.*

*Come get me instead, she taunted.*

She felt Cerenth stir in protest, whisper softly in the back corner of her mind, *Let the bitch die.* Sande ignored her.

*Two Queens, Hunter. Two powerful Queens. This one hasn't even bloomed yet. How much better would she taste in say a year, after she's flown...*

*Ripe with eggs... He finished her thought.*

*There are other eggs to seek, she reminded him.*

*What you hold is tainted.*

Deep in Sande's skull, Cerenth shrilled a curse.

*I will give you the one you seek, Sande said, still pretending to be Cerenth. Pluck her from the balcony. Only leave this one be for now.*

*I did not expect kindness from the Kildarkee Queen. He sounded astonished.*

*I'm just full of surprises, Hunter. She reached toward Cerenth, projecting her wish. Cerenth's responding chuckle was wicked.*

The woods surrounding the young Queen's camp burst into flame, compliments of Cerenth. Reanna's eyes flicked open. They were a lovely shade of blue, pure and innocent. Her men seized her arms. "Change now, Dragoness!" one of them ordered.

Swords were drawn. A phalanx of steel surrounded Reanna.

The smell of singed hounds' flesh filled Sande's nostrils. She gagged.

*You shall die for that! the Hunter swore.*

*You've failed twice now, Sande reminded him and suddenly revealed her presence behind Cerenth's shields.*

The Hunter roared.

Sande was thrown violently back into her body.

Cerenth's mental touch faded. *Bold little fool, she whispered.*

Quince's arms were tight around Sande, his eyes still tinged with the last dregs of sleep. "What's wrong?" He scented the air. "I smell hounds... How can that be?" He flung off the covers. Tossing on his clothing, he belted his sword and was two strides from the door when he remembered her.

Sande still lay in his bed, shaking off the last remnants of her sleep-walk. Her hand clenched around a knife she'd found beneath his pillow. She wasn't sure she could walk yet. She didn't want to try with him watching her.

"Get dressed. Get the servants below."

She nodded. She had expected him to be brusque. When he'd left the chamber she dressed, belting on her sword and tucking the knife in her boot. The citadel's warning bells began to ring. She ran down the hallway to Cerenth's chamber. It was a stupid notion. Soldiers and dragon men filled the hallway, already intent on protecting their Queen.

*Cerenth*, she mentally called.

*Must you destroy everyone's rest?* Cerenth hissed in her head.

"The Queen has called for me. Make way." She tried to shoulder past the guards. They out-and-out ignored her.

Until the door opened and Cerenth stood in the doorway, draped in her golden robe, looking very much like an avenging goddess. "Let her in."

She was shoved roughly into Cerenth's inner drawing room. It was filled with more soldiers and Cerenth's cowering female servants. The dragoness's lips quirked at the sight of Sande's sword. "She will tend me. Out with you." She pointed to some of the openly sobbing women. The soldiers did not move. "Jern," she said to the dragon man in charge. "There are no windows and you have more than adequately guarded the doors. Do you think I may dress in private?"

His Adam's apple bobbed. "Five minutes, Dragoness."

"Thank you," she purred but her voice was laced with steel.

He blinked but did not back down. Brave but stupid.

The room emptied.

"I had not expected you to follow," Sande said in way of an apology.

"What were you thinking?" Cerenth hissed.

"I smelled him. I wanted to track him."

"And bring him here physically?" She rummaged through one of her wardrobes, pulling out a divided riding skirt. She fumbled with the lacings, swearing.

Sande sighed and helped her dress. "He thought I was you."

"Of course he did," she snapped. "For a seer you have poor shields. You leak all over the place. You are lucky most of Kildarkee is psi deaf. If I hadn't been guarding you he'd have killed you."



And left Quince to wake with a dead body. And no one to burn her properly other than Cerenth. She shuddered.

Cerenth sobered. "Taunting is not a battle tactic."

"It kept Reanna alive."

Cerenth's hands closed into fists. "She's my replacement!"

"Like you, she's been given no choice. She doesn't deserve to die at his hands."

"And I do?"

"You're stronger." She tried not to think of the forest the dragon woman managed to set on fire hundreds of miles away. Her kinsmen had no idea how strong their Queen was.

"Can you track the hounds?" Cerenth asked, a sudden gleam in her eyes.

Sande hesitated. "The shadows have stalked me my entire life. These are different. These have substance." And a stench. "I think I was lucky tonight."

"But did you know the hounds were there?"

She thought a moment. Yes, yes she did. She grinned at Cerenth. "We won't be caught unaware."

"Are they here? Now?"

Sande lowered her shields, letting herself spread out again, a thin silvery substance that slid into the citadel's cracks. She was aware of Cerenth's cloaking shield protecting her. The suns were rising. The benevolent shadows were stretching, waking but they were nothing more than that. Shadows of furniture, men and buildings. Nothing lurked within them.

The Hunter had sent the scent of his hounds only. As a warning.

*As a threat*, Cerenth whispered in her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sande returned to Quince's quarters just before lunchtime. Cerenth had gone back to bed, huffy and cranky despite the crowd of servants tending her needs or maybe because of the crowd. In any case, she'd hidden herself behind her mental shields and no one was allowed in, not even Sande.

Sande had laundry to tend to. How ironic that she had to strip the very bed they'd had sex in the night before. Probably better that way. She didn't need the other servants scouring the sheets trying to gauge what they'd been up to. Her cheeks burned.

Quince and Adonthe were huddled together, pouring over a map spread out before the window on a table someone had dragged there. He looked up when the door opened, his face dark.

But he was good at camouflaging his emotions. His voice was smooth, disaffected. "I assumed you were with the Queen."

"Yes."

"Cerenth likes to hear stories about us having sex? Perhaps she'd like to watch next time?" Still his voice was completely conversational. No trace of the anger she read in his stance and gaze.

Adonthe choked on his glass of water.

She turned to Adonthe. "Could you excuse us a moment? I need to salve Quince's pride." She deliberately dropped the "lord". If he wanted to act like a serving wench's bastard child she would treat him as such.

"Of course."

Quince put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Stay. There is nothing to discuss."

Adonthe glanced from Sande to Quince.

"Cydell just brought a fresh pie from the kitchen. It's still steaming hot, in the servants' quarters."

"Ah, she has me, Quince. Warm pie."

Quince dropped his hand. Adonthe gave him a lopsided smile. "I will save you a piece if you wish."

Sande smiled sweetly at Adonthe, ignoring Quince's black stare.

"Don't bother." And this time all pretense was dropped. It came out a snarl.

Adonthe shrugged, surprisingly unaffected. "This is how he is after he wakes up beside a beautiful woman? Ah the sweet agony of bed sports. I'm not jealous." He lowered his voice when he passed Sande. "My betting pieces are on you." He patted her arm.

Once Adonthe had left Sande walked to the window and drew the drapes across them.

"I am reading."

"Sit." She pointed to his chair.

He folded his arms across his chest, glaring at her.

"This ends now."

"You've forgotten your place," he growled.

"And you, your manners," she retorted.

He did not move. Fine then. She thought he might be more comfortable farther from the windows but if he wished to scorch his eyes that was his business. It couldn't darken his temperament any further. She pushed up her sleeves.

"I will not fight you, not in hand-to-hand combat," he muttered.

"But you will verbally batter me without a second thought."

"You were with *her*."

"She is not the enemy."

Quince's jaw tightened.

"Do you wonder how it is I can tolerate her? How we can actually sometimes enjoy each other's company? I understand and I pity her."

"How can you pity that!" he exploded. "A clawless worm, festering inside of Kildarkee."

"Shut up!" She surprised them both at her shout. Her hands were balled into fists. She lowered her voice. "Look at me. Really look at me."

His eyes narrowed.

"What do you see?"

He sighed, raking his hands through his hair, and lowered his eyes.

"A traitor?" she continued, her voice deadly soft. "A toy?"

His head shot up. "Never."

"Then what?"

"Leahlisande Belkirk," he said, meeting her gaze, eyes still black.

She didn't know how to handle him in this mood and she didn't quite care. She was sick of the ruse. She strode up to him, jabbing him in the chest with the butt of her palm. "Look at me!"

"I am!" He shifted, straightening up.

"Blink."

"What?"

"Look at me with dragon eyes."

He glanced at the drapes. A thin line of sunlight weaseled between the fabric. He chanced the burning and blinked.

His eyes were a swirl of dragon colors, multifaceted and whirling with all the shades of the rainbow. Totally inhuman, just like her. She shoved her bare forearm in his face.

She knew the minute he made the connection. His entire demeanor changed. He gripped her wrist, dragged her to his side. He turned her arm over, ran light fingers up and down the skin. Then he took her other arm, turning it over in his hands. In the makeshift night of the room her forearms glowed with an inhuman webwork of scales.

He dropped her hand as if it were made of dragon fire. Blinking, his eyes returned to their normal blackened shade. He tore open the curtains then grabbed her chin. He tilted her head back and forth.

"You have human eyes." His voice sounded hoarse.

"It's a disguise. A glamour."

He dropped his hand then sank into the nearest chair. He put his head in his hands. She saw his chest rise and fall, unsteady at first then more careful, more controlled.

"Say something," she said finally.

"Belkirk had a second Queen." He said that to his hands.

Had she rattled his brains that badly? She waited.

He lifted his head, face blank. "I slept with Belkirk's Queen."

"And she's been doing your laundry and picking up after you as well." Her voice softened. "Quince, it is still me, still Sande."

He shuddered. "I deflowered Belkirk's virgin Queen."

"It's not like I didn't have anything to do with it," she snapped.

"I seduced you."

She knew what he was going to do before he even started moving. She put her hand to her mouth. His honor would be both their downfalls. "Don't."

He slid out of the chair, dropped to one knee and bent his head. "Dragoness."

She fell to her knees, sword banging her hip. She unbuckled it and let it fall. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she shook him. He kept his head bowed. "No one knows but Cerenth. No one must know yet." She shook him again.

He raised his head. "How can I possibly remain silent?"

"You must," she insisted. "If the rest know they'll lock me up just like they did Cerenth." And there'd be no need for another Queen. They had a second one already.

His eyes were shadowed. "I have a duty to my dragon brothers."

She shook him harder. "You have a duty to me." How hard did she have to shake him to get that into his thick skull? "You are mine. I am Belkirk. And I will re-establish my family line. Not Kildarkee's. Do you understand?"

"You were mine once," he whispered.

"I still am." She gave him what she hoped was a bright grin. She didn't feel bright or cheerful just tired and old. "It just works both ways now." She hesitated. Gods, maybe he didn't want to leave Kildarkee. She'd never thought of that. She'd just assumed he'd willingly go where she went. "If you are willing."

His hand rose, so slow, as if he were a thousand years old. He brushed his knuckles against her cheek, very carefully, very lightly.

"I am not glass." She kissed the back of his hand. "I am still Sande. Talk to me," she pleaded.

He pressed a very chaste kiss to her forehead, just a brush of his lips against her skin. "I will have to think on this, Lady Leahlisande." Then he rose and left her, her head bowed, lip bit to keep from calling him back.

Her hand fumbled and fell upon her sword. She picked it up, belt trailing behind the scabbard, and pressed it to her chest. He had called her Leahlisande. She flung the sword away from her then laid her head on his chair and sobbed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cerenth only pretended to be asleep. It was the only way to get that irritating band of servants and soldiers to leave her alone. She detested the guards especially. They

constantly tested her boundaries, seeking a way inside her head, trying to see past the barriers she erected. If she knew it'd give her surcease she'd have hurt them for trying. As it was it'd only make them more wary and force her to be more cautious. Let them think she was a weak and wounded soul.

Surprisingly she'd learned something new from Sande. And she was ready to test her theory. She held herself very still and pictured Zeb in her mind. She thought it'd be harder. After all, she'd only seen him once.

But that image had been burned into her brain. She saw him as if he stood before her, her own personal sculpture. Lithe body covered with lean muscle, a hint of closely cropped silver hair, nearly as white as his skin. He wielded his six fingers so much better than his five-fingered cousins. The quirk of his coral-tinged lips, the magnetic pull in his violet eyes. She willed him to be, begged him to exist.

And then she scented him. It wrapped around her like a cloak, trailing invisible fingers down her arms. A wave of longing washed over her, lapping at her skin like the gentle smack of the water against sand.

Zeb? She called softly, as if coaxing a flower to bloom, her flower, her bud. She wanted to fling all her strength at it, make it instantaneously flourish.

*Easy lady. That isn't necessary.*

Zeb! She almost cried in relief then scolded herself for her folly.

*It is all right to be foolishly in love.*

*I am not in love,* she said haughtily.

He laughed. *What is it then, my not-so-love, that you'd risk all to call me?*

*I need to see you.*

He sighed and she could feel his frustration. *You are well guarded.*

*We are both high psis.*

*Careful high psis,* he reminded her.

She folded her arms. She wanted to hold him, to be held. He agreed.

*Can you meet me in the dungeon?*

*It's no place for courting, Cerenth.*

"Damn you," she whispered.

*I will find a way,* he promised. *But I will not bed you in a dungeon. The next time...* He sent her images of silken sheets and bowls of flowers, of warm wine cascading over her breasts to be lapped up by her lover.

She shivered. *Be quick about it.*

His laughter soothed her soul, a much-needed balm.

## Chapter Twelve

Quince couldn't believe how blind he'd been. He'd been ordering around a Queen for weeks. And letting her wait on him hand and foot. And sleeping with her. He'd led a Queen into danger, even given her a sword to defend herself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* His fellow dragon men would skewer him when they found out.

She smelled like the Dragoon. She carried herself like someone accustomed to being served rather than doing the serving. By all accounts she was a formidable swordswoman and a talented seer.

The worst part was he was foolishly in love with her. A Queen couldn't be loved by just one dragon man. She needed to produce heirs of varied heritage to ensure her bloodline wouldn't stagnate.

But she was the last of the Belkirks. And she had no others to mate with. If she revealed herself it was almost certain another citadel with distant kin would lay claim to her. Or if there were no kin Kildarkee could claim her for their own.

She was damned and she'd dragged him into the abyss with her.

It'd be best for all involved to sever his ties with her now.

He had headed into battle with less trepidation.

He found Sande in his tiny private courtyard, her mouth full of clothespins. She hummed to herself, pinning laundry on the line. He stopped. Her dark hair gleamed like polished stone beneath its silver netting. He recognized the tune, a sad ballad with an unfortunate ending for the hero. He wondered if she sang as well. How little he truly knew about her.

Shaking his head, he banished her inadvertent spell. Didn't the woman realize how mesmerizing she was? Well he did. And he couldn't let her winsome ways divert him from what must be done. He caught her wrist as she dipped into the basket to retrieve another garment. *His clothing.* His face burned.

"What are you doing?"

Straightening, she took the clothespins out of her mouth. "Laundry."

He noticed she'd dropped the "lord" pretense.

"You cannot be doing laundry."

She arched an elegant eyebrow. "And what would you have me do?"

He saw the Dragoon in her now. The striking face, framed by those strong cheekbones, hinted of her heritage. A slight purse of her lips revealed her irritation but it was quickly hidden. He wanted to seize her face in both hands and kiss her soundly,

to cup those breasts hidden beneath her demure dress. She still wore his colors, still shrouded herself in servants' garb.

"Quince?"

He dropped his hand. "Forgive me."

"For?"

"Touching you."

Her breath exploded from her chest. "You have touched me before."

"Inappropriately. I apologize for that as well."

Her eyes narrowed. "If you feel the need to abase yourself, apologize for deliberately avoiding me."

So she noticed? Part of him thrilled at that. The other sighed. She made things so difficult. Nothing he could do would prevent her from being hurt. "I cannot have you doing my laundry," he repeated.

"Fine then." She threw the clothespin down.

Her eyes were nearly black, with rage he realized, but she still held herself carefully, so contained she seemed like a statue, a particularly beautiful garden creature. He had unraveled that careful control with his hands. He had kissed those hard lips, driven those dark eyes mad with lust. He closed his hands into fists. He would not touch her.

"If I would have known how you'd react I would have remained mute."

"It was wise for you to tell me. If something would have happened to you —"

She cut him off. "What? Am I more precious to you now as a Queen than when you thought I was a human? If you had never known my secret would you have not mourned my death? What am I to you now, Quince? A liability?" Her words were savage but her voice steady. Oh so proud and cold.

There was no going back. He'd injured her. "Lady Leahlisande," he began.

"Sande."

"Lady Leahlisande," he repeated more forcefully. "I cannot protect you as you should be. It'd be best if you moved to the Queen's quarters. She is better guarded."

"Best for who?" Her voice was ice. Color bloomed high on her cheeks.

Damn her. She'd drag him through his own personal hell before she was done. "For your safety," he said through gritted teeth.

"To the Seven Hells with my safety. I have taken care of myself well enough. I have survived the Hunter, haven't I?" She laughed bitterly.

"These are hard times. The Dragoon needs every Queen."

"Cerenth and I saved your precious Queen. Did you know that? Two nights ago, the Hunter left his scent behind. He wasn't hunting me. He was hunting her."

He was shocked by the admission. She was taking more chances than he'd thought. She had to be protected from herself. *From him as well.* "We are deeply grateful."

"Stuff your gratitude."

"I do not know what you want from me," he said stiffly.

She twitched as if he had visibly slapped her. "Your love," she whispered. "How foolish of me to think you were unlike the others."

He swallowed hard. The next words would cost him dearly. "I do not love you, Dragoness." He felt his heart crack. He cut it out with the next breath. "You were a pleasant diversion. Comely and a challenge to pursue, no more."

Her breath shuddered out then she smacked him soundly across the face. He deserved that. When he did not fight back she struck him again, harder. She visibly shook, all composure shattered. She pummeled him in the chest again and again. Her breath came in hitching gasps, her lips forming soundless curses. He caught her wrists. She struggled against him then abruptly kned him in the groin.

Dropping her wrists, he doubled over. She crouched beside him. "That's what I feel like," she said softly. "Are you pleased? Proud?" Her eyes narrowed as she saw the truth. "Ashamed? I willingly went to your bed, Quince." She clutched a hand to her chest as if she could protect her broken heart with her fragile human skin. "I, Sande, came to you as a woman, not a Queen. Tell me it meant nothing."

Pain still bloomed low in his stomach. He moistened his lips. "Nothing, my lady. It was nothing."

She bit her knuckles to keep from crying out. Then she straightened and kicked him in the groin again.

He collapsed beside the laundry basket. She smoothed down her skirts and tucked her hair back into the netted bun. Then, without a backward glance, she left him.

Sande met Adonthe in the corridor leading to the Queen's chambers. He carried an armload of books, his sword still belted at his waist. It was a strange juxtaposition, the scholar warring with the man-boy who wished to be a soldier. "Good afternoon, Lady Sande," he said cheerfully. "Have you seen Quince?"

She thought about striking out at him as well, her anger narrowly held in check. But Adonthe had been nothing but kind to her. She swallowed hard and smiled. "Why yes. I left him in his courtyard."

Adonthe's smile was wicked. "Been sparring with him? I love to see him lose."

"He definitely lost something today, Lord Adonthe." She felt as if she were falling apart. Her voice sounded broken, a bit crazy even to her ears. "Best take him some ice. He will appreciate it."

Adonthe's smile wavered. "Are you well, lady? You seem a bit flushed."

Her smile felt fake, skin stretched too tight. If she didn't escape shortly she'd break down right here. "I am fine," she assured him.

His gaze missed very little. "You are wearing your riding attire. Why not Quince's colors?"



"I am headed for the Queen's chambers."

"Does the Queen detest Quince as much as he does her?"

If she didn't, she would as soon as Sande filled her in. She sighed, suddenly weary. "No. Go to Quince." She turned her back and left him staring after her.

"Lady Sande," he called.

She paused, not bothering to turn around.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked, running to catch up to her.

"There's nothing left to hurt," she said quietly. She'd reached the Queen's chambers.

"He would never deliberately harm you." His face was so earnest. One could almost believe him.

"You are wrong, Adonthe. You are so very wrong."

Cerenth's guards were now accustomed to Sande's comings and goings. They let her pass but not Adonthe. He stood just beyond the ring of dragon men, his beautiful face wrinkled in a frown.

Sande found Cerenth standing by her boarded-up balcony window. Her hair tumbled loose down her back, a mass of wild red curls. She didn't turn around when Sande entered. "I can feel her coming," Cerenth said to the makeshift wall. "This Reanna. Happy and as carefree as a summer twitter." There was no anger in her tone, just resignation and a bit of puzzlement. "Why would she look forward to coming here? She was just ripped from her home."

Sande buried her face in her hands and took a deep breath. She raised her head. Cerenth could feel Reanna's emotions but not hers? Damn high psis and their self-centered natures. She steadied her voice. "The adventure?"

"Her citadel must be worse."

"The Council wants to secure psi-laden offspring not match Queens to their perfect mates." She couldn't find it within herself to be kind. She felt dried up. The winter winds would blow her husk away, toss her to the shadows.

"I think I already found him," Cerenth said so softly Sande had to strain to hear her. She roused, turning. "What brings you here? Not to lighten my mood." The corner of her lips twitched, not quite a smile but as much of one as she'd shown in the last couple days.

What had she expected when she fled to her? Sympathy? Revenge? She hugged herself. She didn't know. "Quince sent me to you."

"Violet never was the right accent to your skin, though I think you've lost a waist and gained some breast since that outfit was fitted to you."

"Cerenth!"

Cerenth flung out a hand. "So he left you. Too bloody honorable to continue sleeping with a rogue Queen."

"Yes." Her voice sounded very small. "You could have told me."

"You are the seer." Cerenth paced in front of the nonexistent window. "And did he couch it in polite terms?"

"It was for my safety. You are better guarded."

"A gilded prison is still a prison."

"My thoughts as well. I am not a priceless treasure to be hidden away in times of war and taken out only when another wills it."

"You told him so?"

She bit her lip. "I kneed him in the groin." She dropped to Cerenth's divan, rubbing her brow. "Gods, what have I done?"

Cerenth snorted, quite unladylike. "You did what?"

Sande looked up. "He said evil things." She couldn't repeat them out loud, wouldn't repeat them. They were burned into her brain, a permanent scar no ointment could ever mend.

She heard the tinkle of fine crystal. Cerenth handed her a glass filled with amber fluid. "Drink."

Sande wrapped her hands around it and drank deeply. It stung the back of her throat, sweet and sour at the same time. Her tolerance for alcohol was so poor. As soon as she set the tumbler down she felt warm and fuzzy, the heat tingling all the way to her slipper-clad toes.

Cerenth sipped hers thoughtfully. "Must have cost him his soul to do that."

Sande looked up from her drink. "What did you say?"

"He has fair shields, as far as dragon men go." A chair moved of its own accord from its place beside the fireplace to opposite the divan. Cerenth sat gracefully. It was the first time Sande had seen her use her talent so flippantly. "It bothers the servants so I avoid it when possible," Cerenth said, reading her thoughts. "You leak when you are agitated or, apparently, on your way to being inebriated."

The crystal container floated across the room, settling itself in Cerenth's outstretched hand. She poured Sande another drink. "Sunlight sometimes helps." The boards flew off the balcony window. "The guards will be in shortly to fix that but it's nice to see the sun, even for a few moments."

Sande remained silent, staring into her glass.

Cerenth tipped her head. "If it helps any, he is hurting now."

"Physically?"

Cerenth laughed. "Yes, of course." She sobered, her laughter the only sound in the room. She took a sip of her drink. "Emotionally as well."

"Good. I would break his heart if I could reach it."

"He's your first true love, isn't he?"

"Must you read my thoughts?"

"I wasn't. I can see it plain on your face."

"I hate him."

Cerenth grinned into her glass. "I doubt that. Give him time. He will come around."

Cerenth really did not know him as well as Sande did. Once he made a choice he stuck to it. "Quince does not make decisions lightly." She had thought he'd help rebuild Belkirk. What did she have left now?

She would not abandon her citadel, no matter what. There would be other dragon men willing to accompany her to her home. She drank deeply then poured herself another glass. She didn't want another dragon man. She wanted Quince.

As if reading her thoughts again, Cerenth raised her glass and saluted her.

His Sande was gone. Quince knew the minute he entered his chambers. Viseau and Cydell were also noticeably absent. He crossed the room and flung open the door to his servants' chamber. Cydell roused from her place beside the fireplace.

"Is there something you want, my lord?"

"No, no." He waved her back to her chair. "Stay, Cydell. I wanted..." He paused. What did he want? He was hoping Sande had left behind something, something he could hold in his hands. Damn it. He wanted her. The look on her face when he told her he didn't love would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Her nook was as devoid of life as a burned-out forest. He ran his fingertips lightly over her counter and wash rack. It might be empty of her belongings but her scent remained. Her dress was folded neatly on her naked bed. He seized it like a drowning man grasping an outstretched hand and brought it to his nose. Inhaling her scent made him wonder how he ever thought her human.

How could he have rejected her? He should have wrapped his arms around her and never let go. Holding her dress to his chest, he headed toward his chamber. Cydell's eagle eyes missed nothing.

"Did she leave, my lord?"

"I sent her away," he said. "She'll serve the Queen better than me."

"Ah." The crinkles along the edges of her eyes deepened.

"Cydell, you have something to say?"

"It's not my place, lord."

"You have served in my household since you were a little girl. I value your opinion."

"Why would you send something you treasure so much away? What do you fear, my lord?" She looked away, watching the crackling fire consume its logs. "You love her. She loves you. What more is there?"

He swallowed the rising lump in his throat. "Lady Sande has many secrets."

Cydell laughed, a short barking noise. "And you have none, my lord? The bonds that last the longest are the ones that have an element of mystery."

"She will be happier with the Queen."

"I doubt that."

He sighed. "Good night, Cydell." He turned toward the door.

"Lord Quince?"

He paused. "Yes."

"The Dragoons' lives may be ten times our own but you still squander it as much as we humans do."

He left her sitting by the fire, Sande's dress hugged to his chest.

## Chapter Thirteen

Reanna would arrive today. Cute, petite, young Reanna, filled with hopes and dreams of a new life within Kildarkee's citadel. Cerenth gritted her teeth. She should have left her to the Hunter and his hounds.

Thanks to Sande's second sight she now intimately knew the creature which stalked the Dragoon. *The Hunter*. Even cocooned in her citadel, safe from danger, her lips peeled back in a snarl, hands curled into barely contained claws. He'd not have her.

She glanced at Sande's sleeping form, still curled on the couch. Nor Sande either. Quince deserved a beating for breaking the young Queen's heart. Cerenth should have torn his eyes out when she had the chance. She sighed. If Sande's heart survived the latest onslaught it'd make her an even stronger Queen.

The guards had not repaired the destruction she'd done to the balcony. She was surprised. She'd be allowed to see Reanna's approach. She wondered at the folly of their decision. Didn't they know that distance was not that great of a limitation to her talent?

She sighed again. She couldn't kill the slip of a woman replacing her. Hadn't she had the same bold thoughts when she was young? The same dreams and hopes? A troop of dragon men at her beck and call who'd love and worship her? Where had her dreams taken such a horrible turn?

Sande stirred, blinking in the sunlight. She put her hands over her eyes and groaned.

"Do you wish to see the new Queen's procession?" Cerenth asked her.

Sande sat upright. "She comes? Right now?" She hurried to the window.

"Soon. You can see the dust their mounts kick up." She glanced at Sande's nightgown. "Well, hurry up and get changed. I had some of your garments pulled from the storehouse."

Sande looked startled.

"We emptied your citadel of valuables so I have your clothing. I can't have you trotting after me in the same outfit day after day," Cerenth said irritably. "Go." She made shooing motions with her hands.

Sande blinked. "Thank you." She hurried out.

"The remains of breakfast are left too. Fix yourself a sandwich." It wouldn't do to have her fainting today. Hadn't she done so before?

Sande returned a short time later, attired in a proper dress suitable for a young Queen...except for the sword belted at her waist.

Cerenth glanced pointedly at the blade.

Sande raised her chin. "I am good at a few things. If he chooses today to strike," and they both knew it was the Hunter she referred to, "I will be prepared."

Cerenth's lips quirked. "I am not without my defenses." But she was oddly touched.

The two Queens stood at the balcony, watching the dust take shape. Cerenth's guards watched her from a window off the hallway. Reanna's kinsmen were taking no chances. Fifty dragon men surrounded her carriage. Cerenth thought the carriage and the methores decked-out in plumed headdresses a bit too much. She'd have chosen to fly in.

A party of Kildarkee's guardsmen met Reanna's on the roadway. Sande shielded her eyes from the early morning sunlight with her hand. "Are those Quince's colors?" Adonthe rode beside him.

"Aye, the fools." Cerenth glanced at Sande but her face was carefully neutral. The woman might leak emotion but right now she was rigidly controlled. The only thing which belied her was the way her hand clenched her sword hilt.

The two parties met and the colors blended, Reanna's brash reds with the dominantly violet colors of the Kildarkee. The sun dimmed, shadowed by a thick cluster of clouds. Cerenth tipped her head, tasting fear on the air. Whose, she wasn't sure.

"I recognize this view," Sande said softly. "The height is wrong." She stepped onto the balcony, leaning outward and craning her neck up. "The tower. The field. Another version of it." She glanced at Reanna's party.

Cerenth felt a chill go through her. "What are you babbling?"

Sande shook herself. "Get back!" Grabbing Cerenth by the arm, she dragged them back into the chamber. An arrow lodged itself in the doorframe. Cerenth's guards stormed into the room.

"No!" Cerenth would not be contained again. The force of her will blew the guards out of her chambers despite their own talents. She sealed the door shut with the balcony window's discarded wood. The elegantly carved doorjamb suffered the worst—she'd regret her haste later.

Both women heard the Hunter's laughter, a deep rumbling like approaching thunder. Cerenth threw up an invisible shield to protect them from arrows. They dashed to the balcony again.

With the sun now cleverly tucked behind the clouds, hounds emerged from every shadow. The Hunter crested the hill Reanna's party had just traveled over. An army fanned out behind him. They moved with a disjointed grace, a ragtag bunch of creatures carrying whatever weapons they seemed able to find from swords to pitchforks to dead tree branches.

*Zeb!* Cerenth shrilled. She'd not let her citadel be emptied as the others had been. But they needed reinforcements...and a healer.

The hallway was filled with the sounds of guards. They'd take to the turrets, Cerenth decided. They wouldn't risk leaving the citadel and their Queen.

"Dear mother of the First Egg," Sande whispered. Her vision swam. She spun herself outward, letting herself drift bodiless toward the melee. She needed to see, needed to confirm her fears.

She heard Cerenth curse and drag her back into her body. "You little fool!"

Sande ignored her. "The Hunter's army. It's made up of dragon men."

"That's not possible."

"The undead." Servants and dragon men alike, bodies that had never been found from the missing citadels. She swallowed the bile in her throat. Her family and friends would be among the Hunter's soldiers as well.

"How can he hold that many of them in thrall?"

"They have no choice." As they closed the gap, marching silently behind the Hunter, she felt them pull at her. Shadows and yet not shadows. "He has their souls. They must do his bidding."

Cerenth swore as well.

The hounds continued to worry at the knot of men surrounding Reanna. She saw a few hounds fall back, stabbed with steel and bleeding, but others merely took their place. There were too many of them, like a black heaving miasma.

"Fry some of those monsters," Sande pleaded. As if they could hear her plea, some of the dragon men took to the air and began to sear the hounds.

Cerenth flung fire from her fingertips. Hounds yelped and went up in flames. They ran around crazily, fireballs careening from one side of the battlefield to another.

Reanna's carriage driver saw an opening and the methores surged forward. The carriage shuddered. As if that were the signal, the Hunter's army roared to life. Human voices mixed with the excited yips of hounds. The dragon men, dead and alive, let out growls.

"This can't be happening."

"Come." Cerenth spun away from the balcony. Her chamber doors blew open, startling her guards. She brushed by them as if they didn't exist.

Sande had never felt the full brunt of Cerenth's strength before. It was hard to breathe this close to her. The air crackled like at the forefront of a storm. Cerenth shouted orders and servants scurried. Buckets of water and bandages were sent to the Great Hall. It'd serve as the makeshift infirmary. Archers nocked flaming arrows on the citadel's ramparts. She followed Cerenth out to the rooftop.

Here the view was the same she'd seen in her vision. Cerenth's children had stood here and stared down in horror at much the same battlefield. Cerenth's hair floated loose around her like a living thing, whipping in the unnatural wind her psi caused. She stood on the parapet and raised her hands. Sande tried not to cringe. A quarter of the Hunter's army's mounts died then, collapsing beneath their riders. Cerenth simply stole the creatures' energy, building up her already burgeoning strength. But the riders, humans and dragon men kidnapped from citadels, were already dead. They simply crawled out beneath their animals and rose to swarm the Kildarkees.

Cerenth sent a swath of flame toward the dead army. It rolled across the landscape like a belch from the gods' smithy. The dead passed through the flames untouched.

How could one fight that which could not be killed?

Reanna's carriage was halfway to the citadel. A pack of hounds chased its wheels. Cerenth flung out a hand. The hounds went up in flames.

The Hunter emerged. His troops parted before him, allowing him to give chase to the carriage. His mount was horselike in shape, its body sleek and black like the hounds. Streamers were twined in its mane and tail, waving in the breeze the Hunter stoked. Sande did not look too closely at the streamers. They seemed to be made of bits of flesh and skin. A metal plate was fastened to the creature's bridle and a steel horn sprouted from between its ears. Horns also adorned either side of its bit, a lethal tool when the animal tossed its head in a crowd.

One of the Kildarkee men blocked his path.

Gods help him. It was Quince.

The Hunter chuckled and the laughter swirled on the air, chilling Sande to the bone.

"The fool," Cerenth snarled and Sande didn't recognize her voice. The dragon woman was half changed, hands curled into claws, eyes whirling. Her skin had taken on a slightly reddish cast.

Cerenth flung a psi bolt of lightning. The Hunter batted it away as if it were a noisome fly, not a weapon sent to kill him. It exploded into the ground beside him.

"Change, Quince. Fly!" Sande pleaded, her voice barely a whisper.

Quince's mount reared, pawing the air with its forefeet. And the Hunter charged.

The crash of steel would haunt her nightmares forever.

She hurled herself out of her body, a silver drop upon the wind. She plucked at the Hunter's cloak, tugged at his arm but he was stronger. The air was filled with the scent of sulfur, of noxious things that'd lain dead and rotten for far too long. He flung her aside and she found herself thrown against the balcony's wall, the breath knocked out of her. Struggling to her knees, she crawled to the edge.

Quince's arm hung loose at his side. He held his sword in the opposite hand. Reanna's carriage was almost to the gates.

Sande took a deep breath and the world slowed. She saw the Hunter raise his blade and salute her. She heard the scream torn from her own throat, "No!"



Quince would die. The Hunter's next blow was his last. She knew it.

Her power flared to life. A shadowy wraith, she willed herself to Belkirk's Hall of the Dead, leaving her body behind. Belkirk's urns still sat there untouched, bathed in the darkness. The silence enveloped her, the shadows waiting for her request. She stood in the black maw of the Hall and lifted her sword. Blue fire sprouted from its edge, trailing down her arm to eddy in a puddle at her feet. She summoned the shadows to the light as only a true Queen could. Their names were upon her lips and she called them one by one.

She hesitated, recognizing the shadowy form before her. "Marith," she whispered finally. The wall sconces in the Hall blazed to life, ignited by her flame, her life force.

Her mother curtseyed low and vanished.

Then Sande was back in her body. She stood at the edge of the parapet, her sword drawn. Blue fire licked down its blade, caressing the hilt and the hand that held it. The Hunter's unnatural wind tore at her cloak, stole the air from her lungs. She thought her skin would simply peel off her face and melt away beneath the pelting of his storm.

Then the power she called flowed over her like a mating gown, all ripples and folds of eager blue fire. She flung it out as she'd seen Cerenth do. The power washed over the ground below them like a bright blue storm wave and met the Hunter's attack full on. It was like being hit by a battering ram. Sande didn't know where she ended and it began. It felt as if her body were being split apart. She screamed and it was not a human cry but the shrill battle cry of a dragon Queen.

The Hunter shrieked in fury. His hounds died where they stood. So did any other shadow creature that crossed the power's vengeful path. Cerenth's flame could not bring death but hers could.

Then she felt the Hunter's blade slide between Quince's ribs as if he'd run her through as well.

She doubled over, the pain slicing through her body. Her borrowed power flowed back into her and she felt nothing, just a weary numbness. She threw her arms back and she felt the bones split in half, wings forming.

Cerenth's inarticulate protest was lost on the Hunter's wind.

Sande took to the air, intent only on protecting her mate. She could see Quince's broken body on the battlefield, smell his blood as it seeped into the earth. Landing beside him, she reared back and bellowed. Flame shot out of her mouth, searing the Hunter's mount. It danced back, throwing its head from side to side, eyes rolling red.

But the Hunter laughed. "One escapes but I have another. Not your wisest move, shadow Queen."

Sande hissed. The shadows from Belkirk swirled around her feet, a whirlpool of sapphire color. It wasn't enough. The Hunter was too strong.

It had to be enough!

She looked and saw Cerenth still on the citadel's ramparts, her body haloed in red fire. *Help me!*

The earth abruptly shuddered beneath her. She struggled to maintain her balance then collapsed above Quince, her scaled body protecting his still form. The ground split open between the Hunter and herself. Lava oozed out of the fissure as if the earth were bleeding from the gash.

"You will have to do better," the Hunter said, his voice a whisper on the wind.

The ground collapsed beneath his steed and the earth heaved, spewing rock, lava and flames from the fissure. The Hunter vanished beneath the spray. Sande spat flames and the fire seared his lead hounds. Shadowy blue figures spilled over the wounded earth, surging toward the Hunter's now leaderless army. She caught glimpses of forms, a sword here, a shield there but nothing more. Belkirk's shadows were unleashed and she had no more control over them than a storm cloud releasing its raindrops.

The unnatural wind ceased and with its passing the sun peeked from behind the clouds. The Hunter's army faded, seeping into the earth. The battlefield was left with littered bodies. The silence was punctured only by the groans of the dying. Sande's army of wraiths vanished as well.

Men scurried out of the citadel. Wagons rumbled by. They'd been ready, waiting to fetch their wounded. Sande changed to human form and seized the first passing group. "Here."

The first man gave her a blanket to cover herself with. The second and third loaded Quince onto the wagon. She cradled his head in her lap, hands pressed over his wound. His breath came in short pain-filled gasps. Red burbled up between her fingers like an uncapped artesian well. She couldn't staunch the flow.

Kildarkee had no healer.

She couldn't bear to watch him die. She shivered under the blanket.

Cerenth met her in the Great Hall. Somewhere within that time she'd changed into battle gear. Sande'd never seen her dressed like that. Her bright red hair was braided and pinned tight to her scalp. Fine chain mail draped her body. Only a slim gold band around her forehead marked her as Queen. Her emerald eyes held a barely contained rage.

"Here," Cerenth said curtly and had the men set Quince on a prepared pallet. She brushed away Sande's hands, examining the wound herself.

Cerenth looked up and met her gaze. It was the first time she'd seen sympathy in the Kildarkee Queen's eyes.

"No," Sande whispered.

Cerenth turned away, wrung out a washcloth and pressed it to Quince's forehead.

Sande grabbed her arm. "No! Do something."

"I'm not a healer," Cerenth said, regret lacing her words.

"You can bend the very earth to your will but not simple flesh and blood?"

"You can call the shadows of the dead to your hand but not the soul of your beloved?" Cerenth retorted.

Sande sat back, biting her knuckles to keep from crying out.

Cerenth touched her cheek, her voice soft. "I've armor for you as well. I assume we've only slowed the Hunter down. I'd feel something that powerful die and there was no backlash of psi when he vanished. He'll strike again."

"At dusk. When he's the strongest," Sande replied dully. Three Queens in one citadel would be too much for him to resist.

A servant appeared with a bundle of gear and helped Sande dress. Another tended to Quince's wound, cleaning and bandaging it. Her eyes never left his, even as she dressed. His color had fled, leaving him a washed-out version of himself. Every now and then he twitched, his face screwing up in a grimace of pain. Taking his hand, she settled herself beside him.

Cerenth watched over both Quince and Sande for a short time, her attention drawn to the sheer number of wounded being brought into the Great Hall. Hadn't it been just over a month ago that they'd hosted the Council in this very same room? Now it was littered with bodies, bloody buckets of water and the hushed murmurings of caretakers.

Reanna and her guards huddled in a corner of the hall. She was dressed in all white, a bride prepared to meet her new lovers. The circlet of silver she wore about her head was set with bright blue sapphires, a shade that matched her eyes perfectly. She looked barely nineteen. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

She seized Cerenth's sleeve as she passed. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked in a breathy voice.

Cerenth paused. "How is your stitching?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Can you sew straight neat little stitches?"

"Of course," she replied, a bit haughty.

Cerenth smiled grimly. "Good. Change out of your finery and start stitching up your new kinsmen."

Reanna recoiled.

One of Reanna's handmaids stepped forward, a grizzled woman of at least sixty. "You foul-mouthed worm. How dare you speak to my Queen that way!"

Cerenth spun on her. "It was by my psi and my kinsmen's blood that your pretty little fluff of nothing survived." The air crackled around her. The maid crouched, shielding her face with her hands. Cerenth was suddenly weary. She put her hand on her stomach, feeling a familiar pain begin in her lower back. She wondered if Sande knew of some concoction to ease it but she would not ask her to leave Quince's side.

"I do what must be done," Cerenth said to the maid. "See that she does so as well." Reanna's hand covered her mouth, eyes wide and frightened. The child would never make a decent Queen.

There was a commotion outside, angry shouts from the dragon men muffled by the Great Hall's thick doors. Cerenth turned toward the sound. Someone was trying to enter their gates. Her men were barring the way. She slipped out of the hall then entered the courtyard.

She recognized Sear, her son. "What is amiss?" she asked.

His eyes were wide and alarmed. "Water dragons," he hissed in a low voice.

Her drained steps turned into a giddy run. Zeb had heard her call. He had come! "Open the gates," she shouted.

The guards hesitated.

She drew herself up, trying to catch her breath. "Until the Hatching and the ceremony I am your Queen. Now open those damn gates or I'll strike you dead where you stand."

One gate opened far enough to permit a body to escape. She slipped through the gap. They should be punished for their insolence. She no longer cared. Zeb was here.

A small party of water dragons stood at the gates. Cerenth saw only Zeb.

He was dressed in what must have passed for armor among their kind, a solid pearl breast plate, breeches made of silver scales and thick-scaled boots lashed to mid-thigh. He carried no weapon but his kinsmen did. He looked odd and out of place dressed in clothing. She straightened, suddenly aware that her kinsmen were watching.

"You came," she said softly. Her voice carried to him.

Zeb smiled, violet eyes whirling with color. Then he blinked and they settled into a somewhat human-looking shape, normal eyes set in an alien face. No wonder her men refused him entry. He couldn't pass for human and he barely passed as dragon.

He bridged the gap between them and took both her hands. "I could not refuse your call. You survived."

She raised her chin. "Of course."

He chuckled and touched her cheek.

She sighed, wishing his hand would linger. But both were aware of her kinsmen watching. "You and your men are welcome here. It would be too much to hope or ask, but..." she hesitated, staring into a face she'd known only briefly. "Have you brought healers?"

"We will do what we can," he murmured. "Show me inside, Cerenth. You are exhausted." He took her arm, steering her toward the citadel.

If they had been alone she would have leaned on him. But she couldn't bring herself to seem weak in front of her kinsmen. The citadel gates opened a bit wider. She drew them immediately to the Great Hall. The murmur of shock and amazement preceded them.

She glanced around the hall, counting, and closed her eyes when the body count surpassed what her mind could handle. At least Reanna had changed her clothing. Cerenth was surprised. Reanna didn't have an actual needle in her hand but she was holding a washcloth. It was a start.

Cerenth ushered Zeb toward Sande's corner.

"You need to sit before you fall down, Cerenth," Zeb said softly.

"Not yet." The ache in her back had built into a full-blown cramp.

"Soon," he insisted.

She stopped so quickly Zeb's entourage nearly crashed into her. Sande was slumped over Quince's chest, her shoulders shaking with soundless sobs. Cerenth swore softly. They were too late.

Cerenth put her hand on Sande's shoulder.

"He's gone," Sande said to Quince's chest.

Zeb dropped to his knees beside the pallet. "Let me see."

She raised her head, breath catching in her throat. "You!"

Cerenth flinched. "You know him?"

"We had a brief meeting, inamorata." He leaned over Quince, pressing his fingers to the dragon man's throat, his ear to his chest. "He's beyond my reach," he said to Sande. He eyed her closely. "But within yours, Shadow Queen. If you are willing to fight for him you can still fetch him back."

Sande's breath hitched. "How?"

Zeb tipped his head, studying her. "You're nearly as spent as Cerenth."

"Tell me how to reach him." Cerenth had never heard such a hard note in Sande's voice.

"You'll be walking in the Hunter's lands and more vulnerable," Zeb cautioned.

Sande shook her head, ignoring him. "How?"

"Will yourself to him," Zeb said simply. "You already know how to leave your body behind."

Sande glanced at Cerenth. Cerenth bit her lip and nodded once. What did the woman expect from her? Sympathy? Acceptance? She couldn't find any words that might do.

Closing her eyes, Sande pressed her lips to Quince's. Her body spasmed as if trapped in the throes of a convulsion then went rigid. Her skin's color bled away until she seemed but a specter herself. Zeb caught her before she collapsed.

Cerenth found her voice. "Does her heart still beat?"

"Yes. Her will is nearly as strong as yours," Zeb murmured. "Gods help her."

"Can we do anything to aid her?"

Zeb laid her body beside Quince's then stood. "We can kill her if she doesn't return."

Cerenth's jaw dropped.

He touched her cheek. "I shall if you cannot."

She shook her head. "No. No." Her voice was a bit unsteady. "If it must be done I will do it." If she'd known that, she'd have never let Sande go.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sande was used to controlling her own exodus, a slow careful play of silvery thread as her soul followed roads her body could not. This mad rush into space was like nothing she'd experienced before. Terrifying. Exhilarating. She rocketed down a black tunnel, its formless sides pressing in on her. She was nothing here, just a shadow herself.

She should have asked Zeb how she was to find Quince and, just as important, how she'd get them both back to the land of the living. How could she have forgotten such important questions? Was she damned to do everything half-trained, stumbling over the knowledge like a drunk seeking his home?

Fragments of sound surrounded her. She thought she heard her mother's voice calling her. Had her mother come to be her guide in this world?

"Marith!" she called back.

"Hush now," Berdo's voice soothed. "Go to sleep."

She looked around, seeing nothing but clinging blackness. "I can't," she protested. "I have to save Quince."

"What about us?" Berdo asked.

"And us," another voice pleaded.

"Don't leave us."

She recognized them all, voices from Belkirk. Invisible hands reached out, grabbing at her. She batted at the hands but it was the begging voices that tore at her. Her progress down the endless tunnel slowed.

"I'm here for Quince," she reminded herself. She picked up pace once again then was shot unceremoniously out of the tunnel like an arrow loosed from its string.

She landed on her ass in the middle of a village street. The invisible hands and voices mercifully retreated. Standing, she rubbed her bottom. At least she could feel something in this world.

Quince was here? She turned around, puzzled. She recognized the street. It was part of the village nestled in the Kildarkee citadel's protective shadow. She identified the butcher shop, the open air market, even the tailor shop. But where were the village's inhabitants?

She paused. And why was nothing in color? Had her vision been damaged during her trip? Everything was painted in shades of gray. She glanced down. Except herself. She might as well as worn bright yellow for all she was going to be able to hide in this land. She held her hand out. Her skin was still flush with life. Her fine chain mail glittered like silver jewelry. She made a fine target.

The sky was cloudless, an indeterminate shade of gray with no suns to be found. And yet she cast a shadow. No, not quite a shadow but a silhouette of herself bathed in light. Her body didn't block the light rays, it blocked the shadows, casting light. The buildings around her also had shadows but these were true black, dark clingy masses that didn't even try to mimic the buildings they were supposed to be echoes of.

With a sigh, she drew her sword. The shadows cringed back wherever she stepped. She left footsteps tinged in color, a glowing reminder of where she'd been. The Hunter would have no problem finding her.

The yelp of a hound sounded to her left. She took off at a jog, heading toward it. She rounded the corner, passed the blacksmith shop where the smell of burning hair had her shivering despite what she couldn't see.

Quince stood in the center of the cobblestone street, battling a pack of hounds. Why didn't he just change and fly away? Couldn't he ever pick the easy route? For every hound he skewered another took its place. They were just playing with him, wearing him down until he became an easy target.

She ran to him, an inarticulate battle cry on her lips. The hounds backed off, slinking away. Whenever her shadow fell on them they yelped, hide singeing. She jabbed a hound with her sword. Blue fire danced down its blade, setting the hound ablaze. Finally, something handy she could use. She flung the hound off the sword tip and spun around, seeking another one.

The hounds scattered.

Quince turned on her. "What are you doing here? Get back to the citadel. To safety."

"I came here for you, you dolt." She wanted to throw her arms around him and weep in relief. He eyed her dubiously. *Ungrateful wretch*. She'd cut her hands off herself before she'd touch him.

"I can take care of myself," he said.

She ground her teeth at his lofty tone. "Yes, you were doing quite well. A moment more and they would have had you." What happened if the hounds took a person while they were more than half dead? Could one be truly killed? Or just worried away like a rag doll, tortured endlessly?

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She spun, sword protecting her.

People began to creep from their hiding spots, from open doorways and windows. There were both dragon men and humans, men, women and children. The colors had leached from them, leaving monochromatic versions of themselves.

"They can protect you better at the citadel. Fly now while I get these to safety," Quince urged.

"There's no safety here. You're in the shadow lands," she replied. She pointed to the bloodless gash at his side. "You're mostly dead. I came here to retrieve you."



Quince's sword clanked on the cobblestone. He examined the wound, poking it with his finger. Her stomach flip-flopped uneasily when his hand vanished into the wound. "It's deep."

She closed her eyes. "It's a mortal wound."

"But if what you say is true, how is it that you are here?"

She opened her eyes, saw his face change from annoyance to shock to denial. He closed the gap between them, seized her shoulders and shook her. "You did not take your life?"

Her teeth rattled in her skull. "A humble thank you would suffice."

He crushed his lips to hers. "You silly fool. What were you thinking?"

"Of you." *Endlessly of you.*

He pressed his lips to her forehead, her cheek, drinking in her scent. "There are plenty of other dragon men."

She drew back. "But only one you." She scrubbed a patch of blood off his cheek. "I can't stay here forever. This isn't my land. We have to go."

He glanced around at the people. "I-I can't leave them. They have no one strong enough to protect them."

She shook his shoulders. "In a short while you'll be no better than them. Come!"

"Leahlisande!" a familiar voice said.

Sande went rigid. *Marith. Mother.* She turned painfully slowly as if her joints had forgotten how to bend. Quince's arm snaked about her waist then stiffened.

Sande's mother approached her. She pulled herself free of Quince's grip. "Mother!" The word was torn from her throat. She thought she'd never see her this way again. She was real, in the flesh, not a wraith.

Marith's gaze was sad. There was a gash at her throat that went all the way around her head. When she moved it bobbed open and closed like a second mouth. She opened her arms to embrace Sande. "Leahlisande, dear heart."

She'd thought she'd never be able to speak with her again. Oh she could have summoned her spirit if she chose but foolish pride would have kept her from doing so. Dropping her sword, she reached for her. To touch her one more time, gods, it was worth dying for.

They'd barely touched, the briefest feeling of a kiss against her forehead, when Marith burst into flame. Sande screamed. The old Queen went up like an oil-doused rag. Quince jerked Sande away.

She fought him but there was nothing she could do for her mother. At least the flames were swift. She turned her head into his chest and sobbed. Of what use was her talent when it couldn't be used to protect what she held dear? Cerenth said they'd burned the Belkirk bodies. What was her mother even doing in the shadow lands? She hiccupped, trembling.

"You bring light to the shadow lands. And that light sets us free." He rubbed his cheek in her hair. "Apparently I'm not quite dead enough."

She couldn't bear to see him go up in flames too. She pulled back, out of his reach. "Don't touch me."

"Sande."

Not Lady Leahlisande or Dragoness, just Sande. Her heart stopped. It could not endure another break. She picked up her sword, sheathing it. Then she dropped to her knees beside what remained of her mother. The Hunter must have claimed her mother's soul before the Kildarkees tried to set her free, trapping her here. A light wind stirred the ashes and sent them skittering through the street. What had she done?

"She is truly free," Quince said.

A murmuring went through the assembled group of shadow people. Before Sande could move, two more inhabitants of the shadow lands crept forward. They stepped into her shadow and instantly incinerated. She stumbled to her feet and spun around. "Stay away from me!"

"There is no other way to die here," Quince said. "Would you deny them their chance at peace?"

She froze, sword half-drawn. Quince was right. They were the Hunter's fodder, his army. If she allowed people to truly die here she decimated the Hunter's ranks in her world. She shuddered, closing her eyes.

"Be quick about it," she whispered.

The throng surged forward. She smelled burning flesh, heard the zap as her light destroyed them. Quince would have gone to her but she drew away. "Don't touch me," she repeated. She did not know how much time she had left to return them to their bodies before she condemned them to the shadow lands. She'd come too far to risk a touch that might turn him to ash.

And then she heard his approach. She'd escaped the Hunter not once but three times now. He was part of her whether she wanted it or not. Her senses knew him intimately, felt the rumble of his mount's feet beneath her own, heard the clatter of his armor and weapons. And sensed the quickening pulse of what passed for his heart. He'd felt the change in energy, knew his army was being taken from him.

She looked around her. The street was deserted save for Quince and herself...and a thick layer of ash that swirled at her feet. She couldn't hide from the Hunter and to meet him horseless put him at an even greater advantage.

As if waiting for her glance, a methore stepped forward from the shadows. It was black as a starless, storm-wrought night, the spill of its mane over its bony plates like the crest of a tempest's wave. She could not tell if it was of the shadow lands or her world. She tentatively put her hand on the great beast's flank, afraid it might burst into flames as well. But it held its form, snuffling her clothing with its nose.

A more magnificent steed could not be found than a mature methore. Bone-plated armor covered its vitals. A horn sprouted from between its nostrils.

"Have you come to give me aid?" she asked it.

It snorted, blowing a spray of water on her, shaking its head up and down. Its forelock bobbed, a silky black lock of hair.

"Well then." Who was she to question the gods' will? Sheathing her sword, she put her hands on its ridge and back plates and boosted herself onto its back. She fit her legs into the well-worn grooves and found herself if not comfortably, carefully secured, on its back. The bone plates fit her legs as if they'd aged together as playmates.

Quince grabbed her boot. "I will not let you go into battle alone."

She tried to shake him loose but he held fast. "I see no other methores."

"Sande. The Dragoon cannot bear to lose any more Queens."

"I will not die here," she said more confidently than she felt. She heard the Hunter's mount's hooves strike the cobblestone. "Your life is as valuable to me as my own."

"I cannot bear to have you die here," Quince said softly.

She stared at that upturned face. Her fingers itched to run through his hair, to feel his warm skin against her own. Only he was the color of the shadow lands' inhabitants and his skin was no longer warm. She swallowed hard. "Do not make this harder than it already is."

"Let me ride. Let me wield the blade."

She shook her head. "The methore came to my hand."

"The blade is mine."

"'Twas a gift," she retorted.

"Will you leave me with no honor then?" He sounded frustrated. His hand clenched her ankle tightly.

"You have my heart. It'll have to be enough."

The methore swung around to face their enemy, breaking Quince's grip on her boot. She drew her sword and light spilled from its blade, changing the cobblestones from gray to shades of reds and browns as if they tread upon true stone.

"I had not thought you'd be so madcap as to follow me," the Hunter said. His cloak shifted around him with the same psi-animated life Cerenth's hair had.

"I have killed your army," she said calmly. She hadn't thought she could be so cold.

"I can procure more," he sneered.

"And I've come to fetch what is mine." Inside, she trembled at his voice. But her outer appearance held fast, her father's daughter. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Quince draw his sword. The methore shuddered beneath her but it was with anticipation, not fear.

"You've caused me more trouble than most," the Hunter admitted. "It will give me great pleasure to feast upon your heart, to drink your blood from the same cup I supped your mother's."

"Have you nothing but words to fight with?" she taunted. The methore snorted its agreement and surged forward.

"So rash. It'll be your downfall." The Hunter danced out of her reach, drawing his own sword. Cerenth was much stronger than her and yet she could not do him permanent harm. Sande knew she could not survive a direct blow from him. When he wheeled his mount around and came for her she did not block his blow. Instead she pressed her leg to the methore's side, veered her mount and lopped at his other arm.

"Or yours," she said through clenched teeth.

He threw his arm up at the last moment as if he sensed her thoughts but it was a futile gesture. She felt as if she'd clashed with stone. The vibration traveled up her arm, sending her muscles into spasms. But it gave her joy to see his arm fall off at the elbow. She awkwardly switched her sword from one hand to the other.

Quince shouted and swung at the Hunter's mount, taking a chunk out of its hide.

The Hunter bellowed and swiveled around, aiming for Quince.

"No!" She urged the methore toward the Hunter.

And a dagger plunged through her gut. She doubled over, dropping her sword. Her hands curled around the dagger hilt. All the color in her skin leached into the blade.

She felt something inside her snap, as if she were anchored somewhere else and had just now reached the end of her cord. Someone twanged the cord again. The dagger twisted in her gut. She fell off the methore, Quince's arms around her. She clung to him even as she felt the cord yank her back. The breath exploded out of her lungs. She heard the Hunter's angry howl. Her world went black.

And she sat up gasping, clutching her stomach. She glanced around wildly. Her sword, where was her sword? She was in Kildarkee's Great Hall. Zeb and Cerenth, a trifle too pale, stared back at her.

"You were taking too long," Zeb said mildly. Cerenth held a dagger loosely in one hand. The edge of its blade dripped blood.

She swore then felt her stomach, pinching at the skin. There was no mark, no chink in her armor.

Zeb wiggled his fingers. "I healed you."

She turned to Quince, stretched out beside her. She touched his chest, felt his heart beat beneath her hand. Not quite believing it, she dug beneath the bandage, feeling for the wound.

There was no wound.

"I healed him too," Zeb said. Pride laced his voice.

Quince opened his eyes. "Groping a dragon man in public isn't very queenly behavior."

She laughed, a short bark of noise, and bent her head to his lips.

His arms wrapped around her and he groaned. "I feel like I've been dead for weeks."

Zeb and Cerenth exchanged a glance above their heads. Zeb cleared her throat. "Well, at least a couple hours."

Sande stilled in Quince's arms. Hours? It'd seemed like she'd been gone for no more than several minutes. She lifted her head. "What time is it?"

"You have a few hours before dusk," Cerenth replied.

Quince sat up, drawing Sande with him. He tucked her against his chest as if he feared losing her again. "How many men have we lost?"

Cerenth frowned. "More than half." At his sharp glance, she added, "They are not all dead but I will not turn them out to fight."

"We may not have a choice."

Quince and Cerenth glared at each other.

"We dealt a blow to his army," Sande said in the ensuing pocket of silence.

Zeb raised an eyebrow. "Been busy, have you?" He nodded to himself. "Good. Get yourselves off to bed and rest now. We'll need everyone ready in case he strikes again tonight."

"He won't wait," Quince said. "He knows he has the advantage."

"And the chance to strike down three Queens," Zeb said in his deceptively mild voice.

"Have you brought troops?" Sande's fingers finally found her sword, sheathed at her waist. Her hand curled around its comforting hilt.

Zeb shook his head. "This isn't our war."

Sande's breath exploded in a hiss and an oath.

"You've been spending far too much time in the servants' quarters," Quince murmured.

"We need men!"

"They are healers." Cerenth took Zeb's hand, shocking both Quince and Sande. "They aid us where we need it most."

"What of Adonthe?" Quince said suddenly. He looked around the room.

"He lives." Cerenth ran a nervous hand down her chain mail, as if smoothing skirts. She looked away then glanced back. "We could not heal them all," she said defensively.

Quince opened his mouth to protest but Zeb beat him to it.

Zeb wrapped his arm around Cerenth's waist. "The dragoness saved your new Queen's life while still carrying her own." He placed his hand on her stomach. "She is

exhausted and I can only draw so much strength when I'm away from the sea. He is comfortable and he will live. That's all we can provide now."

Quince nodded sharply. "My thanks," he said, although he did not sound thankful. He sounded weary and angry.

"Where is he?" Sande asked, knowing Quince would want to see for himself.

"There." Cerenth pointed.

They rose as one and Sande thought they both leaned on each other a little bit. A bandage wound around Adonthe's head, covering even his eyebrows. His breath was slow and rhythmic, even if he did seem a bit ashen.

"Is this his only wound?" Sande touched the bandage with the tips of her fingers. She hesitated to draw away the carefully tucked covers.

"I've drawn the poison out of the hounds' bite marks but the tears remaining will need time to heal." Zeb drew a symbol in the air with one hand and it glowed, dripping silver fire until it vanished into the air it'd been wrought from. "His sleep is a peaceful one."

"It is no worse than I hoped," Quince said. "Come. We need sleep as well."

Quince drew Sande away from the cursed hall. When he entered his quarters he found his servants already waiting for them. A bath had been drawn for Sande in his servants' quarters and his tub was set before a crackling fire, the bathwater steaming. He found he couldn't bear to be parted from her for even that length of time, propriety and his dragon brothers be damned.

"Sande?"

"Yes?" She turned toward him, draped in nothing but a blanket. Cydell was already clucking over her bloodstained armor, the torn state of her leathers. Her hair fell in a snarled mess to her waist. Her eyes held a haunted look he'd never be able to wipe away. But damn it, he'd try.

He swallowed a lump in his throat, pride and a bit of panic. "Please stay."

She smiled and the shadows fled from at least her face. Her dark eyes were wild and all Dragoon again, the pupils slanted like a cat's, not round like their human servants'. "Have you room for me then?" she asked.

He crossed the space in three quick strides and crushed her to his chest. His hands tangled in her hair. His lips found hers and he kissed her fiercely. "Never leave me."

When she could catch her breath she whispered, "I never did."

He kissed her lips again, her wind-worn cheeks, and buried his face in her hair. "Forgive me."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. He picked her up and carried her to the tub. Viseau and Cydell discreetly left them. Quince eased her into the tub first then stepped in as well. A bit of water sloshed on the floor.

"Careful, my lord, I will not mop up after you," Sande murmured.

He could barely tear his gaze from the rounded swell of her breasts, breaking the water's surface like a sultry sea serpent. "There is much I have to say, to ask and to understand."

Her smile was all female. "Ah, I can see that such questions are like an unquenched thirst. You'll know no surcease until they are answered." She leaned forward, dark eyes flashing. Her fingers found his rigid shaft and closed around it. "There it is." She licked her lips. He was mesmerized by the little movements of her tongue.

He'd not seen this side of her before. It made him clumsy. He grasped a bar of soap. "There are both hungers and thirsts. Which do you seek to satisfy?"

Her dark eyes flashed. Her fingers played up and down his shaft. He groaned softly. The soap slid between his clenched fingers. She laughed softly. "All of them."

Retrieving the bar, he set his mind to cleansing her, though her clever fingers were hell-bent on distracting him. He forced himself to focus, sliding the bar over her arms, the lean length of her forearm, a gentle scrubbing of her raw elbow, a spiraling circle around her small but powerful upper arm. Surprising strength hid beneath her layers of soft skin. He kissed a bare shoulder, pressed his lips to the flickering pulse at her neck.

He dropped the soap so he could free both hands to grasp her breasts. They were soft and heavy and warm, the water they were shrouded in scented with herbs. He breathed in the scent, letting it wipe away a bit of his worries as well. The Hunter would come. He had no doubt. And the creature would threaten Sande, his Queen.

He couldn't prevent her from riding into battle; they needed every able hand. With her gift she was more than able. Hadn't she been the only one able to do the Hunter harm? He was proud of her but more, he feared for her.

Leaning forward, Sande pressed her lips to his throat, latching on to his skin as if she thought she could ingest it. "I am here. Let no others invade your thoughts."

So she was as jealous as he? Their time, so fleeting, should not be squandered.

He worked at untangling the snarls in her hair, massaging shampoo into it while she pressed her body tight to his and sought to dissuade him from his task. But his will endured for at least this much. At last she took the soap from his hand and pulled his hand beneath the water. She guided him to her, her hips spread, resting her weight on her knees.

His fingers played with her secret lips, teasing the tender flesh until she was breathless. His thumb found her nodule, pulsing under him with a life of its own. He toyed with it, a fierce possessiveness in the gesture, until she gripped his shoulders with both hands and threw her head back.

"Now, gods help me, now," she pleaded.

He pulled her to him and she slid onto his shaft as if they were meant to be but one soul trapped in two bodies. Her breasts pressed into his chest, her hard little nipples brushing him with quick flicks as she wiggled against him.

She was not a delicate citadel-sheltered creature. His arms were full of wet, slippery dragon woman. She fought him, her hips bucking against his, splashing water out of the tub. Her head tipped back and if any servants had lingered, waiting for their requests, they now knew what their dragon lord and lady were about. Her sounds were inarticulate cries meant to encourage his movements.

He did not hesitate. Her nails burrowed into his back. He fisted his hands in her hair, pulled her mouth to his. She screamed into his mouth, body completely rigid while her breath ceased. Then her body shook with tremors. Her eyes opened and they were wide and whirling, bright multi-faceted jewels.

Then her hands were sliding down his body, gripping his bare ass cheeks. She flipped them over, nearly drowning herself. The chamber's cool air struck his back, a wicked caress. She surfaced out of the water beneath him, a serpent of dusky curves shrouded in the dark strands of her hair.

He grabbed her shoulders and her legs wrapped around his waist. He took her again, plunging in and out of her slick folds. She moved like a starved beast, hands fisting in his hair, running down his back, cupping his ass and raking nails against those ass cheeks' sensitive undersides. Within him built a fire she stoked, as hot as any searing flame that'd slipped between dragon jaws. He exploded, his body too fragile to contain the force that consumed him.

Her mind seized upon that strength, that power, until he felt himself spun outside his body as only she was able to do. Until he was nothing more than a pulsing nerve, her inner muscles binding him physically to her, her mind holding him captive. He shuddered, possessed mind, body and soul by his Queen.



## Chapter Fifteen

Peace was not to be Cerenth's gift to her kinsmen, for though Reanna was now here there had been no ceremony, no exchanging of power between the two rulers. And what she contained within her, Handilee's broken child, had yet to be born.

Whether she wanted it or not, despite all the power that came to her hand, her child would be born premature. She'd seen the doomed birth in Sande's farseeing. She knew it as only a mother could know. That grief would have its time but its moment was not yet nigh. Kildarkee needed a strong Queen more than ever right now and she was it.

Zeb accompanied her to her chambers. His arm was warm and strong around her and that was all that mattered to her. He was here in the flesh.

"Hold!"

Must the Council's thrice-cursed guards always slow her down? She'd forgotten about them. She wondered if she'd done them any harm when she'd fled her chambers. She hoped so. The tip of a sword was pointed dangerously close to Zeb's vitals.

She batted it away with a thrust of psi-talent.

Zeb's hand tightened about her waist. *Take care, my lady, and save your strength. I could just as easily turn their steel.*

*They dare point a weapon at the Queen's consort?*

His wry laughter filled her mind but he made no comment. Zeb raised his free hand. "I am merely escorting the Queen to her chambers."

"What manner of creature are you?" one of the guards asked.

"Not so far removed from your kind, kinsman."

The guard swore. "We do not share the same blood."

"It's a water dragon," said another.

Cerenth felt the guard's sweeping touch as he tried to invade the shields surrounding her and Zeb.

"Have you come to do harm to the Queen?"

"Have a care," Cerenth barked. "He and his men have toiled long to make sure that your dragon brothers do not meet their Maker this day."

"True enough," the leader of the group said. But his sword did not waver. "He has my thanks." He gave a short bow, eyes never leaving the pair. "But he does not belong in your quarters."

"I do, though." Handilee rounded a bend in the hallway. He looked tired, disheveled, but his eyes were sharp and clear.

Zeb glanced at him. *You chose this?*

Cerenth gave a mental shrug. *I am a female, easily drawn to comely flesh.* She felt a slow rise of jealousy build in Zeb. It thrilled her. *You must admit he is a fine specimen. See how the muscle rides that torso.* She allowed herself a slow shiver.

Vixen. His mental voice was still mild but she caught the hint of steel in the tone. "I give her to your care, captain." He stepped forward, offering her hand to Handilee.

She drew back. "No." She had not realized she'd said it aloud until she saw the guards exchange a startled glance. She would not relinquish Zeb's touch. After all her dreaming he was finally here in the flesh. She wanted to silence the stir in her blood, to bring her mate, her true mate, to her bed.

"Such would cause you pain," Zeb said in a low voice, reading her thoughts. "Go to him now, inamorata," he cajoled as if she was a child who could be soothed.

"I have endured much. This I cannot tolerate."

"A bit longer."

"No."

Zeb sighed. Handilee reached for Cerenth's arm. She pulled away from them both.

"I will see the Queen to her chambers," another voice said.

Cerenth turned to see Sande several steps behind Handilee. Her hair was still wet and flowed loose down her back, a cascade of molasses. She wore a simple tunic and trousers, her sword belted around her waist.

Handilee opened his mouth to protest. Sande put her hand on his arm. "Please. We've endured so much today. Now is not the time to pick battles to soothe one's pride."

"She is my mate," Handilee retorted, voice tight.

"She does not deny that." She raised an eyebrow when Cerenth would have protested. "But she needs rest and this water dragon is a healer."

"I do not trust him."

"No one asks that you do."

Cerenth saw Handilee relent. When she tried, Sande could be quite charming. And she was another Queen, a young untried one at that. It would not benefit Handilee to raise her ire.

"Do as you see fit, Dragoness." He gave a curt bow to Sande. "But she must not be left alone with that creature."

"My thanks," she murmured back, glancing at him through her lashes.

Cerenth had never had the opportunity to see another Queen flirt. She was shocked at how easy it was to manipulate the enamored. Sande led Cerenth and Zeb past the guards into her chambers.

Zeb headed for Cerenth's bedchamber.

"Quince let you go?" Cerenth asked as soon as the doors were shut and they were alone.

"He sleeps," she said simply.

"As you should be doing as well." Cerenth's nostrils flared. Beneath the scent of lavender Sande smelled of sex. A slow smile curved Cerenth's lips. "Well, well. Perhaps you have been healing yourself in one way."

Sande colored and dropped her eyes.

"Don't try that demure look on me," Cerenth cautioned. "I saw what you did with Handilee."

"Very well." Sande's fingers played with her sword hilt. "Off to bed with you then."

"Are you going to watch Zeb and I consummate our relationship?"

"There'll be none of that, Dragoness," Zeb said from the other room.

Cerenth ground her teeth. She was not a god. What kind of restraint did they expect from her? "Now, Zeb. I am quite hale..."

"At the moment only," he retorted. "And by my doing."

"Bed sports would not tire me out. Rather, they'd be invigorating."

"You need rest," he said flatly.

"Bah." A chair flung itself across the room. Sande ducked but it settled behind Cerenth. She threw herself into it.

Zeb stuck his head out of her bedchamber. "Come here, Cerenth. Antics like that fail to impress me." His voice was soothing. He held out his hand.

Perhaps she could change his mind. She pressed delicately against his mental shields.

A wind swept through the room, sending the drapes flapping at the end of their rods. Cerenth was lifted off the floor, her chair accompanying her. She clenched the armrests for support. It levitated into her bedchambers. Sande stared, open-mouthed. Cerenth wasn't as impressed. Zeb set her down beside the bed.

"Remember, we are evenly matched," he said.

The bedcovers rolled back invitingly. She felt her bodice laces being undone by quick, clever invisible fingers. "Do not hurry our time," she hissed. Her fingers closed over the laces, trying to slow their unlacing.

"Time is not on our side today, my inamorata."

She felt herself lifted out of the chair and gripped the armrests.

"I wish you would not fight me."

"Then stay!" she flung at him.

"I cannot."

She did not want to see the regret in his eyes. It made her weak.

He pried the chair from her hands and set her on the bed all without laying a hand on her.

"You can force me to bed but you cannot make me sleep. I will not rest without you."

"You are acting like a spoiled child."

She crossed her hands over her breasts. Zeb pulled the covers around her, tucking her in. "You aren't listening to me," she retorted.

"I am. And you break my heart." He laid a kiss on her forehead. She tried to sit up but he pressed her flat. "No, Cerenth. There will be time for romance and ravaging. But it will be when we are both at full strength."

How dare he tell her what she could and couldn't do? How dare he force her? He was no better than her kinsmen—but she knew that wasn't true. He was looking out for her best interests, they were looking out for theirs. Her lips peeled back in a snarl. "You'll need it!"

He sighed. "I fear you are correct."

He pressed against her shields, singing a soft lullaby in his native language. He would not force her to rest. She was one of the most powerful psi Queens ever born. His lullaby wavered. The *most powerful one ever born*, he confirmed. *That's why I came for you, Cerenth*. She heard a few more of his dark thoughts. It certainly wasn't for her charming social graces. Then her shields crumbled and her mind was swept into a dreamless sleep. She cursed him with her last thought. She heard him chuckle in her mind.

"I am in your debt," Zeb said to Sande as he closed Cerenth's bedchamber doors. "How you befriended her still amazes me."

Sande shook her head. "You men. You still don't understand. You keep trying to force her will. That's what everyone around her has done."

He stepped to the balcony, tapping his fingers on its railing. "It was for her own good."

"So everyone continues to say."

He glanced over his shoulder, bright violet eyes flashing but voice mild. "I am not her kinsmen."

"No, but you would be her lover."

He sighed. "She needed to rest."

"She needed to be held and cuddled."

"Go to your lover, Lady Leahlisande, before he wakes and finds you missing."

"As Cerenth will."

He spun around and seized her shoulders. His gaze was sharp. "Not by choice! The sea is my home. Even now it calls and its call is like a dagger in the gut. I have to go."

"Then go," Sande whispered, a bit frightened. She was fairly certain Cerenth would do her no harm but she wasn't sure about Zeb. Their display of strength, even mild, had her hiding.

He dropped his hands. "My apologies. I would not hurt you."

She rubbed her shoulders but backed away.

"You do not understand that our very strength, our uniqueness, isolates us."

"I know what it is to be alone."

He opened his mouth then closed it. She saw his throat work. "Very true." He gave her a short bow then touched his fingertip to the corner of his eye. "Give this to my lady." He held out his hand. A tear-shaped pearl rested in its palm.

She hesitated. "What is it?"

"Dragon men of the sea are capable of crying."

She plucked it from his palm with trembling fingers.

"Take care of her for me."

She continued to stare at the pearl. "When will you be back?"

"I will never return to Kildarkee's citadel."

Her quick indrawn breath was the only sound in the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sande knew the moment the first sun faded from the sky. One did not travel to the shadow lands and leave untouched. Quince lay beside her, arm wrapped around her waist, chest pressed into her back. She wished she could delay this day, stay snug beneath the blankets and never have to deal with what lingered outside their bedchamber.

But when the second sun finished its descent the moment of dusk, when the last ray relinquished its grip on the earth and the moons began their ascent, the Hunter's full power would return. They must be ready.

She sat up and Quince stirred. He rolled over and caught her hand.

"It's time," she said simply.

He opened his eyes and sat up. Enfolding her in his arms, he rested his head on her shoulder. One of the servants had made sure the fire remained lit. The flames danced within their prison. "You would return to Belkirk," he said finally.

"If I survive this day."

His grip tightened around her waist. "What do you intend to do?"

"Harry him in the shadow lands," she whispered.

"I will go with you."

"You have no way to travel there. And Zeb is no longer here to heal a mortal wound."

"The water dragons have left?" Surprise rang in his voice.

"They are of the sea," she said simply. "They cannot be gone long from it."

"I would have thought...at least for Cerenth's sake."

"She sleeps." Sande shifted in his grip and laid a kiss on his cheek. She breathed in his musky scent. Scent and a tear, that was all Cerenth would be left with. But she, she still could touch her lover. She stroked his cheek.

"Perhaps that is best," he said finally. "For her unborn children's sake."

Sande sighed. "Her child will die."

He hissed softly then drew back and stared into her eyes. "You know this as fact?"

She nodded, tired of hiding secrets. "I have seen it."

"She knows?"

Another nod of her head. She didn't like the look in his eyes.

"Then she could be sent from the citadel now. The stress of the flight would make no difference. Perhaps if there were only two Queens here the Hunter'd not be so inclined —"

She put a hand over his mouth. "He will come. And we will fight, Cerenth and I, with the gifts given us. Your precious Reanna will be protected."

"She is not my Queen," he said, his voice muffled by her hand. He pulled her hand away from his mouth. "You could fly," he murmured. He looked away and then back at her, pain filling his eyes. "I wish you would."

"We make our stand here."

"You would die for the Kildarkees?"

"No, but I would die for you. For Adonthe." *For Cerenth and Cydell and the former Belkirk servants who've made some semblance of a life here.*

He kissed her then, not with the passion she was accustomed to seeing but with a sweetness that had her stomach doing a curious flip-flop. He ran his hand through her hair and stared at her so long she grew uncomfortable. "What are you doing?"

"Memorizing your face."

Her throat felt tight. "You would not try to keep me here?"

"You are your own person. As much as it pains me I cannot force your will."

*Finally.* She kissed him quick and fierce.

Cydell was waiting to help Sande don her armor. And this was armor made for a Queen. Crafted of dragon scales, it draped her body like her own hide. There were thick leather gloves, boots that lashed over her thigh. A metal chest plate protected her heart. A choker of steel guarded her throat.

"I never thought you were a servant," Cydell murmured as she fixed a circlet of silver around Sande's forehead and secured her hair to her head.

Sande patted the old woman's hand. "I do not resent the time I spent as one."

"Though I did not know her, I am certain your mother would be proud." Cydell tucked a small sachet into the leather pouch at Sande's waist. "For luck."

Sande could smell the crushed herbs, the pungent artemisia mixed with the spicy aroma of basil. She carefully hugged Cydell.

"Come back to us."

"I will try," Sande promised.

Cerenth was waiting for her in the Great Hall. She too had donned her armor. Handilee frowned at them both when she approached.

"Zeb is gone," Cerenth said in a curiously flat voice.

"Yes. He left you this." She dropped the pearl tear into Cerenth's open hand.

Her fingers curled around the gem but she said not a word.

"Where is Reanna?" Sande asked.

"They boarded her up in her chambers. Let her get a true taste of what she bargained for." The bitterness was back in Cerenth's voice. Sande ignored it. She didn't blame her. Cerenth's time with Zeb had been achingly brief.

"It will do little good. The Hunter and his hounds can walk the shadow lands. They will be able to enter any room that harbors a shadow. You must not only secure the doors but brighten the room with light. There can be no shade." She'd returned from the shadow lands with more than just Quince and her life. Such knowledge now lay tantalizingly before her like a newfound book whose pages she'd only skimmed. If she survived she promised herself she'd hone her fledgling skills.

Cerenth nodded. "You will go after him." She said it as if she already knew it was a fact.

"I must." Quince crossed the room, headed toward her. She tried to memorize the way he moved, the slight curl of his dark hair at the nape of his neck, the way his eyes lighted on her, full of possession. She didn't want to leave him. Some heroine she was.

Her fingers played a rhythm against her sword hilt. She'd rather be off now. The goodbyes would kill her. "If you cannot hold them off, seek shelter in a room without shadows." Dusk was here. Kildarkee's shadows curled at her feet.

Seeing them, Cerenth stepped back. The shadows stole over Cerenth's boots, slipped between her legs like a contented cat and returned to Sande. Cerenth looked startled. "And wait until dawn? What then? The suns and moons will rise and fall as they always have."

"I-I fear I'm not quite mortal now, Cerenth. It may make it harder to kill me. I have no answers. I will try not to fail."

Cerenth's lips pressed tight. "I cannot ask for more." She hesitated. "Did he say anything before he left?"

She knew she meant Zeb. "He had to return home."

Cerenth nodded. Sande caught a glimpse of pain before the woman looked away. Her fingers were wrapped, white-knuckled, around Zeb's pearl.

Quince reached their side. "You will want to see what is outside our gates."

She felt the Hunter's presence before Quince even said his name. "The Hunter makes threats," Sande guessed.

"Let him threaten. He has chosen the wrong citadel to attack." Cerenth headed for the stairwell.

Handilee stepped in her path. "It is not safe for you, my Queen."

"Step aside, Handilee," she demanded. Then she softened, modifying Sande's tactic. "You have need of me. More men will die without my aid."

"You carry my child, Dragoness. I worry for your safety."

"Then guard me well but do so from the ramparts."

Much to both Sande's and Cerenth's surprise, he yielded. He fell in stride beside her, Sande behind them, Quince at her back. The Hunter's unnatural wind had returned, tearing at their cloaks and trying to extinguish the archers' flaming arrows. Below them the Hunter paced outside their gates, a sea of hounds in his wake. Sande closed her eyes. How had he conjured up so many? Where did they come from? Behind them ranged the ragtag remains of his army of the dead.

"He has robbed another citadel," Quince said.

Handilee squinted. "I do not recognize the men."

"Thank the gods for that." Sande could not bear to murder any more people she knew.

The Hunter shook his sword at them.

"He has but one arm," Cerenth murmured, surprised.

"He left the other in the shadow lands, thanks to Lady Leahlisande," Quince replied.

Handilee stared at her. "You dealt him such a blow?"

"Despite being a Queen, I too am not without my talents."

"I didn't mean...that is..." Handilee trailed off, his face twisted into a confused scowl.

"Why doesn't he just appear within our walls and be done with it?" Cerenth asked.

"He prefers to taste our fear. It's an appetizer." Sande straightened. She could not dally any longer. "I must go." She was afraid to look at Quince. "If...if I don't come back in due time you must promise me you won't let me linger here."

Cerenth's gaze wavered. Sande saw her hand clench around the tear.

"Do not let me live a half life, to be tortured there."

Cerenth closed her eyes and nodded once.

"Promise me."

"I said I would do it and I will," Cerenth snapped.

Quince's hands rested on Sande's shoulders. "I won't let her."



She refused to turn around and meet his gaze. Her resolve was already crumbling. "My will is as strong as yours. This thing must be done. He can only be harmed there. And I'm the only one who can make the trip." She didn't mention that he'd cut Quince down like a practice toy.

"If you don't come back I will come after you."

"Then we will both die," she replied, weary. "I must go now."

He spun her around. His face looked like it was carved in stone. His black eyes were filled with emotions, his grip like iron. He crushed his lips to hers. She tasted his fear, felt his despair fuel his actions. His heart beat like a trapped thing. "Come back to me."

She couldn't do this any longer. She stepped into the shadows cast by the tower. Closing her eyes, she let herself spin out, losing the hold her body had on her soul.

Quince caught Sande before she collapsed. Her skin was milky pale, a wraith's color, but her chest still rose and fell steadily. He buried his face in her hair then lifted his head. "Could you really do it?" he challenged Cerenth.

Cerenth's gaze was fierce. "If I must."

He shook his head. "Perhaps you are stronger than I thought, Dragoness."

"Heartless," she replied, watching the approach of the Hunter's army.

"No, not that." Quince never thought he'd find himself defending her.

"Best take her to the Hall. We have need of strong Queens." Cerenth raised her hand, calling fire to her fingertips.

"We are blessed with many. Gods be with you."

Cerenth spared him no glance, only waited for the coming onslaught.

## Chapter Sixteen

The path to the shadow lands was new to her. This was no quest for a particular person as her last passing had been. This was directed by her will and her will was to leave her body behind, no more. One moment she stood within her body the next she stood without.

She saw Quince catch her body before she fell, heard he and Cerenth exchange words. But those words were like the buzz of flies in her ears, ramblings she could not process.

She ran down the deserted tower steps. Voices rumbled from within the walls of the Great Hall. Hammers struck wood as the room was secured. She spared it no glance. They would have to fight their own battle.

She entered the courtyard. Men rushed by her carrying torches but none seemed to see her. They were like wraiths. She could see the building's stones through their insubstantial bodies. They avoided touching her as if she was a ghost, an unexplained cold spot of dread.

A methore stood in the shelter of the stables, waiting for her.

"You again."

The methore pawed the ground with one front foot.

"I suppose I'm blessed to have so many powerful allies." She climbed aboard his back. "You know, we will probably die this day." To think so was to make it so. So she must think positively. They'd win this day or if not at least they'd beat the Hunter back.

They rode through the citadel's shuttered gates as if they didn't exist. A rain of fiery arrows greeted them on the opposite side of the wall but they were not of this world and of little concern.

The hounds however were another matter.

They could see her but unless they shifted into her world they could do her no harm. She hacked at them, worrying the pack, her methore trampling them beneath its feet.

Far above her, Cerenth took to the sky in the form of a dragon, bugling her charge. Dragon men followed, flaming the hounds before them.

Still there was no sign of the Hunter. Had he known she'd follow him here? Or was he trying to gain entrance elsewhere? That sent a cold stream of sweat down her back. Leave the hounds to harry the troops outside while he dispatched what mattered inside?

As if the methore read her thoughts, they spun around, headed for the citadel walls. They leaped through the walls, ran up the wide stone steps to the Great Hall. The clatter

of hooves against stone was the only sound that reached her now. There she found the Hunter testing the walls, the point of his sword rapping against the blocks. With each test his sword struck true stone. He was yet unable to enter the Hall.

"There are no shadows there," Sande said. She drew her sword. Blue fire played off it, spattering like drops of water onto the ground around them. The fire bathed her methore in blue light, filling its nostrils and the hollows of its cheeks and muscles with a flickering glow. Had any who'd known her in the living world seen her at this moment, they would have shrunk from her.

The Hunter and his mount spun around. This close, she could see that its bridle was made with bits of bone and sinew, its browband a bit of flailed skin, meat still attached in places. She could see nothing of the Hunter's face, only the bright red gleam of eyes beneath his hood. His gloved hands convulsed around the reins.

"So you come again."

She could not read the expression in his voice. "I have."

"Beg to die by my hand and I'll make it painless."

She laughed and it surprised them both. "I could say the same to you."

She didn't expect the blast of psi to her head. She nearly dropped her sword. Her methore danced back, pulling her out of the Hunter's physical reach. *Cerenth, help me.*

Sande felt Cerenth pause mid-air. Then a blanket of strength surrounded her and the pain diminished.

The Hunter snarled and swung at her with his sword.

Her methore backed down the stairs.

She felt the ripple the same time he did, a plucking at her core. Somewhere beyond the walls shadows lingered.

*No*, she cried. She'd begged them to keep the shadows from their sanctuary. The Hunter laughed then both he and his mount vanished through the wall.

Quince strode around the Great Hall, restless. He'd been pressed to keep Sande's body safe but he'd prefer action. He could hear the screams of hounds and dragons alike and it only agitated him more.

The wounded lay on pallets on the floor so their bodies and beds could cast no shadows. Reanna, dressed in a gown—he'd grown so accustomed to seeing Queens in armor that she seemed out of place—stood in one corner, surrounded by her kinsmen. Her face wore a mask of horror, her innocence wiped away.

Sande lay before him on the Great Hall's table, hands clasped around the hilt of the sword he'd given her.. Despite her waxy appearance her chest still rose and fell. Several times he'd dropped his head to her chest to convince himself that her heart indeed still beat. She at least seemed at peace.

"Who is she?" Reanna asked, disrupting the silence.

"Belkirk's Junior Queen," Quince replied.

"What is she doing here?"

"Saving us all from a fate worse than death."

Reanna pursed her lips, unsatisfied with the answer. He supposed she was a pretty slip of a thing but to his eyes she was washed-out, cool white porcelain skin and ice blonde hair. He was used to his vibrant Queens. Cerenth with the flaming head of red hair. Had he seen only what he wished to see in that one? And his Leahlisande with her dusky tones. His Queen.

"Kildarkee is mine," she said finally. He caught the hint of a petulant tone.

"She makes no claims on Kildarkee."

"And how about on you?"

Ah, he'd missed the gleam in her eye. He watched her appraise him now. She didn't want to lose one of her supposed men, especially one that had attracted another Queen's eye. "I am not of Kildarkee blood."

A tapestry on the wall suddenly flapped in an unseen breeze. Quince drew his sword.

The Hunter swirled into view in the shadow cast by the tapestry's flutter. His mount crashed onto one of the tables, sending pieces of wood splintering. He headed for Reanna. Her men drew their swords, surrounding her. He hacked the first man down as if he was merely a wooden toy to practice marksmanship on.

Sande, astride a methore, burst from the shadow as well. It was an eerie sight to see a full-grown animal and one's beloved materialize before one's eyes. The methore landed on the table as well. Splinters of wood showered the people again.

Her dark hair was frosted with a silver glow and her armor gleamed as well. Blue fire licked down her sword, encasing her entire arm in a long sweep of flame, yet her hand was not burned. With a keening war cry she swung the sword. Droplets of fire spun from the blade's edge, singeing anything it struck, melting even stone. Her eyes were focused only on the Hunter.

His heart swelled with pride and fear. She looked like an avenging goddess. Sande drove her sword into the Hunter's mount's flank, cutting a patch of muscle to the bone. The creature screamed and twisted back, its teeth bared. It drew the battle away from Reanna.

As quickly as they had appeared, they vanished.

The edge of the tapestry smoldered. Quince yanked it off the wall.

An empty bowl, cast off the table, still rolled around the floor. He could hear his own ragged breathing.

"That was Belkirk's Queen?" a guard finally asked.

"Yes."

The guard glanced at a cowering Reanna. "She's no older than our own."

"I wouldn't want that in my bed," another murmured.

"Was it even flesh and bone or only shadow?"

The bowl settled to a stop. The room was silent, save for everyone's breathing. Quince stared in the guards' fearful faces. He had no soothing words. He was as shocked as they.

Sande's body abruptly thrashed. She spit blood.

"No!" He threw himself over her. Shaking her shoulders, he called to the limp form, "Sande. Leahlisande Belkirk, don't you die."

No matter how many hounds Cerenth torched, three more took the dead ones' place. Her men were beating back the army of the dead even though it required hacking them to pieces and even then pieces of them kept trying to attack. She flamed a hand that was creeping its way across the roadway.

She landed on the carnage-strewn path, giving her wings a break. Her abdomen ached with a fierce pain.

She saw no sign of the Hunter and without him there was no calculation in his army. It simply moved forward like rigid clockwork, plowing over everything in its path. The hounds ebbed and flowed like a great tide of black beasts but their teeth only scratched the surface of dragon hide.

She took to the air again, searing a dragon corpse that sought to catch her.

She always kept a light mental touch on the minds of her Dragoon and Sande. A sudden strike to Sande's mental shields nearly yanked Cerenth from the sky. The Hunter dared to attack her charge!

Sande had shields but on their own they were not a strong defense. Cerenth hovered in midair, reinforcing Sande's shields, building up her defenses so that she might live through the Hunter's attack. His mind was like a thick viscous oil coating everything it touched with his taint. She built up Sande's ramparts then counterattacked, putting everything she had into that invisible strike. The Hunter fell back, leaving Sande's mind intact.

Cerenth breathed a sigh of relief.

Then a half-charred dragon body collapsed on top of her. She fell to the ground under its weight, flung it off with a bit of psi she still possessed. Her strength was waning. Zeb was right. She wasn't at her best. She was tired and her pregnancy pulled at her. A pack of hounds circled her. She blew fire at them, torching their second in command but the first one merely leaped the directed blow. They were learning. That did not bode well.

Another hound circled behind her, jumping on her back and worrying at her barbed spine. She shook him off but another took its place.

Where the Seventh Hell was Handilee?

She gave a mental shout but he did not respond.

She torched a few more creatures then they overwhelmed her with their sheer numbers.

Sande stood in the courtyard. Men rushed around her, bringing fire to the archers and killing hounds but none saw her. What in the Seven Hells was she thinking? Taunting the Hunter, drawing him into the open. Did she really believe she could kill him? Her methore snorted, pawing the ground.

She braced her legs against the methore's bony plates and stood in her "saddle". "Coward!" she shouted.

The man closest to her shuddered, nearly dropping his load.

"I stand here protected only by my own steel and yet you choose to hide." She stabbed her sword into the sky.

A throwing star caught her in the stomach. She dropped her sword and doubled over. Her hands scrabbled on the wicked-toothed steel. Whatever it was edged with bubbled and melted her gloves.

The Hunter's laughter erupted around her. "Such an overconfident little fool. Is that to be all the Queens' downfall?" He walked out of the shadows of the courtyard's main gates. Behind him his mount limped. Its ears were pinned back, teeth bared, but its gait was so bad it could do little more than hop.

She had one chance. She prayed to every god she knew then appealed to any she might have missed. *Cerenth*, she called, *Cerenth, I beg you, give me aid*. But there was no reply from the dragoness.

He was almost to her side. Her methore fidgeted beneath her. Clenching her teeth to hold back her cry, she pulled the throwing star out with both hands. The pain was fierce. She thought of Quince, carefully guarding her body. She thought of Cerenth, of the strength that woman must possess to go into battle heavily pregnant. She forced herself to breathe.

The Hunter drew his sword. "I shall enjoy this."

She changed into her dragon shape. The pain was almost unbearable, the stomach wound more apparent as a dragon. The methore skittered away from her, attacking the Hunter's riding creature. Their battle cries surrounded them.

She flamed the Hunter before she was completely changed, the fire searing her half-human throat and lungs.

He threw up his sword to ward off her attack but she caught him full in the chest before he could erect any other barrier. In the world of shadows, he burned as much as any man might. His cloak ignited as if it was coated in lamp oil. The skin peeled from his fingertips, revealing silver bones.

She drew back on her haunches, prepared for another blast. The Hunter wavered. "At least I got one of you." His speech was thick, broken by a raspy burbling. He collapsed, his laughter dying with him. She fell as well.

She didn't know how long she lay there before the methore nudged her with its nose. She still lay in dragon form, her tail flung out behind her like a cast-aside flag standard.

*Go away!*

He nudged her yet again, more impatiently. There was something she needed to do beside wait here for death. She raised her head, feeling as ancient as the stones. Somebody wept over her body. She could feel the quiet grief like a poison to her peace.

*Ah, her body.* She was still in the shadow lands. And dawn approached.

She crawled on all fours across the courtyard, leaving a trail of blood on the stones. When she rested for too long the methore would urge her forward, stamping and snorting until she moved again. She crawled to the Great Hall's doors. This was as far as she could go. She raised her head, braced it against the door and struck her head against the wood.

They were locked against her.

The uncontained grief for her had her swaying. She could see the dragon man, *Quince*, she thought wearily, as if it'd been a century since she left him. Quince, the one who'd help her rebuild Belkirk, if not to its former glory and strength, at least to preserve its bloodline. Ah but she was Belkirk. And if she wanted her citadel to survive she needed to live.

*Let me in*, she pleaded. The ghosts quivering behind the doors gave no sign that they'd heard her.

Inside, Quince drew her still form to his chest. And therein created a shadow. She poured herself into that dark spot, forced herself beyond the doors.

And emerged in her body, gasping. She spat blood.

He overwhelmed her. His hands were in her hair, on her face, feeling beneath her armor for wounds. "Thank the gods. You live, you live," he kept saying over and over.

She couldn't find her voice. The Hunter's gurgling words filled her mind. Though she was bathed in light she still felt trapped in the gloom. One word suddenly filled her mind and mouth. "Cerenth?" The Dragoness's mental touch was noticeably absent.

He stilled. "The battle still rages."

"Dawn comes. Help me up."

"You're hurt."

"I'll live." *I hope.* She could hold off the pain a little longer. Her fingers fumbled with the pouch at her waist. Quince opened it for her. She found the herb packet she needed by touch, dumped the contents into her mouth without looking. There'd be consequences for overdosing her body on such powerful herbs but she lived...for now.

He eased her to her feet, his arm around her waist. She leaned on him. Faces stared at her in shock and fear. "Open the doors," she said.

The guards hesitated.

"Do as she says," Quince said.

"She'll endanger us all."

She raised her head. The guard flinched under her gaze. "The Hunter is dead," she said simply.

He opened the door. The first ray of sunlight hit her face. She turned her face up and bathed it in the sun's warmth.

A trail of crimson-etched stone like a thick, colored vein, ran from the hall doors to the gates.

"What is this?" Quince started to pull her back inside.

"My blood." She heard Quince swear under his breath. "Hurry. She needs us." She couldn't hurry. She hurt too badly. She focused on putting one foot in front of another. They made it to the outer gates.

Around her, people made the sign against evil, etching it in the air in front of them with their fingers. Even some of the dragon men did so. The village had been abandoned before the battle even began, all the villagers taking refuge within the citadel's gates. Now they were moving again. Wagons rumbled by her. The air was filled with the scent of singed flesh and burning hair. Small fires grilled bodies she dare not look at too closely. Hound or human or dragon, she didn't want to know. She had seen too much.

She squinted against the sunlight. *There*. Did she catch a flash of dragon armor? She pulled Quince to the right and he followed, helping her.

Cerenth sat in a ring of charred hounds, bits of dragon hide and scale scattered around her. Her hair was unbound and fell in a tangled array of curls down her back, hiding her face. She didn't even look up when they approached.

Their shadows fell across the woman. She cradled a single cracked egg in her arms. She rocked back and forth.

"Cerenth." Sande wiggled out of Quince's grasp. She collapsed, saved only by his grasp on her elbow. Shaking herself free, she struggled forward on hands and knees. "Cerenth."

Cerenth raised her head. Her eyes were dry, the emerald fires in their depths dead. "I heard you. I did what I could."

"Yes. You blocked the Hunter's blow." She brushed it aside. "Are you hurt?"

"Hurt?" Her voice had a curiously brittle quality to it.

Cerenth's legs were torn, skin flayed from the bone. She could see bite marks riding up both sides. Some gaped, revealing bone. Her arms were also torn, cut to the bone in spots.

Someone handed Quince a blanket and he draped it around Cerenth's naked body. She shivered then as if she suddenly realized she were nude and it was winter.

"Where is Handilee?" she asked. "He was supposed to protect me."



"Hush now, Dragoness." Quince wrapped another blanket around her and picked her up. She still cradled the egg. Its thick fluid dripped over her arms, bathing them in a golden wash of yolk. Sande thought she glimpsed a hint of silver scale entombed in the shelled prison. She shuddered.

Quince settled Cerenth into a wagon, folding her into more blankets and padding her body. "She's in shock."

"She's dying," Sande said softly. She could feel the life ebb out of her like the yolk from her egg. "You have to get her to the sea."

Quince picked her up as well. She worked on getting her feet underneath her but her legs failed her. At least the herbs were taking effect. The pain in her gut was a dull throb.

"What good will that do? The water dragons deserted us."

The pain plucked at her thoughts, clouding them. "No. They had to return to the sea. Please." She closed her eyes. How did one heal a wound that was dealt in the shadow lands? When it couldn't be seen here, only felt?

She felt Quince's lips brush her forehead. "Stay with me," he whispered.

She couldn't make that promise. It was several furlongs to the sea. She felt herself lifted up into the wagon. The horses surged forward. She'd ridden in a wagon like this once before, no less carefully packed and unaware of the true worth of her talent. It felt like years ago rather than months. She drifted in and out of awareness.

Below the blankets Cerenth's fingers hunted for hers. She twined her fingers in Cerenth's.

"He's dead?" Cerenth asked, her voice a whisper of its former strength.

She licked her parched lips, tasted blood. "Yes."

"And you?"

"Dead as well."

Cerenth chuckled and it was more a burble, thick and chunky. She squeezed Sande's hand. "Hold on. Zeb will come." She coughed.

She felt as if she'd returned to the shadow lands. She knew both suns shone above them but she could no longer feel their warmth. Only Cerenth's hand anchored her to this awareness, this place where her body lingered while her soul fought to be rid of it. The scent of the sea tickled her nose.

Then the wagon stopped. She could hear the lap of the water against the rocky shores. Quince lifted her up. Her head bobbed on a rubbery neck that could no longer support its burden. There were other wagons. Someone carried Cerenth as well.

"Sande." Quince's lips were pressed against her forehead. Would he never let her rest? "Leahlisande Belkirk, you must stay here."

"Where is my sword?" Her arms rose like gnarled tree limbs, searching for her hilt. She couldn't walk the shadow lands without a weapon.

"Left behind at the citadel. I'm here. You don't need it. I will protect you."

"Quince," she whispered.

"I'm here."

The water lapped at her legs. Her breath hissed out, rib cage rattling with uncontrolled shakes. She found his hand, curled her fingers around it. Then she closed her eyes and died.

## Chapter Seventeen

Quince cradled Sande to his chest. "Zeb! Enneth!" he shouted. Her body felt too frail. He could not find a wound upon her but she obviously suffered from some unseen injury. Her fingers loosened their grip on his hand.

"Sande!" He shook her but her eyes did not open.

Cerenth lay in another dragon man's arms. She turned her head toward him, painfully slow. "Zeb comes."

"It is too late!" Quince nearly shouted at her.

"Hold her. Hold her here."

"I cannot."

Cerenth fixed her gaze on him. "You must."

He closed his eyes and he focused on his Sande, not the Queen or the talent-possessed creature he'd seen astride the methore. She was all of that and more. She stood before him in her skirts of violet, one hand holding a fistful of cloth away from her feet, the other holding her sword. She turned her head and her hair suddenly fell loose across her face, a picture of grief she did not want to share. He held each image dearly, clung to them. *Stay with me.*

He thought, though he could never be sure, that he heard her say, a bit exasperated, *Oh all right*, and her chest rose and fell again.

Fingers gripped his shoulder but he did not look up, so intent was he on holding Sande's essence to this world. The fingers did a rat-a-tat-tat dance on his shoulder blade. He dimly recognized it wasn't just five fingers that skipped there but six. He raised his head.

Enneth stood behind him.

"I can find no wound," Quince said.

"But she breathes still." Enneth dropped to his knees. The water lapped over his legs like a lover caressing her beloved's flesh. "Wounds from the shadow lands can be hard to find." Harder still to heal were the unspoken words.

"You know this as fact?" Quince said, voice harsh.

Enneth's pale eyes fixed on his. "No." He turned to focus on Sande.

She seemed so much smaller in Quince's arms than when she'd sat astride her methore and flung fire from her sword. Enneth touched her cheek, ran his fingers down both her arms. He laid both hands over her stomach. His brow furrowed.

"This will be no simple task. We must go to my home." He stared at Quince. "Beneath the waves."

"She will drown." His arms involuntarily tightened around her.

"Zeb takes his Queen there as well. You will go with them and he will protect you."

"It's impossible." Dragons of the sky could not take to the sea. Nor could they swim or breathe beneath the waves.

"Having not seen Lady Leahlisande do so, would you have believed one could walk the paths the dead take and return not once but twice?"

"No."

"She breathes, but by your will alone."

"I will not let you take her without me."

He tipped his head. "The passing will not be gentle. It's best she is unconscious. You will want to fight it."

"Be that as it may. I will not leave her."

He nodded as if it confirmed some private thought. "Come then."

Zeb held Cerenth in his arms. Members of the Kildarkee littered the shoreline but avoided the water's edge. Quince suddenly realized most of his breeches were drenched. Zeb merely nodded at him.

"Step close," Enneth advised. "What we do is not without peril."

Zeb's lips quirked. "Your confidence in my abilities is flattering."

"It's not you I worry about but his reaction." Enneth jerked his head toward Quince.

Zeb sobered. "I can make you sleep."

Quince clutched Sande tighter. "No."

"You are a braver man than I. I have no desire to take to the skies." And with those words they were suddenly surrounded by a bubble. It wasn't one which could be seen, only felt. No doubt Quince looked the same to those dragon men gathered at the water's edge. But he felt the bubble press around him. The air suddenly had a weight to it.

"Walk with me," Zeb commanded.

They walked into the sea. The water did not drench his boots but lapped around them. At mid-thigh he felt his first wave of panic. Come now, he'd done battle before. But this was a battle with a nonsentient enemy. One couldn't reason with water. It simply flowed, overwhelmed, drowned.

And all he had for a shield mate was a water dragon. They were waist deep now and still the water did not kill him. It flowed around them as if they were some great boulder.

He heard the dragon men call out from the shore, alarmed. To them it might look like they were committing mass suicide but it could also be because Zeb held their Queen. Reanna was much favored over Cerenth. Without Cerenth they'd lose rights to Reanna.

Chest deep. He tried not to flail. He still kept Sande's head above the water, foolish as that might be. He'd never been this deep in water before. A current twined through his legs, much like a favored pet but stronger, more demanding.

Enneth spared him a sympathetic glance. Zeb appeared locked within himself. The bundle of red hair he carried was as still as his own.

Neck deep. The water lapped at Sande's cheek. He started to hyperventilate, cursing himself. Still he felt dry, save for the river of sweat running down his back. The next step plunged him over the unseen edge.

Had he not been holding Sande he would have flailed, sought to protect himself. Enneth's hand closed around his upper arm with a strength he'd not thought the water dragon possessed. They drifted beneath the waves, the water above him constricting. He tried not to fight the claustrophobia but the water pressed in on all sides. He was going to die here, beneath the waves, clinging to a woman who was so near death herself this latest challenge might have very well plunged her over the edge. He stared at her face, unwilling to feed his fears with visions of the shifting sea around him.

They settled themselves into an invisible current and were pulled along in a rough fashion like a leaf caught in a spring stream's flood. He tried to ignore the crushing amount of water above him. Even so he took short breaths, as if afraid the water might change its mind and suddenly claim his lungs. The water's depths permitted no light this deep. Even his dragon night sight had trouble piercing the gloom.

A cliff stopped their drift. It undulated in a series of jagged ridges, the smallest of which dropped away, vanishing in the inky blackness between their feet.

Enneth touched his arm. *We go there.* He pointed below.

Quince barely kept from shuddering. *Deeper?*

*Hounds are not divers.*

They moved down until the heights of the cliff could no longer be seen. He felt as if he were entering the mouth of some great ravine, that if the water did not consume him this cliff would. Out of the blackness a head reared up. Carved from the cliff face, a teeth-shrouded cave was visible between its jutting jaws. Stone nostrils flared as tall as a dragon man and twice as wide—did he see a hint of light from those nostrils?—resting on jowls that were etched with dragon scales.

Their feet touched bottom and a cloud of sand erupted around them. The upper jaw of the cliff dragon rose thirty or forty feet above them. Each tooth was wider than Quince's waist and at least as tall as he was. They stepped into the mouth, across a carved forked tongue and up a series of ramps. All of a sudden they broke into a bubble of air.

Quince gasped like a drowning man.

Enneth chuckled. "Welcome, representative of Kildarkee. Welcome to our home which no living dragon of the air has ever seen." He held his arms wide.

The carved chamber was lit with peculiar glowing stones set in a series of arches above him. The ceiling vaulted twenty feet up. The ramp did not end at their feet but leveled and meandered through the chamber. This seemed like a meeting room. There was a raised dais at the far end, niches in the walls to accommodate oddly shaped bodies. The floor was smooth and polished like the inside of a seashell or if one had peeled a pearl and used the husk as tile.

"Hurry," Zeb said softly. His voice echoed.

Enneth frowned at him.

"How is it possible? How have you managed to trap the air we're breathing?" Quince asked.

"The Three Sisters Islands are formed of the humps in our citadel's back. The air is brought down shafts." Enneth ushered Quince through the auditorium.

Zeb didn't wait for them but strode forward and disappeared in a side tunnel. Quince and Enneth hurried after him.

The next room was not nearly as impressive as the auditorium. Quince wasn't as talented as his Queens but he could feel the subtle shift in the air, the weight of this place. Something not quite dragon lived here. It wasn't a large chamber, perhaps only a handful of paces wide and long. A shallow basin occupied the center of the room as if the stone had extended out its palm to form a cup.

Sande coughed. A bubble of blood spattered Quince's tunic.

Zeb laid Cerenth in the basin. "Put Leahlisande beside her," he instructed. He didn't wait to see if Quince obeyed. He was already fiddling with bottles stored in a rack along the wall.

Quince relinquished her with a bit of dread. He could feel the chamber building with energy. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he could see the air crackle and spark with a life of its own. When he focused on the apparition, however, there was nothing there.

Removing the stopper of a container, Zeb poured the stuff over the Queens. He tossed bits of shredded plant material into the basin like he was following a recipe and the Queens were a main ingredient meant to be garnished.

"What does he do?" Quince asked.

"He makes an offering to the gods," Enneth replied.

Four low platforms dotted the "corners" of the round basin. Zeb placed a black pearl the size of a man's fist on each one. When all four were similarly adorned, a spark of white light arced between them. Quince jumped back.

Zeb spoke in a language Quince couldn't identify, a low rambling chant that rose and fell in pitch depending on what he did. He circled the bowl twice in one direction, reversed and circled it the other way. When he had completed that circuit the ground rumbled. Quince leaned against the wall for support. The black pearls were sucked into the platforms. Thick muddy streams burst out of the holes the pearls left behind.

The viscous liquid bubbled and frothed. Balanced by their own weight, the streams formed into four pillars, each nearly touching the ceiling. Zeb muttered a word and the streams dropped in height, no taller than three feet. The excess stuff flowed down the platforms and collected in the shallow basin.

Cerenth and Sande were coated in it.

Quince started forward. "They'll be suffocated."

Enneth gripped his arm. "Wait. It is a healing of sorts."

"If any harm comes to them—" he began.

"What, air dragon?" Enneth scoffed. "You will battle us? All we have to do is call water into the chambers and you die. You asked our aid and we have provided it. Now be patient and wait."

Quince's hand wrapped around his sword hilt and released it. Enneth was right. He'd brought this upon himself.

Zeb ignored them both. The thick liquid continued to froth and spatter until the women were completely coated save for their faces, pale white spots bobbing in a sea of rippling brown muck.

Quince dropped to one knee. The muck had splattered, just missing the toes of his boots. He slid his finger through the goo then rubbed it between his thumb and finger. It felt like a fine river silt. He brought his fingers to his nose. A strong, pungent scent assaulted his nostrils. He drew back. The fingers coated in the muck began to tingle.

"What is it?"

"The Mother Earth's healing sap."

The frothing at the platforms stopped. Zeb sank to his knees at the edge of the basin. His head hung low and his breath came in ragged gasps.

"Now we wait," Enneth said. "Come, we will prepare a meal for you."

"I will not leave them."

Zeb raised his head. "I swear to you, on the sands of all the dragons before me that have bled into the sea, no harm will come to them. You need to rest and eat."

"And what of you?"

Zeb gave him a lopsided smile. Exhaustion leached whatever warmth he tried to muster. "I watch."

"There is nothing within our chambers, air dragon, that could harm your women. Come, let Zeb fret over their care. It is what he does best."

Quince hesitated.

The two water dragons exchanged a look.

"I can feel your exhaustion," Zeb said. "It wears on me. Your lady will feel it as well. You do her no good in your condition."

Quince nodded then and both water dragons appeared to relax.

"Come then." Enneth took his arm and gently steered him away. "You will dine on such things your kin could never imagine."

Quince had no appetite, but to sit and watch Sande bleed her life away from a wound he could not see was no easy task either. He relented.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sande drifted. She dreamt of floating within the sea, her hair strewn loose like seaweed behind her. She saw Quince's worried face hover above her as if he looked into the pool she floated in. She held out her hand and he his but their fingertips were separated by the water, like a translucent glass had been laid between them. She opened her mouth, tried to speak and found it full of water. She coughed and trembled and then the cold set in.

She dreamt of burrowing beneath the earth, seeking to warm that which could not be warmed by normal means. Here she hid while the Hunter laid waste to the land above her, his footfalls echoing her heartbeats.

But mostly she slept, the first real sleep she'd had since her talent surfaced. Nothing could hurt her here, beyond the reach of the shadows' touch. She could put a name to peace finally, to the blessed silencing of her talent.

When she woke she could not be sure what it was that drew her from sleep's embrace. Sande turned her head. Cerenth lay beside her. They did not wear their body armor but sleeveless white shifts, much like mating garb. Their bodies were cushioned on a bed of springy grass.

Cerenth opened one emerald eye. "We are not dead?"

"I don't believe so but where we are I am not sure."

"This is not some version of the shadow lands?"

Sande shook her head. "No, you would know it if we were there. It draws on one, consuming your life. It is cold." She hunted for the words. "No, I think this is another place. But where I am not sure."

"Did we win?" Cerenth asked.

"I dealt the Hunter a fatal blow." She sat up abruptly and grabbed her stomach. It felt smooth, unmarred. The pain was gone. She stared at Cerenth. "Look at your legs, your arms." She reached out and grabbed her arms, turning them back and forth. The skin was healed.

"Ach, I feel a century old." She sat up and pulled her arms free of Sande's grip.

They were laid in the center of a circular planting of hedges. Six arched pathways pointed in opposite directions and beyond that, Sande could only see more greenery.

Sande stood. "If we're not dead and we're nowhere we recognize, then what?"

"You cast no shadow," Cerenth said. She pointed upward. "No suns. No moons nor stars."



Quince would never be willing leave her side, would he? She touched the hedges. They felt real. She broke off a branch and brought it to her nose. It smelled of pine. She stepped through one of the arches. A hedge faced her but she could move to her right. She did so and she found herself boxed in, literally, by hedges. She flinched. On the far end of the hedge prison, an image jumped.

She reached for the sword she did not have and cursed. Then she stepped forward cautiously. It was just a human-sized mirror, propped against the far hedge wall. But though it mirrored her gestures—she touched her face, brought her hand to her hair—the reflection within it was not hers.

Her mirror-self wore a gold gown stiff with embroidery and jewels. Her hair was bound up in an intricate series of knots and braids. A thick gold band set with jewels wound through the hair. She looked down. She was still wearing the white shift. She felt her hair float loose around her.

What was this?

Cerenth called her name.

“Here!”

She peered closer. The woman in the mirror looked older than she. There were a few lines around her mouth and eyes that she knew she did not possess. She touched the glass. The woman in the mirror touched back. Her fingertips felt warm. Fascinated, she raised her other hand.

Cerenth stepped around the hedge. “Don’t!”

Her fingertips brushed the glass and welded to it. Her fingers rearranged themselves to mirror the woman in the glass. The warmth spread down her arms, engulfed her chest. She felt the first real stab of fear. “Cerenth!”

Then she threw back her head and screamed. She felt her insides shift as if her organs were realigning themselves to make a place for this stranger, this other self in the mirror.

“Dear gods in the heavens,” Cerenth murmured.

Sande opened her eyes. The mirror lay blank, a smooth sheet of glass. Sande looked down. She was dressed in the golden gown. She touched her hair, felt the thick gold band as it wound around her head.

Cerenth reached out and brushed her fingertips across Sande’s lips, resting momentarily on the age lines. “Do you live?”

“I feel...older.” She turned around. It was her body. She knew it. Her hands slid to her stomach. But this body had born children. Her breasts were fuller, her hips had taken on a curve of their own. She swallowed down a burst of panic. “What happened?”

A frown formed between Cerenth’s brows. “I have no psi here. It’s like being blind.”

She froze. "Cerenth. You...you look younger." Had she really looked at Cerenth when they woke up in this land? She'd examined her arms and legs, looked at her body but had she truly studied her face?

Cerenth's voice was sharp. "How so?"

"I-I can't put a finger on it."

She touched her face. "No age lines." And held out her hands. The skin was as smooth as a maiden's. She glanced in the mirror and Sande saw a reflection of the Cerenth she knew.

"No." Cerenth stepped back, away from the mirror. The vision put its hands on its hips, lips pursed angrily. She turned to Sande, shook her. "How many doors were there in the hedge?"

Sande blinked. "Six."

"The maid, the mother, the hag, the warrioress, the healer, the lover," Cerenth murmured. She ran her hands slowly down her body, lingering on the pert little breasts poking through the thin shift.

"What are you talking about?" She was afraid to move. Her body was her own but it moved with a grace she'd never possessed, a calm self-awareness. Her breasts were imprisoned in the bodice of her gown and thank gods for that. Without that added support they'd sag. She was Queen in truth. Her bloodline would live on through whatever children this body had born.

"The Labyrinth of Life." At Sande's perplexed glance she added, "Did those at Belkirk never read? One of the Dragoon's oldest legends. Queen Nara became trapped in her own mind by a rival. In order to escape she had to find and embrace all her selves."

"The six you mentioned?"

Cerenth seemed lost in her own thoughts. "But whose mind are we trapped in?"

"Not mine. I did not even know the story."

"I don't think it's mine," Cerenth said slowly.

"Can you be sure?"

"Of course not!" she snapped. "I haven't read that story in years," she said in a calmer voice. "Since I was a child."

"Then whose?"

"Without my psi I don't know." She sounded frustrated.

"Well then." Sande put her hands on her ample hips, surprising herself. "Best you embrace yourself and we be on our way."

Cerenth glanced at the mirror. She licked her lips. "Could you really embrace the hag?"

"I don't know what she looks like," Sande replied but she shivered. "If we are trapped as you say then we have no choice. We must." She raised her chin.

Cerenth smiled. "You'll make a fine Queen some day. Will you fly Quince?"

"Go embrace yourself," Sande retorted, avoiding the question.

With a sigh, Cerenth stepped forward. "Goodbye, my youth. Hello, my jaded Queen." Her mirror image was still beautiful, the Cerenth Sande knew. Cerenth put both hands on the mirror. Her head fell back and her chest heaved as if something fought within her, trying to claw itself out of that smooth expanse of skin. The shift tore, her breasts grew, her hips swelled. The tatters of the shift rose from the ground, twisting as if an invisible hand sought to rip its threads apart. A forest green gown blossomed from the center of the fabric as if a magician pulled a feathered bird from his fisted hand. The gown settled itself on Cerenth's body.

She sighed a ragged sigh and glared at Sande. "Happy?"

"It is as I know you."

Her lips quirked. "Old and worn. Gods, I've been ridden so many times I've lost count."

"Cerenth!"

She laughed, not at all contrite. Smoothing her dress, she sighed, "Well, best be off to find the next piece of ourselves. If we are ever to get out of here we need to find our way."

"Is there a time limit?"

She bit her lip. A look of uncertainty crossed her face. "I've never been trapped in my own mind. Have you?"

Sande glanced at her. "No."

With that, they picked up their skirts and returned to the center of the labyrinth to try another arch.

## Chapter Eighteen

Quince was drawn through the chamber into a hallway lit by a pattern of glowing stones set in the walls. He ran his fingertips lightly over them. They were warm. "What are these?"

"In the sea's deep, where light cannot penetrate, creatures must create their own light or perish in the darkness."

Quince drew his hand back. "Are they alive then?"

"They were once. These are but a shell of what they once were. We make use of them while we can. Eventually their luminescence fades and we must replace them but they glow for a long time."

He had never thought about what treasures might lie beneath the sea. "Will Zeb be all right alone?"

"The silt of the Mother can heal all wounds, even those of the heart and mind."

"Where does it come from?"

"This citadel was built long before my and my father's time. We are but keepers of its secrets. Much knowledge was lost when the seas burned and the ancients died."

"Did that really happen?" Quince asked. "Did the seas burn? And the land weep?"

Enneth stared at him. "Of course."

Quince was quiet. "What you speak of with certainty is but legend to us. It is said that the Great Council was formed at that time." When the mountains were leveled and jagged peaks formed in their places. When the earth heaved and smashed citadels. "Did you see it? With your own eyes?"

Enneth's lips narrowed. It might have been a smile. "I was a young dragonet. I remember pieces of it. My parents lived through it and survived."

Dear gods, how old was Enneth? If all the water dragons lived as long as even Enneth, the seas should be overflowing with them. The army they could amass would easily overwhelm the air dragons. He wondered uneasily what the Great Council would think of that news.

They entered another chamber. This one looked like it could easily house a hundred men but there were only four others, two seated, two standing. Neither stood as he and Enneth approached. The two already standing looked like guards. They wore a curious shell-like armor over their chest, their legs sheathed in silver scales but their arms bare.

The two seated possessed an aura about them that Quince sensed as soon as he neared them. It was like being in the presence of Cerenth when she was in a rage, only the energy wasn't constricting but energizing. He felt himself straighten as he

approached. Whatever these two were, they were unlike the others enough to almost be their own species.

A fin sprouted from the center of each of their smooth heads and traveled over the curve of their skulls like a warrior's mohawk. Their eyes were large and round, dominating much of their faces, their nostrils but slits. Well-fleshed lips quirked as if they could read his thoughts. He reinforced his mental shields. Their skin was pearlescent, one with a pink sheen the other white. Quince could see no ears. The webbing between their fingers was thick so that they almost did not have fingers at all, just a single webbed appendage at the end of each arm.

They sat at a raised table, carved from what looked like the hull of a weather-worn ship. All the treasures of the sea were at their fingertips and they chose something born of the earth?

The water dragon seated opposite where he stood smiled. He ran his hand lovingly over the shellacked wood. "We cannot grow trees in the sea." His fingers drummed, once, twice, on the wood. "It is a reminder as well. Just because it can be done does not necessarily mean it should."

Quince found his voice. "You would rather us not sail on your seas?"

"If you were meant to tread water you would have been given gills."

Enneth cleared his throat. "Lord Quince of Kildarkee," he made a formal bow. "Meet King Urk and Queen Scara, lord and lady of all that you have seen and more."

Quince bowed low. "Your men have saved many of my friends' lives. Even as they try to save our Queens now. For that we are grateful."

Urk, the pearlescent white creature, leaned forward. "You hide your thoughts well, air dragon. What do you think of us?"

Quince was quiet. "That you are so unlike Enneth and Zeb you may be another species entirely."

Urk's eyes widened, completely pupil-less and black. "As we age, we change."

"These are my parents," Enneth said quietly.

Urk had not only seen but had lived through the Great Rift. Quince bowed again.

"Be seated," Urk said, waving a webbed hand.

Quince sat. "Again, I thank you for your hospitality."

As if that were the signal, platters of food were brought out of a side passage. There were salads made of fresh sea grass and brightly colored vegetables, trays filled with many-tentacled creatures and stuffed fish. He recognized little. Oh he had had fish before. The villagers fished but nothing with suckers and tentacles had ever crossed his plate.

"So, Lord Quince, you've captured the hand of a shadow queen. Will she bear you a clutch?"

Quince colored, then avoided the question. "Just Quince is fine, your Highness. As to offspring or not, well, that will be up to Lady Leahlisande."

"Then just Urk is fine as well. Any man who can woo a creature such as that and not fear her talents deserves nearly the same recognition as a king. You will soon be citadel ruler as well, I think."

Enneth passed Quince a platter full of scallops. He sighed inaudibly. This at least he recognized. A garlic smell wafted through the air. His stomach growled.

"I hold no such thoughts close to my heart. I only pray Leahlisande lives." He looked at Urk as if the water dragon could divine the future.

The pink-tinted dragon laid her webbed hand on Urk's hand. "Our seers bicker amongst themselves when it comes to the destiny of such as that."

"She is just my Sande."

"Of course. Zeb has depleted his strength so much to keep them alive, I fear he'll leave us too, soon."

"Again, no words could express my thanks."

"It is not a selfless act. There is always a price, hidden or otherwise."

Quince looked up from his plate.

"Cerenth will remain behind when you and your lady leave, gods willing."

Quince was shocked. "She is of the air. Trapping her beneath the sea will be the death of her."

"Kildarkee traded her away to an unseen Dragoon and you raised no protest. Of what matter is it to you who will hoist Belkirk's standard?"

"I made a mistake in judging her. She is not evil. Flighty, demanding, petulant but not evil."

"If it gives you any peace she will choose to stay with Zeb," Scara added.

Quince couldn't seem to think straight. He remembered how Cerenth had taken Zeb's hand in the Great Hall. When had they met before? When she tried drowning herself? "What good could come of such a union?"

"Do not doubt the tenacity of love," Scara said mildly. "The strongest of the sea mating the air's finest. Can you imagine the offspring? We have seen lesser crossings before. And so have you."

Quince laid his fork down. "Where?"

"Your Adonthe." She smiled as shock flashed across Quince's face. "He has our gifts but your kind's features."

Quince blinked and blinked again. "But..."

Urk waved his fork. "Given enough talent, the physical barriers can be overcome."

He looked at Scara. "You have a Queen."

"I am good at siring seers." He patted Scara's hand to silence her protest. "But little else. Zeb's one of the last of an ancient bloodline. I'm afraid they have a tendency to focus on their gift rather than reproducing."

"And the outcome of such a cross? Surely you would not want to curse them to choose between their father's sea and their mother's land."

Urk shrugged. "It is not our decision." His black eyes flashed. "But it is our price."

What would he tell the Kildarkees? The answer reflected in the water dragons' eyes. Cerenth was dead to them.

And that, he realized, would be just fine with Cerenth.

After the meal, he returned to the chamber they'd left Zeb in. Enneth led the way.

"How is it that I have seen no other water dragons?" Quince asked.

"We are shy creatures," Enneth replied.

"How many are there of you?"

Enneth gave him a rare smile. "You think like a soldier."

Quince colored. "I do not seek war with your kind."

"I know and I am thankful to have land allies. But our numbers are a carefully guarded secret. One of many, I'm sure you're thinking. I hope you do not think poorly of us. To share even a meal with an air dragon is something that has not been done for centuries. I hope that when you and your lady take to land we can build on our friendship."

"Certainly."

Enneth nodded. "It would benefit both our species, I think."

Quince couldn't even imagine what his kinsmen would say. Actively trading with water dragons? It was unheard of.

Zeb was in the same spot where they had left him before the meal, seated at Cerenth's right side at the lip of the basin. He raised his head when they approached.

Quince sat beside the basin on Sande's side. The silt had dried and hardened, capturing the women in its crusty embrace. He stretched out a hand and touched it then made a fist and rapped on it. "How is there even room for them to breathe?"

"There is," Enneth said simply. "You must have faith."

"How long do we have to wait?" He reached forward and stroked Sande's bared cheek with a fingertip. Her eyelashes fluttered.

"They are doing battle right now."

Quince sucked in a breath. "In the shadow lands?"

"No, they are not that far gone but in order to keep them from crossing there we needed to trap their essence. They must fight to free themselves from the web Zeb was forced to weave. They are strong women and they've learned already to rely on one another. They will win through."

Quince glanced at Zeb. "Does he aid or hinder them?"

Enneth sighed. "It was his mind that bound them here."

He started to stand but Enneth laid a hand on his shoulder to still him. "Do not disturb Zeb. He does what he can to aid them. Wait and when they need you, you will know."

"Where do you go?"

"I will fetch you some bedding. It may be a long wait."

\* \* \* \* \*

The second arch led Sande and Cerenth on a wild goose chase of twists and turns. By the time they reached the inevitable dead end both were out of breath. The gowns were heavy and neither were young things anymore. Sande vowed that if she lived through this she'd keep her older self in better shape.

The mirror faced them at the far edge. Sande froze. What would it be this time? Sande nudged Cerenth. "You go. I went first last time."

Cerenth tucked a stray piece of hair into her elaborate coiffure. "You forced me to lose my virginity," she said in a haughty tone.

"You were a virgin once?" Sande shot back.

Cerenth tried to maintain a shocked look but couldn't quite pull it off. "Oh all right."

She marched toward the mirror, hands bunched in her skirts. Standing in front of the mirror, she turned to Sande. "Pleased?"

Sande smiled and then, as the mirror began to reflect an image, the smile bled away. The Cerenth of the mirror wore dragon-scaled battle armor from heel to throat. It fit her like a glove, revealing her sinewy curves. Her face bore a bloodless scar down one cheek, marring her flawless features. Her crowning glory, the swath of red curls, had been shorn close to her head. The mirror figure wore it in a short smooth bob.

Cerenth leaned forward. "What have you done to my hair?" she wailed. Her body was leaner than it was now. She wore a sword at her waist, a cross-bow looped over one arm and a series of bolts strapped to her chest. "I look like a man. Where are my breasts?" She grabbed herself. The mirror image shook her nonexistent breasts.

A pain suddenly ripped through Sande. *Not again!* She thought she had been healed here, or at least exempt from pain. Clutching her middle, she doubled over.

Cerenth glanced over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"I'm...I'm not sure," she said through clenched teeth. Another spasm rocked her. She fell to her knees, her legs spread wide in an awkward position. Her body felt like it was turning inside out. She bore down through the pain, gritting her teeth to keep from crying out.

Cerenth dropped to her knees beside her. "What does it feel like?"

"Like I'm pushing my insides out." She let out a cry then managed to gulp air. She knelt on all fours, head down while sweat poured off her and she panted.



"I think you're in labor."

"Here? Now?" No wonder she had felt so contented. She had been in a hormone-ridden pregnancy haze.

Cerenth's eyes sharpened. "Sande, you need to change."

The pain rode through her, a sharp slice that had her swearing, words she'd only heard but never dared utter without blushing.

"Change! Now!"

Crouched on the ground on all fours, she changed. She felt her body ripple and tear. When she screamed it came out a roar. She flung her wings back, arching up and nearly falling backward. Cerenth was thrown against the mirror. She dimly heard Cerenth scream as well but the pain was coiled in her like a living thing, trying to claw its way out of her.

Her body undulated and twisted. Deep inside her she felt her bones twist, shifting out of the way, providing her eggs with a way to escape. She roared again and blew flame. The evergreen hedge smoldered but did not ignite. Another roar and a twist of pain seared her as if a brand had been shoved inside her most private of parts. She lay still, trembling.

Cerenth crouched at the farthest corner of the clearing, the ends of her bobbed hair kissing her cheeks. Her sword was drawn. "Out of the way, Dragoness."

Her mind struggled to form coherent thought. *Cerenth?* She followed Cerenth's gaze. Three eggs lay shaking behind her, still coated with lubricating slime. A wave of protectiveness swept through her. *Don't threaten them!*

"True eggs don't hatch that quickly. Whatever you birthed has no place here."

The eggs rocked again. Sande wrapped her tail around them protectively. *They are mine.*

"You've never been flown. They can't possibly be yours."

She had a point but in this world they were hers. She turned her head, nuzzling her eggs. Then she pointed her head at Cerenth.

"Don't even think it. I won't burn and it'll just infuriate me. Look in that cursed mirror, take your warrioress and we can be on our way."

Sande swung her head between Cerenth and her eggs. *My babies need me.*

"Leahlisande Belkirk, look at me."

She swung her head in Cerenth's direction.

"I am a mother. I have labored and loved and cried over my children. If I believed they were yours, truly yours, I would never threaten them."

Sande remembered finding Cerenth after the battle, her fragile human hands wrapped around her cracked egg, her grief palpable even to the psi-deaf. She shivered. Closing her eyes, she prayed Cerenth was right. She changed. The air was cool against her bare skin.

"Hurry."

She fought her body's instincts, forced herself to move toward the mirror. Behind her she heard an egg crack, shell breaking.

Cerenth swore softly.

Sande gripped the frame of the mirror. The vision in the mirror rippled like water stirred by an unseen wind. Her image shone before her as a blind Goddess of Justice, sword in one hand. The other hand cupped a globe of brilliant yellow light. Her eyes stared at her, wide and blind. What kind of warrior was this?

She glanced over her shoulder. The first egg had cracked open. Something reached a shadowy claw out of the shell's interior. It was no dragonet. There were five claws, yes, but they were wickedly pointed and much too large for the paw that supported them. The skin of the paw was wrinkly and gray. The other eggs were rocking, shells cracking.

"Take it!" Cerenth insisted.

"I can't. I'll go blind!"

"Oh for gods' sakes." Cerenth glanced in the mirror. "What kind of fighter is that?"

"I don't know," she whispered. Why was she blind? A quiet voice in her mind answered her. *You are a shadow Queen. The battles you fight lay in other worlds, not the one your mortal shell occupies.*

But if she took this image she'd be unable to help Cerenth fight what she just birthed.

Was she so sure of that? She had a sword and sure, she would be blind but she also held some glowing otherworldly object in her other hand. *Light*, her inner voice supplied. *Light to guide your way.*

Her father would turn her away if he saw her as the mirror showed her to be. No soldier fought blindly. Of what use was the sword?

She had prided herself on her swordsmanship but that really wasn't what made her a warriorress was it? It was her untrained skill, her ability to shift between worlds, to control the shadows of what once was that made her special. The image in the mirror sheathed her sword and held out her free hand.

She put her palms on the mirror. The world shifted and blurred. She blinked and blinked again, shuddering. She was blind. She threw up her hands in front of her, panic rising. Gods, she couldn't see her hands. She touched her face, felt a bead of sweat slide down her cheek.

Whatever hatched from her egg growled. The ground trembled as it moved. She raised her hand and flung the glowing ball of warmth she held in one hand in the direction of the growl. Something howled in pain, a noise no dragonet ever made.

Cerenth grabbed her arm and then they were running. Well, Cerenth was running, she was stumbling. Hedges struck her outflung arms. Cerenth pushed her roughly down on a bench. "Stay."

"Where are you going?" Her head swung from side to side, trying to gauge from where the sound came.

She heard a squeal of pain and stood. Cerenth grunted and was flung against her feet. "What did you birth? It can be hurt but it doesn't want to die."

"Maybe we shouldn't be killing it."

"Kill or be killed," Cerenth said grimly.

"Where are we?"

"Back in the center of Hell."

"Did what I throw help?"

She felt Cerenth pause. "It helped. It blocked the creature's path."

She held out her hand, felt another ball of warmth form there. "Then guide my hand." Cerenth would have to drop or sheathe her sword to do so. Could she tame the fighter in her long enough to do it? She heard the blade slide into its sheath. Cerenth turned her.

"It is directly before us. Watching us with its hell-ridden eyes. If that's what you dream when you have nightmares I pity you."

Sande carefully balanced the ball in her hand, then arched back and threw it. The creature yelped. "Get us through another arch."

They ran.

Cursing, Cerenth grabbed Sande's upper arm and pulled her forward. She'd done a lot of that—cursing. It wasn't exactly a queenly habit and she shouldn't encourage Sande to do so—but lords only knew if they'd survive this puzzle. Why not discard queenly habits?

Could she have taken on a blind form as easily as Sande did? She doubted it. It was a nasty weakness. Of course it had been no easy task to give up her looks for sheer strength. She paused so they could catch their breaths and touched her shorn hair, grimacing.

Sande's arms were scratched from scraping against the hedge. Cerenth tipped her head. She could hear the creatures Sande birthed whuffling through the maze. It was only a matter of time before they found them. And if all three had grouped together... Cerenth did not want to guess what the outcome of such a battle might be.

"Ready?" Cerenth asked.

Sande only nodded.

"Are you well?"

"As well as a blind person." Bitterness filled her voice. She flung out a hand, a ball of light cupped on her palm.

Cerenth closed Sande's fingers around the ball. "Save your strength. We'll have need of it."

"Easy for you to say. You who have eyes to see!" The ball of light vanished. Sande gripped a hedge branch. "Where are we?"

"Lost in the maze," Cerenth said quietly. "Come. We have to go on." She took Sande's upper arm and steered her away from the dead end. *Zeb, have you kept us alive this long only to have us eaten by monsters?*

A small white bird, no bigger than a sparrow, landed on the top of the hedge and trilled, the first non-malevolent creature the labyrinth had coughed up so far. Ignoring it, Cerenth led them out of the dead end and headed down the right corridor. The bird hopped and fluttered along the hedge, following them. They reached another choice.

"Right or left?" Cerenth asked. The monsters could be down either of them or both. The arm holding her sword felt heavy but she dare not sheathe it lest they run into a creature and she be left unarmed.

The little bird hopped down the right corridor, paused and trilled.

"Maybe it's trying to tell us something," Sande said.

Cerenth snorted. "A bird?"

*A guide.* The voice in her mind was so faint she might have overlooked it had they been fighting or running. *Zeb?* she thought. There was no reply. Fear lodged in the pit of her stomach. *ZEB!* Still no answer. It didn't mean he was dead. He could just be too exhausted to respond. She'd know if he was dead, wouldn't she?

Sande simply waited. Cerenth was certain she could not have been so patient.

"Very well." She pulled Sande down the right corridor.

The bird led them unerringly through the maze until they reached another mirror.

"We're here."

"The next mirror? Thank the gods," Sande murmured. "Will I be able to accept that which I cannot see?"

"I don't know." She balled her hands into fists. There was too much she didn't know, too much she had to guess. And all of it had to be done without her talent. She didn't realize how much she relied on it until it she was bereft of it.

"Did Queen Nara win through?"

"Have you ever read a Dragoon story with a happy ending?"

Sande sighed. "At which obstacle did she fail?"

"She could not embrace the hag." Cerenth bit her lip. She wasn't certain she could either. Was that what lay in wait for her within the mirror?

The white bird hopped onto the mirror's frame and trilled impatiently.

Cerenth raised her sword and jabbed at the bird. "Enough." It jumped onto her blade. When she shook it the bird took flight and vanished into the air.

"You've angered our guide," Sande pointed out.

"Impatient bastard," Cerenth muttered.

She stepped to the mirror. The surface rippled like a fine silk being shook out and then an image formed. She was relieved to see she had her mane of hair back and the scar on her face had vanished. Her image was dressed in a cream divided riding skirt and a simple tan tunic. The edges of the tunic were embroidered with thick silver thread.

She looked closer. It was not her bloodlines stitched there. Seashells were scrolled along the sleeves, mingled with her symbol, the curled horns of the ram. The only way her crest would change was if she was accepted into another citadel. But one of the sea? She traced the curve of the seashell with a stubby fingernail. Gods, did that at least change in the next body? She raised her hand and the image did so as well. The fingernails of that one were short but well manicured.

Was it Zeb's bloodline scrolled along her sleeves? She prayed so.

She put her palms to the mirror. Her hands sank into the warmth. She was bathed in light and heat. Her body felt as if a gentle fire had been kindled in her womb, a soothing sensation that spread to her extremities.

She looked down at herself. At least the divided skirt would be easier to run in than a full gown. But she had lost her weapons. Must each form be so literal?

"Cerenth?" Sande asked, voice hesitant. She glanced around blindly.

"I'm still here."

"Your voice sounds normal." She paused. "It wasn't the hag was it?"

"No." Her hands still felt warm. She stepped forward and put both hands on Sande's shoulders. She needed to touch her, to feel her. Gods, was it the lover? Her hands crept of their own volition to Sande's face.

"You're hot," Sande whispered.

She managed to curl her fingers into her palms but the hands still slid upward until her knuckles brushed the edges of Sande's eyes.

"What are you doing?" she asked in the same breathy voice.

"I'm not sure." Then her knuckles slid lightly over Sande's blind eyes. Her hands began to glow, a rich yellow light that spread from her knuckles to her tucked-under fingers until she could no longer distinguish her bones from the light. The fire inside her uncurled like a contented cat and stretched.

Sande gave a small cry.

"I'm sorry." She could feel Sande's hurt as if it were her own, the sharp pain to her eyes as if something sought to scratch them out but there was nothing she could do to ease that. Her own hands fascinated her. She wondered if anything would be left of them when they had finished the task they'd taken on.

Sande grabbed her wrists and pulled Cerenth's hands away from her eyes.

The shock of being jerked away from such a concentrated task sent Cerenth reeling. She stumbled to the ground.

"Oh Cerenth, I am sorry." Sande dropped to her knees. "Cerenth, I can see." Her voice was filled with wonder and an overwhelming relief.

"Of course you can. What did you think I was doing?" Cerenth replied. Her fingers itched to finish the task. There were other parts of Sande's body that needed healing, tears that couldn't be seen but were slowly draining the life from her. The need to mend was within her, hot and insistent. It hissed, batting at her intestines with invisible paws, demanding release.

"I-I wasn't sure."

"Believe me," Cerenth said dryly. "I am not a gentle lover."

Sande laughed but it was an uneasy sound.

"Go. Get you your healer's body so we can both be defenseless and eaten by your monsters."

"When you phrase it like that, why wouldn't I want it?" Sande stood and touched Cerenth's cheek lightly with her hand. "Thank you."

"Go."

Cerenth glanced at her hands. They had never healed anything before. Exacted pain, yes. Pleasure, definitely. But healed? She wasn't certain how she should feel.

Standing, she smoothed the wrinkles out of her pleats and dusted off the bits of grass. The white bird she'd chased away at swordpoint landed on her shoulder.

"So you're back," she said softly while Sande came to terms with the woman in the mirror.

The bird trilled as if it could admonish her in its perpetually happy twitter.

"You took your time arriving."

The bird ruffled its feathers, preening its wings with its beak. Then it took off and fluttered a short distance away.

"Where are you going?" She glanced at its previous perch. "Ugh." It'd left her a greasy white present on her shoulder. She glared at it. "You better stay out of my reach."

## Chapter Nineteen

Sande wasn't certain they'd have made it back to the center of the labyrinth without the white bird's help. There were too many turns to remember. The bird hopped along on top of the hedge while Cerenth alternately cursed it and urged it faster.

Once they heard the branches breaking on the opposite side of the hedge and froze. Even the bird remained motionless. The creatures—by the sounds of it at least two of them seemed to have joined forces—continued their relentless pursuit. She hoped the hedges were enough of a deterrent. They were truly damned if the monsters started breaking through the branches.

She was comfortable with her healer's form. A bit nervous without at least a sword between the two of them but so thankful to have her eyesight back she didn't really care what form she took as long as she kept all her senses.

Then they stood in the center of the labyrinth unchallenged. She was tired, hungry and in need of a good bath.

"Two more." Cerenth turned around, eying both. "You choose."

"No. If I choose the hag I'll be blamed for all eternity."

The white bird landed on a bench, hopping along the bench back impatiently.

Cerenth glared at the bird. "Why don't you choose?"

The bird made a distinct right to left motion with its head then hid its head beneath one wing.

"Coward." She glanced at Sande. "Both of you."

Sande waited. Cerenth didn't have the patience to linger. She was right. With a huff Cerenth strode to the right. The bird immediately flew to the top of the hedge and fluttered ahead of them.

Branches broke behind them. Sande glanced back. A shadowy form passed the intersection they'd just crossed through, heading in the wrong direction. Something gave cry, a howling noise that tore at her insides. She put her hands over her ears. The noise penetrated even that.

Cerenth shifted into a jog. Dropping her hands, Sande joined her.

"What did I birth?"

Panting, Cerenth rounded another curve. "I have no idea."

"Shouldn't they be a part of me?"

"In theory but we're in no man's land here. I do not know what the rules are."

"Did Queen Nara give birth?"

"If she did the storyteller didn't think it worthy enough to include it."

A stitch formed in Sande's side. She put her hand to it, forcing herself to take deep breaths. She considered herself in good shape but she didn't know how long they had been moving through this maze.

The bird caught one of Cerenth's wild curls in its mouth and tugged. "I am running, you rotten miscreant," she muttered. "You try running in slippers."

They rounded a third bend and hit a dead end. The bird fluttered away and returned, hopping along the hedgerow.

"Where?"

It didn't move.

"There is no mirror," Sande said.

"I can see that."

"Has our guide failed us?"

Cerenth eyed it speculatively. "I don't think so. If this is the path we must take then the mirror must be here."

Sande glanced around. They were walled in by hedges on three sides. She could hear the snuffling of the creatures on the opposite side of the hedge.

Cerenth put her finger to her lips.

The snuffling continued on in its journey.

Sande began to part the hedge, looking for a glimpse of the mirror. If this was the right path then there had to be a mirror somewhere. Her mouth was dry. Cerenth's gift was silent but maybe she could divine the future. She held still, deliberately spinning herself out, willing herself to find an answer.

Her sixth sense was silent. *Damn it, answer me!* Her hands closed around grapevines. She opened her eyes. There was her answer. They were healers. They needed to use that gift. A mirror of their making.

"Help me." She began to pull the tangled vines out of the hedge.

"What are you doing?"

"We must make a mirror."

"How does one make a mirror?" But Cerenth joined her in pulling out the vine.

"You knew that you needed to touch my eyes to heal me. Your hands, at least, knew what needed to be done. Tap that in you."

Cerenth eyed her dubiously. "And the vine?"

"It becomes our frame."

"And what of the looking glass?"

"I don't know. I thought of the frame. You think of the glass."

Cerenth snorted. "I have a very poor imagination."

"I bet under the covers you can be quite inventive." Her face felt hot. She hoped Cerenth didn't feel the need to elaborate.



"The art of passion is not to be confused with," she paused, her nose wrinkling, "The ability to macramé a frame."

Sande ignored her, weaving the vines to form a human-sized frame. It was lumpy and not quite oval but it would have to do. She could hear the snuffling on the opposite side of the hedge again. She propped the frame against the back of the hedge.

"We will die here," Cerenth hissed softly.

The bird hopped onto the top of the twined vines and glanced into the frame. It looked at them and twittered questioningly.

"I have no idea," Cerenth snapped. "Intuition?" She made the word sound like the most foul curse.

Stepping forward, Cerenth put her hands on the frame and closed her eyes, brows furrowing. Could she do it? Sande shivered.

The branches crackled again and the bird hopped on the hedgerow and looked over the side. Something mottled black and gray reared up over the hedge, nothing more than a blur of teeth, and snapped off a chunk of the hedge. The bird vanished into its maw.

"Oh!" Cerenth started forward but Sande stopped her.

"The bird, it was Zeb. Sent to help us. Gods and demons, your bastard children ate Zeb."

The misshapen mandibles vanished then a claw appeared.

Sande grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "We need the mirror. It's in you. Make it happen."

Cerenth regained her senses enough to glare at her. "As if the lover or the hag could protect us from that."

Another arm sprouted from the hedge. The creature was bent on pulling itself over the leafy wall.

Sande swallowed hard. "I will take care of that. You get us a mirror."

"You'll die," Cerenth said flatly.

"Maybe not." She raised her chin. "They are my offspring. Maybe they'll listen to me."

"Spoken like a woman who has never had children." Cerenth turned her back to Sande and faced the mirror. Her knuckles, then the fingers clenched around the vine frame, began to glow.

Sande faced the creature. It hoisted its body over the hedge. Its forepaws were huge, shoulders twice the mass of the body it supported. The paws ended in glittering silver claws that could easily slice a man to bloody ribbons. She thought of the Hunter's mount and its bridle of skin strips. Its head was disproportionately large, set right on the body sans neck. The bulk of the face was nothing more than teeth. Beady black eyes were sunken beneath bony ridges on each side of the houndlike nostrils.

It tipped its monstrous head up, scented the air and bayed. A white feather drifted out of its mouth. Another creature answered that bay. And then it turned its head toward her.

She glanced over her shoulder. Something rippled between the boundaries of her vine frame. It softened the view of the hedges glimpsed through it like a milky sap. She didn't dare break Cerenth's concentration now.

Sande took one step toward the creature, holding out her hands. "You are my offspring," she said quietly.

A second creature sprang through the hole in the hedge. It swung its nasty head in Sande's direction and opened its mouth. A forked tongue flicked out as if tasting the air. Its teeth were as long as her forearm.

Her hands began to feel warm. Perhaps they were glowing. She didn't dare take her eyes from the creatures.

How could she have spawned them? And who was their father?

The second creature spat flame. It roared around her, licked on either side of her but left her untouched. The monster swiveled its head from side to side, clearly confused.

The answer came silently. They were a part of her. Her own creations. A third creature jumped through the hedge. They faced her two in front, one behind, an insurmountable phalanx.

Cerenth gave a surprised shout behind her.

Sande didn't turn around. In that distraction, that softening of focus, the answer came. *Hatred. Vengeance. Grief.* She named them silently. Had not her actions been driven by these very three creatures, even as they still drove her, pushing her through the maze. She hated the Hunter with a passion that threatened to consume her. Vengeance drove her to seek him in the shadow lands. And grief, grief followed at her heels like her own personal silhouette.

The Hunter was dead. She needed to go forward. To claim Belkirk and begin the rebuilding of her citadel, her home. She didn't want to admit that such monsters had lived within her but they were hers and hers alone. She had had need of them then. Hatred and vengeance masked fear.

She opened her arms wide as if to embrace them. "Come home," she whispered.

The first beast attacked.

Behind her, Cerenth screamed, "No!"

Quince kept vigil with Zeb. He knew he dozed. He'd wake up and find himself caressing the hardened mud with his hand as if by his will alone he could make it soft again and pull Sande from its grip. Sande's and Cerenth's faces remained impassive. He could not even see if they breathed. He had to lean over the basin and turn his cheek to Sande's face. The whisper of her breath against his skin convinced him she still lived.

Without the suns, Quince had no idea of how much time passed. From time to time Enneth would show up with food. Quince couldn't find the will to eat more than a bit of unidentifiable meat and sip the wine, just enough to settle the stirrings of his stomach and wet his tongue. Zeb took no visible food at all.

Suddenly Zeb gave a cry and was thrown against the chamber wall as if a giant invisible hand struck him.

Quince stood, drawing his sword. A wind whistled through the chamber, knocking over bottles and Quince's wineglass. It plucked at his hair until he cried out. Then it tried to tear the sword from his hand. He stood over Zeb and held fast. Zeb did not move at all.

As quickly as it had appeared the wind vanished.

Quince dropped to his knees, shaking Zeb's shoulder.

Zeb lifted his head, his gaze morose. A trickle of navy-tinged blood flowed out of his nose. "It is a mad task. It would have been kinder to let them die."

Quince helped him sit upright. The water dragon felt so slight beneath his hands, almost brittle. "I would not have let her go."

Zeb's alien eyes bored into his. "But would you have had the strength to hold her? I think not." He closed his eyes. "I have damned them to a half-life. They cannot win through."

"Listen to what you are saying. You could not have let Cerenth go either."

"I have damned them," Zeb said again. His head drooped.

"Go back. Hold the gate or whatever you did for them."

"I've been cast out of my own creation." His voice was soft, incredulous. "Their fate rests in their own hands."

Quince glanced at Sande's mud-encased form. "How long can they hold?" Did they die even as he thought the words?

"I had not thought that one as strong as I could be cast out. They still have two tasks before they can win free. And the creatures that chased them, their likes I have never seen before." He hesitated. "I do not know what they are but they obviously meant harm."

The creature pounced on Sande. With a shout, Cerenth ran forward. She had nothing in her hands to fight with. She picked up a broken branch.

And then creature simply vanished into Sande's chest. Sande convulsed, her eyelids fluttering but made no other sound. Cerenth stood over her body as the second creature approached.

Sande opened her eyes. "Let them come," she whispered.

She couldn't believe Sande still breathed. "What?"

"They are mine, mine to hold, mine to heal."

Cerenth couldn't believe Sande could contain such malevolence. But the first creature was gone and Sande was still alive. For once she wondered if her talent could even come close to matching Sande's. All the high psi in the world still wouldn't permit her to walk the shadow lands not once but twice, and return.

"Are you insane?"

Sande's lips twitched as if she tried to smile but failed. "I am certain of it."

The second creature approached them from the side, snarling. Spittle fell, singeing the grass. Holding the branch before her, Cerenth backed up.

The creature sprung at Cerenth. Sande reached up as it passed, seizing a hind leg with one hand. It exploded into bits. Cerenth threw her arm up to shield her face. Yelping, she dropped the smoldering branch and grabbed her arm, now coated in a thick, viscous ooze.

Her unharmed hand flared to life, lighting her up like a lantern at a solstice feast. The light spilled over the seared flesh on her arm. The skin reknit beneath her fingertips and like bread dough stretched to cover the remaining wreckage. The light flared, baking the "dough" to her arm. She dropped her hand. Her arm was unscathed.

Sande scrambled to her feet.

The third monstrosity watched them closely. Then it backed away, poised to flee.

"Vengeance," Sande whispered.

The monster froze.

"Let it go," Cerenth hissed.

"It's mine. Until I take back what I birthed I cannot be truly healed. And if I take another form I may not survive the reclamation."

That was the wound Cerenth felt when she touched her. She wondered if her new talent could have mended the rents in Sande's psyche. "I-I built the mirror." She steadied her voice.

"If I fail, go on without me."

"I will not leave you." If she was left with nothing but pieces she would still try to heal her. She was afraid to admit how much she'd come to depend on her. Losing her was unthinkable.

"Vengeance, come to me," Sande whispered. The monster swiveled its head toward her. She held out her hand.

Cerenth watched in awe. The woman was fearless. Then she saw the slight tremor in her outstretched hand.

She spoke its name a third time, binding it to her. "Vengeance, you are mine. Come to me. I embrace you."

The creature moved slowly toward her in a crouch.

"It is hideous."

Sande sighed. "Yes."

It laid its big ugly head at Sande's feet. Its lower teeth jutted out of its lip, too large for its massive jaw.

Cerenth wanted to run. But Sande held her ground and Cerenth would do no less. Sande stooped beside it then put her hands atop its head. Her hands began to glow. The glow spread from her flesh to the creature, encompassing first its head then outlining its body and even its teeth.

Sande sighed again. "All right then. I will take it."

The entire body flared, bright yellow light surrounding it. Cerenth threw up her arm, closing her eyes. The brilliance still cut into her eyelids until she felt she'd either go mad or blind. Then the light vanished. She opened her eyes. Sande crouched beside a blackened hull.

"I thought my desires were unsightly. But yours, yours trump mine."

Sande stood, dusting the ashes off her hands. She stared down at the hulk. A light breeze picked up, plucking bits of the creature and tossing them into the air. "Let's see your mirror," she said finally.

Cerenth was surprised at the abruptness of her tone. "Sande..."

"Apparently internalizing them wasn't the best idea. You, on the other hand, have a tendency to vent." She held up a hand to forestall Cerenth's protest. "I hadn't thought that was healthy either. Perhaps it is more beneficial than what I have done to myself." She walked toward the mirror. "What is it? The lover or the hag?"

"I have not looked." She paused outside the mirror's range.

Sande turned toward her and held out her hand. "We shall do this together."

Cerenth looked at it. So simple, a hand. And yet it meant so much. She had never had someone as close to her as Sande. She took her hand. They turned toward the mirror together. The even surface undulated as if it were going through a convulsion.

"I am not sure it will work with the both of us at once," Cerenth said.

The surface smoothed.

Cerenth gasped. Sande clenched her hand tighter, riveting them to the spot. The individuals in the mirror wore mantillas that blessedly hid most of their scalps. Their bodies were hunched, two-thirds of the women's current heights. Eyes stared at them from within the folds of their skin, black and emerald, still sharp and alert. The skin had peeled away from their fingernails and the yellowed nails curled almost into talons. Pinched lips pursed as if they'd speak but thankfully the mirror gave them no voice.

Cerenth found her voice first. "You need a manicure."

"Speak for yourself," Sande retorted.

"If these are the lovers I'd hate to see how their partners look."

Sande remained silent.

"I don't think I can do it," Cerenth said finally.

"We have to, don't we?"

A wave of panic swept through her but Sande's hand kept her grounded to the spot. The mantillas slipped to their shoulders, revealing patchy scalps. No more than a tuft of a red curl dotted the wrinkled mass of her mirrored creature. "I can't do it," Cerenth whispered.

Sande raised her free hand. Her mirror image followed suit. The taloned hand turned and one finger beckoned.

Cerenth grabbed at Sande's free hand. "What are you doing?"

"Going home."

"Do you think we can thread the maze like that? Let's go back and find the lovers."

"Even if we did we'd still have to find our way here. We'll have wasted time."

Cerenth let her go. "You go back. I am content here."

"Zeb waits for you."

"Zeb may be dead," she said, giving voice to her fears. She swallowed hard, fighting back a hiccupping sob. She would not break down.

"Oh," Sande said in a very small voice. "I am sorry for that...and this." She turned toward Cerenth, abruptly grabbed her hands and yanked them both into the mirror.

Cerenth screamed but it came out a croak. Her skin stretched and peeled, soft smooth skin giving way to a papery thin covering. She felt her back hunch, her spine forced into an unnatural curve. She held out her hand and her teeth dropped like pearly pebbles into it.

She fell to the ground.

A shape rolled next to her.

"Damn you." Spittle flew all over. She crawled on hands and knees to the hedges and pulled herself up. She blinked. Her vision was blurry, like looking at a clouded mirror. Cataracts. She didn't dare touch herself. Her breasts dangled like limp waterskins to her waist.

Sande pulled herself up as well. Her hair stuck at odd angles out of her scalp, tufts of dull chocolate brown. Her dark eyes glared back at Cerenth. "Must you make everything so difficult?"

"What were you thinking? We'll die here in this cursed maze and this is how our spirits will wander. Do you want to haunt someone looking like this?"

"At least they'll know they're haunted. Come to them cloaked as a harlot and they'd be expecting to be fucked not scared to death."

"You make a good harridan, Leahlisande Belkirk. The best I've seen."

"So you can still see? Even through those thick scales?"

Cerenth held up a hand. She tried to not look at the gnarled, shrunken thing she presumed must be attached to her body. "We waste our strength and breath. Truce?"

"We'll never find our way through this."

"I tried to warn you."

"Shut up, you harpy!"

Cerenth closed her mouth, swallowing down the angry retort. She would have to be the mature one. Apparently the transformation affected Sande's mind. She wasn't certain she was quite sane anymore either. "One step at a time, Sande. We'll find it."

Sande snarled a retort but let Cerenth lead the way. At the pace they were going it was going to take a very long time.

They rested often, dozing in the gray light that served as sun in this land. Her bones felt brittle. Her joints ached. She'd never be warm again. They passed under the arched center of the labyrinth for the final time and headed to find the last mirror. She lost track of how many times she prayed that she died young, not a grizzled remnant of herself.

Finally they rounded a bend and saw the mirror. It towered over them, framed in stone. Beyond lay a clear blue sky, not the gray one they huddled under. They both eagerly looked into the mirror and saw not their reflections but Quince and Zeb.

## Chapter Twenty

"Look!" Zeb pointed to the basin. "They wake!" He leaped into the basin and began pulling strips of mud off Cerenth. Quince copied him, tearing at the mud encasing Sande. They broke mud off their shoulders and pulled their chests upright.

"Sande," Quince whispered. Her eyelashes fluttered. What he saw of her dark brown eyes was cloudy and unfocused.

Zeb paused, laying his hand on Quince's arm. His face was serious. "No matter what she begs you to do, hold onto her. What they have gone through is enough to drive a sane woman mad. We have kept vigil while they have fought. Now it is our turn to prove ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

He shook his head. "I have never healed like this before. I can only go by what was written down before me. And that is little but warnings." He wrapped an arm around Cerenth's shoulders and gently pulled a bit of mud off her scalp. It came away with a clump of hair.

Cerenth's eyes opened. They rolled around in their sockets, as unfocused as Sande's. "Don't let me go."

"Never," Zeb promised.

Quince freed the rest of Sande's torso. Her skin was gray-tinged and wrinkled like a potato that had aged within the cellar for far too long.

"Sande. Leahlisande, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes again, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I'm hideous," she whispered.

"You're alive," he reassured her. "Here. Within my arms."

Her arm stirred at her side. She lifted it weakly, holding it before her face. "It clings to us still. Oh gods, Quince, let me die."

He held her more tightly, laid a kiss on her mud-caked forehead. "Zeb brought you back."

"How can you bear to look at me?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"I don't understand why you keep saying such things." He pulled a strip of mud off her scalp and a patch of hair came with it. He cringed and tossed it out of her sight. "Do you feel the pain in your stomach still?"

She closed her eyes. "No."



He pounded on the mud encasing her legs with his free hand. Then he pulled her out of the basin and laid her on his blanket. He began working on the smaller chunks of mud that clung to her skin.

"Cerenth?" she whispered.

"She is alive as well. Covered in the sea's healing silt. But we can wash you free of that."

"I forced her to take the hag. We should have stayed there."

Her babbling scared him. He wrapped her in his blanket, ignoring her weak attempts to push him away. "Zeb, where can I wash this off her?"

"In the chamber you arrived in."

Quince picked Sande up. She relented and pressed her face to his chest, lying as still as a corpse. He carried her to the chamber and laid her at the water's edge then eased her legs into the water. He started at her toes, methodically removing bits of mud from between them.

"Quince?"

He paused. "I'm here."

"Let me drown."

"How can you say such a thing?" His hand curled protectively around her ankle.

"Let me slip beneath the waves. Give me at least that. Don't let anyone see me like this."

"There is no one here but me," he reassured. "And as soon as I wash the mud away you'll feel better."

Her hands clenched into slow fists. "We drew the hags back with us. I am trapped in this body. Can't you see it?"

"I see my Sande," he said patiently. He worked a thick chunk of mud from between her toes.

She grabbed a hunk of hair and held it out before him. "This is all that is left?" Her voice bordered on the edge of hysteria.

He gently pried the hair out of her fingers. "It will grow back."

"Look at me," she insisted. "Really look at me!"

He wiped the mud off her calf and held it up. The skin was not so gray but it was still wrinkled and shriveled. After all, it had lain beneath the silt for gods knew how long. He blew out a breath. Sande was right. It wasn't beautiful but he didn't care. She was alive.

"It will heal," he said simply.

"You are a hopelessly-in-love fool," she whispered, laying back and closing her eyes.

"Is that so wrong?"

She said nothing.

He leaned forward to kiss her. She turned her head at the last moment so that the kiss landed on her cheek instead. It tasted of minerals. "Sande," he breathed.

"Go away."

He cupped her face in both his hands, streaking it with mud. She struggled, nearly kneeling him in the groin, but he moved smoothly out of the way. He kissed her full on the lips.

With that contact, power washed through him as if he'd harnessed the lightning within a storm. Her hands shoved against his chest but he wrapped his arms tighter around her and drew her in for a deeper kiss. The air crackled with energy. His lungs felt hot. They would both be burned up by the power she exuded. He pulled them chest deep into the water and when that eased the burning slightly he broke the kiss, seized a breath of air and dunked them both beneath the still surface.

Sheer terror at being underwater overcame any preconceived notion she had about her appearance. She clung to Quince. They broke the surface.

The water bubbled around them as if they were in a hot spring rather than the sea. On the edge of his vision he caught sight of a swath of red hair. Zeb pulled a soaking and swearing Cerenth out of the water.

He glanced down at the woman he held. The bubbling water had washed the silt away. Her hair floated around her like the dark tentacles of some underwater sea creature. He cupped her chin in his hand.

"You...You tried to drown me," she accused.

He tried not to laugh. "You were being unreasonable."

"How can you stand the sight of me?"

He pried her hand off his shoulder and held it before her face. The skin was smooth and tanned, the silt washed from it. He rubbed a thumb over her wrist before he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

She stared, eyes widening. "But...But I was a hag. A horrible hag. I lost all my teeth and everything ached. And then you were there and you still wanted me." Her breath hitched and he thought she was going to sob.

"I traveled to the very ends of my known world to keep you alive. Why wouldn't I want you?"

"I was hideous!"

"Filthy. Talking gibberish." He shook his head. "But not revolting."

She fumbled over her words then lapsed into silence.

"Are you done trying to boil us?" The water around them settled into a slow simmer.

"I would do nothing of the sort." The water stopped churning.

He pulled them to shore. Zeb was already there, so many towels wrapped around Cerenth that Quince could see little more than her face and a lock of hair that had

escaped its fluffy prison. He bundled Sande into towels that had appeared at the shoreline.

Sande reached out and found Cerenth's hand. Their fingers closed around one another's briefly then released.

"Where are we?" Cerenth asked.

"In my home," Zeb replied.

Sande let out a small squeal and put her hand over her mouth to silence it.

Cerenth merely raised an eyebrow. "Under the sea? Well, that should buffer us from the Great Council's meddling."

"You do not seem concerned, my Queen," Quince said softly.

She glanced at him and her lips twitched. "You have a Queen, Quince. Now is not the time to change your allegiance."

"I owe you an apology," he murmured.

She waved it off. "I am not an easy creature to live with." She glanced at Zeb. "You will soon find this out."

Zeb kissed her forehead. "I am certain that whenever you have a tantrum I can distract you."

Cerenth snorted but made no reply. Zeb nibbled on her earlobe. Quince was shocked at the soft look in Cerenth's eye.

She must have heard his thoughts for her gaze sharpened just a bit. "You will return to Belkirk," Cerenth said and it was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," Sande replied.

"By way of Kildarkee," Quince added. "To fetch supplies and those things that are rightfully Belkirk's."

"The Council may not allow it," Cerenth warned.

Zeb settled Cerenth more comfortably against him. "You have been gone nearly a month in your time." Quince's breath hissed out but Zeb continued. "Yes, time has a way of simply slipping by here." He scooped up a handful of water and let it spill through his webbed fingers. "I suspect the rumors of the Hunter's defeat will have suitably awed the Council and rightly so."

Cerenth laughed, a low sound that was not at all kind. "They've not dealt with the likes of Sande before. They'll hesitate to act against her."

"Nor will they be in a rush to see that more are spawned like her."

Quince eyed Sande thoughtfully. "And what of Reanna? Will her kinsmen take her home? After all, Kildarkee has no Queen to trade for her now."

"You will have to let us know," Zeb said. His grip tightened on Cerenth and she seemed inclined to let him keep his claim. "Legends will be sung of the fiery-haired Queen and how she died of her battle wounds, protecting her citadel."

"And our children?" Cerenth asked in a low voice. "What of them?"

"If they take after their mother, Belkirk will foster them," Sande said.

"It will work," Cerenth murmured. She and Zeb had eyes only for one another.

Quince and Sande exchanged a glance. Sande hid a smile.

Enneth broke the spell by stepping into the chamber. "We have a feast prepared to celebrate the return of our warrioresses." He laid a hand on Zeb's shoulder. "And our future king. Come and we'll show you how water dragons celebrate."

Quince stood, pulling Sande up with him. Then he swept her off her feet and kissed her soundly. She clung to him and they laughed until the very shells in the great chandelier above them seemed to dance as well.

## Epilogue

When Quince and Sande emerged from the sea's embrace, long after the feasting and dancing were done, they found two methores waiting for them.

"Yours?" Quince asked.

Sande shook her head. "They come and go as they please. As it should be."

And so they entered Kildarkee's village suitably mounted. The water dragons had raided their chests so that they might be finely attired. Both dressed in shades of black, gray and silver, as befitting a shadow Queen and her consort. Sande wore a silver crown set with black pearls. Their dark cloaks, lined with ermine and stiff with silver embroidery, spilled over their mounts' rears. When the methores pranced, the sunlight winked off the jewels, blurring the line between fabric and methore hide. Their finely polished dragon scale armor gleamed like dewdrops trapped in ice.

When they entered the village the villagers stepped out of their businesses and cottages and watched them pass in silence. Sande could still see the signs of war. Buildings were burned and there were some houses that were boarded up. Some humans dropped to their knees and bowed their heads. Others stood with a kind of shocked awe on their faces, hands over their mouths.

They rode unchallenged to the Kildarkee citadel's gates.

Handilee met them at the entrance. His men spilled behind him, all wearing armor and carrying weapons. He held up a hand. "Are you of the flesh or...or another thing altogether?"

"You know me, Handilee," Quince replied.

"But there are those who saw you vanish into the sea over a month ago to take the Queens to a watery grave." He glanced uneasily at Sande.

"I have returned with Leahlisande Belkirk to collect what was plundered from her citadel."

"You rode out with two Queens, Quince."

"Cerenth did not survive her wounds."

Handilee nodded. If he grieved he did not let it show. "They who saw her said she was gravely injured."

The lie came easily. "She fought well in both worlds but the shadow lands finally claimed her."

Handilee nodded again. Then he rode forward, leaned over his mount's neck and clasped Quince's arm. The troops behind him visibly relaxed. "There are those who

hoped you'd never return," he said in a low voice. "Myself included. One as powerful as that is something to be feared." He glanced at Sande.

"I will return with her to Belkirk," Quince said smoothly. "Do you keep Reanna?"

"We do. Because our citadel and Queen vanquished the Hunter the Great Council decided we could keep our claim to her."

"The Council met again?" Quince said with surprise.

Handilee smiled again. "It is a century worth writing about, is it not?" His smile faded a bit when he eyed Sande sitting silently on her mount. "There should be a feast or something to celebrate your return but I do not think Reanna would welcome that. She has no talent and she greatly feared both Cerenth and your lady."

"We will stay only long enough to collect what we need."

Handilee hesitated, searching Quince's face. "Did you truly live beneath the sea this entire time?"

"Truly."

"And you are still of the sky?"

"Yes."

"Such tales you must be able to tell." He dropped his hand. "Welcome, Quince. And Lady Leahlisande of Belkirk. Kildarkee owes you much."

When the wagons were packed and Reanna had finally appeared to gravely thank Sande for her sacrifice, Cydell and Viseau as well as Adonthe chose to ride with them to Belkirk. The wagons rumbled out of the gates in the shadow of the ceremonial bonfire lit on Cerenth's behalf. And there were others that, by and by, also fled Kildarkee to take up their trades in Belkirk's village.

So Belkirk grew and prospered. When spring kissed the land Quince flew his lady Queen and soon there were dragonets roaming the hallways again.

Cerenth visited Sande often enough and those who knew her as the Queen of the Kildarkees swore that she was not the same woman but another in a similar guise. For there were laugh lines around her eyes and mouth and she moved with a carefree grace their former Queen had never known. And what air dragon would ever willingly sequester herself beneath the sea? No, Cerenth of the Kildarkees was truly dead. What walked Belkirk's halls, arm in arm with Leahlisande, was something altogether different, more than a shadow, less than a dragon. In time Cerenth and Zeb did give birth to three talented children, Mirium, Navarre and Altarre.

But that is another tale entirely.

## **About the Author**

Christine McKay was born and raised in northeastern Wisconsin, graduated in a class of less than 54 students, and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science at a local college taught mostly by nuns. She is the oldest in her family, with two brothers and one sister.

Christine lives on a farm with her husband and an assortment of four-legged creatures including goats, mules, dogs, rabbits, cats, chickens, a donkey, and a llama. Her favorite authors include Robin McKinley, Patricia McKillip, Anne McCaffrey, Ayn Rand, Andre Norton, and Nora Roberts.

Christine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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